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

Models of Trilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Regions of China Project

Briefing Paper No.5

Analysis of English Learning Mechanisms of
Tibetan Middle School Students in a
“Tibetan-Chinese-English” Language
Environment from the Perspective of
Cognition

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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.

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

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Analysis of English Learning Mechanisms of Tibetan Middle School Students in a “Tibetan-Chinese-English” Language Environment from the Perspective of Cognition

Significance of the Research

- Necessity for developing English education in Tibetan areas of China
- Contribution to academic literature
- Linguistic knowledge
- Pedagogical improvements
- References and proposals for foreign language teaching



Research Questions

1. What are the subjective attitudes of the students towards English learning?
2. What are the language transfers caused by Tibetan and Chinese?
3. What are the influences of the systems of Tibetan and Chinese knowledge and cognition structure?
4. What are the internal mechanisms of the Tibetan students in the trilingual environment?

Research Methodology

1. Analysis based on linguistics and cognitive theories;
2. Empirical Research –two experiments
 - Questionnaire & test
 - Think-aloud protocols

General Structure of the Study

- Literature Review
- Analysis on the language transfers caused by Tibetan and Chinese;
- Analysis on the learning mechanism of Tibetan students;
- Findings from the empirical research;
- Conclusions and implications;

Literature Review

- Piaget's model of learning and cognitive development
- Bruner's constructivist theory
- Ausubel's meaningful verbal learning
- Gagne's events of instruction & Information processing model
- Language transfer
- Critical period hypothesis

Analysis on the language transfers caused by Tibetan and Chinese

- Phonetic symbols
- Intonation
- Grammar
- Syntax

Analysis on the learning mechanism of Tibetan students

- Learning process

English information → received by the sense receptor (eyes, ears) → selected perception (features need to be given attention will be selected) → short term storage → long term storage → performance

- Other elements

Age/ Motivation/Personality/ Ethnic identity



Conclusions and implications

Conclusions:

- Affective factors
- Language transfers
- English learning mechanism

Implications:

- Increasing Tibetan students' interests in learning English
- Taking advantages of languages
- Building connections among systems of knowledge and cognition structure
- Adopt appropriate and effective teaching methods

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