

Exploring the Impact of Language Policy on Heritage Language Education: a Case of Tibetan Language Classroom

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Abstract: With the advancement of globalization and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Tibet, a great number of foreigners from all over the world gather to Tibet for the purpose of study, tourism or commercial trade. In this case, people with various cultures converge in Tibet, thus providing both challenges and chances for local Tibetans to maintain and develop their own culture and the heritage language within it while interacting with other cultures. A great number of researches have shown that although there are many locals in the Tibetan region, many of them have a low level of speaking Tibetan language, not to mention literacy ability, as some Tibetan dialects have no written form at all, especially for those who have left Tibet to study or work at a young age. In order to cope with this problem, distinct language policies are implemented in Tibet according to its multiple dialects and heritage ethnic culture. This paper explores the impact of language policy on Tibetan heritage language teaching and learning in Tibet area, and further discusses the issue of local Tibetans' identity in the multilingual context of Tibet, which has practical significance for Tibet's language teaching pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The distinct geographical location of Tibet implies that it has more opportunities to form a multilingual environment for language teaching and learning. Tibet is located in the northwest of China, which borders with several countries including Kashmir, India, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal. As an important border for China and an essential route to above mentioned countries, Tibet intermixes its own native language with various foreign languages spoken by above neighbouring countries. On the other hand, a variety of native Tibetan ethnic minorities also lead to the linguistic diversity of the Tibetan region. Tibet is an ethnic autonomous region which is composed of many ethnic minorities, such as Naxi, Luoba, Nu, Menba, Hui and other nationalities^[20]. Every ethnic has its own unique dialect, symbol and customs to distinguish from others. Tibetan as the most frequent used language in Tibet also shows a clear difference with standard Mandarin in the aspect of vowels and consonants^[22]. Therefore, there is a multilingual even multicultural environment in Tibet because of its geographical location and various local ethnic minority groups.

This paper aims to explore how language policy in China may influence heritage language teaching and learning. Tibetan language as an important heritage language in urgent need of protection is analyzed as a case to reveal the situation of bilingual education in ethnic minority areas in China. To start with, literature about previous Tibetan language researches and relevant language policies are presented. Next, issues of Tibetan language teaching and learning in Tibet's classrooms are analyzed from three aspect - the dominance of Mandarin, influence of stereotypical views towards minority groups' and Tibetan students' identity. Finally, key points of the discussion are summarized in the conclusion part.

2. Literature Review

Since 1949, the Chinese government has implemented a number of language policies in order to preserve minority languages usage and growth^[24]. According to previous literature, three historical stages in the implementation of minority language policy can be summarized as following, which safeguard heritage language speakers' right to develop their own language step by step.

“Pluralistic stage” is the first stage which lasted from 1949 to 1957. In this period of time, local ethnic minority citizens were encouraged to use various dialects in any public places, such as school, hospital and supermarket. Even officials from Han nationality which is the dominant nationality in China were trained in minority languages^[23] if they worked in regions inhabited by ethnic groups. Therefore, the right of using ethnic dialects for minority groups was highlighted in this first stage.

Next, the year of 1958 to 1977 marked the arrival of “Chinese monopolistic stage”. The most obvious feature of this stage was the predominance of mind assimilation. In this case, the official language in minority areas was Mandarin rather than natives' own dialects, which implies the assimilation in heritage language education^[8]. It would be seen as a threat for ethnic harmony and national unity to advocate bilingualism and multilingualism in the second stage^[11]. The policy of impeding bilingual and multilingual education in some extent limited the development of minority languages and undermined the language diversity which further resulted in some dialects in minority areas becoming endangered.

From 1978 to present, the mistake of restricting the use of local dialects has been corrected by the final stage which is called “recovery and development stage”. That is to say, bilingual and multilingual education are prevalent once again in classroom depending on the circumstances. According to the Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities published in 1984, for schools with a predominantly ethnic minority student intake, minority language is allowed in the textbooks^[6]. In order to promote the development of ethnic heritage language, model Tibetan-use units were set up by the Tibetan Language Committee to generalize exemplary use of the Tibetan language^[24].

Although policies of protecting heritage language in minority areas have been established, it is noticed that the use of Tibetan language is sharply declined in Tibet Autonomous Region^[10]. Researches have shown that the number of students who were taught by Tibetan language in Tibet was declined from 95% in the year of 2000 to 5% in the year of 2007. The same situation could be found in other ethnic minority areas as well^[15]. Therefore, there is a gap between heritage language policy and practice in reality due to the lack of professional heritage language teachers and appropriate teaching materials^[3]. Moreover, the dominant position of Mandarin in language education also negatively impacts the development of other minority languages in China. Thus, how the heritage language policy is put into effect in Tibet and other autonomous regions in China deserve discussions.

3. Heritage Language Education in Tibet

3.1 Mandarin-Dominant Situation

There is no doubt that Mandarin is the most spoken language in China. Especially in the context of globalization, most people choose to leave their hometown to other provinces even other countries for better academic achievement or career prospects. Thus, people from Tibet are easily influenced by Mandarin in a broader social environment. In 1956, language policy which stressed the popularization of Mandarin was established - “the state promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua [Mandarin Chinese] (common speech based on Beijing pronunciation)”^[18]. Through emphasizing the necessary of promoting Mandarin throughout China, this policy highlights and confirms Mandarin's dominant position. Tibetan as the most important dialect in Tibet is inevitably influenced by the promotion of Mandarin. The impact of Mandarin on Tibetan language teaching and learning is analyzed as following.

From the perspective of school, the bilingual system in Tibet consists of Tibet and Mandarin. Most schools in Tibet adopt the Tibetan-medium type which uses Tibetan as instructional language in class. In this case, Mandarin is a compulsory subject for all the students. Schools are trying to

achieve a balanced bilingualism between Tibetan and Mandarin for students in Tibet. However, as academic competition has gotten heated in China, Mandarin as a mandatory subject in the high school examination or college entrance examination has been prioritized in school's curriculum, which sacrifices students' learning time and motivation of Tibetan language. What's more, the high dropout rates among students in Tibet ^{[12][21]} and the shortage of qualified Tibetan language teachers ^{[1][13]} are also reasons for the absence of Tibetan language teaching. Because of above mentioned factors, the dominance of Mandarin in Tibet has already impacted Tibetan language structure to develop it in a similar vocabulary system, grammar rules and syntax structure with Mandarin ^[14]. Thus, there a call for analyzing how students perceive Tibetan language in the textbooks and whether textbooks in Tibetan language education can positively effect students' Tibetan language achievement.

3.2 Tibetan Language in Textbooks

The national uniform curriculum is required to be used for students in ethnic autonomous regions from grade 3 ^{[25][7]}. Within this official uniform curriculum, the instructional language is Mandarin rather than Tibetan dialect. Tibetan traditional customs and symbols are also marginalized in Mandarin-dominant textbooks ^[18]. The reason is that all the language policies in China are dependent on the development of the Chinese national unity and defend national unification. The language policy would be invalid if there is any intention of separating the concept of one harmonious nation ^[9]. Thus, Han culture occupies the centre stage in textbooks while language and culture of ethnic minority groups are marginalized, under-represented and even misrepresented. For example, through analyzing language education for Tibetan students in Sichuan province, Upton (1999) finds that the textbook is intentionally promoting the concept of ethnic unity among Tibetan students ^[17]. Since Tibetan students are exposure to the Mandarin-dominant environment and do not have enough opportunities to deepen their understanding and knowledge of local Tibetan culture, there is a risk of losing both Tibetan heritage language and culture.

Besides of the marginalization of Tibetan language and culture, the stereotypical views towards ethnic minorities is another issue in Mandarin textbooks which hinders the development and popularity of the Tibetan language. According to Chu's research in 2015, textbooks always describe minority culture as "primitive, traditional, exotic or distant" ^[2]. Other researchers also state that the texts in textbooks relevant to ethnic minority groups are depicted as unscientific, backward or lack of civilization ^[18]. Although heritage language policy stresses the importance of protecting endangered dialects and the right to use various local languages, Mandarin as the dominant language is far more represented in textbooks than minority languages. The gap between language policy and practice in language education implies that the stereotypical view of ethnic minorities needs to be corrected from an objective perspective. Upton (1996) suggests that "the view of Tibetan history that is presented in the formal curriculum under the current political and cultural regime is far removed from the 'real history' that so many Tibetans at home and abroad currently crave" ^[16]. A more decent image of local Tibetans' life and culture derived from modern Tibetan sources can not only generate positive impact on heritage Tibetan language preservation and development, but also provide chances for Tibetan students to establish their Tibetan identity.

3.3 Analysis of Tibetan students' Identity

Identity means the sense of "belongings" ^[19], in this essay, identity refers to Tibetan students' perception of belongings in the context of learning Mandarin as a second language. According to Heller (2000), it is difficult to achieve equal status for both languages in bilingualism because deeper cultural identification and higher social values are always achieved by the dominant language ^[5], that is the Mandarin in this case. Students in Tibet tend to form a multilayered identity because of the various dialects and languages usage environment, which consists of their native Tibetan identity and Mandarin-dominant identity. In order to develop the Tibetan identity, it is necessary to balance between Tibetan heritage language and Mandarin and further create bilingual even multilingual identity.

Nevertheless, the current Tibetan language education can not serve the purpose of maintaining

students' Tibetan identity effectively. For students who are exposure in a massive Mandarin usage environment, there is no support of Tibetan culture, customs and symbols from the school, which results in gradual deviation from their local culture and language. In this case, Tibetan language teaching is necessary for students to not only meet the demand of protecting heritage language, but also achieve greater cultural empathy and cognitive flexibility. In other words, heritage language education in curriculum is an effective way to fulfil the identity need. However, researchers have suggested that ethnic minorities' language and culture are inevitably influenced by the Mandarin-dominant context and globalization forces ^[16] [4]. One way to cope with this issue is designing appropriate bilingual education curriculum in ethnic minority regions, thus achieving the goal of mediating students' ethnic minority identity through balancing local heritage language and Mandarin.

4. Conclusion

Because of the Mandarin-dominant context and stereotypical views of minority cultures in Tibet and other similar ethnic minority areas, bilingual schools and educators face great challenges in developing local heritage language and mediating students' bilingual identity between Mandarin and local dialects. It is worth noting that bilingual education is not two separate monolingual education. In contrast, the relationship between two language systems are interrelated, which assists learners in becoming creative in more than one language and across a spectrum of literature and cultures, thereby maintaining a balance between diversity and unity. Thus, there is call for heritage language education in school curriculum to fulfil both linguistics and identity need.

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