

The Current Situation and Problems of the Language Education of Yunnan's "Zhi Guo" Ethnic Groups

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Abstract. Relatively little research has been conducted on the language education of Yunnan's "Zhi Guo" ethnic groups. This study surveyed the teachers, students and villagers to learn their current situation and problems of language education. Qualitative data were gathered using classroom observation and semi-structured interviews in Cangyuan county and Ruili city and analyzed using the paradigm of the education ecosystem. The conclusion of the study showed that ethnic language does not constitute an obstacle for junior students' school learning anymore. On the contrary, setting up the local curriculum of ethnic language and culture education is a policy to supplement the minority culture. The dilemma is that the characteristics of multicultural education are becoming thinner and thinner, while the modernization of education remains on the surface.

1. Introduction

"Zhi Guo" here is a Chinese word. It means some ethnic groups' development transit directly from pre-modern society to modern society. When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, some ethnic groups began to develop from the pre-modern society. More than half a century later, they have developed rapidly and the modern society and the modern education system have been established.

There are currently nine "Zhi Guo" ethnic groups in Yunnan Province, such as Dulong, Deang, Jinuo, Nu, Bulang, Jingpo, Yi, Lahu and Lisu, with a total population of 2.33 million[1]. They are special consisting of members of the 56 ethnic groups in China. However, most of these ethnic groups live in border areas and mountainous valleys, and the living conditions are tough. And also because of their special history, they have a lack of the ability to develop totally by themselves. Even today, their development is lagging behind, poverty is widespread, and the anti-poverty task is difficult[2].

According to previous research, we observed the "Zhi Guo" ethnic minority children obviously have low academic achievement in school learning and difficulties in earning a living after school mainly because of language barriers. And that then led to the inter-generational transmission of poverty. So, in the process of declaring war on poverty, the government, the communities and the researchers all put the focus on education, especially on language education. For example, in March 2016, the government of Yunnan issued the document "*Yunnan Province's Poverty Alleviation Campaign for "Zhi Guo" Ethnic Groups (2016-2020)*", which decided to use five years to declare war on ethnic poverty. And among six anti-poverty projects, education-related projects ranked first, which including a series of measures to popularize Mandarin, implement free education, and strengthen rural school construction. The study began to conceive the research theme in October 2018: the current situation and problems of the anti-poverty education of Yunnan's "Zhi Guo" ethnic groups.

2. Research Method and Case Study

However, in November in 2018 and early April in 2019, we respectively visited more than 10 kindergartens and primary schools in the minority areas of Cangyuan county (Wa) and Ruili city

(Jingpo, Dai, De'ang and Achang), and found that the situation of language education in schools of these minority areas had changed greatly especially since 2000. The preliminary impression is that Putonghua, or Mandarin is no longer the main obstacle to school learning, but the difficulty is learning the native ethnic language. Thus, the research turned to focus on: the use of Mandarin in schools of the border "Zhi Guo" ethnic areas, the coordination and conflict between Mandarin and ethnic languages in school learning, and the relationship between language education and the quality of education. The problem discussed is the contradiction and unity between educational pluralism and educational modernity.

After twice visits of about 10 days, the principals, teachers, villagers and students were randomly interviewed, classroom observation [3] was carried out, and there were three family surveys of villagers. Through descriptive observation and semi-structured interviews, six representative people and their stories were selected, including two teachers, two students and two villagers.

The questions of semi-structured interviews are:

To Teachers: Can bilingual teaching be conducted? Is the class bilingual or just in mandarin? How about the use of mandarin during and after classes? What is the relationship between Mandarin proficiency and academic performance? What is the role of the school in the promotion of mandarin in the community?

To Students: Can you speak Mandarin? When did you start learning and using Mandarin? How about the use during and after classes? What is the impact of speaking Mandarin on school learning? What's your interest in learning minority language?

To Villagers: Can you speak Mandarin? When and where did you begin to learn Mandarin? Are you used to speaking the minority language or Mandarin? Under what circumstances? What impact does speaking Mandarin have on your life?

Table 1. The Situation of Two Teachers about Language Education

Interviewee	T1, a Principal, male, Wa ethnic group, About 50 years old
Site and Background	Hunban central primary school, Wanding town, Ruili city There are 327 people, 41 teachers. Dai and Wa students account for 70% in this school.
Answer	When I was a child, I spoke Wa language and began to learn Mandarin after entering school. It was a primary school in the 1980s that would be offered a year of bilingual class as a transition to help me learn Mandarin. I learned Wa characters at the normal school. Nowadays, the Autonomous Prefecture issues Regulations on ethnic education, which stipulates that bilingual courses are required, and also organizes bilingual teaching training for ethnic teachers every year. The school now requires senior Wa students to learn Wa language once a week. Many Wa students couldn't understand the meaning, although they could spell Wa characters. Because there is no basis for oral Wa language (some families had Wa and Han parents on one side, the registered permanent residence was Wa, but could not speak Wa language). Another problem was that they didn't use it usually after learning, so they forgot it soon after. They are mainly learning Mandarin. After the basic balance of compulsory education, the overall quality of education has been improved. The influence of ethnic language on academic performance is not as obvious as before.
Interviewee	T2, Yi, male, Jingpo ethnic group, over 50 years old, engaged in the teaching of folk language (Jingpo) for 29 years. He also teaches math.
Site and Background	Managing primary school, Wanding town, Ruili city The school has 6 classes with 217 students, some from Myanmar, 141 ethnic students which accounting for 64.9% of all students. Among them, 54 are Dai which accounting for 24.8% of the total; 39 are Jingpo which accounting for 17.9% of the total; 43 are Deang which accounting for 19.8% of the total; Two are Lisu; one is Achang; two are other ethnic groups.
Answer	Unfortunately, this generation of Jingpo is less and less care about ethnic culture. They can understand some ethnic cultures by learning Jingpo language. I used bilingual in class at junior grades to help some students who can't speak Mandarin. Teachers who can speak Jingpo language are a little, so most students need to learn basic Mandarin oral before entering school. Students who can't speak Mandarin have been less since 2000. Jingpo Students from Myanmar also can speak Mandarin. Now there is Jingpo language class at senior grades once a week to help them understand some ethnic culture.

Table 2. The Situation of Two Students about Language Education

Interviewee	S1, boy, 4 years old, Jingpo ethnic group
Site and Background	Ruili Kindergarten, Ruili city, Ruili Kindergarten is public institution in the city. It has two campuses. There are over 800 children and different ethnic groups. More than half of them are minority students.
Answer	I'm not Dai. I'm Jingpo. I can speak Mandarin but can't speak Jingpo. My father is Jingpo, my mother is Han. We all speak Mandarin at home.
Interviewees	S2, girl, grade3,9 years old, Wa ethnic group
Site and Background	Shangyonghe primary school, Mengdong town, Cangyuan county The village where the school located was mainly Wa ethnic group area, which mixed with other ethnic groups such as Lagu. The school borders on villages of Myanmar. Students who live in villages of Myanmar can take a path to go to school across the border.
Answer	I can speak Mandarin and Wa language. I learned Mandarin through cartoons, cell phones and from adults in the village before school. Some children spoke Wa language, some spoke Lahu language and some came from Myanmar in our school. But their Wa language was not quite the same as ours. So I spoke Mandarin to them.

Table 3. The Situation of Two Villagers about Language Education

Interviewee	V1, male, farmer, married. Wa ethnic group, 35 years old
Site and Background	Shangnai village, Mengdong town, Cangyuan county He has a son and a daughter. The daughter is learning well in junior high school. The son is 3 years old and not old enough to go to school. The wife is at home with their children. They built a new 3-layers house and had a farm car.
Answer	I can speak a little Mandarin. When I started to buy and sell things in the town, I gradually could listen and speak Mandarin. I dropped out at Grade 3. I'm used to speaking Wa. Sometimes I communicate with my eldest daughter in Mandarin. I didn't leave home to work because I'm uneducated. My Mandarin level is enough for me to live in the village. So I won't learn much more. But I would like to support my children learning at school as long as they want.
Interviewee	V2, a village head, male, Deang ethnic group, about 40 years old
Site and Background	Mengxiu village, Wanding town, Ruili city He is a community leader and has educational aspirations. He often subsidizes the education of the village and coordinates with the school to carry out the ethnic culture activity. He is also a student's parent. It is only 7 minutes' walk from school to home.
Answer	I began to speak Mandarin after entering primary school. The teacher also could speak the ethnic language. They could use ethnic language to help us understand Chinese characters. Now I'm a village cadre. I need to communicate with everyone. My mandarin has no problem. Especially recently, many people came to the village during the holiday, so I use mandarin more often. But I would like to communicate with villagers in our mother tongue. I communicate with my children in ethnic language at home. However, due to the influence of mobile phone, the Internet and TV, children can speak Mandarin before entering school and are more accustomed to speaking Mandarin.

3. Some Discussions and Analysis

Based on the information from the on-the-spot investigation, we analyzed the current situation and problems of the language education of Yunnan's "Zhi Guo" ethnic groups. The implicit analysis framework of this research as follows.

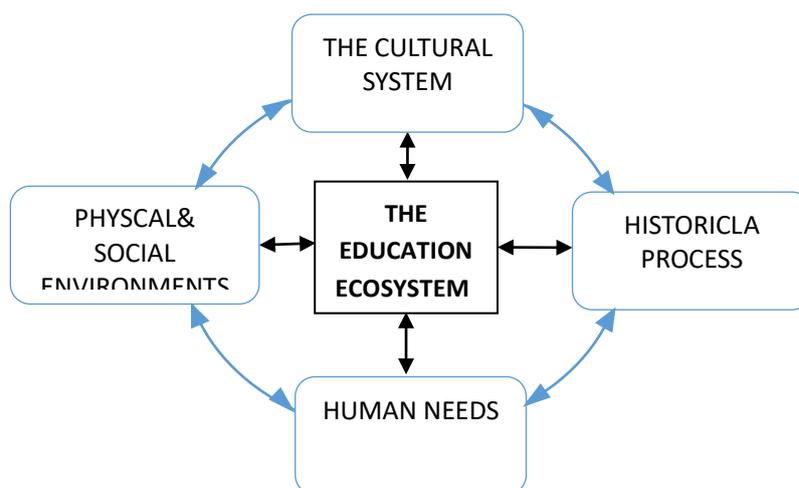


Figure 1. The paradigm of the education ecosystem

It means the outlook of educational ecology in a certain cultural system depends on the historical process, the changes in the physical and social environment, and the satisfaction of human needs[4].

The appearance of the educational ecosystem in a certain region is always constantly forming and developing. The driving force behind it comes from the changes in human needs, physical and social environment, historical changes and the internal adjustment of its cultural system. There are multiple interactions among these forces. Influenced by historical and social changes, economic development, government and social governance, and the improvements of communications, transportation and natural environment, the education of the “Zhi Guo” ethnic groups has been undergoing rapid changes in the past 20 years since 2000. The internal balance of their own cultural system has been constantly broken[5]. Before 2000, these minority schools had bilingual classes, which mainly helped the junior students who did not understand Mandarin to be able to speak Mandarin and acquired mainstream cultural knowledge through Mandarin[6], and in order to avoid Mandarin become the main obstacle to school learning. Later, the central government vigorously promoted the use of Mandarin. Besides the main efforts from schools, deep influences were also from economic activities and especially from the popularization of information technology, Mandarin penetrated through mobile phones, networks and television. Most minority children even can speak Mandarin before entering schools. Great changes have taken place. A new educational ecology is taking shape. By the government-led anti-poverty campaign, a large amount of “hardware” investment for the basic balance of rural education and the grant of subsidies (“three exemptions and one subsidy”) have greatly improved the quality of rural education and changed the idea of education. With the rapid development of the economy, the influence of government behavior is more direct. The modernization of ethnic education is accelerating.

But now, the problem is the space of ethnic language and culture was occupied, and the rural and ethnic culture gradually declined. In view of this, the government's policy has changed in recent years. *The Regulations of Yunnan Province on Minority Education* (April 8, 2011) require to provide ethnic language courses. The schools of these areas are also considering including some elements of ethnic culture in the campus environment, arts and sports activities as a local feature. However, some schools are unable to offer such courses due to the lack of capable teachers. Therefore, as the villagers said, “it used to be difficult to learn Mandarin, but now it is difficult to learn the native ethnic language.” “A decade or two years ago, ethnic minorities can't speak Mandarin, while now they can't speak its native ethnic language, let alone the written language.”

4. Conclusion

We visited 10 kindergartens and primary schools in the minority areas of Cangyuan county and Ruili city. There are five “Zhi Guo” ethnic groups: Wa, Jingpo, Lisu, De'ang and Achang. We found

that the situation had changed greatly especially in the recent twenty years. Ethnic language does not become an obstacle for junior students to learn textbook knowledge. The influence of language education on academic achievement is not as obvious as before in rural ethnic education. On the contrary, native ethnic language and culture education, as a local curriculum, is a remedial policy measure for the decline of ethnic culture. But the main purpose of school education is still to learn Mandarin well, to provide students with fair access to the mainstream capital of political, economic and cultural.

The pace of modernization of education in ethnic minority areas is faster and faster, and the influence of mainstream culture on the educational ecology of ethnic minorities in rural areas is greater and more direct. But in general, rural area is still marginalized in China's development. The government seeks urban-rural integration in “hardware” investment, but there is still a shortage in rural minority areas in “software”, such as high-quality teachers, mainstream cultural resources and so on. And the opportunities for ethnic minorities to get higher-level education are still scarce. At the same time, ethnic minority culture is declining with an irresistible trend. So, rural education of ethnic minorities is still facing a dilemma: the characteristics of multicultural education are becoming thinner and thinner, while the modernization of education remains on the surface. The future direction of minority education remains as a question to answer.

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