

Trilingual Education in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region: Challenges and Threats for Mongolian Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is a growing trend around the world. National, regional, and international languages complement local languages in education systems as policy makers respond to the forces and impacts of globalization. The use of multiple languages within a particular context creates an ecology in which people speaking a minority language can experience discrimination and oppression under the hegemony of powerful, dominant languages and cultures (Kramsch and Whiteside 2008). Such people could thus be seen as living in the disadvantaged “global South”, and careful maintenance of the language ecology is required to ensure that their language survives and is respected (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2008). This chapter explores the language policies implemented in different primary school contexts of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous

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Region (IMAR) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Using a four-model typology of trilingual education (Adamson and Feng 2014, 2015; Dong et al. 2015), this chapter analyzes the models implemented in three Mongolian-nationality primary schools located in a city, town, and village in the IMAR. These schools aim to preserve the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Mongolians—one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in the PRC—while also preparing the students to participate in the social, economic, and political activities of the country through strong propagation of Chinese (the national language) and English (viewed by policy makers as an important tool to enable the PRC to play a prominent role in international affairs). While identifying some diversity in the models (accounted for by a variety of local factors), the analysis suggests a common trend that Mongolian identity is under threat as the language and culture struggle in the face of powerful economic, demographic, and political changes that promote other languages and cultures. This chapter therefore views the struggle of the Mongolian language as a “southern” dimension of the IMAR's position within the PRC.

The study uses a “southern” knowledge perspective by focusing on local responses to global and national forces, and by seeking the perspectives of stakeholders directly involved in devising and implementing trilingual education. The main author, Yi, is a Mongolian and received trilingual education in the IMAR for 12 years before becoming a language teacher and researcher. Yi's educational background and fluency in Mongolian provide her with privileged access to, and understanding of, schools that are implementing trilingual education. The second author, Adamson, is a Briton who has spent over 30 years teaching and researching in Chinese contexts, with a particular interest in minority regions in recent years. The partnership facilitates, we hope, a contribution to the international literature by disseminating insightful findings on an area that has not previously received much attention.

BACKGROUND

Inner Mongolia is located in the north of China, and shares international borders with Mongolia and Russia. The Mongolian ethnic minority is one of China's 55 official ethnic minority groups. The Mongolian population in the IMAR is over 4.2 million out of a total of 10.58 million (Governmental Statistics in the IMAR 2010). Large numbers of Mongolians also live in

Xinjiang, Qinghai, Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces in China. Milk, coal mining, farming, animal husbandry, and tourism are all major industries in the IMAR. In recent decades, extraction of the plentiful mineral resources has transformed the IMAR's landscape and impacted negatively upon the traditional nomadic lifestyle.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, language policies about minority languages have veered between coercive assimilation and respect for diversity (Lam 2005). A key issue is whether to allow the minority groups to learn their mother language (and thus maintain their sense of cultural identity) while also learning standard Chinese (also known as Putonghua) which has been strongly promoted in education in the PRC since the 1950s (Lam 2005). Adding to the complexity is the phenomenal rise of English as an international language in the PRC (Adamson 2004; Osnos 2008) and its role in determining economic and educational opportunities. As a result, different policy streams have produced a demand for trilingual education in schools serving ethnic minority populations. Decisions concerning the details of language policies are decentralized in the PRC, which means that local authorities and schools can determine the model of trilingual education that is implemented.

A large-scale study of trilingual education in ethnic minority regions in the PRC identified four common models—the Accretive, Balanced, Transitional, and Depreciative Models (Adamson and Feng 2014, 2015; Dong et al. 2015). The weakest, the Depreciative Model, is found in schools that claim to cater to an ethnic minority language but, in reality, do not use the minority language as the medium of instruction or even teach it as school subject. Such schools also claim to be bilingual, in the sense that Chinese and English are studied as languages in the curriculum and Chinese serves as the medium of instruction. In these cases, the bilingual label reflects the curriculum content, while the trilingual label reflects the ethnic profile of the students. The Depreciative Model is deleterious to the minority language, which is absent from the curriculum and even the playground of schools that advertise a trilingual experience; only the stronger national (i.e., Chinese) and international (i.e., English) languages are promoted. Schools using the Transitional Model offer only a very basic foundation in the minority language in the early years of schooling, before jettisoning it in favor of Chinese. The other two models are more supportive of trilingualism. The Balanced Model, found in minority regions where there is also a large population of Han Chinese (i.e., the

majority group in the PRC), comprises two streams: one allows students to study through Chinese as the medium of instruction while learning the minority language as a subject, and the other uses the minority language as the medium of instruction while Chinese is learnt as a subject. The Accretive Model integrates the three languages. The minority language is learnt comprehensively, with Chinese as a strong second language; both languages then support the learning of English. In all models, Adamson and Feng (2015) found that Chinese language dominated, learning the minority language tended to tail off in secondary schools, and English was taught patchily in many regions due to a lack of resources.

The study reported in this chapter investigated the role and status of Mongolian, Chinese, and English in three schools designated as Mongolian National Primary Schools (MNPSs). The schools were differentiated by location and socioeconomic status, being situated in a major city, a large town, and a village, respectively. The research approach included policy document analysis, an analysis of the linguistic profile of the community, school-based field studies, and interviews and questionnaires with teachers, stakeholders, policy makers, and parents based on research instruments developed for the large-scale study of language ecology of the local community and schools' implementation of trilingual education described above (see Adamson et al. 2013). The field trips took place between December 2012 and July 2013.

CITY SCHOOL

The city school is located in Hohhot, the largest city in the IMAR. The Mongolian population of Hohhot stands at less than ten percent as the city is strongly Han-dominated. Chinese is the dominant language in the government, and in cultural, business, and educational interactions. The city school was set up in 1985 to cater for the Mongolian community. It is one of the two MNPSs in Hohhot that has adopted the Balanced Model. In this school, Mongolian, Chinese, and English are all taught as subjects to all students. Mongolian is used as the main medium of instruction in the Mongolian stream. Chinese is used as main medium of instruction in the Chinese stream. The staff of 104 are all Mongolian. The school provides nine years of compulsory education. Overall, there are 1624 students in 29 classes in the school, out of which 19 of the classes are in the Mongolian stream with a total of 1214 Mongolian students. The class size is about 50–60 students. The majority of the other students are Han Chinese, but there are also over 100 international students from Japan,

Mongolia, South Korea, and Russia in this school using boarding facilities. The school is well resourced with textbooks and multimedia equipment.

Elements of Mongolian language and culture have been incorporated within the teaching and learning environment in the Mongolian-stream classrooms, while the Chinese-stream classrooms have a variety of displays in only Chinese and English. Every classroom has the national flag placed above the blackboard. The Mongolian classrooms and corridors also have posters of Mongolian proverbs as well as pictures of traditional games (such as Mongolian wrestling, horse racing, and archery), Mongolian nature, and animals. The school's name is translated into three languages on the school gate. Throughout the school, the students converse with one another mostly in Chinese.

However, the accent on Mongolian within the school is not reflected in the external language ecology. Once students leave the school, they are in an almost 100 percent Chinese-language environment. Interviews with the students suggest that only a small number of the Mongolian students speak in Mongolian with their parents. This marginal local presence of Mongolian restricts the students' opportunities to access suitable resources in the language:

Nowadays, there are not enough Mongolian reading materials for students to read outside of the classroom. If they want to read in Mongolian, what's available are only those too complicated translations of the Four Ancient Masterpieces of Chinese stories or a monthly magazine, *Nabeya* [a publication for primary students in the IMAR]. (Teacher 1/1)

As a result, there are negative impacts upon the Mongolian students' mastery of their own language:

Sometimes our students cannot even understand the titles or questions of Mongolian reading comprehension texts. I need to explain to them in Chinese. Then they would understand them better. If you ask them purely in Mongolian, they would not understand the meaning of the questions in the reading comprehension when analyzing it. (Teacher 1/1)

There is also little scope in the city for English to prosper, as the language is only used in lessons or occasional business and government meetings.

The first 20 minutes of the school morning involve all students performing a standard exercise routine that is broadcast by a national radio station. When lessons begin, the Mongolian stream is allocated lessons in

the three languages as illustrated in Table 8.1. Chinese is introduced in Grade Two, and English in Grade Three.

By the time the students reach Grade Four, there is a balanced distribution of all three languages. Mongolian, having been taught as the foundational language of learning, has to give space to the other two languages, and the allocation of lessons decreases to 7 per week. Nevertheless, students' language outcomes show that they have developed high competence in Mongolian reading, writing, listening, and speaking by the end of primary school. These students also acquire strong competence in Chinese and English. Test results and interviews with teachers show that Mongolian-stream students' performance in English tests is better than Han Chinese students' in general—especially in terms of speaking and listening:

Mongolian students not only can learn English well, they can learn English better than Han Chinese students while still managing to learn three languages. (Teacher 1/2)

Table 8.2 shows the allocation of lessons in the Chinese stream. Chinese occupies the lion's share of time throughout the curriculum. In this stream, Mongolian gives way to English after students have developed a solid foundation in Mongolian grammar, spelling and pronunciation, simple reading, and simple narrative writing skills. Mongolian is in the curriculum from Grade One to Grade Five. By the time the students reach Grade Six, there are only reading lessons to sustain their competence in Mongolian, which reflects the marginal nature of the language in the external environment.

An important factor that affects this distribution is the examinations policy. In the Chinese stream, Mongolian is not tested for secondary

Table 8.1 Distribution of language and cultural lessons in the city school (Mongolian stream)

| | <i>Grade</i> <i>1</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>2</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>3</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>4</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>5</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>6</i> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Mongolian | 13 | 10 | 9 | 7 | 10 | 10 |
| Mongolian Culture | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| Mongolian Reading and Writing | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Chinese | 0 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 |
| English | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 |

Table 8.2 Distribution of language and cultural lessons in the city school (Chinese stream)

| | <i>Grade 1</i> | <i>Grade 2</i> | <i>Grade 3</i> | <i>Grade 4</i> | <i>Grade 5</i> | <i>Grade 6</i> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Mongolian | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 0 |
| Mongolian Culture | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Mongolian Reading and Writing | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Chinese | 8 | 9 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| English | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 5 |

school admission. Therefore, for many students, Grade Five will be the last chance they have for learning Mongolian in the school system. By that time, the best-case scenario is that they have developed a basic grounding in Mongolian reading, writing, and spelling. But, as the interview data from teachers show, even this basic standard of Mongolian is difficult to achieve for many students who are learning in the Chinese stream. For these students, learning Mongolian is just a means to make a good impression to ensure their entry into a good secondary school. There is a significant difference in terms of Mongolian ability between students in the Chinese stream and those in the Mongolian stream.

To tell you the truth, most of the Chinese students cannot even read properly after learning Mongolian for two years. They can only write very simple characters and read very simple articles. This subject will not be included in the secondary school entrance exam—I think this fact has a big impact on students' learning attitude. They do not need to perform well in this subject but can get into a Chinese secondary school anyhow. Some of the students do not even know what the traditional five nomadic animals on the grasslands are in Mongolian culture. (Teacher 1/1)

The performance of these students in public examinations in Chinese also remains on a par with Han students who attend other Han primary schools without learning Mongolian.

Factors that foster the relatively effective implementation of trilingualism in this MNPS are the national policy, the government's financial support, teacher resources and teacher development, and the local community's attitudes and perceptions regarding Mongolian education. However, there are also strong countervailing factors that hinder the

sustainability of the language, such as the urbanization policy and the shifting demographics. With their increasing numbers, Han students have become the school's main source of recruitment, given that some Han parents reason that if their children learn Mongolian at school they will get access to a better secondary school, even though Mongolian is not formally tested. In this case, the Mongolian language is a school subject studied for instrumental reasons, rather than out of a commitment to the language itself. If Han migration into the IMAR continues, the school, and similar institutions, will cater more for those students who are seeking merely to have the study of Mongolian listed on their transcript. At the same time, greater pressure will be placed upon the Mongolian stream in competing for resources with the Chinese stream, and it is likely that less attention will be paid to sustaining the Mongolian stream. This threat to Mongolian is further exacerbated by its diminished presence in the city with the continued influx of Chinese speakers, which means that there is weakening community support for the language, thus eroding its status within the IMAR.

TOWN SCHOOL

The second MNPS is located 160 km from the major city of Baotou. The Baotou region is the world's largest producer of rare earth metals. The population of Baotou is 2,650,364 and the Mongolian population stands at 15.1 percent. The population of the town where the school is located numbers 17,597; the Mongolian population is 15.3 percent. As a counterbalance, the proximity to the border and the opportunities for trade as well as social and cultural interaction with Mongolia create a potentially strong platform for the use of Mongolian in this town, despite the fact that the linguistic variety and script are different in the neighboring country. The town school was established in 1974. In 1998, it merged with another local primary school and became the only MPNS in the town. It provides nine years of compulsory education. This school has adopted the Accretive Model. Mongolian, Chinese, and English are all taught as a subject. Mongolian is the main medium of instruction. In 2013, there were 576 students and 91 staff. The class size is about 45–50 students, and all the students and teachers are Mongolian. The school is well equipped with textbooks, multimedia equipment, traditional Mongolian musical instruments, chess, and games equipment. This school has newly renovated boarding facilities.

Administratively, the school is located within the Baotou city region but it is close to the Mongolia-China border. The sensitive geographical location of this town has drawn attention from the national government, which has built a military base there and required schools to bolster patriotic education to avoid the development of strong cross-border Mongolian sentiments that might threaten the integrity of the PRC.

The rapid growth of the local mining industry has drastically altered the landscape. Local Mongolians have witnessed how the mining industry is contributing to economic growth, but at the same time bringing ecological and social damage. The traditional Mongolian lifestyle has been affected, as the government has banned the nomadic lifestyle and required former nomads to settle in urban areas. The Mongolian language has strong pastoral roots, and economic modernization and related policies threaten it with deracination:

Nowadays, if we want to see something about Mongolian culture or history, we have to go to the museum. How many students in our school have seen a camel? Camels have almost disappeared. There were so many wild camels, cows, sheep, and horses on the grasslands in the past. When I was young, I used to ride a horse, tend sheep, and take care of various animals for my family. (Teacher 2/1)

International trade in the region also boosts the status of English, while Chinese remains the dominant language in many walks of life. In the streets, one can hear international pop music and see trailers for Hollywood movies on advertising screens. Even in a town this size, English is becoming a part of the culture, albeit on a very small scale.

Learning English seems to have become a social phenomenon. Compared with rural schools, English in this school has improved a lot. Mongolian students here can understand even if the teacher only speaks in English. Grade 1 to Grade 6 can all understand. (Teacher 2/2)

Although the town holds cultural festivals each year to attract tourism and popularize Mongolian culture, it is not difficult to see that Mongolian traditions are slowly weakening due to the influence of Chinese and English. The school represents a bulwark against cultural deterioration. The local community has demonstrated strong support for the school's mission of preserving Mongolian culture. The town government provided funds to

upgrade the facilities. Parents and other groups cooperate in providing extracurricular classes in Mongolian language and cultural activities, such as poetry readings, *Naadam* games, folk dancing, and musical performances. Local TV and radio stations broadcast the school's special events. Many of the students speak Mongolian at home and with friends.

The school environment has a strong Mongolian flavor. The school gate is in the shape of an ancient sculpture, called the 'Secret History of the Mongols', and there is a statue of a running horse in front of the main school building. In the grounds, a sculpture of the Mongolian *Suulte* (arrow) has been erected alongside a stone painting depicting the nomadic lifestyle of over a thousand years ago. Students perform the traditional Mongolian *Andai* dance every morning in place of the physical exercises generally prescribed for primary school students in China. The music room is well stocked with traditional instruments. There are many posters of Mongolian proverbs and poems, traditional games, and religion in classrooms and corridors, while each classroom has a picture of Genghis Khan above the blackboard. Political slogans and posters in Chinese can also be seen, nurturing students' patriotic awareness, citizenship, and military knowledge.

The study of Mongolian is accorded the most teaching hours in the curriculum, and the language is also used as the medium of instruction. Students' outcomes show that they have strong Mongolian competence across the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

We are probably securing first place in Mongolian exam results in the city. Most of the time Mongolian in this school is better than in the other two schools in the city. This is because our school has a Mongolian environment. Another factor is that our school really emphasizes sustaining Mongolian culture and focuses on improving minority education. (Teacher 2/1)

Among the several Mongolian language classes observed, one lesson was particularly interesting. It featured a traditional Mongolian role-play, which combined entertainment, education, and the warlike spirit of Mongolians. The students reacted by being inquisitive and engaged. The plot quickly drew their attention to the lesson's objective—cherishing the environment and the land they live on. Students' awareness of the need for ecological protection was challenged, and they became acquainted with the current situation in the region through an entertaining dialogue that is a key component of this kind of role-play. The teacher also shared some

ancient proverbs with the students, and used a variety of interesting metaphors that are related to nature and the nomadic lifestyle. After the lesson, the teacher commented:

Once the natural environment that carries the rich traditions, knowledge, and ecology of Mongolian culture slowly fades away, Mongolian culture would be threatened. The well-being of the grasslands is the well-being of Mongolian culture. (Teacher 2/3)

Chinese and English are introduced incrementally and at different times to the curriculum, in line with the Accretive Model. Table 8.3 depicts the length of time distributed to the three languages, which changes every school year, and the time spent on extracurricular activities that are implemented in order to sustain Mongolian culture.

It is clear that the goal of maintaining Mongolian culture, language, and traditions lies at the core of the school's mission. However, Mongolian is also on a downward trend, as attention to Chinese (in particular) and English increases, putting the Accretive Model under threat. Teachers ascribed this trend to the dominance of Chinese in secondary schools. Overall, though, assessment results indicate that, by the end of school, students have relatively good proficiency in Chinese and basic knowledge of English without detriment to their mother language. The local conditions create a sense of optimism among some teachers, who observe that Mongolian is still frequently used among students with their parents and friends:

According to my observations, the Mongolian language is not going to become extinct that fast. But yes, Chinese has become the most widely used language ... I assume that in the future the global language will be Chinese.

Table 8.3 Distribution of language and cultural lessons in the town school

| | <i>Grade</i> <i>1</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>2</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>3</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>4</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>5</i> | <i>Grade</i> <i>6</i> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Mongolian | 7 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Mongolian Culture | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Mongolian Reading and Writing | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Chinese | 1 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 |
| English | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 |

But if each and every Mongolian is really dedicated to keeping our culture alive, and puts effort into protecting our language and culture, Mongolian will not die out. (Teacher 2/3)

Others believe that, in the long term, Chinese will be essential; using Mongolian and English will depend upon the nature of employment.

The most important language in the future will be Chinese. Mongolian will basically not be widely used in society, unless one does some work closely related to Mongolian culture or Mongolia. Otherwise they would just use Chinese. All the documents are in Chinese; SMS is in Chinese; when we have a meeting in the school, we also use Chinese. English may be forgotten in the future if the students' employment is not in translating, or based abroad or in teaching. (Teacher 2/1)

Factors that are currently supporting the relatively strong implementation of Mongolian in the school include the language ecology, the national policy, local financial support, a strong and committed group of teachers, the facilities and resources, parental support, and the positive attitudes of teachers and students. There are also factors that are hindering the sustainability of the Mongolian language, such as local policies that have banned the nomadic lifestyle thereby separating the language from its pastoral roots. (The government declared the reason they issued this policy was to protect the grassland from being destroyed by overgrazing, but another reason could be that there are rich mineral resources under the nomads' land, which the government wishes to mine.) Other factors include local economic growth, the influx of the Han Chinese into the town, and the shortage of Mongolian teaching resources. This school is increasingly becoming isolated as a small island in a sea of Chinese.

VILLAGE SCHOOL

The village MNPS is located in northeast IMAR, 150 km from Tongliao city IMAR, and only 50 km from Liaoning Province and IMAR border. Demographically, the population of this village is 10,144. Mongolians make up over 90 percent of the population in this area, and their language is widely used in the government, cultural activities, business, and education. Owing to the proximity to Liaoning Province, Chinese is frequently used for cross-border trade. There is more demand here for Chinese than

in other inland areas in the IMAR. Economically, this particular village is comparatively well developed and is the biggest of the 36 villages under the jurisdiction of the local town authorities. Since the 1990s, it has held a weekly market and it benefits from being located close to a highway.

Originally, the school served just the local village, but in 2000, it was merged with another school some 15 km away to consolidate the provision of Mongolian education. Upon merging, the school opened boarding facilities for the students who transferred from the other site. At the time of this study, there were 269 students, all Mongolian, in six classes, and 15 teachers. Class size ranged from 40–50 students. This school had adopted the Accretive Model. Mongolian, Chinese, and English are taught as subjects in the school. Mongolian is the main medium of instruction and the most widely used language among teachers and students. The school has very basic boarding facilities and teaching resources. The boarding area has two dormitories, with 40–45 students living in each room. The students have to light fires in the dormitories to keep warm during the winter. This is inconvenient and dangerous, but there is no alternative. There is a packed-earth playground with some dilapidated fitness equipment on one side. Inside the school, wall decorations are very simple. The national flag is made of red and yellow paper. The walls have a few posters in Mongolian, English, and Chinese. The school is crowded; students' chairs, desks, and tables are old and rickety. In the classrooms, students and teachers also have to light a fire during the winter, when temperatures fall to between -20 and -27 degrees Celsius.

This primary school represents a commitment on the part of the local government to preserving the Mongolian language and culture. As one of three Mongolian schools in the neighborhood—there is also a preschool and a secondary school—the primary school offers education from Grade One to Grade Five. Government aid is allocated to schools according to students' numbers, and is only just sufficient to cover the daily running of the school. Further support has to be raised from other sources, which is a challenge, as economic growth is slower than in the city or town described in this chapter.

The village has a stronger Mongolian cultural and linguistic environment, to the extent that many Han Chinese inhabitants can speak the language. Mongolian is used for daily communication among the local populace, while Chinese is the bridge that connects the village to the outside world. Although some villagers are fluent in Chinese, one can notice their strong Mongolian accent. As with all the school areas mentioned in

this chapter, the local populace has access to national and international media resources: many advertisements in the media are in Mongolian, while the television, radio, and telecommunications services are bilingual—in Chinese and Mongolian. CCTV 9, the national English TV channel, is also available. Even in a small village like this, for an extra fee, some English channels, such as HBO, BBC, Star TV, and Fox News, can also be accessed, but the subscription costs and the linguistic demands are too great for most local families. Some of the youngsters in the village enjoy watching English movies and TV programs (with Chinese subtitles) on the internet, but otherwise, there is little use of English.

In recent years, the use of the Chinese language has become more frequent in this community, and the pressure from the national language has had a negative impact on Mongolian. As one teacher stated during an interview:

Students' Chinese ability is about to out-pace their Mongolian ability. We try to speak only Mongolian in the school. But outside of school they see and hear more and more Chinese. The environment is being influenced more and more by Chinese culture. So it is easier for them to learn Chinese than Mongolian. (Teacher 3/1)

Of the three languages, Mongolian receives the largest allocation of lessons, although it does make some room for English from Grade Three (Table 8.4). Mongolian is the foundational language and the main medium of instruction. Various activities are also organized by the school to enhance students' Mongolian culture practices; these include poetry readings and Mongolian chess. Some of the teachers have added lessons in traditional Mongolian as an extracurricular activity. The arrangement reflects the Accretive Model of trilingual education, with Chinese and then English being built upon the students' first language, although there are initial indications that the model is changing to the Transitional Model as more Chinese-medium lessons are introduced.

Actually, for Mongolian students who are studying at a Mongolian primary school, we emphasize the importance of learning Mongolian to them. Mongolian is their mother language. (Teacher 3/1)

While agreeing with the curriculum design, Chinese and English teachers expressed concern about the students' capacity to cope:

Table 8.4 Distribution of language and cultural lessons in the village school

| | <i>Grade 1</i> | <i>Grade 2</i> | <i>Grade 3</i> | <i>Grade 4</i> | <i>Grade 5</i> |
|-----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Mongolian | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 7 |
| Chinese | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| English | 0 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

It is a little bit early for students to learn English from Grade 3. It is because the students start to learn *pinyin* [the romanized form of Chinese characters] in Grade Two and at Grade Three students reach a critical stage of learning Chinese words and phrases. English comes in as the third language. Learning three languages at this stage is difficult for students. (Teacher 3/2)

The students' perceptions show that most of them are very confident that by the end of their primary study, they will achieve good proficiency in speaking and writing in the three languages. Assessment of students' competence shows that they become fluent in Chinese, are able to write simple descriptive essays, and can do comprehensive reading in the language. The students agree that it is appropriate to start learning Chinese from Grade One, and to use Chinese increasingly as the medium of instruction. Teachers find that, with a greater presence of Chinese culture in their daily lives, students not only show more interest in learning Chinese, they also learn Chinese faster than Mongolian. However, it was observed that the students tended to code-switch between Chinese and Mongolian in Chinese-medium lessons. While the students' English remained at a basic level, several students indicated a desire to learn other subjects, such as physical education and art, through the medium of English. They also rated their confidence in speaking and writing in English as higher than in Chinese.

As the use of Chinese spreads in the village, teachers in the school commented that, although Mongolian is still widely used, the local lifestyle is showing signs of cultural and linguistic assimilation with that of the Chinese, and this assimilation is more marked than in other villages in the region. The students' Mongolian is relatively poor compared with the competence of students in the town school in this study. This can be seen from students' limited vocabulary in their writing, public examination results, and the weak grasp of discourse in their daily learning activities. In terms of resources, this school is far behind the town school and city school. Teachers cite the lack of Mongolian bookstores or magazines. In terms of sustainability, Chinese is in the strongest position among the

three languages, but Mongolian still has some advantages—the population remains predominantly Mongolian, and the language can still be found in daily communication within the family context. The standard of English is poor, largely because it is hardly used outside of school. It is a foreign language, and has been studied for the secondary school entrance examinations since 2010. Although at town and city level it has been found that Mongolian students' English performance in examinations is better than that of Han Chinese students, this is not the case at village level. The shortages of resources and of trained English teachers are important factors.

We lack professional teachers who graduated in art, P.E, English, dancing and music. Chinese English teachers are not suitable for Mongolian students because they cannot understand Mongolian and it is difficult to teach Mongolian students. (Teacher 3/3)

The main reason that this school currently implements an Accretive Model is because of the demographic features of this village. This school is surrounded by a Mongolian-speaking environment, albeit with an ever-increasing use of Chinese. English is weak, but students appear to be enthusiastic about learning it. Theoretically, the village school has the potential for building a really strong Accretive Model, but it is hindered by a lack of human, financial, and teaching resources and by the advancing predominance of Chinese.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Four major models of trilingual education have been identified in the IMAR. In this study we have found two of them—the Balanced Model in the city school and the Accretive Model in the town and village schools. On the surface, these findings indicate that the Mongolian language is being preserved in areas where a majority of the population is Mongolian, where the economy is comparatively well developed, and the location is close to Mongolia. Such factors allow the town and village schools in this study to implement the Accretive Model, although the efforts of the village school are hampered by a lack of resources. At the city school, the tendency toward assimilation is stronger. The city school applies the Balanced Model as a means to strive for social harmony or prepare students for a smooth transition into mainstream society. A common feature

of all three schools is a commitment to a coherent system that nurtures the Mongolian language and culture as well as allowing the students to learn Chinese and English. This commitment is in line with the national government policy to preserve and develop minority languages.

However, on closer examination, it appears that all these schools are trying to fight against the deterioration in the Mongolian language that has occurred as a consequence of the economic development and concomitant demographic changes resulting from a major influx of Chinese-speaking Han in the region. The power of Chinese is buttressed by its role as the national language and its importance in providing students with opportunities to further their education and enhance their employment prospects. The high status of English is institutionalized through the examination systems and its place in popular culture. Mongolian, meanwhile, remains a marginalized minority language, and it will probably continue to be increasingly marginalized with urbanization, which represents a major threat to rural languages (Moseley 2007). As they grow up and progress through the school system, students move closer to assimilation. The external environment supports this trend:

Mongolian is a very beautiful language with very rich vocabulary and artistic expression, and historical and cultural roots. But nowadays students cannot learn this language very well. First they do not have an authentic environment anymore; outside of school it is all Chinese. Secondly, they are under too much stress to learn English and Chinese at a young age. Balancing three languages is a very big challenge for both teachers and students. (Teacher 3/2)

Strong models of trilingual education may offer a win-win-win solution, but only if there is political will and commitment to providing the necessary economic and human resources to support the “southern” language under threat (Fishman 2001). This requires cooperation among policy makers, principals, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders. The community also plays an important role in trilingual education. A strong model, whether Accretive or Balanced, needs a powerful Mongolian language environment and authentic Mongolian resources. Institutional support, for example, would include mass media (Cormack 2005) as well as social, legal, and administrative services in Mongolian that would provide the language with status, while the provision of schooling in the language serves as an essential factor in order to reflect the government’s

commitment to maintain and sustain it. If the ‘southern’ language does not exist in a school curriculum, and is not widely used among the youth, then its chances of survival severely decrease, a danger recognized by a teacher in the village school:

Mongolian will not disappear, but this language is facing difficulties for sure. There are policies that support the teaching and using of Mongolian. There are also a considerable number of people using Mongolian. Mongolian language also has its written form in addition to the spoken form, so it will not disappear. ... [However] our students do not know so much about traditional Mongolian celebrations or festivals anymore. These traditions have already disappeared from here for many decades. I hope there will be more multimedia resources to supplement textbooks, Mongolian TV channels, Mongolian movies or Mongolian cartoons produced in the future so that students can still get access to these old traditions and learn about their mother culture. (Teacher 3/1)

Minority “southern” regions around the world are often battlegrounds for political power, economic resources, social mobility, social justice, and human rights (as well as an excellent context for the study of language policies). Schools, especially primary schools, are at the eye of the ecological storm. Today, Mongolian schools with their cultural icons may look very beautiful on the surface, but if we dig beneath all this beauty, we find that the sustained well-being of the Mongolian language and culture is dependent upon national and local policy, investment, and commitment.

RESEARCH NOTE

The interviewees who participated in the research presented in the chapter agreed to be quoted as long as their anonymity was maintained, in line with ethical procedures approved by the Education University of Hong Kong.

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