

# **The Challenges of Bilingual Education in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region People's Republic of China**

David Strawbridge  
Education Advisor, Save the Children

## **Abstract**

*In China, the right of children to learn their own mother tongue and a second language is incorporated in national education policy. According to a large body of research, one of the most effective ways in which this can be achieved is through bilingual education, where a second language is learned after a foundation is first built in mother tongue. However current bilingual education trends in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China make it increasingly difficult for minority children to do so. This paper looks at the bilingual education situation in Xinjiang, describes the challenges of implementing a bilingual education programme in the region, and outlines the strategies that Save the Children use to promote the use of mother tongue in the education of minority children.*

## **Background**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is located in the very northwest of China, and makes up one sixth of China's territory. The population of the region is just over 20 million with ethnic minority groups, mostly Uyghur and Kazak, making up about 60 percent of the total. The Han Chinese population in the region has increased from six percent in 1949 to just over 40 percent today. Many people of this very remote region of China, with its inhospitable terrain and harsh climate, live in extreme poverty, despite the rapid economic growth taking place elsewhere in China.

## **Primary schools in Xinjiang**

With a large population of Han Chinese living alongside the many ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, there are three different types of primary schools that cater for the various language groups. One is the "Han" school, attended predominantly by Han children, and a small but increasing number of minority children, with all subjects taught in Mandarin by Han teachers. Another is the "Combined school", attended by Han and minority children who can study in Mandarin only, or take classes in which mother tongue is taught as a subject, with all other subjects taught in Mandarin. The third type of primary school is the "Ethnic school" where minority children make up 100 percent of the enrolment. These children learn mother tongue as a subject and have all other subjects taught in Mandarin.

## **Save the Children's education work in Xinjiang**

Save the Children UK is an International Non Government Organisation that works with government partners to help them realise child rights, and improve the welfare and development of vulnerable children. As part of this focus in China, we are implementing a three year education project in two areas of Xinjiang. Both of these areas, Urumchi County on the outskirts of Urumchi City and Yining City near the Kazakhstan border, are mainly populated by Kazak or Uyghur ethnic minorities.

The specific objective of the education project is "... to ensure the rights of minority children to a relevant, high quality basic education ...", and so the focus for project work is on the welfare and development of minority children in ethnic and combined schools. Project components include teacher training, child protection, health education, community involvement in schools, and the development of bilingual teaching strategies to improve learning for children in Mandarin and their mother tongue.

In our work on bilingual education, we seek to follow the approach that children should learn their mother tongue first, and that this foundation should be the bridge to learning a second language. In Xinjiang, this is not easy, and we face a number of challenges in our work with government in this area. These challenges can be highlighted through a more detailed look at the bilingual education situation in the region.

## **Bilingual education in Xinjiang**

**Policy development and implementation:** Chinese national education policy enables minority children to learn their mother tongue in school, and requires that all children learn the national language, Mandarin. Until the late 1990s, this meant that mother tongue was used as the language of instruction in minority primary schools, with Mandarin taught as a subject.

After piloting the teaching of all subjects in Mandarin for a number of years, the Xinjiang Regional Education Bureau introduced a new bilingual education policy in 2002, requiring Mandarin to be used as the language of instruction, with mother tongue to be taught as a subject. This was done primarily to improve the standard of Mandarin among minority graduates, so that they would be more competitive in the work place.

From 2002, implementation of the policy was initially slow. In most rural areas, and many cities apart from Urumchi, there were few minority teachers with good Mandarin skills, and so mother tongue continued to be the main language of instruction in most minority schools. Mandarin was used more in urban minority schools where there were more qualified teachers. To hasten implementation of the policy, the government began upgrading the Mandarin level of established teachers through ongoing learning programmes, and sending minority teachers with good Mandarin to rural schools.

In 2005, the Regional Education Bureau directed all schools throughout Xinjiang to use Mandarin as the language of instruction in line with the policy requirements. Since then, the pace of policy implementation has continued to vary, depending on the capacity in a particular area to teach Mandarin effectively, or on how the policy was interpreted by local government officials.

For example, all minority children in Yining City since September 2007, are required to learn Mandarin from grade one, and do not have any instruction in mother tongue. These children will continue to be taught in Mandarin as they progress through primary school, and will learn basic skills in mother tongue only from grade four. In other areas of Xinjiang, including Urumchi Municipality, primary teachers will use Mandarin as the language of instruction from 2009, and minority children will have between two and four periods per week of mother tongue taught as a subject.

In these situations, the use of Mandarin as the language of instruction in minority schools is referred to by education authorities in Xinjiang as "bilingual" education. In other words, "bilingual" teachers are minority teachers who teach subjects in Mandarin, and are required not to use mother tongue in their lessons.

The widespread implementation of the bilingual policy has increased pressure on children to have a basic understanding of Mandarin from the time they start primary school. This has led to Mandarin being widely taught in pre-schools and even kindergartens to prepare children for school life in a second language environment.

From 2007, education authorities have sought to further improve the standard of Mandarin in primary schools by stepping up language training. This involved sending minority teachers with good Mandarin skills to courses for up to two years to improve their skills in spoken and written Mandarin. Temporarily, these teachers were replaced by young graduates from Mandarin language institutions who have good language skills but no skills in teaching. At the same time, minority teachers in ethnic and combined schools with limited Mandarin were replaced, also by graduates with good Mandarin and no teaching skills.

**The impact on minority schools:** The implementation of the bilingual language policy throughout the region has had a profound impact on the composition and status of the different types of schools in Xinjiang. Fully aware that good Mandarin is required for employment; parents from ethnic minority communities are now enrolling their children in Han schools where the standard of Mandarin is considered to be better. Parents are also moving their children from classes in combined schools that provide mother tongue lessons into classes that are taught in Mandarin only. The increasing status of Mandarin has been enhanced by the fact that many parents who are also government officials are leading the trend to enrol their children in classes where Mandarin is the only language of instruction.

As experienced teachers in minority schools were replaced by unqualified graduates with good Mandarin skills, the quality of teaching, particularly in ethnic schools, has declined further according to education bureau authorities. This has further contributed to the movement of minority children into classes in which Mandarin only is used.

There are now declining numbers of children attending ethnic schools, and fewer minority children studying mother tongue in combined schools. It is likely that, within a few years, Mandarin will be the only language of instruction for minority children in many combined schools if the trend in urban schools is any indication. As the number of classes providing mother tongue instruction reduces and more Mandarin is used in schools, mother tongue teachers are being retired or moved to other roles in schools. Our baseline survey showed that already 21 percent of the minority children with which we work are no longer learning mother tongue. This is likely to increase to 40 percent or more next year.

## **Challenges**

### **1. The lack of opportunity to develop bilingual teaching in schools**

The increasing use of Mandarin as the principal or only language of instruction in ethnic and combined schools precludes us from implementing a bilingual programme that promotes the full development of mother tongue languages. To date, this has not been possible even in pre-schools because children are required to attain a certain level of Mandarin before entering grade one, and so education bureaus are preoccupied with teaching Mandarin at this stage.

### **2. The use of teacher centred methods and literary approach to teaching mother tongue and Mandarin in schools**

Teaching in most schools tends to be content and exam based, with rote learning and text book or blackboard activities the primary teaching methods used. Minority bilingual teachers, who teach subjects in Mandarin only, tend to use a literacy based approach, where they introduce new vocabulary and concepts through reading and speaking at the same time. This usually involves a lot of explanation by the teacher and little practice of oral or written Mandarin by children. When oral language is practiced, it is most often through the use of whole class rote methods. The last baseline survey we conducted found that nearly two thirds of bilingual teachers used too much Mandarin language in their lessons, and the language was usually above the level of that used by children. Education supervisors and head teachers tend to have

a limited understanding of second language learning approaches, and do not provide appropriate support.

### **3. The reduced focus on, and declining value of mother tongue languages in schools**

The focus on improving the standard of Mandarin among teachers and students has undermined the status of mother tongue languages. Ethnic minority communities realise the importance of Mandarin for their children's advancement in education, but are concerned that the focus on Mandarin will lead to limited use of mother tongue, and the loss of local culture. This is already apparent in school visits to combined schools, where minority children are often more comfortable talking to us in Mandarin as they have had very little or no instruction in their mother tongue.

## **Strategies**

As an INGO working in China, Save the Children must work within the boundaries of government policy. In fact, some of the most successful projects implemented have strengthened government policies such as Quality Education and the Minors' Protection Law. In bilingual education then, our approach has been to work within the limits of the current regional bilingual policy, to raise awareness of language learning processes among government partners, work with partners to solve problems in 'bilingual' education, and use available opportunities to improve the teaching of mother tongue.

### **1. Advocacy**

As the Save the Children education project has become more established in Xinjiang, and government partners have a better understanding of the ways in which we work, it has been possible to discuss various approaches to bilingual education more openly with partners in meetings and workshops. The development of good relationships with academics has also helped. For example, a professor from a local university, who is very familiar with our work, raised concerns in a presentation he made on bilingual education for senior government partners from project sites and Save the Children education staff, that bilingual teaching practices in Xinjiang were not guided by research, and that the impact of these on children's language skills had not been determined. Such venues are likely to provide opportunities for more analysis and discussion of current bilingual practices in the future.

### **2. Improving teaching skills**

Teacher training at several levels, followed by in-school support, has improved the quality of Mandarin and mother tongue teaching in ethnic and combined schools. Firstly, by training primary teachers in child centred teaching methods, most children now work in groups, play games, and do education activities that enable them to practice and use mother tongue and Mandarin. Then, training of 'bilingual' teachers in second language teaching methods has led to more widespread use of oral language and learning materials (or actions) to introduce new vocabulary. In most classrooms, the relationships between teachers and children have improved, the use of corporal punishment is reduced, children are happier to come to school, and they take a more active role in learning.

As government partners have seen teaching methods improve, it has been possible to do more to promote the use of mother tongue. This has taken place through two initiatives that are very new for Xinjiang schools, and have proved to be useful in helping to overcome problems that teachers had in using Mandarin as the language of instruction.

**a. Teaching new concepts through mother tongue:** Through discussions with education officials on language acquisition and classroom observations, we showed that children did not learn new maths concepts in Mandarin very easily, as they had difficulties understanding the language and understanding the concept. Together with a group of bilingual minority teachers, we developed “concept” booklets so that maths teachers could teach new concepts in mother tongue first, and then do other activities using specific words and phrases translated into Mandarin.

Not only has this initiative enabled the bridging of mother tongue to Mandarin, but it has also forced teachers to focus on specific structures to teach in Mandarin, thus reducing the amount of language they use, and bringing their language level down closer to that of the children.

**b. Developing a Mandarin language environment in the classroom:** Classroom observations, along with discussions with teachers and children found that children lacked the vocabulary to use Mandarin confidently or appropriately. ‘Bilingual’ teachers were shown how to create and manage a Mandarin language learning environment in their classrooms, so that children could express themselves in Mandarin and display their work. The teachers were also shown how to use more everyday language in Mandarin to label features of the classroom, make day/weather charts, and set up interest tables.

While this initiative focuses on the development of children’s Mandarin skills, it has increased the use of Uyghur and Kazakh in classrooms, as mother tongue teachers have been encouraged to set up similar learning environments in classrooms. Because these learning environments have increased children’s interest and confidence in Mandarin, they have also created an opportunity for us to revisit, in the near future, the possibility of setting up similar learning conditions in pre-school classrooms to increase the use of mother tongue.

### 3. Developing resources

There are limited mother tongue language resources available in schools. Therefore, all the resources developed in the project, such as the concept booklet for maths teachers and health booklets for parents, are produced in mother tongue, or in both languages. This has not only enabled us to spread materials more widely in minority schools and communities, but has also helped to raise the profile of mother tongue. The curricula for training events and the session plans for all workshops are prepared in mother tongue as well as Mandarin. All workshops in schools and communities are conducted in Kazakh or Uyghur to further promote mother tongue, particularly among government officials who tend to conduct training events in Mandarin.

### The future

Government partners are keen for Save the Children to expand project activities in Urumchi and Yining. Bilingual education will be a key part of this expansion, and we will increasingly work with more senior education and government officials. This will create increased opportunities to advocate for increased use of mother tongue in schools, and develop activities that further improve children’s mother tongue language skills. Possible activities include:

- Holding a regional conference on bilingual education, possibly in collaboration with organisations such as UNICEF and UNESCO
- Conducting study tours to sites where there is good bilingual policy and practice
- Collaborating with Xinjiang universities to carry out research on the impact of bilingual education approaches in the region

- Establishing mother tongue classes in communities mainly taught by minority teachers who have been made redundant through the implementation of the bilingual policy
- Setting up language environments in pre-schools to help bridging from mother tongue to Mandarin
- Developing mother tongue resources, such as story books, with minority communities and schools.

## **Conclusion**

It is not easy for Save the Children to support the development of bilingual education in Xinjiang, where there is increasing use of Mandarin as the principal or only language of instruction in schools. While this is seen as a way to improve the standard of Mandarin among minority graduates entering the work force, the emphasis on teaching Mandarin in schools has reduced the status of mother tongue, and raised concerns among ethnic minorities about its effect on the sustainability of mother tongue and local culture.

However, by working within the boundaries of government policies and ‘bilingual’ education practices, we have helped improve the quality of mother tongue and Mandarin teaching in minority schools. We have also helped solve some of the problems that education authorities and teachers have acknowledged in using Mandarin as the primary language of instruction.

Through successfully targeting such issues that are important to education authorities in project sites, we have enhanced our credibility as a partner in education development. Therefore, as we continue to develop our project work, and collaborate increasingly with officials at higher levels of government, there will be more opportunities to implement bilingual education approaches that demonstrate the value of teaching and using mother tongue. Working within the system, and in collaboration with government partners in Xinjiang, we believe, is the best way to influence regional bilingual education practices, and bring changes that help to restore the place of mother tongue in Xinjiang minority schools and communities.