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Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (General Research Fund 840012)

**Models of Trilingual Education in  
Ethnic Minority Regions of China  
Project**

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**Briefing Paper No.15**

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Formality in Written English of Middle School Students in the Zhuang Autonomous Region in the Context of Multilingualism

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## **Models of Trilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Regions of China Project**

This research project offers a holistic and descriptive account of trilingualism and trilingual education in China. Policy changes have led to the introduction of English language teaching and learning in primary schools. These reforms pose particular challenges to communities in ethnic minority areas, where Putonghua often competes with the minority language, and English is often taught in under-resourced schools with teachers with the requisite training in short supply.

The project involves extensive and intensive research comprising investigations into school- and community-level practices, policies and perceptions relating to trilingualism in such key regions as Xinjiang, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Sichuan, Gansu, Guizhou, Guangxi, Qinghai, Jilin, Tibet and Guangdong. Using first-hand data collected from each region, the researchers examine language policies and curricula, as well as language allocation in the classroom and in the community, and analyse them in their specific historical, socio-political, demographical, economic, geographical and cultural contexts.

A distinctive feature of the project is its presentation of a new methodology and approach to researching such phenomena. This methodology encompasses policy analysis, community language profiles, as well as school-based fieldwork in order to provide rich data that facilitates multilevel analysis of policy-in-context.

This series of Briefing Papers presents information about different aspects of the project.

*Models of Trilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Regions of China Project* Briefing Papers  
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# **Formality in Written English of Middle School Students in the Zhuang Autonomous Region in the Context of Multilingualism**

## **Context of the Study**

### **Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region**

- Located in southwest China, in the core of the Beibu Gulf between Guangdong, Guizhou, Hunan and Yunnan;
- Shares a border with Vietnam;
- A southern coastline along the Beibu Bay;
- A diverse mix of ethnic minorities, with the Zhuang people making up a significant proportion of the Population. In recognition of this, Guangxi became Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in 1958.
- Total population: 48 million
- Zhuang People: 17million
- Area: 23.7 million sq km
- Ethnic Groups: Zhuang, Han, Yao, Miao, Dong, Mula, Maonan, Hui, Gin, Yi, Sui, and Gelao
- Climate: Subtropical monsoon climate, mild winters and long, hot, humid summers.
- Language: Zhuang, established in 1955, based on the Latin alphabet

## **The Study**

When reviewing the studies of English style at home and abroad we found that most researchers, especially domestic scholars, focus much more on higher-level English learners, and are less concerned with minority middle school students. Foreign language learning of minority students is an important part of the study of trilingual education, and middle school is an important stage for students to improve their English proficiency, the study of which will shed light on the teaching and learning of English of middle schools in China's ethnic minority areas. Therefore, this study selects the high school students of 5 middle schools in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region as the research subjects.

Based on a self-built corpus and questionnaire survey, we analyze the degree of formality in English writing by the subjects from the aspects of lexical density and lexical richness.

## **Research Design**

### **Research questions**

1. What is the degree of formality in written English of middle school students in the Zhuang Autonomous Region?
2. What factors affect this degree of formality?

### **Theoretical basis**

Formality is argued to be the most important dimension of variation between styles or registers (Heylighen & Dewaele, 2002). Some researchers have subdivided it into "deep" formality and "surface" formality. Though there has not yet been a widely accepted operational definition of formality, many characteristics can be distinguished by linguistic features, such as choices of words, syntactic structures, semantic and pragmatic meanings, and multitextual levels of discourse (Biber, 1988).

### **Methodology**

There have been attempts to measure formality either at word or phrase levels, or at multiple discourse levels (Li, 2015). In this study, we measure the formality of 300 pieces of examination writing by the subjects from the aspects of word level—that is, the aspects of lexical density and lexical richness—and then analyze their recognition of formality and the affecting factors through questionnaires.

### **Formulas**

(1) Lexical density = number of content words / total number of words × 100% (Ure, 1971);

(2) Lexical complexity: the percentage of words beyond 1000 high frequency words;

(3) Lexical variability: standard type token ratio.

### **Tools**

- Range32
- Antconc3.4.3
- SPSS20.0

- Questionnaire
- Compleat Lexical Tutor website

### **Reliability and validity of the questionnaire**

Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	项数
.866	30

### **Writing Corpus and Questionnaire Data Collection**

#### ***Writing Materials***

The corpus built in this study comes from the examination writings of senior students from 5 middle schools in Guangxi Zhuang area, a total of 337 writing materials were received by random cluster sampling.

#### ***Questionnaires:***

173 valid student questionnaires and 21 valid teacher questionnaires were administered and received from the 5 middle schools in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

### **Results of the study**

#### **The Status of Students' Writing Formality:**

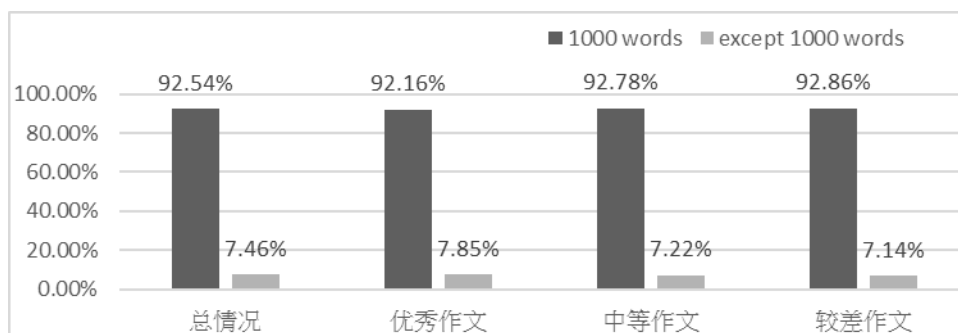
Table1 lexical density

	the whole situation	Excellent composition	Good composition	Poor composition
Total words	29681	12115	10631	6935
Function words	16325	6785	5954	3537
Content words	13356	5330	4677	3398
Lexical density	45%	44%	44%	49%

Table 2 lexical variability

Student's writing	types	tokens	STTR
The whole situation	1350	29489	23.8%
Excellent composition	987	12047	25.1%
Good composition	819	10567	24.1%
Poor composition	693	6879	21.2%

Table 3 lexical complexity



From the analysis of corpus, we can see that the lexical density value of students' writing in this study is more than 40%, which indicates that the English writing of middle school students in the Zhuang Autonomous Region has a certain degree of formality, but the lexical variability and lexical complexity are too low to have significant vocabulary richness, thus the corpus is not very formal as a whole.

### **Analysis of Questionnaires:**

In the questionnaires, the influencing factors are discussed from the aspects of English teaching policy, teaching level, the multilingual learning environment and the learning motivation of the students, etc.

- (1) Low cognition and awareness of formality;
- (2) Low demand of formality in writing in the exam - oriented education;
- (3) Low motivation to teach or learn because of the students' poor English foundation;
- (4) Influence of multilingual learning environment, such as negative transfer of Zhuang language, etc.

## **Conclusion**

Under the complex minority multi-lingual teaching environment, teachers' correct guidance to students is particularly important. Teachers should not only pay attention to the cultivation of students' language learning ability, but also pay more attention to their ability of language use.

## **Suggestions:**

1. Introduce the concept of style from middle school to cultivate students' cognition of formal style;
2. Put the specific content of English style into the textbooks and make relevant requirements in the curriculum;
3. Make the language environment as real as possible for students to learn various style;
4. According to the language policy of “提高母语，加强汉语，学习英语” (Raise competence in the Mother Tongue, strengthen Mandarin, and learn English”, lay a good foundation in Mandarin and the students' minority languages.

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