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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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**Technical Paper No.3**

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**Ethnographic Research**

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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 field work in order to provide rich data that facilitates multilevel analysis of policy-in-context.

*Models of Trilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Regions of China Project* Technical Papers Series Editors: Anwei Feng (University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China) and Bob Adamson (The Education University of Hong Kong)

This series of Technical Papers presents information about the research instruments used in this project.

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# Ethnographic Research

## Introduction

One of the key research questions driving the project is how the policy goals of trilingualism is being interpreted and realised in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The project distinguished four distinct policy models of trilingual education (Adamson and Feng, 2013). The first model focuses strongly on the ethnic minority language. Typically, the nine years of compulsory education from Grade 1 in primary schools to Grade 3 in junior secondary schools is provided through the medium of the minority language. Chinese and English are taught as subjects in the curriculum. Chinese could be used as the medium of instruction for certain school subjects in late primary and secondary years. The second model is a balance between Chinese and the minority language. The balance is evident in terms not only of the medium of instruction but also of the ethnicity of the teachers and students. The third model often exists in two different forms. The first form is the reverse of the first model, i.e., Chinese is used as the primary medium instruction and the major ethnic minority language is taught as a subject to all students in the school, irrespective of their own ethnicity or mother tongue. The second form is found in many remote village schools in which one minority group dominates. In these schools, the minority language is used as the medium of instruction for the first two to three years with Chinese taught as a major school subject. Starting from Year 3 or Year 4, all school subjects are taught in Chinese. In both cases, English is taught as a school subject, with Chinese being used when necessary in those lessons. A fourth model is represented by schools that proclaim to be an ethnic minority language school but, in reality, do not use the minority language as the medium of instruction nor even teach it as school subject. Such schools also claimed to be bilingual, in the sense that Chinese and English are studied as languages in the curriculum and Chinese serves as the medium of instruction.

## Factors Shaping the Trilingual Education Models

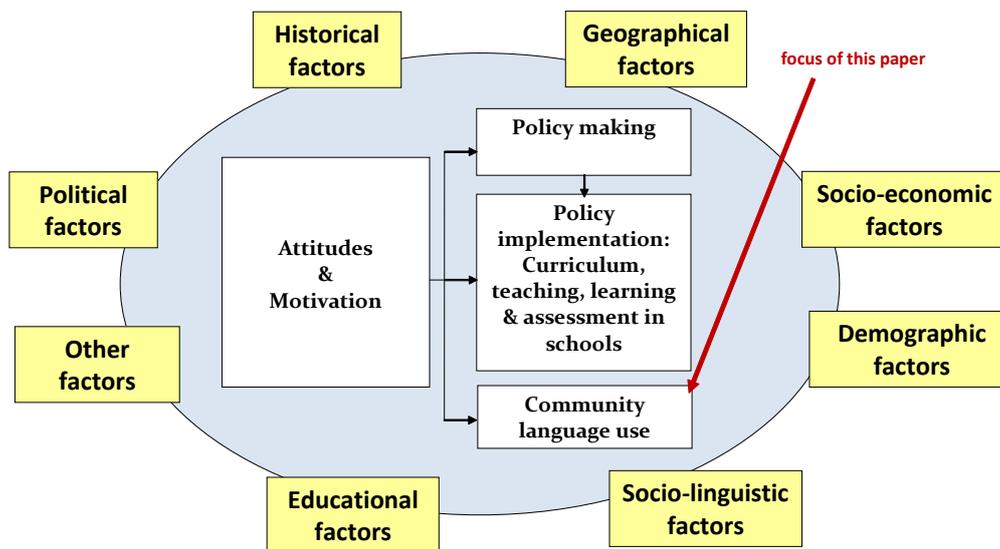
What factors shape and sustain the various models of trilingual education? This question denotes a particular view of education policy—that it emerges from, and forms part of broader contexts.

At the outset of the project, it was possible (on the basis of relevant literature) to identify key contextual factors that would likely play a role in shaping trilingual education policy. For instance, Fägerlind and Saha (1989) propose a triadic framework that positions education policy under the influence of socio-economic, socio-political and educational priorities.

A key concept for the study is ethnolinguistic vitality, the strength of life force of a language within a community. Ethnolinguistic vitality is influenced by geographical, historical, demographic and socio-linguistic factors, in addition to socio-economic and socio-political factors (Landweer, 2000). Other factors, such as religion, are emerging from the first phase of the project.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for the study of models of trilingual education in the PRC.

Figure 1—Conceptual framework



To conduct the research into the factors that shape and sustain the various models of trilingual education, a range of methodological tools were adopted.

A suite of research tools as shown in Table 1 were designed. A typical study of each single school would include:

- focus group interviews with 3-6 community leaders
- 2-3 interviews with regional and local education officials
- 1-3 interviews with school principal, deputy and other school leaders
- focus group interviews with 5-10 teachers
- focus group interviews with approximately 10 students
- 3-5 interviews with former students
- focus group interviews with approximately 10 parents
- documentary analysis of policy papers, syllabuses, timetables, learning resources and curriculum materials
- 5-10 lesson observations
- questionnaire surveys focusing on language attitudes and views of trilingual education among 60-100 students, 20-30 teachers including headteachers and deputies.
- field notes (e.g. observations of the school buildings and wall decorations, of languages used in the school outside of the classroom and of language use in the community).

These tools are described in detail in other Technical Papers in this series.

*Table 1 – Methods to study factors that shape and sustain the models of trilingual education*

<b>Paradigm</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Focus</b>
Qualitative	Semi-structured interview with head-teachers and teachers (focus groups or individuals)	Perceptions of and attitudes to trilingualism and each language, and their experiences implementing trilingual education models
	Semi-structured interview with policy makers (for individuals)	Perceptions of & attitudes to trilingualism and each language, and their experiences in policy making and implementation of trilingual education policy
	Semi-structured interview with parents (focus group or individuals)	Attitudes to different languages, their knowledge of what is going on in schools and their experiences of their children’s trilingual education
	Semi-structured interview with pupils (focus group or individuals)	Attitudes and experiences in using and learning languages in a trilingual education context
	School observation	Language environment: notice boards, signs, pictures, etc.; languages used by staff, pupils, etc.; the role and distribution of languages, as shown in curriculum documents
	Classroom observation	languages used by teacher and pupils, for classroom instruction and activities
	Ethnographic study	To study the language environment in a minority community
Quantitative	Teacher Questionnaire	Teacher’s perceptions of current practice, views of language use and views concerning language education
	Parent Questionnaire	Parents’ knowledge of current practice and views of language use and language education
	Student Questionnaire	Students’ attitude to current practice and views of language use and language education
	Subjective vitality survey	Ethnolinguistic vitality of a minority language
Other (Archival)	Objective vitality study	Ethnolinguistic vitality of a minority language by collecting data through archives, mass media, official documents, etc.

### **Ethnographic Research Procedure**

The qualitative research aims to produce an ethnographic description of the languages used in everyday life and work in a town where an aboriginal minority group dominates, and to examine how Chinese (and possibly other languages) influences the linguistic landscape in that town and how this sociolinguistic context impacts on children and their parents or carers in terms of life choices and education.

The data collected from this part of the research seem irrelevant to English as it is unlikely that English is used at all in a town where an aboriginal minority group dominates in China. However, as a trilingualism project, the significance of collecting the data concerning L1 and L2 use for a minority group is that the data have direct bearings on language education, including the determination of Zhongjeyu, the language used for teaching and learning of L3, English. Given the diversity of the

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population in China, the data help evaluate to what extent a minority group are linguistically and culturally assimilated into the mainstream society, what the strongest language is for the majority of the group, how they perceive their linguistic identity, and thus whether promoting the use and teaching of the minority language can empower them and facilitate cognitive development of the pupils.

Place: A middle-sized or small town of a region or area where an aboriginal minority group dominates.

Field Worker: The field worker must be bi/tri/multilingual and understand equally well the minority language and Chinese, or other local language(s) used there. Ideally, the field worker is a member of the dominant minority group.

Two types of data are collected:

1. General observations of the language environment: the language(s) in which people speak to each other in most situations; the language(s) of the mass media; the language(s) of the public signs, announcements, broadcasts, etc. (The data are important as background/context information).
2. In-depth, ethnographic observation and interviews researching into how this specific minority group communicate in naturalistic settings

For the Second Type of data, follow these steps:

Step 1 – Choose a site or several sites to conduct an ethnographic study. This site should be a place frequented by an ethnic or social group you are interested in studying. It may be a tea house, a shop, a market place, a family you've got to know, a restaurant run by an ethnic minority member or group, a society, a barber or hair dresser, a mosque, a temple, a church, etc.

Step 2 – Visit the site(s) frequently, make friends with them if possible, make observations of how they communicate (using their natural native language, Chinese, or a mixed code, or else) and take notes during or after the observation.

Step 3 – Note any salient features, doubts and ambiguities of the people and their behaviours you observe.

Step 4 – Formulate a set of questions and hypotheses about the ethnic group you are studying and observing. For example:

- You have observed one individual who never used Chinese while others used a lot in their conversation. Obviously, this individual had no difficulty in understanding others when they used Chinese. You may hypothesise that he/she must know some Chinese but doesn't want to use it as he/she has a strong sense of ethnic identity.
- You have noted that another individual spoke to his peers in an obviously different accent though in the same language. You wonder if he is local, or has lived outside the region for some time.

Step 5 – Identify and approach some individuals you have observed (selecting those who look interesting and articulate as research subjects and are willing to chat to you). With consent, conduct ethnographic interviews with them in appropriate venues to confirm or disapprove your hypotheses

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and answer your questions (tape the interviews if appropriate). The way to approach them and the venues to conduct interviews should be as natural as possible to try to reduce researcher's reactivity.

Step 6 – Analyse the interview data as soon as possible, ideally soon after each interview (not necessarily transcribe them, which is time consuming). Whenever necessary, conduct further ethnographic interviews with the same individuals, e.g., in casual conversations with them. The data collected in such ways will enable you to look at the people and the interplay of social, linguistic and cultural factors from emic and etic perspectives.

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