English Learning in Chinese Minority Areas: The Challenges and New Directions

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Abstract—This paper examines the English teaching, the use of English, and the attitudes towards English learning amongst university students coming from Chinese minority areas. Starting with the introduction of China's ethnic minority education, this paper explores the situation of current English education in minority areas in China. After the brief introduction, the paper describes the current English curriculum requirements in universities and schools based on the Chinese Educational System, including both major parts and ethnic minority areas. This is followed by a discussion of the research design to investigate the differences in students' attitudes on English extracurricular between minority students and students coming from urban areas. Afterwards, research findings are provided. In conclusion, it provides suggestions and discussions of the challenges and new directions for minority English education.

Index Terms—Chinese minority area, English learning and teaching, Chinese Educational System, English extracurricular, English curriculum

I. INTRODUCTION

Although English, as a foreign language, was first taught in 1862, the Chinese Cultural Revolution became a stumbling block to the development of English education after the foundation of the PRC. Thus, English language learning did not become an essential part of Chinese Education until the late 1970s. From the beginning of the 1980s to the present, English teaching and learning has been in a higher status than other subjects in schools and universities both academically and practically (Gil, 2006). However, English teaching and learning has been largely ignored by both Chinese and western scholars for decades. As we know, China is a developing country with more than 1.3 billion population, among which 8% makes up minority population. Thus, it is essential to investigate their attitudes on English learning and teaching in the development of English language in China. This paper presents research findings based on the survey and interviews. It explains the current difficulties of English learning for minorities. Also, it suggests challenges and new directions.

A. *Current English Learning and Teaching in Minority Areas*

It is known that China has 55 different ethnic minorities but the regions where most ethnic population is in are designated as autonomous areas. In mainland China, there are five autonomous areas, 30 autonomous prefectures, and more than 120 autonomous counties. The minorities have the equal rights as others, such as the freedom of choosing religions, the rights of free speech and writing, and the rights of education. Accordingly, the central government allocates funds to help these areas to build ethnic minority schools. What is more, many undergraduates and post graduates can have privileges when hunting jobs after graduation if they are willing to work in autonomous areas for more than two years as in-service teachers. Although the Central government and the Ministry education put much effort to help these minority schools to improve their education level, the gap between the minorities and Han nationalities is still very obvious in English education. Lacking English language educational resources, largely advocacy of bilingual education policy, and limited use for English are three major reasons.

Lack of educational resources

Educational resources play an important role in all levels of education. Some significant improvements have been made since the foundation of the PRC, the overall situation is still not satisfied, particularly, in the rural areas. There are shortages of "teachers, books, and all other educational facilities" (Mackerras, 1995, p. 139). Based on the researches, it is not difficult to find examples of extremely poor ethnic schools (Postiglione, 1992). In Wuwu County, Guangxi Province had only one toilet for 2000 students. Also, students and teachers had to use their legs as desks since the school buildings were not safe for learning and teaching (Postiglione, 1992, p. 324). Compared with these educational infrastructures, English learning resources are largely slim. According to Kong and Chen (2012), large quantities of ethnic university students lack English learning resources to improve their spoken and listening ability. A lack of teaching resources is prevalent in English education in minority areas. Although the number has been increased these years, there is still a shortcoming in qualified teachers. Gao (2011) researched in Inner Mongolia and supported that "the number of teaching staff capable in English remains in insufficient and most schools carried out English education in Chinese" (p.153). Some teachers are unwilling to work in minority areas because of poor conditions and unsatisfied career plans (Postiglione, 1992, pp. 323-324; 1999), and in cases where there are qualified teachers, some want to quit

teaching to hunt satisfied jobs in more developed coastal cities (Shih, 2002, p. 186). Another example was in Baiwu Town of the Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. Schools in surrounding areas did not provide education for students from Grade 4 to Grade 6 so that all students needed to go to the same primary school in Baiwu if they wanted to continue receiving education. However, some students need to walk for nearly two hours since they live far away from the school in Baiwu (Harrell & Ma, 1999, p. 224). A survey in a western minority area school by the State Education Department Research Center showed that “37.8 percent schools lack enough desks and stools, 22.3 percent schools do not have safe classrooms and offices, and about 32.5 percent schools do not have enough funds to buy teaching aids” (Yang, 2005, p. 20). Therefore, it is argued that perhaps more educational resources should be allocated to minority areas and attitudes towards ethnic groups should be significantly changed, which could be possible to improve English language teaching and learning (Gil, 2006).

Bilingual education policy

Implementing a bilingual education policy in minority areas has many merits but it is difficult to put into practice. Firstly, the purpose of bilingual education is not clear so that it becomes like a transitional language education (Baker, 1996). It also reveals that this ambiguity exists in minority education in China (Shoji, 2003). Based on the policy, it plans to promote the use of the minority languages and to emphasize the importance of perceiving its own culture. On the contrary, in fact, this policy finally becomes a tool to expand Mandarin (Shoji, 2003). Secondly, qualified bilingual teachers are largely in a shortage. Because of poverty, slim chances to attract qualified bilingual teachers to devote their efforts to implement bilingual education to minority students, let alone to improve their language learning and realize their rights (Xing, 2001). Thirdly, English, as a third language is rather difficult to be instructed in minority areas. Based on the bilingual education policy, students need to be a proficient bilingual learner in the primary education then they have access to learn a third language-English otherwise they cannot understand the transitional language-Mandarin. Although many researchers have indicated that bilingual learners have a higher metalinguistic awareness than monolingual learners and bilingual students can learn a third language in a quicker pace, it is unlikely to learn a third language efficiently as it will add a heavily burden on a bilingual learning process. In other words, the bilingual education policy and English language learning are not realistic in a harmony in Chinese minority areas (Gao, 2011).

Limited use of English

The function of a language is to communicate in a social context (Klippel, 1987; Leech & Svartvik, 1974). Based on Gil's research, English has very slim chances to use and little presence in minority areas (Gil, 2006). It is found that students and teachers are two main groups to speak English compared with students in other areas (Gil, 2006, p. 457). Similarly, some empirical researches illustrated that an unbalanced economic development in minority areas and other big cities hinder graduate to progress and develop themselves in the local employment markets, which further lead to a fierce competition in seeking jobs in these areas. Given the situation, a large number of students give up English learning in an early age since they do not think it is useful for them in future.

B. English Curriculum Requirements

After the restoration of the College Entrance Examination in 1978, the Ministry of Education issued a trial English Syllabus for secondary schools for the whole nation. Although, English language teaching has been paid more attention to in the early days of the 1980s, the aim of the teaching was to boost the national economy and technological exchange. Therefore, the school teachers just focused on how to develop students' intellectual abilities rather than to teach them how to learn a different language. The suggested teaching approach was a combination of the grammar-translation method and audio-lingualism (Adamson & Morris, 1997). In 1982, the syllabus was subsequently revised to satisfy the needs of English language teaching in key secondary schools. To put more effort and to raise the teaching and learning quality in schools curriculum, the time allocated for English class was from 656 hours to 960 hours per year for students (Ministry of Education, 1982). Also, the English textbooks for secondary schools were revised at that time. On the one hand, it required teachers in schools to emphasize more on intonation training and oral practice through pattern drilling at the early stage of the 1980s (G Hu, 2002; S. M. Hu & Seifman, 1987). On the other hand, however, because of a lack of information about English teaching from other countries in the world, English teachers still followed a similar pedagogical approach as those published before Cultural Revolution- a method of grammar-translation in English language classrooms. Although the students could have access to oral training, it seemed very hard to change traditional practice characterized by detailed study of sentence-level grammar, text-translation, rote learning of vocabulary and reading and writing skills. The other feature was that the textbooks were heavily emphasized literacy together with political and moral messages, which dominated secondary English language teaching for a decade.

Since the 1990s, the English language curriculum has been experienced a top-down reform from primary schools to universities in China. First of all, English exams play an important role in the educational framework in all levels of education. Chinese students must attend English exams in order to get a satisfactory score if they want to continue to receive a higher education. It is basically required that a Nine-year compulsory education occurs for all Chinese children. This refers to children who are seven years old need to receive a basic nine years education, from primary schools to junior middle schools. After these nine years, students could have access to hunt a job or advance their English learning in senior middle schools according to their family economic burden. Apart from family affairs, whether students could be accepted to a top university and further to be a postgraduate, English examination is essential in their life. Figure 1 below shows the details of the framework. Moreover, English has been implemented as a

compulsory subject from Grade three from primary schools in some coastal cities and developed areas, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Thirdly, it is required to promote students' communicative skills as an essential task in English language education, which should be presented in newly issued English textbooks and learning materials. Compared with the traditional GT (Grammar Translation) Method, the Ministry of Education have emphasized improving students' communicative competence is the key to motivate them to learn a language (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Figure 1. The educational framework

Compared with the major parts in China, however, it is not the case that everyone is able to enjoy this kind of policy. As mentioned previously, largely advocating bilingual education is finally to emphasize learning Chinese instead of promoting students' abilities on learning a foreign language. What is more, ethnic autonomous regions have the authority to develop their own educational programs, including "levels and kinds of schools, curriculum content, and languages of instruction" (Postiglione, 2009, p. 503). Thus, it is allowed to have some flexibility regarding unique regional differences in education. It is illustrated that there is no history of foreign language education when compared with urban schools, many of which have over 50 years' experiences in English teaching (Gao, 2011).

II. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

So far the cases of English learning has been researched in broad terms (H. Hu, 2004; Hua, 2001a, 2001b; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). However, little attention has been paid to English as a third language in minority areas. In order to understand better the actual situation and improve English language teaching and learning in minority areas, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were carried out in the first semester of 2012-1-2013 in a Chinese minority university. This university was chosen for its large ethnic population and its top rank in China. With more than 15,000 students in the subject university, almost 80% of the students are minorities and these students come from nearly 55 different ethnic regions. Also, this university is ranked in the 2nd place among minority universities within mainland China. Thus, it is reasonable to choose this university as a subject university in this subject.

Participants

The information sheet of this research was emailed to the university students on campus before the project was conducted. In the information sheet, it has noted that research topic, research process and research method. Thus, it is believed that students could understand all the information related to the research. In the first semester of 2012, 150 students participated in this research questionnaire. After the survey, 20 students were willing to join in the semi-structured interviews, including 13 female students and seven male students.

Instrument design

In the first phrase, the questionnaire was designed to examine students' attitude towards their English learning and

their teachers' teaching, particularly, on the English activities outside English classes, which adopted a five-Likert Scale (Likert, 1932) was utilized in this survey. The semi-structured interview was conducted after the survey, which concluded 10 questions. These 10 questions were believed to further explore students' views towards their learning and their teaching problems as a supplementary of the questionnaire.

Data analysis

The Statistics Software SPSS 19.0 was used to analyse the quantitative data. In order to ensure the validity of the study, the students were required to complete the same questionnaire twice, which was a month time in between. Later, the agreement analysis was used by SPSS to test the inner validity and credibility of this questionnaire. For the case of two raters, this function gives Cohen's kappa (weighted and unweighted) and Scott's pi as measures of inter-rater agreement for two raters' categorical assessments (Fleiss, 1981; Scott, 1995). For three or more raters, this function gives extensions of the Cohen kappa method, due to Fleiss and Cuzick (1979) in the case of two possible responses per rater, and Fleiss, Nee and Landis (1979) in the general case of three or more responses per rater. According to Landis and Koch (1977), the strength of agreement is divided into five levels, from poor to very good, which shows in table 1. Therefore, this survey had a strong strength since the strength of agreement reaches 0.715 in this study.

TABLE 1.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KAPPA VALUES AND THE STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT

Kappa	Strength of agreement
< 0.2	Poor
> 0.2 >= 0.4	Fair
> 0.4 >= 0.6	Moderate
> 0.6 >= 0.8	Good
> 0.8	Very good

Among 150 participants, 95 students, including 52 males and 43 females, returned their questionnaires with a 63% response rate. More than half of these 95 students came from ethnic regions. The details are presented in the following figure.

Figure 1. The background information of the participants

In this project, two groups of students (minority and non-minority) need to be tested by using the Mann-Whitney U Test as it tests for differences between two independent variables on a continuous measure (Pallant, 2007).

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Phase I

After the SPSS software analysis, it finds out two questions in the survey are strongly significantly to the minorities. Question 9 asks students' attitudes on using computers to assist their English learning and teaching. Question 10 is regarding their opinions of using English via blogs and the Internet to contact foreign friends. Scale 1-5 represent 'never', 'seldom', 'sometimes', 'often', and 'very frequent' respectively. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics of these two questions.

From the descriptive statistics (Table 1), students prefer to use computers as media to assist their English learning rather than using Internet and blogs to communicate with foreign friends by comparing the mean values in two groups ($2.22 > 1.76$).

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS IN QUESTIONS.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Location	95	1	2	1.40	.492
Q7	95	1	5	2.22	1.222
Q9	95	1	5	1.76	.942
Valid N (listwise)	95				

By using a Mann-Whitney U test, it shows that 95 students coming from minority areas and urban areas have significant difference in these two questions. In Table 3 and Table 4 below, we can see that the P values (Asymp. Sig.) of two questions are less than 0.05 ($0.029 < 0.05$, $0.035 < 0.05$), which are considered to be significant (Pallant, 2007).

TABLE 3.
A MANN-WHITNEY U TEST OF QUESTION 7

Test Statistics ^a	
	Q7
Mann-Whitney U	808.500
Wilcoxon W	2461.500
Z	-2.180
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.029
a. Grouping Variable: Location	

TABLE 4.
A MANN-WHITNEY U TEST OF QUESTION 9

Test Statistics ^a	
	Q9
Mann-Whitney U	828.000
Wilcoxon W	1569.000
Z	-2.111
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.035
a. Grouping Variable: Location	

After using a U test to know the differences between students from ethnic groups and urban areas on the two questions, the mean value of two questions needs comparing to understand better different choices from degrees '1' to '5' on these two activities. The details are shown in the following table.

TABLE 5
REPORT OF MEAN VALUE OF Q7 AND Q9

Location		Q7	Q9
Minority areas	Mean	1.98	1.93
	N	57	57
	Std. Deviation	1.077	1.033
Urban areas	Mean	2.58	1.50
	N	38	38
	Std. Deviation	1.348	.726
Total	Mean	2.22	1.76
	N	95	95
	Std. Deviation	1.222	.942

It is reported that the mean values of the ethnic students are smaller than the students from urban areas ($1.98 < 2.58$) regarding question 7. However, regarding question 9, the mean values of the ethnic students are larger than the students from urban areas ($1.93 > 1.50$). From the mean values of these two groups of students, it shows that more students coming from urban areas prefer to use computers to assist their English learning and teaching than those from minority areas. On the contrary, the students in ethnic group have a stronger desire to communicate with foreign friends via blogs and Internet.

Phase II

After using the statistical analysis to analyze the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted among 20 students to understand better students' views on their English teaching and learning. 13 female students and 7 male students were involved in this interview. The background information of the 20 participants is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Background information of interview participants

It shows that more minority students would like to join in this interview to express their opinions than those from urban areas. Moreover, freshmen and sophomores are keener on this research rather than juniors and seniors. Not surprisingly, juniors and seniors had a lot of burdens such as education practices, employment trainings and other professional development. Generally, students from minority areas were not satisfied with English teaching methods, teaching and learning materials, and educational expenses on their language learning. The students in ethnic group showed a stronger desire to learn English than students from urban areas. For the other group, however, students coming from urban areas are concerned more on the reform of all kinds of English examinations, which would be significantly related to their employment. Two groups of students have obvious goals for English learning and all of them think the biggest problem for them is their communicative ability. In other words, they do not have enough time to practice their oral English. Following examples are two participants' views regarding their English learning problems.

Although I have learnt English for almost 6 year, English, as a foreign language for me, was still difficult. Compared with other subjects in schools, English teachers only guided me in class time but I could not communicate with others in English after class. The only thing I could do was to practice my grammar and write more essays. It did not change much until I came to the university. In the university, oral English and listening comprehension have been paid much attention in my learning. However, I found it has a huge gap between me and other students (from urban areas) due to they laid a good foundation of speaking and listening when they were in schools. Now, I am very eager to learn English but I feel very hard.

(A student from minority areas)

I felt English learning and teaching was very boring these years. From primary to university, I have tried my best to learn English as I have been told it is the most important exam for my future. School teachers emphasized English grammar because it was important in College Entrance Examination. Only if I could get a high score, a top university is open for me. In this situation, I did not have motivation to learn English. After I was enrolled in the university, English teachers pushed us to learn English for CET-4 and CET-6 exams as these exams are keys for our future job. Almost all companies and institutions require students to get these two certificates to prove their English abilities. Nowadays, I really think all these English exams need to be reformed to be more interesting and more practical rather than only testing grammars and writing.

(A student from urban areas)

IV. SUGGESTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the previous section, it showed research finding in two phases: Phase I and Phase II. Phase I is the quantitative data from the survey, which reveals that students from minority areas and urban areas have a significant difference on two questions regarding English extracurricular activities. Findings of Phase II are textual data, which are further explored by using interviews to investigate students' opinions on their English learning and teaching. Suggestions and challenges facing us are provided based on the research finding from two stages as follows:

1. Strengthening educational funds in minority areas

Allocating more funds on minority education is essential and necessary. As mentioned above, a lot of students in minority areas lack basic equipment to study, such as computers, comfortable desks and chairs, and qualified teaching and learning tools, which became obstacles in minority areas. The responses from the questionnaire were the cases in point. Minority students had not any chances to learn English using computers and internet although they had a stronger desire to learn English well. They would like to communicate to friends by using blogs and the Internet but they lack such resources. In addition, increasing funds for teacher' training and in-service training is urgently needed. In particular, the question of how to increase numbers of qualified bilingual teachers needs further researching. It is suggested that schools could be established according to the characteristics of the ethnic minorities and stipends provided for students (Postiglione, 2009).

2. Progressing the economic development in regional development

The main reason why minority students do not use English often is the unbalanced regional development. It is known

that most foreign enterprises set up branches, offices, and factories in some coastal areas and big cities due to its convenient transportation and intense labor force markets (Ministry of Education, 2006). On the one hand, they think improving their oral English competence is vital in language use. On the other hand, it is difficult for them to use English in classes and after class as there are slim chances for them to get a job related to English in future. Thus, improving the industry of public infrastructures, human resources training, and construction of information super-highway are important for regional development in the 21st century.

3. Enforcing the English curriculum and evaluation reform

As an unbalanced development of economy and education between minority areas and urban cities, it is suggested that speaking and listening parts should be added into current English books otherwise minority students cannot catch up with other students when they come into universities. Also, minority students should have equal rights to enjoy their English learning from primary education. Specifically, most ethnic students have started English learning from middle schools while English is a compulsory subject in urban cities from primary schools. Therefore, in order to enable minority students to have the equal rights of students from urban areas, English is called for to be put into practice from primary education. Finally, due to the dissatisfaction of current English assessment, which is supported from data collection from the interviews, English evaluation could be used by multiple kinds rather than only through examination papers. For example, computers as major tools in assisting learning and teaching could be adopted as an examination tool in English assessment in future.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an overview of the status and situation of English learning and teaching in minority areas. It aimed to investigate the students' attitudes on their English learning and their teachers' teaching through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. It has shown that although minority students are eager to learn English, they do not have a lot of chances to get access to English learning tools and resources after their English class, such as computers, bilingual teachers, and so on. However, compared with the minority group, students from urban areas have an obvious advantage in English learning in addition to the requirements of the English curriculum, appropriate and sufficient English learning resources, and more educational funds. Efforts must be made to narrow the huge gap between two groups of students and ensure English is acquired without being detrimental to their own cultures and languages.

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