

# Ethnolinguistic Vitality, Language Attitudes and Language Education in Tibetan Schools in Qinghai

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**Abstract** This chapter reports an on-going study of trilingual education practised in bilingual schools in three Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in Qinghai Province. While objective ethnolinguistic vitality is examined mainly through secondary sources, language allocation in the classroom and perceptions and attitudes of secondary school teachers and students towards the ethnic language, Mandarin Chinese and English were collected through empirical investigation. It was found that lack of qualified trilingual/bilingual teachers seriously hinders development of multilingual education in these schools. What could be more worrying is the finding that some key stakeholders hold negative views about the use and teaching of students' mother tongue as they see Mandarin Chinese as the language of power and the lingua franca in the country and beyond. The schools with stakeholders holding these views are more likely to adopt the Chinese-Tibetan model in which Chinese is used as the medium of instruction for most school subjects.

**Keywords** Qinghai · Tibetan · Ethnolinguistic vitality · Bilingual policy · Tibetan-Chinese model · Chinese-Tibetan model · Perceptions · Attitudes

## 1 Introduction

Ethnic minority groups in China have their own distinctive features in education. One feature as shown in policy documents is the requirement that school children have to learn their mother tongue in addition to the national language (Chinese) and even the third language (English) from the third year or fifth year onwards in primary school. This implies that from the commencement of their education, ethnic minority pupils are expected to grow up at least as bilinguals, if not as trilinguals.

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It is often claimed that bilinguals have an advantage over monolinguals in learning school subjects in general, and in learning a third language in particular. However, there is little evidence available of the advantages enjoyed by ethnic students in Qinghai, a province dominated by ethnic groups in Western China. The Tibetan group can be cited as an example. This ethnic group accounts for more than one fifth of the population in the province. Ethnolinguistic vitality of Tibetan in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures is very strong and Tibetans enjoy a specific system of language education to satisfy their needs. According to our investigation conducted in 2009, different language policies have been enacted since the founding of the People's Republic of China, with the aim of catering to different requirements of language teaching in schools. Minority groups are supposed to be able to use either their mother tongue or the national language as the media of instruction in school teaching, depending on the local situation. However, after more than sixty years of implementation of these language policies, there is little evidence to demonstrate that Tibetan ethnic groups have the benefit of cognitive advantages in school or language subjects. Instead, we frequently discern that Tibetan students often experience various cognitive, cultural and psychological problems in learning a third language (Zhang 2010).

What are the reasons behind the current situation in education for Tibetan students? What are the language policies and their effectiveness? What are the language teachers' qualifications and dispositions? What are the attitudes and perceptions of the key stakeholders, including the students? With these questions in mind, the Qinghai project team of trilingualism research in bilingual schools conducted investigations with the aim of gaining an overall understanding of ethnolinguistic vitality and trilingual education for ethnic groups in Qinghai. More specifically, the studies were designed to examine the trilingual situation, to investigate the ethnolinguistic vitality of the major ethnic groups, to observe the language allocation in real classrooms, and to understand the perceptions and attitudes held by the local stakeholders. After more than three years of investigation, the research team collected valuable information on the state of ethnolinguistic vitality and trilingual implementation in bilingual schools. Trilingual allocations, teachers and students' attitudes, parental and stakeholders' understanding are all presented in the following pages on the basis of an analysis of the context, history and language policies.

## 2 The Research Context

Qinghai province is located in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Its vast territory is the source of the Yangtze, the Yellow and the Lancang River. It is named after the Qinghai Lake, the largest inland saltwater lake in the territory. It is the largest province in area, the highest in altitude, the smallest province in population density, and the highest in terms of percentage of minority population.

Qinghai has administrative jurisdiction over two cities: Xining and Ge'amu. Xining, the capital of Qinghai, is the political, cultural and economic centre. Haidong

is one prefecture of the province consisting of eight agricultural counties around Xining. There are six Tibetan autonomous prefectures, namely Haibei, Hainan, Huangnan, Yushu, Guoluo Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, and Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. There are 51 counties many of which are autonomous counties. The minority autonomous regions make up 98% of the whole province.

A north-western inland province, Qinghai is famous for its extensive territory, with its total area amounting to 720,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It has a population of 5.6 , among whom 46.9% belong to minority nationalities such as Tibetan, Hui, Tu, Sala, Mongolian and other nationalities. Tibetans are the largest minority, at approximately 1.1 million.

The investigation targeted what are normally termed as Tibetan bilingual schools. It aimed to collect data that could reflect Tibetan vitality, peoples' language attitudes and policy implementation. Based upon the statistics of the Qinghai Provincial Education Bureau (*Qinghai Jiaoyuting 2011*), there are 868 primary and secondary schools with more than 540, 000 students belonging to ethnic minority groups. Most schools in Tibetan dominated areas use Tibetan as the medium of instruction in classroom teaching and daily communication. However, in some schools, Chinese is used as the medium of instruction for subjects except for the Tibetan language. In order to find out the true nature of implementation of language policy in schools, the research team of Qinghai conducted an investigation on ethnolinguistic vitality and trilingual education in thirteen Tibetan bilingual schools, which extend throughout the province. At the beginning of 2010, the team visited five Tibetan primary schools and seven Tibetan secondary schools, distributed throughout five Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures. Approximately one thousand questionnaires were distributed to teachers and students and interviews were held with headmasters, teachers and students' representatives.

The investigation resulted in questionnaire collection from 120 teachers and 531 students in secondary schools with Tibetan ethnic minorities and data from interviews with 16 headmasters or directors in charge of school education, to understand and evaluate their understanding of ethnolinguistic vitality and their attitudes towards trilingual education in their schools.

## **2.1 Bilingual Education Policies in Qinghai**

Literature on language education and language policy review indicates that bilingual education in Qinghai began as early as the time when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949. The Education Plan (*Qinghai Jiaoyuting 1950*) approved by the Provincial government in 1950, stated that education for different ethnic groups would be restored and further developed. The Policy at that time confirmed that in Tibetan bilingual schools, the medium of instruction in ethnic schools should mainly be the native minority language. Teaching materials were typically compiled by local ethnic teachers with teaching experience. Corresponding to the Plan, the provincial press of editing and translating published four volumes of

Tibetan language textbooks, six volumes of arithmetic textbooks, four volumes of history textbooks, four volumes of geography textbooks and two volumes of nature textbooks (Du 2006). In 1962, the provincial government initiated a movement for enforcing the promotion of quality in ethnic minority schools. It produced a report in relation to the basic situation prevalent in ethnic minority schools and made proposals for future implementation. One proposal was that the native minority language as the medium of instruction principle had to be strictly implemented and ethnic minority students had to improve their proficiency in native language use. In 1963, the provincial education bureau proposed opening primary boarding schools in pastoral areas. The bureau specified that a bilingual education system should be applied to students in higher grades in boarding schools. The pupils were expected to learn their ethnic mother tongue as well as Chinese in the early stages of their schooling.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), bilingual education in ethnic minority schools of Qinghai province experienced a 'stagnancy stage' (Zhou and Sun 2004), similar to the situation prevailing in other areas, when the ethnic language was regarded as unnecessary and redundant and thus, largely overlooked. Chinese acquired the most prominent position in classroom instruction and the Tibetan language was discontinued as a medium of instruction.

With the development of the social economy and integration of the Chinese language after 1978, Tibetan students in different areas varied in their bilingual proficiency. Many Tibetan students in areas of Chinese domination possessed listening and speaking abilities in Chinese and they adopted mainstream public education. But Tibetan students in pastoral areas experienced difficulties in learning school subjects. This was because they had not developed their Chinese speaking and writing skills and experienced numerous obstacles in learning school subjects.

The significance and function of the ethnic minority language as the medium of instruction in ethnic schools was re-emphasised in the provincial report of 1979, with reference to strengthening education in the ethnic minority language (Du 2006). The next ten years witnessed an increase in the number of bilingual schools in pastoral areas. During that period, there were 895 primary Tibetan schools with a total number of 43,368 pupils, and 16 primary Mongolian schools with 1,415 pupils. As a result, Tibetan schools made steady progress in subject teaching and language learning through two models of education, which were implemented based exclusively upon the local situation, in ethnic minority schools. They were the Tibetan-Chinese model (Model 1) and the Sino-Tibetan Model (Model 2). The provincial educational bureau (*Qinghai Jiaoyuting* 1979) issued a further regulation to strengthen the teaching of ethnic languages, requiring that the ethnic language be the principal medium of instruction for most ethnic minority schools. The education conference held in April 1980 under the auspices of the government resulted in an emphasis that ethnic minority schools in different regions had special characteristics and their own distinctive features. They could perhaps have different planning strategies in terms of administration requirements and management organisation. Documents issued by the provincial government in the following year stated clearly that the medium of instruction in ethnic minority schools should be the ethnic

language. Chinese began being taught as a required subject from Grade Three of primary schools.

The institutional support for the ethnic minority language as the medium of instruction in Tibetan schools played an active part in the development of ethnolinguistic vitality and bilingual education in Qinghai. In bilingual schools, bilingual teachers increased in numbers. Tibetan schools using Model 1, with Tibetan as the medium of instruction, were predominant in the 1980s and 1990s. Publications of textbooks in Tibetan comprised main school subjects such as Mathematics, language, Physics, Chemistry, and so forth.

Various research studies were also conducted on issues in Tibetan bilingual education in Tibetan Autonomous prefectures. The method by which Chinese proficiency of students could be improved was identified as the key issue in Tibetan bilingual schools. In 1993, a reform experiment was conducted in Tongren county of Huangnan prefecture, the aim being that Tibetan students master Chinese as swiftly as time permitted, through the training of their skills in listening to and thereafter, speaking Chinese.

As to the statistics provided by Qinghai Education Bureau (2001), there were 1,040 bilingual primary and secondary Tibetan schools with a total number of 108,441 students. Tibetan schools in different areas adopted Model 1 or Model 2 as their option of education for reasons of practical implementation. Bilingual Schools in Huangnan, Hainan, and Guoluo prefectures preferred to implement Model 1. While many Model 1 schools were effective, some were found less so in Chinese language teaching compared with the bilingual schools in Yushu and Haibei prefectures, which mostly implemented Model 2. Some schools therefore became flexible in their approach to conducting classes, using both Model 1 and Model 2 in order to better cater to the students' wishes and needs. In some Tibetan schools in Hainan, for example, classes were grouped into Model 1 and Model 2 classes.

In the new century, education in ethnic regions has become well developed with regulations imposed on teaching languages. The Qinghai government has paid deliberate and conscious attention to the quality of language instruction. The guidelines proposed by the Qinghai Educational Bureau in 2003 on strengthening and improving bilingual teaching accept Model 1 as the principal model for implementation in ethnic Tibetan and Mongolian schools. Chinese as the medium of instruction can be the option, in conformity with the local practical situation. Examinations for language proficiency have to be administered under the organisation of local education administration departments. Papers of the National Examination for university entrance are written in the ethnic language and Chinese. The scores in the ethnic language and Chinese subjects are recorded (out of a hundred percent) independently.

To ensure the quality of Chinese proficiency in ethnic schools, the implementation of Chinese Examination was carried out in 2004. Ethnic students educated in their native language, and teachers under the age of 45 in ethnic schools, were required to take and pass the Chinese proficiency examination (MHK).

English courses were introduced in ethnic minority schools in the new century. Some primary schools in Huangnan Prefecture commenced English instruction

from Grade Three, with two classroom hours a week. English teaching is customarily scheduled from Grade Five onwards in ethnic minority schools, with four classroom hours a week. There is no requirement for an English course examination in the National Entrance Examination for colleges or university, though English examination results tend to be marginally taken into account, if the examinee attains a score of over 60 points. Hence, English study in ethnic schools can be a part of the formal process of education, without any guarantee of proficiency qualifications.

In the following sections, we assess some empirical findings of ethnolinguistic vitality in some minority-dominated areas and the perceptions and attitudes of key stakeholders in these areas about the languages they use and/or learn and bilingual/trilingual education.

### 3 Case Studies

The research team conducted case studies in three Tibetan autonomous prefectures, namely, Huangnan, Guoluo and Yushu. The case studies were carried out through questionnaire surveys, interviews and observations in particular selected schools. The three prefectures have a similar percentage of Tibetan population (over seventy percent) and thus a similar education system. They regularly benefit from strong governmental and institutional support. The case studies were carried out primarily in the Tibetan language. We decided to choose schools in those three prefectures, because they are representative of Tibetan-dominated areas in terms of the economy, geography, demography and socio-political status. Through questionnaire surveys, interviews and observations in the selected schools in these areas, as stated before, we aimed to understand the present educational status of Tibetan students, the language policy, the language teachers, and the attitudes and perceptions of key stakeholders.

The Qinghai government implements a well-accepted and commonly approved policy for ethnic language education. Huangnan prefecture is the first example in the government document (1994). Ethnolinguistic vitality can be observed both in the community and in bilingual schools. Tongren County in Huangnan, for example, is dominated by Tibetans, who make up 75% of the population. The Tongren Ethnic School, visited by our team, is a typical Tibetan bilingual school in Qinghai. It was founded in 1975. As a boarding school with the oldest history and the biggest scale in terms of area—some 32,001 m<sup>2</sup>, with a building footprint of 12,010 m<sup>2</sup>—it is truly unique. The school comprises a multipurpose building, two lecture buildings and four accommodation blocks, including facilities for dining halls. During our visit, we learnt that the school was equipped with modern facilities such as language labs, computer rooms, and Physics and Chemistry experiment rooms. The school adopts Model 1 as its system of education, i.e., Tibetan is used as the medium of instruction in most subjects, with Chinese and English taught as subjects.

Our first impression of this school during our investigation was that Tibetan ethnolinguistic vitality in the school was distinctly strong. During the morning break,

**Table 1** Classroom hours for Language Instruction in Huangnan Primary Schools

Grade	Tibetan (h/week)	Chinese (h/week)	English
1	7	7	0
2	9	9	0
3	8	10	2
4	9	10	2
5	7	9	5 h/week
6	8	6	7 h/week

as a replacement for the usual school broadcast, gymnastics or stretching exercises witnessed in ordinary schools, we noticed that students formed groups and danced in the school playground to the tune of Tibetan music emanating through the school loudspeakers. Tibetan staff and students were the dominant majority in the school and they communicated with each other in Tibetan, unless their listeners were not Tibetan themselves. The school environment was unmistakably Tibetan, abounding in slogans, notices and regulation articles in Tibetan. Occasionally though, a few notices were published in Chinese. A point to note is that all staff and students could communicate effortlessly in Chinese when we conducted interviews. The Mathematics lesson we observed was completely conducted in Tibetan, while the Chinese lesson was taught in Chinese by a native Chinese speaking teacher and English was taught with some interpretation in Tibetan. Textbooks in Tibetan, Chinese and English were stacked up all together on students' desks. One of the teachers suggested: "If we can make progress in education, we have to use a similar teaching syllabus and curriculum (as) for the Han majority". He further explained that the level and teaching contents are equal to those implemented in mainstream public schools, except for Tibetan transcriptions.

Bilingual Schools in all the three Tibetan autonomous prefectures we visited displayed features equivalent to the Tongren ethnic school in their basic practical implementation of trilingual education in terms of language instruction periods, and attitudes of students and teachers. Furthermore, we collected information on the number of classroom hours allotted to each language taught in their curriculum, as illustrated in Tables 1, 2 and 3. From these tables, we perceive the class hours allocated to each language as a school subject, in Huangnan, Yushu and Guoluo. The schools attached almost equal importance to the pupils' home language (L1) and Chinese (L2), although a few more hours were specified for L2 in Grades Three to Five in primary schools. We recorded that English language instruction in the primary schools in the two prefectures commenced in different years. Huangnan Primary schools started at Grade Three, while Yushu Primary schools began English education from Grade Five.

English language provision has been implemented in Tibetan schools since 2004. Schools in Huangnan prefecture initiated English provision from Grade Three, which is comparable to the national syllabus requirement. Genuine implementation of L3 teaching in Tibetan primary schools confirms that Tibetan bilingual schools have no inclination to lag behind mainstream schools, in terms of their proficiency in language learning. Their students intend and aim to complete the required

**Table 2** Classroom hours for Language Instruction in Yushu Tibetan Primary Schools

Grade	Tibetan (h/week)	Chinese (h/week)	English
1	7	7	0
2	9	9	0
3	8	10	0
4	9	10	0
5	7	9	5 h/week
6	8	6	7 h/week

**Table 3** Classroom hours for Language Instruction in Tongde Tibetan Secondary School

Grade	Tibetan (h/week)	Chinese (h/week)	English (h/week)
7	6	6	5
8	5	5	5
9	6	6	4

contents in the national syllabus for primary schools in China, in order to compete for future life opportunities with those attending mainstream schools.

#### 4 Students' Views of Three Languages and Language Education

In this section, we compare students' views of the three languages in question and language education for Tibetan secondary schools in three different areas (Table 4). Using a five-point Likert scale, the investigation results undoubtedly indicate the different views held by students in the three schools, in terms of their mother tongue (L1) in relation to L2 and L3. The findings help to increase our understanding of language policy implementation in minority-dominated schools in Qinghai. For the first, second and third statements, students in different schools differed vastly in their views on language promotion. Students from schools in Huangnan and Guoluo that have primarily adopted Model 1 sought to increase the promotion of the three languages, particularly L1, but students in the school in Yushu were not similarly inclined. Schools in this prefecture mostly follow Model 2, which may imply that they wish to further enhance the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction as early as possible in primary schools. Surprisingly, the data indicate that students in Yushu schools were not as positive as Huangnan and Guolou students with reference to the promotion of all the three languages. The only probable explanation could be that Yushu students were, in general, content with current school practices.

For statements 4 and 5, most Tibetan students do not hold strong or firm views on whether they are taught by either Tibetan or Han Chinese teachers. In terms of school facilities and learning conditions (statement 6), understandably, minority school children desired to study in better equipped classrooms. They were extremely keen on the improvement and enhancement of teaching and learning facilities.



**Table 4** Comparison of students' views on languages and language education in Tibetan secondary schools

Statement	Huangnan N=114		Guoluo N=96		Yushu N=50	
	Mean	Std	Mean	Std	Mean	Std
1. Minority language teaching and learning should be promoted more seriously in my school	4.33	0.75	4.78	0.66	3.5	1.39
2. Chinese language teaching and learning should be further enhanced in my school	4.07	0.798	4.38	0.62	3.56	1.25
3. English language teaching and learning should be improved in my school	4.27	0.88	4.43	0.59	3.3	1.76
4. More teachers of minority nationality should be employed by my school because they know minority pupils' needs better	4.09	1.03	3.41	0.68	3.9	1.23
5. More teachers of Han nationality should be employed by this school because they are generally better than minority teachers	3.4	1.2	3.06	1.35	3.26	1.29
6. More equipment such as computers and language labs should be provided for my school	4.49	0.77	4.66	0.69	4.12	1.35
7. There should be more schools with pupils of mixed nationalities so that we can integrate better	3.77	1.11	4.45	0.89	3.36	1.27
8. There should be different syllabuses for Han and minority pupils, even in the same school, because their learning abilities differ	3	1.18	2.41	0.968	3.28	1.5
9. Minority children should know their own minority language first, then Chinese and English	4.39	0.89	3.93	1.33	3.78	1.54
10. Minority pupils cannot learn English as well as Han pupils. So English should be dropped from the school curriculum for them	2.17	1.2	2.38	0.997	1.92	1.77

“Investment for the education should be greatly promoted”, one interviewee proposed. For the option of priority in language learning, most students took a clear position on the three languages. They attached great importance to their mother tongue. “I like my ethnic mother tongue, and make my best to learn it well”, explained one of the interviewees. They desired to be treated equally in education and did not wish to be marginalised. This would, in fact, explain the reason behind Statement 10 having the lowest score—hardly any students agreed or approved of the statement that minority pupils cannot learn L3 (i.e., English) as well as Han pupils. They were genuinely interested in retaining L3 in the school curriculum.

Table 5 compares the views of the teachers in areas identical to the ones in which the students were surveyed. It must be emphasised at this juncture that the sample size of the teachers is small, as access to teachers in these three regions was limited. In view of the fact that the project is still continuing, we intend to increase the

**Table 5** Comparison of Teachers' views on Languages and Language Education in Tibetan Secondary Schools

Statement	Agree (Huangnan) <i>N</i> =17			Agree (Guoluo) <i>N</i> =34			Agree (Yushu) <i>N</i> =12		
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std</i>	%	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std</i>	%	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std</i>	%
	1. The home language of minority pupils is important because it helps them learn school subjects better if they know it well	3.7	0.98	74	4.18	0.87	83.5	3.5	1.57
2. Minority pupils should only learn Chinese and use Chinese to learn all other school subject	2.23	1.2	44.7	2.26	0.58	45.2	2.55	0.93	46.6
3. English is too difficult for minority pupils. They cannot learn it as well as Han pupils	2.24	0.97	44.7	1.79	0.67	32.9	2.67	1.49	53.3
4. Minority culture here is backward. Minority people generally reject anything foreign including foreign languages	2.24	1.14	44.7	1.79	0.67	39.4	2.89	1.19	56.7
5. Minority pupils' IQ is not as good as the IQ of Han pupils. So they learn new languages slowly	1.53	0.62	30.5	1.76	0.496	34.7	2.33	1.23	46.7
6. Minority pupils should not be taught English because their main task is to learn Chinese	1.64	0.93	32.9	1.59	0.45	34	1.58	1.16	31.7
7. If English is taught to minority pupils, they should target a lower level of achievement than that required in the NES	3.29	1.1	65.9	3	0.92	60	3.33	1.23	50
8. The language used to teach and learn English should be the minority language, not Chinese	3.7	1.04	74	2.74	0.79	60.6	3.18	1.53	58.3
9. All minority pupils should follow the same syllabuses for Chinese and English as Han pupils, forgetting their minority language	1.35	0.61	27	2.12	1.2	42.4	2.27	1.27	41.7
10. The key for minority pupils to do well in school is first of all to learn their own language well. They can then learn all other school subjects including Chinese and English equally well	3.94	0.97	78.8	4.09	1.05	81.8	3.58	1.56	71.7

sample size to enhance the reliability of the findings. The data presented in this table may perhaps, therefore, be appreciated as work in progress.

As we can see, most of the statements in the questionnaire for teachers are phrased negatively and thus we need to analyse this part of the data cautiously. From the table above, we perceive that teachers' views on the three languages are fairly consistent. A remarkably noticeable and obvious finding is that the teachers scored considerably highly for Statements 1 and 10, both of which emphasise the importance of students' L1 in learning. It should be pointed out that more than ninety per cent of the teachers are Tibetan, and they possess great comprehension and a broad understanding of the importance of the mother tongue in subject learning. Naturally, individual teachers in different areas espoused their personal views about language in use and language policies. However, our data confirm that, in general, teachers in Guoluo were united with regard to the advantages of mother tongue improvement in education. This can be explained by the density of the Tibetan population (90.95%) in Guoluo and perhaps its strong desire to maintain traditions in language provision, when compared with other prefectures.

In terms of Chinese learning, when comparing the data presenting teachers' views with those held by students, we could appreciate that both teachers and students recognised the value of learning Chinese, but teachers in Guoluo were determinedly opposed to the concept of using Chinese as the only medium of instruction. This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of teachers who were Tibetan perceive bilingual education differently. To them, pupils' native language is more effective than any other language in teaching school subjects

Interestingly, while the students did reflect on the fact that they were capable of learning English satisfactorily, the teachers displayed no confidence in visualising an improvement in the present situation, with reference to English language learning. More than half of the teachers in Yushu opined that English is too difficult and challenging for ethnic minority students. It can be argued that the pessimistic attitudes held by the teachers would negatively affect their efforts and hinder the development of English language provision for ethnic minority students in the region.

## 5 Discussion

Existing literature and our investigation of the current situation of trilingual education in Tibetan ethnic minority schools in Qinghai give clear evidence of the strong ethnolinguistic vitality of Tibetan in Qinghai, particularly in areas dominated by ethnic Tibetans. Trilingual or bilingual education is institutionally supported in terms of provincial policies. However, many issues remain for real world implementation of the policies. Research reported in the literature shows evidence of a severe lack of qualified teachers for trilingual education. More significantly, our research shows that practitioner teachers differ hugely in terms of their perception of and attitudes towards the languages they teach and their understanding of the crucial role of each language. In some of the schools we visited, while most teachers

could function well both in daily life and in academic situations, others lacked even basic Mandarin proficiency. It is not difficult to imagine these teachers would not serve as good role models for pupils and students in bilingual schools.

Similarly, our research shows that the majority of the students and teachers in the Tibetan schools we visited desired to learn and maintain their language and culture, and at the same time to improve their Chinese and English proficiency. Some others, particularly those in schools where Model 2 is adopted, demonstrated lack of genuine recognition of the value of the mother tongue in education, which would present risk and uncertainty for the future development of bilingual education. Some teachers in these schools claimed that as the Chinese language is “international” and a language of the economy, it should be the main language for learning or even the sole medium of instruction for all school subjects. Some explicitly stated their objection to bilingual education for fear that the study of Tibetan would slow down the learning of Chinese. Several teachers went so far as to advocate the view that the reason why some Tibetan students reject anything foreign native, not foreign is because Tibetan culture is backward, which is clearly a profound misconception of culture.

The initial stages of English teaching in primary schools in Qinghai also require further discussion. Primary schools in different areas begin teaching English at different grades. There does not seem to be a provincial policy that corresponds to the national policy which stipulates the start of English teaching from the third grade of primary schooling. It can be argued that it is imperative for ethnic minority schools to comply with the national English teaching syllabus, so as to prevent minority students from being disadvantaged and deprived of opportunities for education equality.

Despite the fact that the project is on-going, we are confident that we have gained a better understanding through research that certain policies encourage the promotion of strong forms of bilingual/trilingual education which have produced positive outcomes and some do not. We saw many ethnic minority schools in Qinghai adopt effective strategies that aim to develop trilingual pupils with strong competence in their home minority language (L1) and Mandarin Chinese (L2), and peer-appropriate competence in English (L3), that is, additive trilingualism (Feng and Adamson, in this volume). During this process, schools may encounter issues with regard to facilities, teachers’ qualifications and their language proficiency. These issues are thorny but could be addressed through favourable policies over time. What is more difficult to tackle is the negative attitudes and perceptions of some key stakeholders concerning the use and education of the three languages.

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