

# Study on Bilingualism Policy in Border Ethnic Minority Areas of Yunnan Province

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## Abstract

Language education plays a crucial role to facilitate the stability, prosperity and harmony of border ethnic minority areas. The education of Yunnan border ethnic areas has long been in the forefront of neighboring countries, but after the 1990s, the economic and social development in the border ethnic areas of Yunnan has been far behind compared with the coastal developed areas. Due to the large and deep poverty in the border towns, the masses can hardly afford the high cost of children's education, resulting in the low enrollment rate and high dropout rate in the border ethnic areas. For this reason, Yunnan took the lead in practicing the "three free" education in border ethnic areas, and then carried out the "two exemptions and one subsidy" education with the whole country. At the same time, in view of the complicated and diversified trend of languages in border areas, a bilingual pilot school project was implemented in the stage of compulsory education. This measure not only completely reversed the flow of students at home and abroad, but also provided a feasible basis for the idea of building a pluralistic and integrated community.

## Keywords

Border ethnic minority, Bilingual education, Language policy.

## 1. Introduction

Education is one of the important means to stabilize and prosper borders, communicate "The Belt and Road" and build a pluralistic and integrated community. The education of Yunnan border ethnic areas has long been in the forefront of neighboring countries, but after the 1990s, the economic and social development in the border ethnic areas of Yunnan has been far behind compared with the coastal developed areas. Due to the large and deep poverty in the border towns, the masses can hardly afford the high cost of children's education, resulting in the low enrollment rate, high dropout rate, students studying abroad and even teachers teaching abroad in the border ethnic minority areas, which has had an adverse impact on China's international image and reputation. For this reason, Yunnan took the lead in practicing "three free" education in the border ethnic areas, and then implemented "two exemptions and one subsidy" education with the whole country, completely reversing the flow of students at home and abroad at the beginning of the 21st century. Now, a large number of students from neighboring countries, especially Myanmar, attend schools on the Chinese side of the border every year, greatly increasing the appeal of China. For example, Ruili Jie Gao Elementary School, according to its enrollment data, only about 80 of the more than 500 students at Jie Gao Elementary School are actually locals, while the rest are the children of migrant workers from all over the country and Burmese students studying across the border. They study together and use the national unified textbooks, so that the influence of Chinese culture, the influence of harmonious ethnic relations in Yunnan, and the influence of flourish and stability in Yunnan border areas will disseminate naturally (Yunnan Province Education Department, 2015).

However, there are still some problems in cross-border education, among which language education has always been the core concern of the government and society. Due to the mixed ethnic groups living in the border areas, the traditional ethnic minorities living across the border generally use their native language as the main social language, and also use some of the languages of their mixed ethnic groups. Along with the increase of China's investment in basic education and the implementation of the compulsory education policy in border minority areas, the Chinese level of cross-border ethnic minority people in border areas is enhancing year by year, which makes the languages in border areas present a complex and diversified trend. At the same time, most of the ethnic minorities living across the border in Yunnan have languages but no words, which also limits the implementation of Chinese and the teaching of ethnic languages (Chen Lu, 2015).

In view of the language education problem in cross-border area, Yunnan Province Education Department began to launch bilingual experimental school project in 2011, with the purpose of ensuring national unity, to provide tools for ethnic groups to communicate with each other (Chinese), in the meantime, to the culture of each nation get further development and inheritance, forming the diverse national culture and constantly injecting vigor and vitality to the whole culture of the Chinese nation.

## **2. The Present Situation and Problems of Bilingual Pilot Schools in Yunnan Border Ethnic Regions**

### **2.1. An Overview of the Bilingual Pilot Schools**

There are 29 pilot bilingual schools in the border ethnic areas of Yunnan, among which 9 are school sites (schools of less than six grades are collectively referred to as school sites, only 1 school for grades 1-2, 3 for grades 1-3, 3 for grades 1-4, and 2 for grades 1-5). The 29 schools have a total of 7,659 primary students, among whom 6,930 are ethnic minority students, accounting for 90.4% of the total. The average student size of the bilingual pilot schools is 264.1, with an average of 44 students per grade. Sixteen schools are accompanied by preschool classes, with 641 preschool children, among whom 537 are ethnic minority children, averaging 40 students per class.

### **2.2. Problems with Bilingual Pilot Schools**

(1) A high proportion of preschool students who can only understand their mother tongue

Of the 29 bilingual pilot schools, 16 have preschools. In these preschools, apart from the fact that students of Naxi language, Dulong language and Yi language preschool in Shilin (the total of being able to understand simple Chinese and communicate directly in Chinese is about 90%) can communicate in Chinese, the remaining 13 preschool students must use their mother tongue to communicate normally. There are 11 schools in which more than half of students understand only their native language.

(2) The mother tongue is the first language of most students in the lower stages of primary school

In the lower grades of primary school, students' mother tongue is still the main language of communication in most schools. However, after two years of bilingual teaching, the Chinese proficiency of students in grade 3 and above has improved significantly, and only students in one primary school still have difficulties in communicating in Chinese in grade five or six.

(3) The cognition of all sectors of society is still unfavorable to the development of bilingual teaching in schools

In a survey of parents across the border, many of them think the burden on students to learn Chinese and the burden on children would be even heavier if they were required to learn minority languages. In addition, yunnan has a large number of ethnic groups and languages,

while the population of each ethnic group is relatively small. The characteristics of "large mixed residence, small settlement" determine that there is no independent system of school education for ethnic minorities in Yunnan, especially in border ethnic areas. Ethnic minorities living together in the main ethnic groups (other ethnic minorities in the minority agglomeration area) have certain feelings of resistance to learning the ethnic language of the main body of the environment where the school is located, etc. These factors have caused some obstacles to the bilingual teaching in the school.

(4) The development of bilingual teaching lacks necessary theoretical and policy support

Because of the doubling of investment in bilingual education, combined with general education, bilingual education in Yunnan has been gradually weakened since the late 1990s due to the changes in teacher establishment, education funds, bilingual education policies and so on. At present, there is not a complete and special institution studying bilingual education in primary schools in Yunnan province. The lack of authoritative theoretical support, unclear goal of bilingual education and disordered teaching organization all lead to low teaching efficiency. Secondly, the vast majority of schools do not have qualified bilingual teachers, and more than 90% of teachers have not received training in bilingual teaching method. Most of the teachers in bilingual pilot schools can only use ethnic languages for teaching assistance, but rarely use ethnic characters for teaching. At the same time, the small scale of bilingual pilot schools is not conducive to the improvement of teachers' professional level. The average student size of the 29 bilingual pilot schools is 264.1, with an average of 44 students per grade, and most of schools have only one class per grade. Due to the shortage of teachers, some teachers report that teachers in grades 1-4 in their schools have to cover all classes. This kind of school structure determines that each teacher is required to teach across grades or disciplines. Due to the lack of parallel classes, lack of peer support and expert guidance, the school's teaching and research activities are difficult to carry out.

### **3. Countermeasures and Suggestions for Developing Bilingual Teaching in Border Ethnic Areas**

#### **3.1. Implementation of the "Transitional Bilingual Education" Mode of Running Schools**

"Transitional bilingual education" refers to an education in which children use part or all of their native language in school, and then gradually transition to the full use of non-native language or Chinese adopted by the school. This mode is to carry out enlightenment education in the language familiar to children, with the purpose of developing the second language (namely Chinese) of minority children, so that they can better master the communicative tools and thinking mode to integrate into the mainstream society (Weining Xi, 2006). There are two types of "transitional bilingual education": (1) Early retreat of ethnic languages: using mother tongue to the maximum extent in the first two years of learning to prepare for the teaching of Chinese; (2) Late retreat of ethnic languages: ethnic language teaching can account for 40%, up to the sixth grade.

According to the current situation of the bilingual pilot schools and the requirements of promoting the economic development of the regions along the "the Belt and Road", inheriting national culture and promoting cultural diversity, in cross-border areas, the "late retreat of ethnic languages" as the main teaching model can be adopted, and preschool classes in areas where ethnic minorities live in communities that basically do not speak Chinese can be included in the category of compulsory education, extending bilingual education from the early childhood to the sixth grade of primary school, so as to promote the development of bilingual education. Due to the large gap between the border areas inhabited by ethnic minorities and the mainland in economy, politics, culture, education, transportation and other aspects, which

are comprehensive poverty. Children in such areas have little access to contemporary early childhood education. Therefore, it is necessary to give strong policy support to such areas and extend bilingual teaching to about grade 6 of primary school while establishing a preschool education system, so as to solve the language transition problem of minority students to the utmost extent.

The following is the data and result analysis of the pilot teaching mode in Jinghong Manmai Primary School, Xishuangbanna:

In 2010, Jinghong Manmai Primary School carried out the "primary school experimental project of bilingual teaching in Dai and Chinese based on mother tongue", and then carried out "Mannongfeng and Mannbie project classes". The aim is to help Dai children start their primary school study smoothly, improve their mandarin and mathematical abilities, master two languages and characters of Dai and Han, strengthen their ethnic identity and protect their cultural heritage. After the end of the first phase of the Dai and Chinese bilingual education project in 2011, relevant experts conducted an informal evaluation of the project, evaluation means include subjective and objective methods, namely questionnaire survey and examination (Xishuangbanna Education Bureau, 2012).

The teaching contents are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

|                |               |                                      |  |                  |
|----------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|--|------------------|
| Primary school | 6             | Dai (teaching language and subjects) | Chinese (teaching language and subjects) | Interest Classes |
|                | 5             | Dai (teaching language and subjects) | Chinese (teaching language and subjects) | Interest Classes |
|                | 4             | Dai (teaching language and subjects) | Chinese (teaching language and subjects) |                  |
|                | 3             | Dai (teaching language)              | Chinese (teaching language and subjects) |                  |
|                | 2             | Dai (teaching language)              | Spoken and read-write Chinese            |                  |
|                | 1             | Dai (teaching language)              | Spoken and read-write Chinese            |                  |
| Preschool      | Large classes | Dai (teaching language)              | Spoken Chinese                           |                  |
|                | Small classes | Dai (teaching language)              |  |                  |

The outline for the preschool education phase of the project is aimed at Dai children aged 5-6 years, and Dai language is the only teaching language, developing the children's ability to express in Dai language and read and write in Dai writing. The teaching method used is a multi-strategy approach that emphasizes both accuracy and understanding of the content. In addition to the Dai language classes, the outline also includes math, music, art, PE and other content. In large classes, students are taught oral Chinese using the whole body response learning method. Project evaluation is as follows:

When asked about the impact of the Dai and Chinese programs on students, all the teachers answered in the affirmative, saying that the children's enthusiasm for learning has increased, they like reading stories in the Dai language, and like attending classes more, and their intelligence has been developed. Now students have a strong self-confidence and can express their ideas well.

Parents and Dai elders are happy for their children to read Dai writing. Several teachers said that some parents want to learn Dai language with their children, who are happy that their children can learn their own ethnic culture and are happy to help their children learn their own ethnic culture, and some Dai people believe that preserving the Dai language gives them hope for the future. One teacher said parents are supportive of the Dai-Chinese bilingual program when they see their children "learn both Chinese and Dai, and know more than other children."

Teachers found that students in the program responded more positively to teachers, had better verbal skills, and taught themselves better than preschool students who did not participate in the Dai-Chinese program. The teachers all agree that the program has helped children greatly in literacy and math!

The impact of the Dai Chinese project on the Dai community has been to make people more interested in their own ethnic culture, and the project has "set off a wave of revival of the Dai language and culture among the villagers".

### **3.2. Development of Teachers**

The "bilingual teachers training fund" and the "bilingual teachers reward fund" have been set up to support the development of bilingual teaching. At the same time, in the border areas, "substituted post exercitation, replacement training" can be used to comprehensively solve the difficulty of bilingual teacher training. The implementation of bilingual teaching for bilingual teachers is an important guarantee to enhance the teaching quality in remote areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. Therefore, the establishment of "bilingual teacher training fund" can guarantee the quantity and quality of bilingual teachers. In the meantime, the "Regulations on the Promotion of Minority Education in Yunnan" and "Other Policies and Regulations on Education for Ethnic Minorities" have been earnestly and substantially implemented, and a "bilingual teachers' reward fund" has been set up to encourage teachers to actively participate in bilingual teaching (Trove, 2000). Cross-border regional bilingual schools and colleges and universities in yunnan province has established the cooperation mechanism. Colleges and universities with ethnic language and literature majors substitute teachers from bilingual schools to relevant schools for training with the form of "substituted post exercitation", so as to improve the quality of teachers and solve the problem of difficulty in students' internship in colleges and universities, to achieve a win-win situation between colleges and pilot schools.

### **3.3. "Model Schools for Ethnic Cultural Heritage" Are Established to Replace The Bilingual Pilot Schools.**

The term of "bilingual pilot schools" tends to weaken the clarity of policy objectives, making the teaching ideas and teaching contents advocated by them not clear enough. In addition, if the word "bilingual" is not annotated as "bilingualism of national language and Chinese", it is easy to be misunderstood as the more popular English-Chinese bilingual teaching in the modern and contemporary time. Therefore, naming future projects with the term "model schools for ethnic cultural heritage" can make the meaning clear. Only in this way can there be less confusion and the educational objectives be clarified. On the other hand, heritage schools can also appropriately expand the teaching objects and extend the teaching duration, thus providing more research space for exploring the protection of national languages and promotion of lingua franca under cultural diversity.

## 4. Conclusions

In general, the strengthening of minority language education is a key component of school education in cross-border minority areas in Yunnan. In the process of protecting and inheriting minority languages, ethnic gathering places and schools should be the starting point. Through optimized and innovative teaching methods, focusing on the teaching of "late retreat" ethnic language, the ethnic minority culture inheritance teaching is developed to help the students in the cross-border ethnic minority areas, so that they can fully master the common language and the language of their own ethnic group. The shortage of bilingual teachers in minority areas can be improved by improving teachers' mastery of ethnic languages, reinforcing teachers' training and promoting their quality. Also, in the process of teaching minority languages, we should also scientifically compile and revise language textbooks. According to the teaching practice of minority languages, the compilation of scientific and comprehensive teaching materials will make the teaching work more targeted. Finally, in the process of teaching minority languages, it is required to actively innovate teaching methods, improve the overall teaching quality of minority languages by means of technological and scientific innovation, and optimize the protection and inheritance of minority languages.

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