

# Bilingual Education in China: Current Issues, Problem, and a Proposal for Change

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## Abstract

Bilingualism is an important feature which may affect language learning and language instruction. The bilingual education has become an important and widely used teaching model in Chinese students' English education. The purpose of this paper is to explore bilingual education issues and practices in China. This paper first introduces the background of Chinese language policies and then examines bilingual education policies and practices in China. It then analyzes issues exist in Chinese bilingual education. Through exploring and analyzing significances and issues exist in Chinese bilingual education, this paper reviews teaching strategies of effective bilingual education and provides practical suggestions and recommendations for Chinese bilingual education.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, bilingual education, teaching English as a second language, language policy

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Backgrounds of Chinese Nationality and Language Policies

China is very diverse in languages and culture; there are fifty-six ethnic groups and over hundred of dialects and ethnic minority languages. The Han is the dominant ethnic group in China. Mandarin (Putonghua) is the official language. In addition, Chinese people also share one writing script, Chinese (Hanyu).

According to Postiglione (1999), "the Han, as representative of those at the higher end of development, were thought to be more evolved, and were to lead the way for minorities to follow, while there are many nationalities in China, the Han are defined to be in the cultural and technical vanguard, leading the manifest destiny of all the minorities" (p.58). The diverse languages used by the ethnic minority groups might become a challenge to the popularization of education in China's rural and remote frontier regions. Although Chinese law places ethnic minority languages and Mandarin on equal importance, the implementation of schooling in ethnic minority languages has been complicated by the fact that "linguistic survey work and language and literacy planning efforts for many minority languages are still underway" (Postiglione, 1999, p.95). According to Beauchamp (1985), "in China, national minorities are not defined by racial characteristics but by cultural traits, including customs, religion, economic way of life, and language. Chinese researchers have identified that there are more than 50 distinct ethnolinguistic groups" (p. 20). Moreover, literacy in minority languages still "lies outside the cultural sphere defined by the Han language writing system" (Postiglione, 1999, p.95).

According to Postiglione (1999), "Chinese minority language policies, minority literacy planning, and bilingual education policy and practices can all be interpreted as efforts to construct and maintain cultural boundaries. Languages are among the most fundamental markers of identity and differences. While linguistic diversity within the majority Han nationality is an inescapable fact, the image of Han cultural uniformity is supported by the contrast between Han and minority language literacy; official policies as well as popular attitudes toward minority languages and literacy are shaped by the convergence of Chinese nationalism and Han ethnic identity" (p.96).

The demographic features and the Chinese culture led to the social diversity and language diversity. Multiculturalism and multicultural education policies have received more attention over recent years in China. This is also reflected in the national language policies. According to Postiglione (1999), "estimates of the number of mother tongues spoken in China range from 80 to more than 100 and yet there are only 55 officially recognized minority nationalities; thus, there is considerable linguistic diversity within nationalities in China" (p. 102). This historical background of Chinese language policies is connected to political and social backgrounds.

In the early years of its existence of the language policy, more than 90% of the national minorities were illiterate and some did not possess a written language. “After the Cultural Revolution, the government began to modernize China’s agriculture, industry, military, science, and technology, a movement referred to as the Four Modernizations; this program constitutes an extraordinary agenda for the future of China; efforts have been made not only to recognize minority linguistic rights, but to reinstitute the use of local languages both as the medium of instruction in schools and in the mass media” (Beauchamp, 1985, p.25). Beijing attaches great importance to the principle of a common language binding the nation’s people together, but it also is committed to preserving and expanding the linguistic rights of the ethnic minorities. Chinese language policies, “have oscillated sharply depending on the political line in favor at a given time” (Beauchamp, 1985, p.25).

### *1.2 Chinese Bilingual Education Policies*

The Chinese linguistic expert Xing Gongwan expressed the apparently widespread official view that, “the majority of Han Chinese are already bilingual in the sense that they understand both a Han regionalect and Mandarin. Yan Xuejun, another expert explained that the term bilingualism though borrowed from Western scholarship, had taken one somewhat different implication in the Chinese context; Ma Xueliang argued that Chinese society was characterized by two types of bilingualism” (Postiglione, 1999, p.102). According to Postiglione (1999), “the first type was characteristic of linguistic diversity within the majority Han population, Ma used the English term diglossia and in Chinese *shuangyan xianxiang* for the situation in which both mandarin and a Han regionalect are used by an individual or group. Then English term bilingualism was paired with the Chinese *shuangyu xianxiang* and used in reference to the use of two or more nationality languages by individuals or groups in China. The two different Chinese terms for bilingualism reflect official recognition of two distinct levels of linguistic differences within China” (pp.102-103).

Besides social and cultural elements, the political elements are also closely associated with bilingual education philosophy and policy. According to Beauchamp (1985), “bilingual education is more than just learning another language, it also involves the redistribution of power, although argument is favoring bilingual education invariably talk about preserving the culture and literary traditions of speakers of minority languages, and it may accomplish that goal, it is fundamentally redressing political and economic power between the haves and the have-nots” (p.10). Therefore, in most societies bilingual education really means that “the minority group learns the dominant group’s language, which is functionally the language of economic and political power within the society” (Beauchamp, 1985, p.10).

Generally speaking, the bilingualism and bilingual education in China include the bilingual education of Mandarin and minority languages and English-Chinese model composed the bilingual education structure. Nowadays, the educational department pays attention on improving the English-Chinese based bilingual education. Today the issues surrounding bilingualism and minority languages are no longer a unique issue, this issue has been with “people since ancient times, today in many parts of Asia, bilingualism is the norm; a large percentage of the world’s population is bilingual” (Beauchamp, 1985, p7). According to Wang (1999), “English as a Second/Foreign language has become an important component of school curriculum in most non-English speaking countries in the world. English language proficiency is also one of the most desired skills leading to better career opportunities and professional advancement” (p.2). Even in the monolingual country, bilingualism or English education is neither uncommon nor new. Nowadays English is widely viewed as a useful instrument for economic, political, communicational, and educational development.

Since China has practiced the policy of Reformation and Opening-Up in 1978, many schools have provided English courses and started English-Chinese based bilingual education, with the emphasis on improving students’ language proficiency both in English and Chinese. From then on English education runs through primary schools, high schools, and university education in China. Most English teachers are educated in China, with the aim of creating authentic and effective English-speaking study environment, some schools will have native English speakers’ teachers to teach English courses for Chinese students. As it becomes a global language, English remains an important role in Chinese education in recent years, the Han people are encouraged to become bilingual in Mandarin and English, while minority groups are encouraged to become bilingual in their own minority language and mandarin.

## **2. The English-Chinese Based Bilingual Education in China**

The English-Chinese based bilingual education in China has two important features: First, English becomes a main academic subject in China; second, it is not just a medium of instruction for other subjects. In China, English is a major subject in the educational system. Chinese students start to receive English education in primary school and through the K12 education process. English is also an essential subject in the entrance

examination for high schools and universities. All students in the second year of studying at Chinese universities are required to take the College English Test Band Four, which aims to examine students' English proficiencies in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and their grammatical knowledge of English. In addition, to pass this examination is necessary to graduate from universities.

In many metropolitan cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, there are foreign languages schools which mainly emphasize on enhancing students' English proficiencies in English reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These foreign languages schools are at a premium role because they can provide students a chance to attend key universities; meanwhile they can provide students bright prospects in the future. Since English plays an increasingly important role in educational system, the enrollment rate of foreign languages schools has been high for many years. The Chinese Ministry of Education describes the curriculum criterion of English education as: inspiring students' motivation, establishing students' confidence of learning English, cultivating good study skills, and forming students' independent study abilities. These are focusing on fostering students' comprehensive English abilities.

In the twenty-first century, the government pays attention to the development of English-Chinese based bilingual education. Over the past years, English education has indeed achieved remarkable success in China. The popularization of English education improves Chinese students' English proficiency; English has become a common communicative language in daily life.

There are various definitions of bilingualism. According to Bloomfield (1933), "bilingualism means native like competency in two languages"; it also means the ability to use more than one language (Mackey, 1962); bilingualism is also the practice of alternatively using two languages (Weinreich, 1968). According to Baker (2008), "the bilingual is a complete linguistic entity and integrated whole. Bilinguals use their two languages with different people, in different contexts and for different purposes. Levels of proficiency in a language may depend on which contexts and how often that language is used. Communicative competence in one of a bilinguals two languages may be stronger in some domains than in others" (p.12).

In China, the English-Chinese based bilingual education means: besides Chinese, teachers use a foreign language to teach. Today English is the major foreign language in most cities. In China, bilingual education requires teachers to use advanced English skills and proficiencies while teaching, but it doesn't exclude Chinese from bilingual classes. Chinese language acts as the supplement to support students to have a clear and better understanding of the content knowledge taught at class. Bilingual education in China could be viewed as a maintainable kind of bilingual education.

Being one of the pioneer cities to implement bilingual education, since 2001 the Shanghai government has required that all key high schools and primary schools to promote bilingual education. Shanghai high school students' English proficiency exceed the average level of national students' English proficiency. This successful promotion of bilingual education in high schools and primary schools contribute to students' future English studies in post-secondary education. This has led to many provinces beginning to observe and study the example of Shanghai's bilingual education model to implement bilingual education. Although bilingual education can enhance students' English proficiency and provide more people with excellent English abilities and skills, it also needs to be improved.

Ovendo and McLaren (2000) indicate that, "teachers themselves must be sensitive to the ways they portray perspectives on diversity while teaching students with diverse cultural and language backgrounds" (p.9). Traditionally, education was highly valued in China, as Cleverley (1991) presents, "Chinese teachers were expected to raise their qualifications through study and also improve their teaching skills. They were to share teaching experiences, devise more materials and teaching aids, run their own research projects" (p.132).

Over the last decade China has had to explore with differing views as to what kind of schooling will serve the best interests of Chinese students' bilingual education. When people review the history of bilingual policies and bilingual education in China, they will find that language policies have been changed less by educational reasons than by political imperatives, bilingual education is influenced by political elements because language policies and strategies sometimes are used as a tool which to achieve political needs and goals. According to Beauchamp (1985), "education has been used throughout our history as a political-economic vehicle, whether it is the common school as a means of political integration or the land-grant college as a means of promoting better agriculture, bilingual education in other societies also has been political in nature. Once we recognized the political nature of bilingual education; we might be better able to understand the true nature of the debate" (p.33).

According to Hansen (1999), "the central and provincial governments in China have suggested and implemented

various methods to improve English instruction and accomplish basic compulsory education among China” (p.xiii), such as establishment of foreign languages schools, experiments with bilingual education models, and create access for students to receive high quality English-Chinese based bilingual instruction. Bilingual education in China attempts to achieve following goals: to increase cross-cultural and cross-language communication, to enhance the quality of English education, to promote students’ motivations of studying English, and to prepare English-proficient cross-cultural communication experts. According to Hansen (1999), “the majority of researchers in China concerned with English education seem to agree that developing bilingual education is necessary in many areas...promotes bilingual education with the purpose of hastening proficiency in English is very important and needed” (pp.5-6).

According to Yuan (2005), “China and the U.S. have similar purposes in providing bilingual education to language minorities at schools. The Americans use bilingual education as a remedy, but most Chinese treat it as a tool for tangible interests. Most of American colleges and universities provide monolingual instruction only, but their Chinese counterparts are promoting bilingual instruction today” (p.48). Many research works have been done to indicate that bilingual education may be efficiently and effectively provided to different groups with various educational needs. According to Li (2007), “due to alienation, conversation breakdowns, ambiguity, and the massive number of lexical items, language learning can be a hard, even painful struggle” (p.41). So, in the bilingual classroom, teacher’s ability to empathize with and ameliorate these linguistic and cultural struggles is greatly needed. The effective and positive bilingual education needs to have active engagement and interaction between students and teachers in teaching and learning, instead of the passive memorization and learning during the second language acquisition process.

According to Yuan (2005), “officially, China established bilingual education services to the language minorities, the initial goals in providing bilingual education to language minority students are: using students’ first language (L1) to facilitate learning subject matters; assisting their acquisition of the mainstream languages (L2) for work and communication in respective larger societies” (p.49). Some educators believe that the best way for children to learn content knowledge in a second or foreign language is through their primary language because it is easier to learn to read in a language they understand (Krashen, 1997). Students need the support of L1 to initiate and deepen comprehensive in L2, the “combination of L1 and L3 subject matter teaching and literacy development is the first characteristic of a good bilingual program” (Yuan, 2005, p.49). Nowadays many bilingual schools are supported by the Chinese government to help students merge into English-Chinese based bilingual classes.

According to Yuan (2005), there are four major types of bilingual education programs, “English as a second language (ESL); submersion immersion and transitional bilingual education (TBE). In an ESL program, students receive most instruction in English-only classes, as ESL teachers may have limited knowledge about students’ L1 and home cultures, but it is still the major approach to start bilingual education. In a submersion program, a student is put in an ordinary English-only classroom, immersion programs provide instruction in English, immersion teachers are bilingual but speak English most of the time, allowing students to address them in students’ first languages” (p.49). After China joining the World Trade Organization, to eliminate barriers of the linguistic and cultural differences and improve the effective communication under the influences of globalization, bilingual education is becoming an important part in many Chinese cities. As mentioned by Yuan (2005), “the ultimate purpose of bilingual education in China is to improve students’ English proficiency to meet the needs of the nation, the community and the individuals for future advancement” (p.50). Numerous bilingual kindergartens and elementary middle schools are burgeoning in big cities in China, in this type of Chinese bilingual schools, English as a foreign language, like ESL, is taught across all grades. ESL and Two-Way teaching instructors “are mixed with trained Chinese and native English speakers, however, in most cases, the native English speakers speak very little Chinese” (Yuan, 2005, p.50).

Currently, there is also a trend in China’s universities to provide bilingual education. “These two languages are Chinese and a foreign one, mostly English (L2), this type of courses is different from college English that focuses on language learning only. There are two major purposes: to empower China’s elite youths to get advanced sciences and technologies directly from the outside world with a foreign language; then it helps students develop bilingual language skills for efficient and effective worldwide communication by the integration of L2 learning with academic content studies” (Yuan, 2005, p.51).

China’s bilingual education policy for higher education can be found for the first time in the document of Ministry of Education No.4. in 2001, and in 2004, the Ministry of Education regulated again in document No.21 that the percentage of bilingual class is defined as “using English textbook and the percentage of English as curriculum instruction language should be no less than 50% of total learning time” (Wang, 2010, p.28). These two documents are guidance for bilingual education in Chinese higher education among many bilingualism

promotion policies in a whole. Bilingual teaching model in Chinese universities has been developing in a varied level, most Chinese students have “had 6-years English learning experiences during secondary education before they are entering universities” (Wang, 2010, p.28). “Students always have indeed some very basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) but lack cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)” (Wang, 2010 p.28), which is essential in bilingual education.

Educators have paid attention to the importance of bilingual education, it is clear that the English-Chinese based bilingual education brings benefits to Chinese students. It improves Chinese students’ English proficiency, increases students’ career preparedness for a global job market, establishes bridges to another culture and language, and cultivates students’ self-identity and self-esteem. However, it still needs to be mindful to incorporate an international standard in bilingual education that interweave with cultural values, social needs, public choices, and personal preferences, because “there are not any totally perfect model for Chinese bilingual education to copy” (Yuan, 2005, p.52).

### **3. Problems and Proposed Solutions for Chinese Bilingual Education**

Although Chinese bilingual education has received many achievements, the bilingual education itself faces several issues and challenges. First, the bilingual education is still developing in China. Many schools lack the high quality and experienced bilingual education model. Second, qualified bilingual teachers and bilingual educational materials are greatly needed, especially in schools in rural areas. The shortage of high-quality English-proficient teachers and materials will impact on students’ access to effective bilingual education resources and opportunities. Third, schools still need to improve their bilingual educational policy, practice, and philosophy. Fourth, bilingual education in China is still exam-oriented, teachers mainly focus on developing students’ English study abilities which prepare them for passing the standardized English tests. Some educators indicate that improper bilingual education might impact on students’ Chinese and English studies, because code-switching and code-mixing will happen. Moreover, bilingual education might also result in cultural conflict in students’ language learning process, such as the cultural balance between home cultural heritages and the imported Westernized cultures. Besides, there is also a gap in language education and language application in daily life. After completing English courses, students mainly focus on how to pass the standardized English tests. To improve students’ English proficiency, some cities view bilingual education as the strategic point of the development of the metropolis, for example, the government of Shanghai has formulated many programs of bilingual education and the popularity of bilingualism.

Furthermore, there are issues in bilingual curriculum development in many schools. According to Wang (2010), “in English-Chinese based bilingual classes, there is 50% Chinese and 50% English language instruction, at the end of term, students usually acquire a little experience of how to use an original English textbook and how to think in English at more or less. Referring to the bilingual allocation in China, Chinese government has given a minimum of bilingual allocation as 10:90 for four disciplines, that is to say, at least 10 percent of courses adopt English-Chinese based bilingual education and 90 percent of courses take place in Chinese. How to distribute such designated bilingual curriculums to four academic years is decided by every single university and is just what we should think very carefully in systematic curriculum construction” (p.30). Schools need to find a balance between Chinese and English education and make efforts to use appropriate instructional methods that fit to students’ individual characteristics and the current educational situation in China, in order to fully improve students’ bilingual study and create a good bilingual educational study environment for students.

According to Ovando and McLaren (2000), “in the case of bilingual students, promotion of pride in students’ language and culture through bilingual programs was frequently regarded as an integral component of a broader philosophy of multicultural education” (p.129). Schools need to identify more proper ways to improve the quality of bilingual education. In 2000, Ovando and McLaren presented several ways to improve the bilingual education: “First, the promotion of literacy in bilingual students’ two languages throughout elementary school is far more important than the specific language in which students are introduced to literacy. Second, a bilingual program should be a genuine bilingual program with coherence across grade levels and a strong English-language literacy development syllabus built into the plan. Teachers would work for two-way transfer across languages to amplify bilingual students’ awareness of language, through drawing attention to cognate connections, student collaborative research projects focused on language” (p.133).

Education is thus deeply involved in politics, policy changes needed to reduce inequalities and problems that students from linguistic and ethnic minority groups might face in China. Teachers should also pay attention to students’ cultural differences and try to find appropriate strategies to inspire students’ motivation to study the foreign or second language. According to Petrovic (2010), “language policy and planning involve a body of

ideas, laws, regulations, rules, and practices enacted to promote systematic linguistic change in a community of speakers. Language policies might be enacted through legislation, court decisions, executive action, or other means” (p.3). As Chinese government and schools design and modify bilingual education policies, they need take political, social, cultural and students’ individual elements into consideration. There is a long way to go in the field of promoting effective and high-quality bilingual education in China, but we can learn lessons and experiences from bilingual programs in other countries to effectively improve Chinese bilingual education quality and outcomes.

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