Learning English as a third language by Uyghur students in Xinjiang : a blessing in disguise ?

Mamtimyn Sunuodula , Anwei Feng

Abstract

The spread and rapid rise in status of English language in education and society across China in recent years has been widely discussed and debated by scholars as well as policy makers. More recently, the phenomena described as "English and Chinese bilingual education" has been promoted and gained currency in educational establishments in economically developed costal regions and urban centres in the country, with the ostensible aim of achieving both language proficiency and subject learning simultaneously. The term "bilingual education" has become part of the everyday vocabulary for parents, educators and policy makers alike. This article focuses on the impact of this change on the already multilingual but economically less developed linguistic minority regions, using a case study of Uyghurs in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Based on the empirical research, the article tries to demonstrate that foreign language, in particular English language, provision in education and society had had an empowering impact on some Uyghur students who found that they could be very successful in learning a foreign language, even without the high proficiency level in the second language, which is a pre-requisite for succeeding in other areas.

英语作为第三种语言学习：对少数民族学生是祸还是福[①]？

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摘要

近年来，英语教学在中国得到大力推广并且受到社会各阶层，尤其是教育界的高度重视。短暂的几年之内，"汉英双语教育"在沿海及其它经济发达地区逐渐兴起并且迅速蔓延。"双语教育"这个术语也相应地加入了社会各个阶层，广大父母，教育界以及决策人员的日常用语。这一现象引起了国内外新闻界，学术界和国内有关决策者的广泛辩论。那么，这一现象在经济相对落后，多种语言并存的边远少数民族地区的影响如何呢？

这篇文章以社会语言学，教育学的理论为框架，以新疆维吾尔族大学生学习英语为实例，试图探讨和回答有关少数民族学生第三语言学习方面的一些问题。文章采用法国社会学家 Pierre Bourdieu 提出的"文化资本"的理论概念来分析实证研究结果并且对当地各种语言之间的动态关系进行理论解释。文章做出以下结论：一些维吾尔族学生所表现的极高的英语学习动机来自于他们强烈的民族与个人自尊感。与其它学科的学习劣势相反，由于他们学习第三种语言时对汉语水平的要求不那么高，他们在英语学习上体现一定优势，这使得他们在英语学习上加倍投于并取得较好成绩。积极的反馈有助于进一步调动他们对其它学科的学习动机并且发展他们积极乐观的学习和生活态度。文章认为，少数民族学生第三种语言学习如果处理得当有可能成其为提高他们学习信心和民族与个人自尊感的突破口。

英語作為第三種語言學習：對少數民族學生是禍還是福 ？

Mamtimyn Sunuodula , Anwei Feng

摘要

近年來，英語教學在中國得到大力推廣並且受到社會各階層，尤其是教育界的高度重視。短暫的幾年之內，"漢英雙語教育"在沿海及其它經濟發達地區逐漸興起並且迅速蔓延。"雙語教育"這個術語也相應地加入了社會各個階層，廣大父母，教育界以及決策人員的日常用語。這一現象引起了國內外新聞界，學術界和國內有關決策者的廣泛辯論。那麼，這一現象在經濟相對落后，多種語言並存的邊遠少數民族地區的影響如何呢？

這篇文章以社會語言學，教育學的理論為框架，以新疆維吾爾族大學生學習英語為實例，試圖探討和回答有關少數民族學生第三語言學習方面的一些問題。文章採用法國社會學家 Pierre Bourdieu 提出的"文化資本"的理論概念來分析實証研究結果並且對當地各種語言之間的動態關系進行理論解釋。文章做出以下結論：一些維吾爾族學生所表現的極高的英語學習動機來自於他們強烈的民族與個人自尊感。與其它學科的學習劣勢相反，由於他們學習第三種語言時對漢語水平的要求不那麼高，他們在英語學習上體現一定優勢，這使得他們在英語學習上加倍投於並取得較好成績。積極的反饋有助於進一步調動他們對其它學科的學習動機並且發展他們積極樂觀的學習和生活態度。文章認為，少數民族學生第三種語言學習如果處理得當有可能成其為提高他們學習信心和民族與個人自尊感的突破口。

關鍵詞：維吾爾族教育；少數民族教育；外語教育；社會語言學；英語教育；新疆

Chapter 13 – Learning English as a Third Language by Uyghur Students in Xinjiang: a Blessing in Disguise?

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Introduction

At the CCTV (China Central Television) Cup English Speaking Contest 2008 hosted by CCTV 9 on 24th November 2008, Tian Wei, a well-known news anchor at the English language CCTV 9 and one of the judges of the contest, asked Faruk Mardan from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, a semifinalist and the winner of Most Energetic Speaker award, the following question:

> Q: I would like to ask this question. China has so many ethnic groups, Xinjiang of course very exotic and very beautiful place. Many people outside this country may not know very well. How did you get the chance to participate in a competition like this, what is the, you know, English education like in Xinjiang, for example? I am curious. I really like your engaging and passionate speaking style, also your gestures, like a rap singer in a way (China Central Television, 2008).

Here is Faruk's answer:

> A: I have to tell you that people in Xinjiang really enthusiastic about learning English. Because we have lots of youngsters who are willing speak English, who are willing to learn English. There are lots of ethnic groups in Xinjiang. They are passionate and enthusiastic. They like new things, English is really new and it is like new blood in their body (China Central Television, 2008).

Faruk's answer may have only addressed part of the judge's question (multi-questions to be precise), however, the passion and enthusiasm in learning English which Faruk believes 'the youngsters' in Xinjiang

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 Uyghur Autonomous Region have, are clearly articulated. Both the question(s) and the answer point towards the general interests of this chapter.

The Context

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is situated in the northwest of the People's Republic of China and occupies one sixth of the country's total land mass. It borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Mongolia and has a complex mixture of ethnic composition and a great potential for international exposure, both in sociocultural terms and economic activities. It is home to a number of officially recognized ethnic groups with a total population of almost 21 million at the end of 2007 (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Government, 2009). The largest ethnic group in Xinjiang are the Uyghurs with a population of some nine million and this is closely followed by China's dominant Han ethnic group, whose population in the region has increased from less than 7% to over 40% in the last half century (Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan, 1994, pp. 39-40).

From the end of the "Cultural Revolution" in the late 1970s till the promulgation of the Xinjiang bilingual education policy in 2004, the education system in Xinjiang was largely divided into two parallel subsystems: minority language medium education for the ethnic minority students with Mandarin Chinese as a second language school subject and Mandarin Chinese language medium education for the Han population with English as the preferred second language school subject. Thus, in this system, the schools were divided along the ethnic lines on the basis of the language of instruction and, as Uyghur is one of the two official languages in the Autonomous Region, most Uyghurs were educated in their mother tongue with varying degree of knowledge of the Mandarin Chinese, depending on where they lived and the possibilities for them to interact with the Han population (Benson, 2004, pp. 190-202). An official survey conducted in 1986 showed that only 4.4% of the Uyghurs reported that they were fully communicative in Mandarin Chinese, with 90% reporting that they did not even have the basic communicative skills in the language (Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan, 1994). However, this situation is changing rapidly as an increasing number of Uyghur pupils in mixed communities or cities attend Chinese medium schools or Chinese-Uyghur mixed schools from childhood (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009).

In 2001, there were 6221 primary schools in Xinjiang of which 56.37% (3507) were Uyghur language medium schools; there were 1457 lower secondary schools of which 39% (566) were Uyghur schools; at higher secondary school level, the proportion of Uyghur schools is under 34% (158) of a total of 472 schools (Zhao, 2004). According to Zhao (2004), the percentage of ethnic minority students receiving education in their native language medium schools represented somewhere between 65%-70% of the total number, but in the south of Xinjiang where Uyghurs are dominant the percentage can be as high as 96% of the total. A recent survey confirms that the proportion of Uyghur university students who graduated from Uyghur language medium schools remained at over 90% (Cui, 2005). Those Uyghur students who had not attended Uyghur language medium schools went through a variety of other schooling where the medium of instruction is Mandarin Chinese. These include Mandarin Chinese language medium schools in Xinjiang, special classes set up for ethnic minorities outside Xinjiang (内地新疆班), specially set-up classes for ethnic minorities in Mandarin Chinese language medium schools in Han majority areas in Xinjiang (疆内民族班), mixed Uyghur-Han schools and experimental Mandarin Chinese language medium based classes in Uyghur language medium schools.

Turning to foreign language teaching and learning, the first of two policy documents specifically mentioning foreign language education for minority nationalities in the region was issued in May 1950 by the then provincial government. The document entitled "Directive on Reforming the Current Education System" required Mandarin Chinese language-medium schools to opt either for an ethnic minority language or Russian and the minority language medium schools to opt for Mandarin Chinese or Russian (Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui, 2000). Therefore, in the first couple of decades, the teaching of Russian as a foreign language was possible in principle, even for minority schools.

On 15 December 1977, another foreign language education policy document was formulated in Xinjiang and promulgated by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Education Bureau. The document entitled "Curriculum Plan for Ten-year Full-time Primary and secondary schools in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (draft plan)" stipulated that:

> "**ethnic minority schools** provide Mandarin Chinese as the compulsory second language school subject from Year 3 of primary school until the end of secondary school education; **no foreign language courses are to be provided**. Han and Hui primary schools should generally teach an ethnic minority language as a school subject. At

the junior secondary school, two thirds of the Han and Hui schools should offer ethnic minority language courses and the other third should offer foreign language courses. At the senior secondary school level, all Han and Hui schools should offer foreign language curriculum; no ethnic minority language curriculum is to be offered" (quoted in Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui, 2000, p. 275, authors' translation and emphasis)

This document has made explicit two subsystems and left the vast majority of the Uyghur and other linguistic minority students studying at non-Mandarin Chinese medium schools out of the national foreign language education system.

Though a 'draft plan', the document seems to be the only official policy that has been practised for the past decades. Foreign language provision has been very limited for minority pupils. For example, a recent survey at six junior and senior secondary schools in the Kashgar Prefecture which is dominated by Uyghurs revealed that until the end of 1990s, no Uyghur school (at primary, junior or senior secondary level) had offered any English or other foreign language classes (Li, 2005). English was not a required subject for the university entrance examination for Uyghur students. In the late 1990s some junior and senior secondary schools in relatively developed areas in Xinjiang started teaching English to a selected group of 'talented' students in the so-called 'experimental classes'. Due to resource restrains, most of them only offered English on a two-hour-per-week basis. Qualifications of English teachers in schools also looked gloomy (Li, 2005), with 20% of the teachers having received diploma level education, 30% having gone through only one-year intensive English language teacher training, 30% being supply teachers with high school level education, and 15% being university graduates but non-English majors acting as English teachers.

Olan (2007) conducted a survey among 618 minority students at the most prestigious university in Xinjiang and found that, even there, 62% of them had had no English learning experience at all. For the remaining 38% of students surveyed, according to Olan, they had gained English learning experience through the following channels: by attending schools where Chinese is the medium of instruction; by taking private lessons from profit-making English language teaching agencies; by virtue of living in socio-political and economic centres, such as Urumqi or the major city of a prefecture where educational opportunities are more accessible; and for the highly motivated, through self-study.

At the turn of the century, despite the promulgation of the New Curriculum Standards (see Cheng in this volume) which is specified to be applicable to schools all over the country, the official position in Xinjiang with regard to ethnic minorities learning English or other foreign languages has not changed, i.e., the document issued in 1977 still applies to Xinjiang. What has evidently changed in Xinjiang, however, is the fact that while Chinese language has been strongly promoted and its curriculum enhanced in minority schools (Blachford, 2004), minority languages have gradually disappeared from the curricula in Han schools or for Han pupils in mixed schools and have been replaced by English (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). This has widened the gap between the two subsystems for the Han majority group and other ethnic minority groups and created further obstacles for pupils to integrate in the region.

While English provision for minority students, particularly those who live in remote areas and study in minority language medium schools, is limited, the demand for English in the region is clearly on the rise. Ever-growing tourism (see Table 13.1 and Table 13.2) and presence of

Table 13.1 – Statistics of International Tourist Arrivals in Xinjiang (excluding overseas Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Macao tourists)

Years	Xinjiang	National total
1997	157,067	7,428,000
1998	141,000	7,107,700
1999	190,151	8,432,300
2000	208,400	10,160,400
2001	218,600	11,226,400
2002	233,700	13,439,500
2003	149,916	11,402,900
2004	270,959	16,932,500
2005	290,140	20,255,100
2006	313,101	22,210,300
2007	402,700	26,109,700

Sources: Guojia Tongjiju [State Statistical Bureau] (1998-2007). *China Foreign Economic Statistical Yearbook*; and Guojia Lüyouju [State Tourism Bureau] (1997-2007). *Yearbook of China Tourism Statistics*.

Table 13.2 – Statistics on International Tourist Agencies and Hotels Xinjiang

Series Year	International travel agencies	Number of employees	No. of International tourist hotels	No. of employees	Foreign exchange Earnings from International tourism (unit: $1 million)
1997	26	1260	103	10541	71
1998	36	1032	173	17204	86
1999	38	1111	176	19948	86
2000	39	1266	233		95
2001	38	1292	173	20567	99
2002	39	1735	190	22835	99
2004	39	27307		30117	92
2007	51		432		

Sources: Guojia Lüyouju [State Tourism Bureau] (1997-2007). *Yearbook of China Tourism Statistics*.

multinationals (see Table 13.3) are two indicators suggesting increasing opportunities for people with foreign language competence.

Some issues appear unequivocal in this context. First, while the demand for English-knowing personnel is high as the tables show, few people of minority background are qualified for the market since they have no opportunity to study the language during compulsory education. Second, there is a clear discrepancy between the national policy and the regional policy in foreign language provision as the systems followed by the majority group and the minority groups differ. And third, many authors (e.g., Bastid-Bruguiere, 2001) argue that the current national drive for English language education is further empowering the already powerful majority Han group, leaving minority and indigenous peoples like the Uyghurs and Tibetans even further behind. As the Uyghur and other linguistic minority students are required to learn Mandarin Chinese as a tall-order priority, and because the majority of minority groups live in impoverished areas with few who can afford private English lessons for themselves and/or their children, Beckett & MacPherson (2005) state that the expansion of English

Table 13.3 – Number of foreign owned enterprises and their employees in Xinjiang (excluding Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao owned)

Year	No. of Companies	No. of Employees
1997	76	6129
1998	80	6000
1999	65	5000
2000	58	5093
2001	72	5502
2002	64	6428
2003	342	No official figure
2004	331	Ditto
2005	345	Ditto
2006	421	Ditto

Sources: Guojia Tongjiju [State Statistical Bureau] (1997-2006). *China Labour Statistical Yearbook*; and Guojia Tongjiju [State Statistical Bureau] (1998-2007). *China Foreign Economic Statistical Yearbook*.

language education is widening the gap and augmenting educational inequities minority peoples already face in the traditional system.

The gloomy picture portrayed in the literature has often led to calls for making special policies on foreign language education for minority groups. However, claims that the calls are based on are often inadequately researched empirically. For example, ethnic minority students are often represented as having low motivation to learn English and showing cognitive difficulties in learning it (see the section below). Is that really the case? Drawing from narratives and semi-structured interviews with Uyghur students attending English language and Chinese-English "bilingual" classes, in this chapter, we will examine how the learning of English language and English language medium education are perceived by Uyghur students. The analysis of the empirical data is done using Bourdieu's (1977) notions of cultural and linguistic capital and symbolic power within the context of power relations among different ethnic groups in Xinjiang. The need for such a focus will become obvious in the following section in which we critically

review current discussions on English language education, or the lack of it, for these minority groups.

English Language Teaching for Minority Students: An overview

The literature on foreign language provision for minority groups is relatively new due to the fact that traditionally language education for minority groups primarily aimed for developing *Min-Han Jiantong*, minority language and Mandarin Chinese bilinguals (Feng, 2005). In recent years, owing to various forces of globalisation and the promulgation of the new English Curriculum Standards (ECS), there is an increase in English language provision for minority groups in China and thus an increase in research and discussions. A number of researchers and scholars working both inside and outside of China (Adamson & Feng, 2009; Beckett & MacPherson, 2005; Chen, 2008; Feng, 2007; Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Olan, 2007, Yang, 2005) have contributed to a literature that aims for an understanding of issues related to tensions between mother tongue, national language and English in policy formulation, the policy making and implementing cycle, and socio-cultural, economic and political factors that affect English language education, or the lack of it, in specific contexts. This new literature can be broadly divided into three categories.

The first category collects writings in English that give general accounts of English language provision or trilingual education for the 100 million strong minority groups living within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China. These writings aim to make this literature primarily in Chinese accessible to international readers. Feng's (2005) analysis of the parallel conceptions of bilingualism and Yang's (2005) account of English as a third language fall into this category. Some chapters in Feng (2007) also contribute to a general understanding of the ELT situation in minority regions in China. In Feng's (2005) discussion on the parallel conceptions of bilingualism in the country, namely the Chinese-English bilingualism for the Han majority and minority language-Chinese bilingualism for the minority groups, he points out that the former inevitably impacts on the latter. What is urgently needed is research into the extent of the impact and into how this impact could possibly be addressed in the particular socio-political, cultural and economic context of each minority group. In many of the writings under this category, a shared concern is that ethnic minority students' ethnic identity, personality development and academic performance are undermined because many issues regarding policies, curricula, and pedagogy

remain unaddressed. Most of the authors agree on the need for empirical research into local responses to national policies and pedagogical issues in relation to cognitive and identity development as findings from such research would provide not only useful insights for practitioners in similar contexts but also constructive feedback to policy making (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009; Wang & Gao, 2008).

Falling into the second category are those that focus on issues in English language provision for minority groups since the turn of the century, particularly since 2001 when the ECS was promulgated. These discussions are particularly on the rise inside China. While some (e.g. Jing 2007; Wang 2000) show optimism about trilingualism and trilingual education for minority pupils, many educators and commentators give dismal accounts of the situation by listing various difficulties and problems minority students face in learning English, from lack of resources to cognitive, affective and socio-cultural hurdles minority pupils experience in learning a third language (Ju 2000; Li 2003; Wu 2002; Yang, 2005).

Yang (2005) makes the case of diverse needs of ethnic minority education and argues for diversity of English language bilingual or trilingual education in China. In his analysis of the issues facing minority pupils, Yang lists four factors that negatively impact on ELT in ethnic minority regions: lack of resources, lack of motivation, the interference of existing bilingual policies and difficulty in learning a third language. Yang asserts that ethnic minorities appear to be interested in learning Han language and opportunity to study in coastal cities. Here, he seems to adopt a point of view of financial gains in speculating that ethnic minorities in impoverished border areas pursue the powerful national language because that would bring them economic benefits. There is hardly any empirical evidence for such claims and no serious reflection on the complex socio-political, cultural and linguistic dimensions at play in language learning.

Beckett and MacPherson (2005), in analysing the impact of the spread of English on native languages, critique the trend of equating China and Chinese with the majority Han ethnic group without paying due attention to the diversity and contrasts that exist in the country. Through an analysis of the Uyghur and Tibetan cases, two of China's largest minority ethnic groups, they strongly argue for and demonstrate the existence of very different social, political, cultural and linguistic conditions and inequities in educational opportunities between the Han and other ethnic minority groups. Based on an examination of the conditions of the two groups and their relation with the Han nationality,

the authors speculate that the promotion of bilingual English-Chinese education for the Han language speakers and making it a requirement for social, economic and political advancement for all citizens of China will further polarize and disadvantage the already marginal communities by creating additional obstacles: "English is exacerbating the educational inequities facing minority and Indigenous peoples, who already face significant educational and literacy disadvantages" (Beckett & MacPherson, 2005: 305).

Out of the second category of the writings comes the argument for lowering expectations for minority students' English proficiency. Strong calls are often made by educators and scholars, such as Cao & Xiang (2006) and Zhang (2002) to formulate special policies for minority students at all levels. One key part of the special policies they argue for is to lower the 'standards' as specified in the NCS. These calls, however, are usually based on claims that are hardly supported with empirical evidence, or only supported with *ad hoc* observations, and the consequences of the special policies, if made, are rarely discussed.

More recently, several empirical studies have been conducted in different minority dominated regions and these studies form the third category of literature on English provision for minority groups in China. They include Adamson & Feng (2009), Blachford & Jones (forthcoming), Feng & Sunuodula (2009), Huang (2007) and Jiang, et al. (2007). Feng & Sunuodula (2009), for example, focus on the 'policy cycle' by providing empirical evidence of the formulation and implementation processes of national, regional and local policies with regard to English language provision for three minority groups, namely Yi, Zhuang and Uyghur. With a theoretical framework developed on the basis of policy studies, they have carried out an analysis of English language education for the ethnic minority groups taking into account functions of all agents and stakeholders in the policy cycle. In this chapter, as mentioned before, we focus on a two widely-made claims, i.e. that minority students often attach little value to English learning and that the current national drive for English language education will inevitably further marginalise minority groups in China. Are they empirically true?

Theoretical Concepts

To analyse our data, we have chosen to use critically the notion of "cultural capital" put forward by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain the power relations between Uyghur and Han language in the

current situation. According to Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital consists of ideas and knowledge people draw upon as they participate in social life. Everything from rules of etiquette to being able to speak and write effectively can be considered cultural capital. Bourdieu is particularly interested in the unequal distribution of cultural capital in stratified societies and how such inequality disadvantages people. This is especially true in schools and other institutions where ignorance of what the dominant classes define as basic knowledge makes it difficult for those in marginal or subordinate groups to compete successfully (Johnson, 2000). Uyghur students, for example, do not do as well in many school subjects because they lack the cultural capital presumed by the education system in which knowledge is essentially defined by the dominant group. Bourdieu refers to this lack as cultural deprivation.

By identifying language as an area in which power relations are created and exercised, Bourdieu (1977: p. 648) shows that the act of speaking does not merely involve exchanging information: 'language is not only an instrument of communication or knowledge but an instrument of power.' Bourdieu argues that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships – many of which may be unequally structured. The acquisition of certain types of socially valued linguistic behaviour may then allow a person to access additional resources that can be translated into material wealth. The ability to speak a language and use it in certain ways, therefore, signifies a measure or subcategory of cultural capital, i.e., the linguistic capital a person possesses (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Although the notion of linguistic capital is coined by them primarily to explain the 'hidden mediations through which the relationship (grasped by our tests) between social origin and scholastic achievement is set up' (p. 116) in a given society, many educators make use of the concept to explore power relationships in social interactions where a powerful language such as English is used and/or taught as a second/foreign language (e.g., Abdullah & Chan, 2003; Lin, 1996; Norton, 1997).

Norton (1997), for example, extends Bourdieu's (1977) social theory into second language learning by questioning how relations of power in the social world affect social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers and proposes a theory of social identity which assumes power relations play a crucial role in social interactions between language learners and target language speakers. She introduces the notion of investment instead of second language learning motivation. The notion of investment attempts to capture

the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world. It conceives of the language learner as having a complex social identity and multiple desires. The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own social identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. If learners invest in a second language, Norton (1997) points out, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources.

Norton's definition of the term identity is also worth noting here. She (1997: p.410) refers to identity as the process of "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future." She also takes the position, following West (1992), that identity relates to desire – desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation and the desire for security and safety. In this view, a person's identity will shift in accordance with changing social and economic relations.

Furthermore, relevant to our discussion is Vaish's (2005) argument about the groups who have historically been linguistically 'subalternized' and have only now gained more equitable access to linguistic capital due to the market forces of globalization. His argument is based on the notion of 'subaltern', a term popularized by Antonio Gramsci (1971) to refer to depressed groups in society that suffer from the hegemony of the ruling class. Vaish proposes the "peripherist" view of English language use in India which disagrees with those sociolinguists who think that English endangers local languages and perpetuates inequality. He sees this as Orientalism disguised as liberal sociolinguistics that, in fact, reproduces the inequitable distribution of linguistic capital and fails to acknowledge the tenacity of indigenous cultures in being able to maintain their longevity (Vaish, 2005). The way English is taught adds a domain to the multilingual/multiliterate repertoire of subalterns, a workplace literacy domain, that can help them break the constraints of class and caste (Vaish, 2005).

This chapter makes use of all these concepts, namely cultural capital, identity that is related to desire, and linguistic capital, other than the

factors directly or indirectly related to economic or material reward, which are believed to be at play in second or third language learning. In the case studies of Uyghur university students[1] we present in this paper, we will analyze the data focusing on evidence that shows these factors at play. We chose to conduct the case studies at tertiary level for the obvious reason that, unlike many other regions, as the context section shows, most Uyghur students do not start learning English till they go to university. Our primary focus is on their perceptions of the third language, English, in relation to their home language and Chinese, the second language, their willingness to invest in the third and the process of social identity negotiation and transformation (Olsson & Larsson, 2008: 10-11).

Case Studies

Our research was conducted following ethnographic research principles developed for education research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). We adopted this methodology mainly for the purpose of identifying perceptions and attitudes of students about the role of English and about the new form of bilingual or trilingual education, without assuming any consequences as a result of it. 10 tertiary students were chosen for two rounds of ethnographic interviews which involved a first round of minimally structured interviews followed by a second round of semi-structured interviews with a focus on emergent themes from the first round. The interviews were conducted in Uyghur. The findings of our research in respect to English language learning can be categorised under the following five subheadings which are interrelated.

English as Linguistic Capital

One of the general questions asked in the interviews was to elicit interviewees' perceptions of the English language. The following answers are representative:

> English is an important language. It is a world language. … It is important to know English for learning new and cutting edge academic knowledge and scholarly exchange. Many Han scholars publish their work in English. English dominates the academic literature published. (S-6, Uyghur male, first year MA in humanities)

> English is now a popular language in China. A few years ago, knowing Chinese was sufficient for getting a job. Now everyone

> knows Chinese, so learning English gives extra qualification to get better jobs. (S-2, Uyghur male, fifth year in social sciences)

> I wanted to learn English because when I went to see my sister in Beijing where she was studying I came across her speaking English with some of her friends. I think English is easier to learn than Chinese. But my sister is now a teacher in Kashgar region and her English is wasted. (S-4, Uyghur female, fourth year in humanities)

As an MA student, the Uyghur male who gave the first quote viewed the language as the access to 'cutting edge academic knowledge and scholarly exchange', that is, the linguistic capital he needs to acquire so as to be able to participate in his specialised field successfully. In the third quote, the word, *wasted*, reveals all; her sister had gained the linguistic capital but failed to translate it into a life chance that usually goes with it. In all quotes, the importance of the language is perceived and the motivation to acquire it is obvious.

Though Uyghur students usually start English learning at a later stage than their Han counterparts, many set up high goals for themselves, e.g., to pursue studies abroad and to achieve the competence to access information through English:

> I am studying English because I have a desire to continue my studies in a European country. I also want to learn about the world through the medium of the English language, rather than the limited and filtered information I get through the Han language. Europe has been leading the world in cultural and technological terms for hundreds of years and many important inventions were discovered by Europeans, for example, trains, Newton, Shakespeare, Dante, Rousseau, Picasso, these are just a few. (S-3, Uyghur male, fifth-year in journalism)

> I would like to go abroad to study if I get the opportunity. English is also a very important tool to learn about what is happening around the world, rather than reading about it in Chinese translation or re-interpretation. Knowledge of English has also become important for finding employment and being able to use computers. Teachers in my hometown (in Kashgar region) are required to have the knowledge of English and being able to offer English language classes. (S-1, Uyghur female, fifth-year in sociology)

In addition to their high expectations, it is also worth noting that both interviewees wish to learn what is happening around the world through

the medium of English directly, not through their second language, Mandarin Chinese. This suggests that, to the interviewees, the meaning of obtaining the multilingual and multi-literate repertoire goes beyond economic benefits to include socio-political and cultural gains.

Willingness to Invest

Norton's (1997) notion of investment has great relevancy to the interview data we collected. The investment can be either in the form of time, through self learning, or in the form of financial resources, by paying to attend private English learning lessons available in the market.

> I started studying English because I wanted to progress to Masters level programme. I also wanted to explore the possibility of studying abroad. English is the language of international contact and exchange. I studied English by myself, but also attended some private tuition. I did not even know the English alphabet when I started. (S-5, Uyghur male, majoring in humanities)
>
> Learning Uyghur, Han and English languages will provide me with greater employment opportunity. I learned English by myself but stopped when it became too hard. I would like to go abroad for visits if get the chance. I feel confident about finding employment and my knowledge of English will be an asset for that. (S-4, Uyghur female, fourth year in humanities)

Despite the difficulties the Uyghur female student in humanities found herself in, she made the time investment with the understanding that the value of her cultural capital will be increased.

Some may have even started cashing in on the demand for the language with their hard-acquired competence.

> I started learning English in 2002. I heard of English being offered to experimental classes (selected class for top performing students) only while at high school. I am now privately coaching Uyghur primary school children in English at home. (S-3, Uyghur male, fifth-year in journalism)

Perceptions of Languages at Play

As a language with a long history, Uyghur is spoken by about 10 million speakers in Xinjiang and other countries such as Kazakhstan. Its culture in terms of literature, medicine, arts and music is among the most sophisticated in the world. Not surprisingly, in the interview data there is

clear evidence of confidence in maintaining the Uyghur language and culture.

> I am confident that Uyghur language will survive in future and my aim of learning other languages is to learn the valuable aspects of other cultures. (S-1, Uyghur female, fifth-year in sociology)

> I do not worry about the threat to Uyghur language and culture. Uyghur culture and language are well advanced and deeply rooted among the Uyghurs. Uyghur culture has had many influences on the Han culture in things such as food, dress, respect for the elderly. … Uyghurs possess a well developed tradition of commerce and trading. This is also very important for preserving the Uyghur identity. (S-3, Uyghur male, fifth-year journalism)

This could be seen as an illustration of what Vaish (2005) calls the tenacity of indigenous cultures. However, because of the rapid increase of the majority Han population and its growing economic and socio-political influence on the region, many interviewees also showed anxiety about the status of minority groups in the society and about their own future for lacking Mandarin Chinese competence. The same male student in his fifth year in journalism had the following to say:

> I am more worried about the great influx of Han immigration into Uyghur areas. This trend will have greater impact than the language assimilation policy. (S-3, Uyghur male, fifth-year journalism)

> Mandarin Chinese is a difficult language to learn. I am required to write my thesis in Mandarin Chinese. There is little originality and creativity in it because I don't have deep enough knowledge of Mandarin Chinese to fully express myself. What is happening is language assimilation, not bilingual education. Most lectures are about politics, Han China's history and culture. I can't relate myself to what was taught about Qing history … (S-6, Uyghur male, first year MA in humanities).

> I am very concerned about the overwhelming influence and pressure to learn Mandarin Chinese. Uyghurs are least knowledgeable in Mandarin Chinese compared with most other minority nationalities in China. I am not sure if I will be able to progress to Masters degree course when I finish my BA. (S-2, Uyghur male, fifth year in social sciences)

Decades of rigorous, top-down promotion of Mandarin Chinese language education does not seem to bring about desired outcomes. The data as a whole suggest that the strong influence of the majority culture and the 'concealed assimilation' policy (Feng, 2007: 271-272) cause anxiety and even resistance which may well be the major hurdles for minority students to acquire the Chinese language they wish to acquire.

Surprisingly, when they talked about English language learning, most interviewees demonstrated a keen interest and there seemed to be a consensus that Uyghur students can perhaps have a real chance to compete with the majority Han counterparts.

> Uyghur children perform better than their Han counterparts in learning English because they are genuinely interested and motivated to learn it, rather than only interested in passing exams. I have now passed the Level 4 English language test for university students. Han people also recognize the Uyghur students' ability to learn new languages. (S-3, Uyghur male, fifth-year in journalism)

> If a lecture is delivered in English and other factors being equal, Uyghurs can compete with the Han students. In the oral English language classes that I have recently attended, most Uyghur students perform better than their Han counterparts attending the same class, despite the fact that the Hans would have studied English at least seven or eight years longer than the Uyghurs. (S-5, Uyghur male, majoring in humanities)

Most interviewees agreed that the motivation to learn English among Uyghurs is very strong and this 'genuine interest' is not the same as in learning Mandarin Chinese. The intrinsic motivation to learn English shown in many interviewees such as the two above seems to be derived both from the desire to show their competitiveness or capability of learning and from the fact that English is not a compulsory subject for minority students and thus they learn it out of real interest. When combined, these two factors, as the interview data suggest, have brought about desirable outcomes.

Mother Tongue and Learning

To develop competence in a third language, a practical question often raised in China is: which language should be adopted as *Zhongjieyu*, i.e., the language used to teach and learn English in the classroom and in compiling textbooks for minority students. Many educators and

researchers involved in teaching and researching minority students such as Xiao (2003) and Xu (2000) argue that *Zhongjieyu* should be the students' mother tongue. However, in practice, the Chinese language dominates the classroom and text material for English teaching and learning. This mismatch is also evident in our data. For *Zhongjieyu*, the view expressed by the female English major was representative:

> Yes, I think the use of mother tongue as the explanatory language in classrooms and textbooks will bring about better results. Students can use the mother tongue to learn grammar, to recite vocabulary, and this helps memorise things easily. (S-9, Uyghur female, majoring in English)

Quite a few interviewees also commented on the correlation between creative thinking and the use of mother tongue. They seemed to agree unanimously that the use of the second language as *Zhongjieyu* inhibits the thinking and learning process rather than facilitating it. However, one interviewee pointed out that:

> There is a practical problem here. In exams, there is always a part that asks us to translate English into Chinese. This is where Uyghur students who are not good at Chinese lose points (marks). What can you do? (S-7 Uyghur male)

The issue of *Zhongjieyu* is certainly not trivial according to these interviewees as they believe that the majority Han students benefit from the linguistic capital but the use of this *Zhongjieyu* limits minority students' options of learning strategies and affects their learning outcome as measured by high-stake tests.

Desires for Equality and Recognition in Identity Negotiation

The most striking evidence shown in our data is the interviewees' strong desire to be recognised in the society and get equal opportunities to access the linguistic capital, usually English in their perception. This is in correspondence to Norton's (1997) and West's (1992) conception of identity which relates to such desires. The following quotes are representative:

> Uyghur children perform better than their Han counterparts in learning English because they are genuinely interested and motivated to learn it, rather than only interested in passing exams. I have now passed the Level 4 English language test for university students.

Han people also recognize the Uyghur students' ability to learn new languages. (S-3, Uyghur male, fifth year in journalism)

I very much welcome the opportunity to study the subjects in English. This will provide both Han and Uyghurs with the same starting point and equal footing and the Han student will get the taste of how it is like to learn subject knowledge in a foreign language. I think Uyghurs are better in learning languages. (S-5, Uyghur male majoring in humanity subject)

When I was at primary and secondary schools, there was no English offered to us. So at the university, I had to learn English all by myself. I found myself quite confident. Unfortunately, I had to drop the language because of other pressures . . . However, I feel that if Uyghur students are put on equal footing with Han students, we can compete with them. (S-8, Uyghur female, fourth-year history)

As the quotes show, most of the interviewees were conscious of their minority status, but at the same time, in Vaish (2005) words, they seemed to sense that the national drive to English education may be the opportunity for equitable access to the linguistic capital which is valued in today's society.

Discussion

As shown in the literature review section, the majority of authors who have written about the effect of the national drive for English language education on the linguistic minorities such as Uyghurs have taken the view that it would strengthen the hand of the already powerful majority Han group as this group sets the rules and has access to vastly superior cultural and economic resources in achieving that goal. This would in turn further marginalise linguistic minorities. Our data show that the Uyghur students at the tertiary level perceived the importance of the English language and were highly motivated to learn it though they faced more difficulties than their Han counterparts because of lack of or limited English education they received in earlier schooling. The origin of this motivation commonly shown in the students we interviewed can be too complex to trace; however, their strong desire for recognition and for equal conditions in education and their willingness to invest signify that they were trying to acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which would increase the value of their cultural capital. Consideration for economic and material gains in second or third language learning, as argued by several authors reviewed above

and by some policy makers, is not the only factor influencing the second or third language learning by linguistic minorities. The three elements related to social identity as seen by Norton (1997) are all at play here: how students understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how students understand their possibilities for the future.

As social groups, Uyghur and Han students are unavoidably situated in a dynamic power relationship which has significant influences on how they invest in linguistic capital. While the Uyghur students face great difficulty adjusting to learning their university subjects in their second language, Mandarin Chinese, they are aware that this puts the Han students in an advantageous position because of their linguistic capital. English, which is a foreign language for both groups, may provide Uyghur students a real chance in balancing this power relationship. Our data show Uyghur students were aware of this and many invested heavily in the third language. This may explain why Faruk Mardan, the winner of Most Energetic Speaker Award at the CCTV Cup English Speaking Contest 2008, was quoted in the introduction as saying figuratively, 'English is really new and it is like new blood in their [the Uyghur youth in Xinjiang] body.'

A related issue we wish to discuss is the question of whether there should be 'special policies' to set up English standards lower than those required by the NCS. This is a call often found in the literature but seldom debated. Of many issues listed in the literature (e.g., Yang, 2005), financial issues such as inadequate resources and lack of funding cannot justify the call as these problems can be and should be addressed gradually by a country that is fast developing economically. If the need to lower the standards is based on the argument that minority students attach low value to foreign languages and/or they face more cognitive and affective barriers than their majority counterparts in English language learning, this argument is clearly refuted by the data presented in this chapter. On the contrary, those interviewed showed strong motivation to learn the third language and they saw their strengths in learning it. Thus, we wish to re-state an argument we made elsewhere (Feng; 2008; Feng & Sunuodula, 2009) that, if minority groups are expected to be structurally integrated into the mainstream society, which is a widely-acknowledged political objective, it is then misguided to make calls for lowering the standards. Those policies, once made, would not benefit the minority groups in any way, but would segregate them further from the mainstream society and put them on an unequal footing for life opportunities. Having restated our view, we also make it explicit

that we do not argue against special policies that have proved necessary both nationally and internationally for minority groups, such as 'preferential policies' or positive discrimination in education (see Feng & Sunuodula, 2009). In the case of English provision, we agree with many other authors that special policies to provide additional funding, resources and incentives for minority regions are not only necessary but crucial. These policies can help create 'equal conditions' (Feng, 2008) for minority people to engage with the nation and the world.

Last but not least, the data indicate that the issue of *Zhongjieyu*, the language used to teach and learn English in the classroom and in compiling textbooks for minority pupils, should be further researched and debated. Research has already shown that the use of mother tongue as *Zhongjieyu* is more effective in helping minority students to acquire a third language (Xiao, 2003; Xu, 2000). With respect to the cognitive dimension of learning, our interviewees agreed unanimously that the use of mother tongue rather than Mandarin Chinese facilitates the thinking and learning process. While there does not seem to be any regulation or policy against the use of mother tongue in English classrooms where ethnic minority pupils dominate and which are taught by a minority teacher of English, our data show that the use of mother tongue in high-stakes examinations is unusual and this, to us, is clearly an issue that needs addressing. For minority students such as Uyghurs whose mother tongue is an official language in the region, it can be speculated that when their home language is used not only for classroom teaching and learning but also in high-stakes examinations, they will be less disadvantaged linguistically and more significantly, socio-culturally, they may well feel confident in maintaining their own linguistic identity and become empowered through learning a third language. Without a system that fully honours their home language in both learning and examination, this remains speculative.

Conclusion

Having reflected on our findings in terms of social identity, linguistic capital, policies and Zhongjieyu, we feel in a position to argue that, although having to learn a third language is an enormous challenge for minority students given the usually unfavourable conditions they are in, the challenge may not necessarily further marginalise them as many predict. Instead, for minority students, this situation could be a blessing in disguise. The situation could trigger minority students' motivation to negotiate their identity by investing in the linguistic capital and lead to

debates among educators, researchers and policy makers on key issues in minority education. There is already evidence in the literature of language provision for minority students that the key stakeholders, as mentioned above, do not look at English education solely from the point of view of third language acquisition, but they also reflect on the role of the first language in relation to second and third language learning and the socio-political, cultural and economic dimensions of language use and language education. This may lead to repositioning of languages in classroom use and restructuring of curriculums, and impact on language provision for minority groups, which, indeed, has long been dissatisfactory.

Note

1. The university degree programmes normally lasts for four years, but it becomes five years for students who are not sufficiently proficient in Mandarin Chinese. Those students spend their first year learning Mandarin Chinese before proceeding to the formal degree programmes.

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