

# Trilingual Literacy for Ethnic Groups in China

## A case study of Hani People in Yuanyang County of Yunnan

Yuanbing Duan

School of Arts and Science, Yunnan Radio and TV University, Kunming, 650223, China

Tel: 86-871-588-6817 E-mail: duanyuanbing@yahoo.com.cn

Received: May 23, 2011

Accepted: June 13, 2011

Published: December 1, 2011

doi:10.5539/elt.v4n4p274

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n4p274>

### Abstract

This paper examines the current trilingual literacy situation of Hani People in Yuanyang County of Yunnan, China, with significance of finding out specific problems which influence the trilingual education greatly. It also reports on the effects of training for trilingual teachers, ways of improving learner's motivation and updating the trilingual education materials. Lastly, several possible solutions are provided for successful minority education.

**Keywords:** Trilingual literacy, Trilingual education, Minority education

### 1. Introduction

This paper will discuss one part of school literacy in China, to be specific, how do ethnic groups start learning English, their difficulties and problems in current situation, and suggested solutions are provided for guiding students' literacy success.

With the reform and open policy carried out in 1978, education in China has gained its growing concern; more and more people have had the consciousness of being literate. However, literacy means two different levels in countryside and in cities. In rural countryside, to complete middle school education owns the opportunity of attaining stable job to meet local demand, education at this level simply means having the ability to read and write; while in the big cities, pursuing higher degree, university education or post graduate education, highlight the functional meaning of literacy; being 'knowledgeable' at this high level requires the ability to read between lines and write academically. Therefore, it is hard to keep the same pace in terms of literacy throughout the whole China.

Yunnan is a frontier province located in the southwest of China with its English interpretation 'South of the Clouds', indicating its distance to the central capital of China. Whenever mentioned about it, an interwoven picture of diversity ethnic cultures, wonderful places of interest, colorful food customs suddenly come to mind. Among these, ethnic groups in Yunnan attract international scholars from a variety of fields. There are all together 26 ethnic groups with respective cultures and customs. Comparing with Han Chinese, which is considered the majority, ethnic people have lower percentage of population (ninety million people) in line with its name, minorities. Historians have great interests on the history and development of specific group; ethnographies focus on origin and transformation of minority people; linguists pay special attention to their minority educations and languages. According to Hansen (1999), "there is a great tendency to regard all of them as one relatively homogenous group of people in need of more or less uniform special considerations within education" (p.167), minority literacy has been put into research agenda.

The United Nations Decade of Education for sustainable Development, which began in 2005 and runs to 2014, was established to promote a commitment to education that works optimistically and with moral responsibility towards a future for all by valuing diverse ways of knowing. As an EFL teacher in Yunnan, to pay particular focus on the diverse ways of school literacy by ethnic minority students will make a contribution to this international endeavor of education for sustainable development.

In short, to narrow down my concerns of this paper are how do ethnic people start to learn English; what is their learning situation, what might be problems in their contexts and what are possible solutions. To find out answers to address these particular questions is the aim of this paper, Hani ethnic groups in Yuanyang will be taken for a close look.

### 2. Profile of Yuanyang and Hani People

Administratively, Yunnan is divided into 16 prefectures and 128 counties and Yuanyang is a border county lies in the

south of Honghe Hani and Yi ethnic autonomous prefecture. In this prefecture, Hani and Yi people account for the highest percentage, they have gained some privileges for some aspects, such as only Hani and Yi people can be elected to be the governor; they can gain extra 20 points in the national entrance examination. Hani people, who has high reputation of hard working and diligent, accounts for 54 percent of its population at Yuanyang, however, compared with Han Chinese students, they are relatively less educated than largely due to socio-economic and geographic factors.

In Hani language, 'Ha' means 'mountain', 'Ni' means 'people', thus Hani means 'people live in the mountains' (Shi, 1999, p.38). Geographically, they are scattered in compact communities mainly in the Ailao Mountain region, bordering Vietnam. It has been believed that there is a close relationship between nature and mankind, so Hani village is usually located on the top of a ridge and within a dense forest. They cut off most of their connections with outside world, especially with non-Hani peoples due to inconvenience transportation (Luka, 2000). Hani people have special religion called Animism, which holds the truth that souls are quasi-physical and can exist outside of the body, can be transferred from one body to another and persist after the death of the body. The distinctive religion may affect the worldview of Hani people, and further has influence on their attitude towards education.

Generally speaking, Hani ethnic minority students speak their mother tongue, or Hani language (L1) before coming to school as a result of having rare interactions with the outside world. In other words, speaking L1 will fully meet the daily communication within Hani communities. Hani children lead a very simple and easy life, taking care of sisters and brothers, looking after draught animals, assisting farm works. As a result, most of them never touch Mandarin or standard Chinese (L2) until primary schooling. The process of learning L2 at primary is called bilingual education. Later, when they enter junior school, they have to learn English, which is considered as their foreign language or third language (L3). They will not stop learning English until the end of their school lives, including Masters and Doctors. Thus they hopefully become trilingual in their mother tongue, Mandarin as well as English. Since China entered WTO (World Trade Organization), English has become more and more significant. English language learning has gained a prominent role for educators and teachers who attempts to improve English education in China nationwide. Under such a world order, trilingual education has become a heated topic and English literacy for ethnic students is inevitable. However, L3 education in current situation is far too satisfactory. The following part will briefing the development of trilingualism.

### 3. Literature on Trilingual Education

In China, the term "trilingual" education is defined in a narrow sense. Lin (1990) noted that trilingual education is the education through the medium of three languages. That is to say, ethnic groups with separate mother tongue in Chinese contexts will take the advantage of three language education.

Historical reasons have formed the three language situation. According to the China-nationwide census of 1990, 90 million people, who account for about 8% of China's total population, belong to minority nationalities. They are considered as very important part of Chinese society for three reasons: minorities occupy a big proportion of Chinese land area, 62%; they take over 90% of border regions; a great part of natural resources, such as forestry, mining and tropical crops are located in national minority regions (Hayhoe, 1992, p.308). Additionally, with the political and economic system-reform policies, ethnic identity became more and more significant in the early 1980s, namely the rising prosperity of 1980s and 1990s (Colin, 1995).

Under such circumstances, it is important to maintain the stability of the border region, to make good use of natural resources and furthermore to help ethnic people remove from poverty. The government tried to promote a "unified multi-ethnic country"; non-Han populations have the right to preserve their own languages, cultures and religions over a long period of time until all nationalities ultimately "melt together" (Hansen,1999.p.12). Education is one of the solutions for ethnic development, including English language literacy.

In addition, the government has come to realize that China's opening up to the other countries not only depends on "bilingualism" but also by which the government requires English curriculum to start at the secondary education in minority districts (Yang 2000, cited in Yuan, 2006). That is why there are increasing studies done in this field.

Huang (2003) concluded two types of bilingual instruction in China. One focus on some programs of Mongolian, Tibetan, and Korean people, their courses are conducted in their L1 (mother tongues), and L2 (Chinese) is used only in one of the courses; the other type emphasizes on the courses which are conducted by Chinese (L2), and (L1) is used only when students cannot understand. In 1990s, Huang investigated the effects of bilingual education of Miao and Jingpo in Yunnan, which belong to the second type, showing that instruction with the aid of L1 is much better than instruction solely conducted through the medium Chinese. This research has gained some support. A teacher may use code switching as a teaching technique if problems of comprehension arise, as Camilleri suggested (1994, cited in Mercer et al, 2007, p.134).

Considering the relationship between L1, L2 and L3, Hu (2007) found out two interesting aspects on Dai and Aini People in southern Yunnan: bilingualism has little effect on the study of L3; ethnic students who did very well in L2 might not perform well in L3.

#### 4. Problems

Based on the discussion, the potential problems for L3 learning situation are:

Lack of professional L3 teachers will be taken into the first consideration as teacher is the major carrier of knowledge. As the old Chinese proverb goes, “if you want to give your students a drop of water, you should have a bucket of water”, indicating the vital place of a professional teacher. Good teacher should be knowledgeable and learned; as far as L3 concerned, it requires a teacher with correct and clear pronunciation, understandable speaking language, appropriate ability of L3 reading and writing; good teacher should have the ability to impart knowledge to students, which requires teaching strategy as well; this part involves tactics of meeting various demand of the learners and teaching relating to the local situations, such as ethnic identity, cultures, social background and religions of Hani people. Currently, Yuanyang is facing a serious challenge of lacking L3 teachers due to the painstaking living situations and low payment.

Many ethnic groups are in short of L3 motivation; Yuan (2006) carried out a study on Miao, Zhuang, Yi and Hani ethnic groups, the result shows they are less motivated as Han people and their language proficiency of L3 is relatively low. Motivation can create impetus of learning, which is proved has positive correlation with language proficiency. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation has been classified into two main types: instrumental motivation and integrate motivation. The former is the motivation which comes from a learner’s assessment of the utilitarian value of linguistic achievement, such as passing exams, getting ahead in one’s occupation or gaining financial rewards, in this case, motivation serves as a tool to achieve the goal; the latter comes from a wish to learn more about the other cultural community and eventually integrate with the target language community, in this case, motivation serves as a purpose in order to “integrate” language, culture and people together. However, Hani people in Yuanyang lack both types of motivations to some extent due to their weak performance in learning L3. Instrumental motivation plays a more important role than integrate one because they can easily judge from its profits. Yuanyang is on her way for applying the world heritage site, good command of L3 will have the opportunity to make money so as to get rid of poverty.

Next, inappropriate learning method should be paid to the third concern; learning is a dynamic process which involves interaction between teacher and learner. The problem is teacher teaches the big class with one method, the class has been pushed forward into passive learning, influenced by Confucius ideology, unaware of learner-centered method will benefit both learners and teachers. Besides, individual difference will encourage different people to use different method toward the long and tedious learning process.

Additionally, teaching textbooks and materials should be counted; minority students in Yuanyang use the same textbook with other Han students and take part in the same examination. It is very hard for Hani students to keep the same level with Han because they are taking the advantage of working with their first language (Chinese).

Lastly, authentic learning environment is extremely limited. Debi (1998) affirms that a child’s intellectual and linguistic development does not get maximal opportunities either if he or she is not sufficient exposed to her target culture or environment. The situation is even worse for Hani students, in most cases they choose the nearest middle school to have their school education where equips nothing except a self-taught English teacher, let alone the authentic environment.

#### 5. Suggested Solutions

Five suggestions will be put forward in order to improve the learning outcomes of trilingual literacy of Hani students.

At first, adequate and qualified teachers are vital for the success of trilingual education in Yuanyang; teaching is a magic job which requires the magician a lot of skills. Teachers are trying to accomplish certain things when they give a lecture on some topics or ask students to engage in various activities. Successful teachers know how to accomplish their goals and do regular basis. Unsuccessful teachers, in contrast, try to make things happen in their classroom but have trouble getting the results that they want (Byrnes & Wasik, 2003).

Effective teacher can deal with the following without difficulties. He will know what are goals and needs of Hani students; he will grasp the general principles of efficient instruction, such as scaffolding, guided participation, modeling, and fading; he will have the knowledge of that RRE (Routines, Receptions and Exposure) are more important than IRF (Initiation, Response and Feedback); he will be familiar with Hani minority’s history and living customs and can combine Hani stories with the updated textbook and expand to authentic materials; he will know

that activities should be meaningful and challenging, which will increase students motivation of learning.

Secondly, first language use and development needs to be encouraged, especially when students are at the starting level; Learning turns to be easier when teachers build up connections between two languages. Liu Baojun (1993) and Shama Jiaga (1991) argued that learning through ethnic minority students' mother tongues would help build a bridge between school and home, arouse their interest and help them develop a sense of confidence and respect. Lin (1997) also suggests that learning in one's own language should start in the first grade, while mandarin should be introduced in the secondary school.

Thirdly, find out similarities between L1 and L3. In the early 1950s, the Chinese government helped Hani people develop a set of written system. This system took Dazhai Hani language of Luchun County as a standard Hani language with a spelling system of Latin-like letters (Shi, 1999, p.29). If similarities can be found between L1 and L3, it will benefit Hani students learning, for instance, Dai people are born with talented dialect with Thai language; it is easier for them to learn Thai than other minorities.

Fourthly, rich environment is created to arouse interest and motivation of L3 students. Oxford and Shearin (1994) claimed that language development deserves and requires a stimulating environment. Without the environment, the individual's inborn, motivated quest for cognitive growth will be hindered, informing the significance of L3 environment. Rich printing materials, classroom languages, as well as practicing activities will form good learning environment.

Lastly, local solutions must be adapted to local problems. Although minorities only occupy a small percentage, they are scattered in different parts of Yunnan, with special local varieties. Therefore, local solutions can fulfill the regional demand of a particular place

## 6. Conclusion

This paper describes the learning situation of Hani people in Yuanyang County in China with special focus on the third language literacy. Despite numerous studies carried out on various ethnic groups, there is no case dealing with Yuanyang Hani people. For gaining a success of L3 education, five potential problems are summarized together with corresponding possible solutions proposed so as to assist minority education in China nationwide.

## References

- Byrnes, J., & Wasik, B. (2003). *Language and literacy development, what educators needs to know*. Guilford Press.
- Colin, M. (1995). *China's minority culture: identities and integration since 1912*. Melbourne: Longman Australia & New York.
- Debi, P. P. (1988). Monolingual myopia and the petals of the Indian Lotus. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, and J. Communing, *minority education: from shame to struggle*. London: Minority Rights Group. pp. 378-388
- Gardner, R., & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov. (1999). *Lessons in Beijing Chinese—minority education and ethnic identity in southwest china*. University of Washinton press, Seattle and London.
- Hayhoe, R. (1992). *Education and modernization—the Chinese experience*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Hu, D. Y. (2007). *Trilingual education of members from ethnic minority nationalities in Yunnan*. Kunming: Yunnan University press.
- Huang, X. (2003). Minority language planning of china: in relation to use and development. Paper presented at the conference on language development, language revitalization and multilingual education, Bangkok.
- Lin, J. (1997). Policies and practices of bilingual education for minority in china. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18(3), 193-205. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01434639708666314>
- Lin, X. R. (1990). A report on the investigation of bilingualism in A Ba Tibetan Prefecture in Sichuan provience. In T. Fu (ed.), *Collected Essays on Bilingual studies for china ' national minorities*. Beijing: ethnic publishing house. pp. 84-106
- Liu, B. J. (1993). The importance of minority nationality mother tongue in bilingual education and its development of prospect. *Journal of Minzu Yuwen*, 3, 75-78
- Luka, C. (2000). Akha Ecology: past, present and future. Paper presented at the third international proseminor of Hani/ Akha culture in Jingong, Yunnan, China.
- Mercer, Neil, Swann, Joan, & Mayor, Barbara. (2007). *Learning English*. London: Routledge.

- Oxford, R., & Shearin, J. (1994). Language Learning Motivation: Expanding the Theoretical Framework. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78 (1), 12-28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/329249>
- Shama, J. (1991). The development of minority language textbooks and problems. *China national education*, 2, 55-57
- Shi, J. C. (1999). *A grand sight of the hani culture*. Kunming: Yunnan national publishing house.
- Yuan, Y. C. (2006). *Attitude and motivation for English learning of ethnic minority students in China*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.