

---

---

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

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

---

**Technical Paper No.10**

---

**The ‘One-Dragon’ Approach to Research  
in Trilingual Education in China**

**Anwei Feng & Bob Adamson**

January 2017

## **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.

Please cite as:

Feng A., & Adamson, B. (2017). *The 'One-Dragon' Approach to Research in Trilingual Education in China*. Technical Paper, Models of Trilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Regions of China Project. Hong Kong: The Education University of Hong Kong.

© Anwei Feng and Bob Adamson, 2017

***The authors acknowledge the generous funding received from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (General Research Fund 840012). Views expressed are those of the authors.***

---

# The ‘One-Dragon’ Approach to Research in Trilingual Education in China

## Introduction

In this paper, the ‘One-Dragon’ approach (一条龙研究法) is coined to refer to a linear, from-start-to-end methodology to research the causal factors that affect practice in trilingual education in a specific context. This coinage reflects the usual connotation of 一条龙 as in 一条龙服务 (‘one-dragon’ service provided to the clients/customers from the start to its completion). As shown in Figure 1, the approach consists of three major phases, from determining major causal factors, studying and evaluating these factors, to finally revealing the nature of the trilingual education practice and its likely outcomes. The paper draws on research evidence reported in Feng & Adamson (2015a) and on other recent publication on trilingual education in China. It is written with the intention to share our experience with fellow researchers in this area of research and to help junior researchers get a holistic idea of what to research into, how to investigate and evaluate the causal factors that affect trilingual education in geopolitically, socio-linguistically and culturally complex situations, and which models would lead to (un)desirable outcomes in the real world.

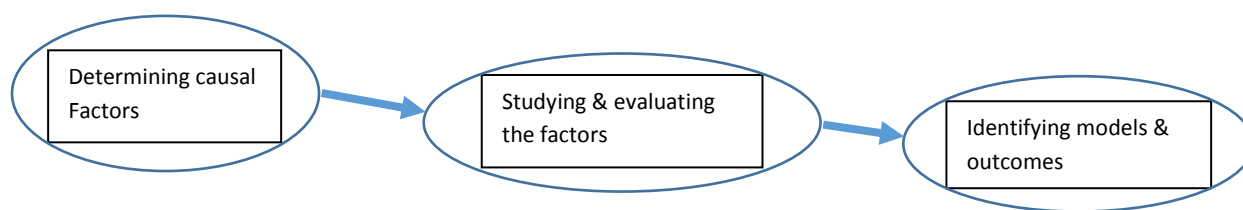


Fig. 1 – the ‘one-dragon’ approach

## What Can We Research?

Recent research conducted in minority regions including those in Feng & Adamson (2015a) indicate that selection of a trilingual education model and its effectiveness when implemented depend upon numerous contextual factors that can be grouped into three levels of analysis which are interrelated to each other (see Fig. 2). At **the micro-level**, factors that directly determine the selection of a model, include geographical location, demography, resources, key stakeholders’ attitudes and perceptions and school leadership. Among them, school leadership plays a crucial role. They make key decisions on the ground, although their decisions are determined by the other factors such as resources. The school leadership of a remote village school in Liangshan, Sichuan, for example, may choose not to teach Nuosu, pupils’ L1, even though it is encouraged by the regional policy, because they see it as less relevant than L2 for the pupils’ future (Liu, et al., 2015). In many remote areas, schools usually have to defer offering pupils L3, or simply ignore it, due to lack of human resources. Decision making by the school leadership may also be determined by the demography of the school. A model for a town school with pupils of mixed ethnic background, for example, may well differ from a relatively isolated village school with pupils of the same ethnic group. Furthermore, the attitudes and perceptions of the teachers and parents – local key stakeholders of the school – would be crucial in determining whether L1 is given any place at all in language use and teaching at school and which language should be used as the medium of instruction.

At **the meso-level**, many factors would regulate the model used in a classroom given that education is tightly controlled in a top-down approach in China. State and local policies are

often the determining factors for curriculum design, language allocation and subject details. Research suggests that ethnolinguistic vitality is a variable that all key stakeholders including policy makers would have to take into account in selecting and designing school curricula. Models of trilingual education that promote additive trilingualism tend to be found in contexts where the ethnolinguistic vitality of a minority language is strong. This suggests that widespread use of a vibrant minority language (both in a written as well as a spoken form) in a community – its objective ethnolinguistic vitality – and positive attitudes towards that language among members of the community – its subjective vitality – tend to provide the impetus and support necessary for strong models of trilingual education in the local schools. However, strong ethnolinguistic vitality alone does not guarantee the presence of a strong model, as evidenced by some of the special arrangements for minority students such as the inland classes and the Three Options in Xinjiang (Sunoudula & Cao, 2015). It has to be accompanied by political stability.

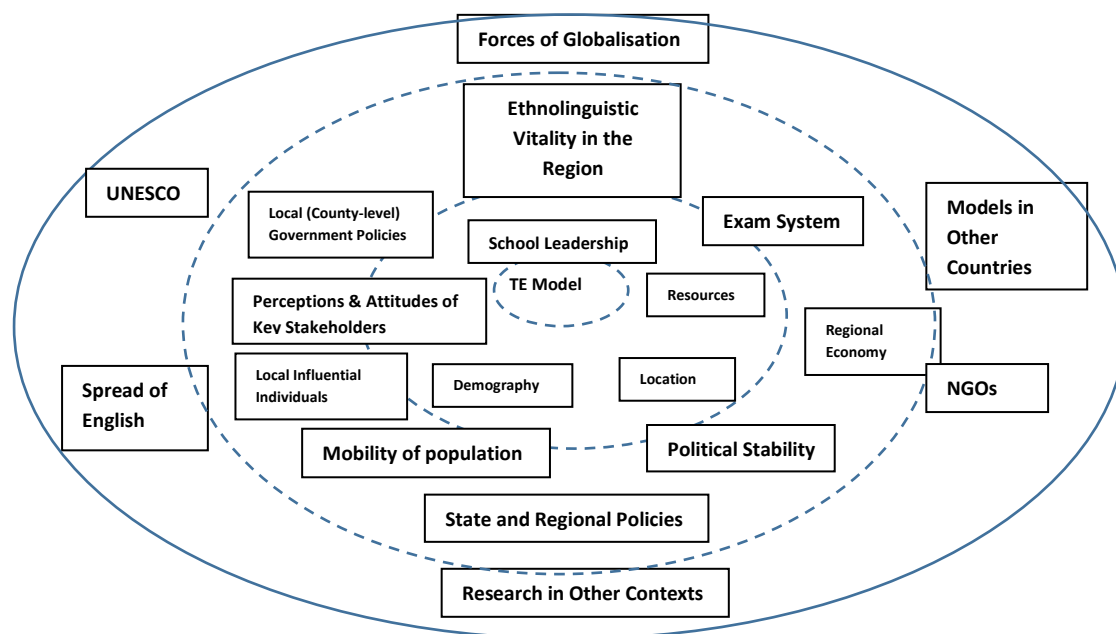


Figure 2 – Trilingual education in context

In addition, the exam system, regional economy and mobility of population determine how key stakeholders perceive the relative importance or usefulness of the languages in question. Research also clearly suggests perceptions and attitudes of individuals, particularly those in power (Tsung, 2009), are pivotal for practice on the ground. Meaningful empirical studies have been conducted recently in many areas including Liangshan (Liu, et al. 2015), Yunnan (Yuan, et al., 2015) and Qinghai (Ma & Renzen, 2015) to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of local policy makers, school teachers, including head-teachers, parents and students. The findings should be able to inform policy making and school curriculum designing in the specific regions. However, due to the ever-changing nature of the linguistic landscape in the 21st century and correspondingly, stakeholders' changing attitudes, all the factors at the meso level should be studied regularly in conjunction with other factor at other levels so as to better inform policy making and classroom practice.

---

Furthermore, at **the supra-national macro-level**, many factors such as various forces of globalization including spread of English, UNESCO's Mother-Tongue Multilingual Education (M-T MLE), NGOs, and trilingual models developed in other countries (e.g., Cenoz, 2009), may directly or indirectly affect the policy and practice in a given school or region. The influence from this level on practices in various sociolinguistic domains would usually be indirect, for example, from researchers equipped with theories and practical models developed abroad or policies that reflect awareness of globalisation. Sometimes, however, factors at the macro-level could impact practice unswervingly. SIL International, a non-government organization with active presence in many Asian countries, have conducted quite a number of bilingual and trilingual education experimental studies on the ground to promote M-T MLE in remote regions in China (Cobby, 2007; Finifrock, 2010).

### **How to Study and Evaluate the Factors**

It should be noted that contextual factors listed in Fig. 2 are by no means meant to be exhaustive. As regions dominated by minority groups differ so immensely, some other factors not often found in most places may exist and be relevant to a specific region. In any case, the list could offer a point of departure. Once the key factors are identified and analysed, local decision makers and school leadership should be able to determine, in broad terms, how each language is taught and/or used in the curriculum and on school campus and which language(s) is/are used as the medium of instruction. For researchers, however, each factor should be studied and evaluated in more detail as they are expected to give much more valid and reliable evidence not only on what is happening and what is (in)effective, but also on what should be the case.

The dimensions and individual items in Appendix 1 are compiled by drawing on research evidence reported in Feng & Adamson (2015a) and on many other recent publications on trilingual education. It is meant to be a **quantitative research tool** to measure the contextual factors statistically. As it can be seen, all key factors are included in the scoring rubric. When we evaluate and assess the practice of trilingual education in a particular school, with this rubric, we should be able to obtain useful statistical data by giving a score to each item. The total score would give us an idea about how strong or weak the form of trilingual education is in that school and where the key issues/challenges could be.

It is, however, vital for researchers to be aware that the seemingly simple task to give a score to each item could mean months, if not years, of research. Any item in the table should be investigated and/or analysed thoroughly to arrive at a valid score. Take the first item, regional policy, for example. There is no regional level bureau who would explicit state in their documents that they aim for subtractive bilingualism and bilingual education, which would not align with the Constitution. In a similar way, few government departments would put additive trilingualism and trilingual education as the ultimate goal for school education, because the terms have remained in the academic domain and, for years, have rarely appeared in the official documents. Whether the ultimate goal indicated or implied in the policy document is to nurture additive or subtractive bi-/tri-lingualism requires researchers to search extensively and arrive at a convincing conclusion through in-depth analysis of all relevant documents. In effect, most question items listed in the table such as subjective ethnolinguistic vitality, language(s) in education and stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes necessitate researchers to go to the field to collect empirical data before an answer can be given. To fill in the rubrics, therefore, a researcher is obliged to design and engage in a series of investigations, from **document search and analysis** to carefully planned **qualitative research, as well as quantitative studies**, in order to gain valid data for drawing conclusions.

## Which Model Brings about What Outcome?

On the basis of the findings from the ‘trilingualism-in-China’ project carried out over six years in nine key minority regions, Adamson and Feng (2014) produced a summary (see Table 2) depicting four major models found adopted by ethnic minority schools in the regions. As it shows, the first two models, namely accretive and balanced, are effective models that are likely to bring about additive bilingualism or trilingualism while the other two, transitional (early exit) and depreciative, would likely result in subtractive bilingualism or trilingualism. The former would lead to satisfactory school performance in general but the latter models are detrimental to pupils’ cognitive and affective development during schooling.

*Table 2 – Summary of the major models found in the trilingualism-in-China project with its key features (slightly adapted from Adamson & Feng (2014))*

Models	Aims	Key Features	Likely Outcomes
Accretive	To maintain strong L1 and ethnic identity To develop strong L2 competence To strive for peer appropriate competence in L3	Strong ethno-linguistic vitality in L1 and minority pupil domination in school Using L1 as MoI for all or most school subjects at least in primary years Strong presence of L1 culture in school environment L2 and L3 are promoted robustly as school subjects	Strong competence in L1 and strong sense of ethnic identity  Where favourable conditions exist, it is likely to develop: strong performance in all school subjects additive trilingualism
Balanced	To develop both strong L1 and L2 To promote ethnic harmony	Mixed Han and minority groups Using both L1 and L2 as MoI in primary years Strong presence of L1 and L2 cultures in school environment L3 is less stressed but could be introduced depending on resources	Strong competence in L1 and L2 Strong performance in school subjects More likely to foster balanced bilingualism than balanced trilingualism
Transitional (Early exit)	To shift to L2 as MoI To assimilate pupils into the mainstream	May be mixed Han and minority groups or a single minority group where ethno-linguistic vitality is weak L2 emphasised in curricula and in classrooms L1 only deemed useful as a stepping stone L3 may be offered where conditions exist.	Acquiring (limited) competence in L2 at the expense of L1 (leading to subtractive bi- or trilingualism) Poor performance in school subjects including L3 because no strong language can be used for academic thinking
Depreciative	To aim usually covertly for monolingualism in L2 Linguistic and cultural assimilation	Remote places with weak ethnolinguistic vitality L1 ignored as it is seen useless and L2 used as the only MoI Minority school with mixed minority groups or a single minority group of pupils Difficult to offer L3	Acquiring competence in L2 at the expense of L1 (leading to subtractive bi- or trilingualism) Little chance to develop bilingual or trilingual competence

---

In addition to these major models, other practices are found for students from some specific contexts, particularly in those areas that are deemed politically sensitive. For example, in Xinjiang, minority and Han schools are sometimes merged as *Min Han Hexiao* (Tsung, 2009); another practice is Tibetan and Xinjiang *Neidiban* – classes usually offered in schools in relatively developed inland cities in other provinces but attended by Tibetan or Xinjiang secondary students far away from their home minority communities (Postiglione, et al., 2007). They appear to be models not leading to balanced/additive but subtractive bilingualism or trilingualism.

For individual pupils, recent scholarship and research indicate that, broadly speaking, different models adopted in trilingual education would bring about three major outcomes. The first is termed '*balanced trilingualism*' defined as having (almost) equally strong competence in the three languages in use or under study. In such cases in China, an individual may usually have acquired the three languages in the order of L1 + L2 + L3, or (L1 and L2 simultaneously) + L3. For example, an Inner Mongolian student might have acquired both Mongolian and Chinese, in terms of both oracy and literacy, sequentially or simultaneously, under a balanced model of bilingual education. His/her L3 might be weak, but if he/she goes on to study as an English major at university or goes abroad to study, he/she is likely to become a balanced trilingual as the learning experience enables him/her to speak three languages and be tri-literate. Also, in some cases such as that reported in Wang's (2012) ethnographic study of two Naxi university students majoring in English, they can be claimed as balanced trilinguals, although their Naxi remained largely oral. It should be noted that, statistically, balanced trilinguals defined as such are not as common as the other two types of trilinguals (to be discussed below), because only a small percentage of minority students would have the chance to develop strong competence in all three languages.

Research shows that, compared to balanced trilingualism, *additive trilingualism* is more achievable. In the Chinese context, this term is defined as '*the development of very strong competences both in L1 (minority pupils' home language) and L2 (Mandarin Chinese), given its wide use and absolute importance for life opportunities in China, and peer appropriate competence in L3 (a foreign language, usually English). Peer appropriate competence in L3 refers to oral proficiency and literacy in L3 comparable to that of peers of the majority Han group*' (Feng & Adamson, 2015b: 8). This definition takes into account many aspects essential for minority education in the new century: cognitive and affective needs for L1 maintenance and development; economic and socio-political imperatives for L2 competence for structural integration into the mainstream society; and a recognised certificate in L3 to remain competitive for the job market and international mobility. This conception has proved its attainability through multiple case studies conducted in Northern China where Korean groups dominate or live in mixed communities (Zhang, et al. 2015) and in some places in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Dong, et al., 2015). A longitudinal experimental study conducted in a Dong village school in Guizhou (Finifrock & Schilken, 2015) also gives clear evidence of its benefits.

The third outcome, *subtractive trilingualism*, refers to a situation in which minority students acquire competence in L2, limited or strong, and perhaps limited competence in L3 too, but at the expense of their L1. Subtractive trilingualism results from use of weak models in which L1 is either ignored or used only in very limited time and space in early years of schooling while L2 is not only taught as a school subject but used as the medium of instruction, either from the very start or after 2-3 years of schooling. Such weak models leading to subtractive trilingualism are a major causal factor that results in an individual's low self-esteem, loss of cultural or ethnic identity, and thus further marginalisation.

---

## Concluding Remarks

It is worth noting that it would benefit researchers more when this paper were read in conjunction with the technical papers posted on the website <http://www.eduhk.hk/triling/>. The papers do not only offer methodological guidance but also a suite of research tools designed for investigating empirically the contextual factors listed in Table 2. Researchers could find, for example, guidelines and questionnaires to survey ethnolinguistic vitality (both objective and subjective), observation and interview sheets for studying perceptions and attitudes of key stakeholders such as (head)teachers, parents and students, and detailed instruction to conduct ethnographic research. The research tools were meant to be generic and to be used to study as many key issues as possible. However, researchers could feel free to adapt or totally revamp them to suit a specific context. They could also select the dimension(s) they wish to study, which was what most researchers did in Feng & Adamson (2015), and ignore others. A study that focuses on one dimension or sub-question may well yield more in-depth data than a comprehensive coverage, given similar resources and time. As indicated before, each dimension or even each question under a dimension in Table 2 could be a research project itself.

Above all, it is important to state that the ‘one-dragon’ approach is not meant to be prescriptive. It remains absolutely open to adaptation, appropriation and challenge. Furthermore, there might well be other approaches and methodologies that could be equally or even more valid and reliable in trilingual education research.

## References

- Adamson, B. and Feng, A.W. (2014). Models for Trilingual Education in the People’s Republic of China. In Gorter D., Zenotz, V. & Cenoz, J. (eds.) *Minority Languages and Multilingual Education* (29-44). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Cenoz, J. (2009). *Towards Multilingual Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Cobbey, H. (2007). Challenges and prospects of minority bilingual education in China – An analysis of four projects. In A. W. Feng (Ed.), *Bilingual Education in China* (pp. 182-199). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Dong, F., Narisu, Gou, Y.H., Wang, X.G. and Qiu, J. (2015). Four models of Mongolian Nationality Schools in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 25-46). Dordrecht: Springer
- Feng, A.W. and B. Adamson (eds.) (2015a). *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Feng, A.W. and B. Adamson (2015b). Researching Trilingualism and Trilingual Education in China. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (1-24). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Finifrock, J. (2010). English as a third language in rural China: Lessons from the Zaidang Kam-Mandarin Bilingual Education Project. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 4(1), 33–46.
- Finifrock, J.E. and Schilken, D. (2015). Emerging trilingualism in the Dong minority in Guizhou Province. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 199-222). Dordrecht: Springer
- Liu, C.Y., Ding, H.D., Wang, H., Yu, L.J. and Yang, M.Z. (2015). A Multi-case Investigation into Trilingualism and Trilingual Education in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 141-174). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Ma, F. and Renzen (2015). Ethnolinguistic vitality, language attitudes and language education in Qinghai Tibetan Schools. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 103-116). Dordrecht: Springer.



- 
- Postiglione, G. Ben J. and Manlaji (2007). Language in Tibetan education: The case of the Neidiban. In A. W. Feng (Ed.), *Bilingual Education in China* (pp. 49-74). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Sunuodula, M. and Cao, Y. (2015). Language learning and empowerment: Language in education for Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 65-102). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Tsung, L. (2009). *Minority languages, education and communities in China*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Yuan, Y.C., Hu, D.Y., Li, P., Zhu, H.H., Wang, J.J., Shang, Y., and Ba, H.B. (2015). A survey report on trilingualism and trilingual education in Yunnan. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 175-198). Dordrecht: Springer
- Zhang, Z.A., Wen, L.T., and Li, G.H. (2015). Trilingual education in China's Korean Communities. In Feng, A.W. & B. Adamson (eds.) *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges* (pp. 47-64). Dordrecht: Springer.

*Appendix 1 – Rubrics for Evaluating Trilingual Education in Context (Quantitative Measurement)*

<b>Scores</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>Dimensions</b>						
<b>Socio-linguistic Context</b>	Regional policy – Ultimate goal	Subtractive bilingualism & bilingual education	Bilingualism but L2 literacy only	Trilingualism but L2 and L3 biliteracy	Trilingualism & triliteracy	
	L1 vitality (objective)	Endangered L1 with little vitality in community	L1 used in public domains but not widely	L1 used widely but without strong institutional support	Widely used and strongly supported institutionally	
	L1 vitality (subjective)	Very weak sense of linguistic and cultural identity	Somewhat conscious of linguistic and cultural identity	fairly strong of linguistic and cultural identity	Very strong of linguistic and cultural identity	
	L2 use (in relation to L1 use)	L2 rarely/ predominantly used in community	L1 for informal use; L2 for formal use	Unbalanced use of L1 and L2 in both domains	Balanced L1 and L2 use in both domains	
	L3 use	Rarely existent even in schools	Limited presence in schools	Some use and presence in schools and in community	Frequent use for tourism and in multinational companies	
	Literacy	L1 only used verbally with emphasis on L2 literacy	L1 literacy taught briefly in early schooling with quick transition to L2 literacy	Literacy in both L1 & L2 is taught with little support for L3 literacy	Literacy in L1, L2 and L3 are all emphasised and supported	

Scores		Dimensions				Points
		1	2	3	4	
Population	Demography & mobility	Small minority population in mixed communities decreasing due to mobility	Large minority population decreasing due to mobility & urbanisation	Local minority population remaining relatively stable	Empowered minority group with stable population due to tourism or other reasons	
Language in Education	Language as school subject (SS)	Only L2 as SS	L1 & L2 as SSs but not L3	L1 & L2 as SSs with L3 offered later than English Curriculum Standard (ECS)	All three as SSs with L3 offered according to ECS	
	Language as medium of instruction (MoI)	Only L2 as MoI from start	L1 as MoI early but moving to L2 in Y3/Y4	L1 as MoI with L2 & L3 as SSs	All three as MoI to a lesser or more extent	
	Language(s) and content of assessment	Entirely in L2; content the same as that for majority pupils	Mostly in L2 but some in L1 in continuous assessment	Choice of language for high stakes exam but content direct translation of national papers	Free choice of language for exams and content suits the local context	
	School environment	Monolingual L2 with L1 suppressed	L2 dominant with L1 used in informal domains	L1 allowed in classrooms to limited degree for transition to L2 as MoI	L1 & L2 equally dominant with L3 as desired	
	Human resources for trilingual education (TE)	Mostly monolingual L2 Ts without L1 competence	Some native L1 Ts with L2 ability working with monolingual L2 Ts	Some native L1 Ts with L2 ability working with L2 Ts with knowledge in minority language	L1-L2 & L2-L1 bilingual teachers with some trilingual	

Scores		1	2	3	4	Points
Dimensions						
Attitudes of stake-holders	Policy makers	Only interested in promoting L2	<i>laissez-faire</i> attitude towards languages in education	Responding to BE needs in L1 and L2, not in L3	Proactive in promoting trilingual education (TE)	
	Teachers	Ditto	Ditto	Ditto	Ditto	
	Parents	Only interested in child's L2	Ditto	Keen on Child's bilingual competence	Proactive in supporting TE	
	Pupils/Students	Only interested in learning L2	Ditto	Keen on becoming L1 and L2 bilingual	Keen to become trilingual	
Other factors	Language Family	Distant between all three	Fairly close between two	Close between two or three	Same language family (all three)	
	Geopolitical situation	Politically tense areas	Remote regions with little resources and poor accessibility	Politically stable and accessible regions with reasonable resources	Regions with good accessibility, resources and stability	
	Macro influence	Region/school indifferent to global trends & change	Region/school reluctantly reacting to global trends & change	Region/school moving along with global trends & change	Region/school actively responding to global trends & change	
					<b>Total</b>	