



การศึกษาการเรียนรู้ภาษาหยาและจีนกลางแบบทวิภาษาของเด็กวัยก่อนเรียน ในจังหวัดยี่วี่ซี มณฑลยูนนาน กรณีศึกษาเด็กในหมู่บ้านหยาโหล่เหอ

A Study of Acquisition of Yi and Mandarin by Bilingual
Preschoolers in Yunnan Province, China: A Case Study of Children
in a Yi Village¹

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บทคัดย่อ

จุดประสงค์ของการวิจัยนี้เพื่อศึกษาการเรียนรู้ภาษาหยาและภาษาจีนกลางแบบทวิภาษาของเด็กวัยก่อนเรียนในชุมชนที่มีชนชาติส่วนน้อยอาศัยอยู่อย่างหนาแน่นในจังหวัดยี่วี่ซี มณฑลยูนนาน โดยมุ่งศึกษาถึงอิทธิพลของสิ่งแวดล้อมภาษาโดยเฉพาะการสัมผัสภาษาและความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ทวิภาษาของเด็กชาติพันธุ์วัยก่อนเรียนการศึกษานี้ใช้วิธีวิจัยแบบชาติพันธุ์วรรณาโดยศึกษาวิจัยผู้เรียนรู้และการใช้ทวิภาษาในครอบครัวในโรงเรียนและในชุมชนหมู่บ้าน

ผลการวิจัยพบว่าสิ่งแวดล้อมทวิภาษาโดยเฉพาะการสัมผัสภาษาและปริมาณการบ่อนภาษาเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญในการส่งเสริมความสามารถการใช้ทวิภาษา นอกจากนี้เจตคติเกี่ยวกับทวิภาษาของผู้บ่อนภาษาก็เป็นปัจจัยสำคัญที่มีผลต่อการเรียนรู้แบบทวิภาษาของเด็ก ผลการวิจัยได้ข้อเสนอแนะสำหรับผู้ปกครองตั้งนี้ผู้ปกครองควรใช้กลยุทธ์หนึ่งคนหนึ่งภาษาและสร้างสภาพแวดล้อมทวิภาษาที่ดีสำหรับเด็กนอกจากนี้ พ่อแม่และครูควรให้ความสำคัญแก่การสัมผัสภาษาและคุณภาพการบ่อนภาษาไทย นอกจากนี้ ผู้กำหนดนโยบายภาษาสัมพันธควรกำหนดนโยบายภาษาที่ดีต่อภาษาชนกลุ่มน้อยและภาษาจีนกลางอีกทั้งยังต้องพิจารณาสถานภาพที่เท่าเทียมกันของทั้งสองภาษา

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คำสำคัญ : การเรียนรู้ ทวิภาษา ภาษาหยี่ และแมนดาริน

Abstract

This study investigated how ethnic preschoolers acquire bilingual competence in an ethnic minority concentrated community in Yunnan Province of China. It mainly examined the influence of bilingual environment, specifically, amount of language exposure and input on bilingual competence of ethnic preschoolers. Through using ethnographic methods in this study, the issue of how the informants simultaneously acquire bilingual competence at home, school and community was carefully observed.

The results of the study indicated that bilingual environment, especially, amount of exposure and input were significant predictors of bilingual competence. It was found that interlocutors' positive attitudes toward bilingual teaching could influence bilingual acquisition of the children. The results from this study suggested that parents should follow one person one language strategy and create favorable bilingual environment for the children. Also, both parents and teachers were advised to highlight the quality of language exposure and input. Furthermore, the language policy makers were suggested to stipulate relative language policies in favor of both the minority language and majority language and consider equal status of both languages.

Keywords : Bilingual Acquisition Yi and Mandarin Preschoolers

Introduction

Early childhood bilingualism is a widespread phenomenon and it is estimated that nearly half of the world's population is functionally bilingual and that most of these bilinguals are ethnic minority people (Edwards. 2004). So the study of bilingualism has become trend in linguistic circle and there have been an increasing number of studies on bilingual children.



Yuxi, a prefecture-level city in Yunnan Province of China, located in the central part of Yunnan, is characterized by diversified ethnic minorities who inhabit permanently in different parts of it. Correspondingly, many ethnic minorities are capable of speaking two languages. Especially, Yi³ nationality typifies all other ethnic minorities with bilingual widely conducted by many Yi people. According to a survey conducted by Yuxi Municipal Government in 2007, among 671,000 minority people in Yuxi, which covers 32.2% of the total population, Yi people covers 395,374, reaching a large proportion of 61.9% among the ethnic minorities (Yuxi Year Book. 2007: 89). Nevertheless, preschoolers of Yi nationality have caught some researchers' eyes as their parents and other caregivers are applying bilingual approach from birth in language teaching.

The research site was in Luohe Township, approximately 18 kilometers away from Yuxi City. It is a bilingual community of Mandarin⁴ and Yi. Almost all Yi people in Luohe are able to speak Yi and Mandarin except a small portion of senior citizens who are around 70 years simply speak Yi. Generally speaking, people interact with each other in Yi in the village, but for the purpose of teaching young children two languages, many people, mainly children's parents, address the children in Mandarin and turn to Yi when

³Yi language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman Language Group of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family, it is a language spoken by Yi ethnic minority who mainly live in China, Lao, and Vietnam. In China, they live in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou. There are six dialects spoken by the Yi people in China. Yi language in this study refers to one of six dialects spoken in Yunnan Province. It is Yi for short in this study.

⁴Mandarin is a category of related Chinese dialects spoken across most of northern and south-western China. Generally, Mandarin can refer to either of two distinct concepts: Standard Mandarin and all of the Mandarin dialects; the former is based on the particular Mandarin dialect spoken in Beijing and the latter is spoken in northern and southwestern China. In this study, Mandarin refers to one of the Mandarin dialects spoken in Yunnan Province.



Mandarin is evident in the media (TV stations, radio programs, newspapers, magazines), in the villages (in the form of signs and announcements), and on the street of the township (most store personnel in medium to large stores often provide service in Mandarin). Dawan Village in Luohe Township was selected to conduct the current study. It is about 10 kilometers away from the township. People in this village are all born with Yi origin and are capable of speaking Yi and Mandarin. It is a very interesting phenomenon as the interlocutors gave up addressing the children with their mother language and shift to the dominant language Mandarin, while it turned out to be the situation that children are able to speak two languages fluently.

How the children grow up to be bilingual in such an isolated village is worth exploring in perspective of linguistics. Hence, this paper pursued to study language acquisition of bilingual preschoolers through a case study of Yi bilingual preschoolers. In the process of conducting this research, qualitative analysis of data would be offered. Upon achieving the study, comments on ethnic bilingual preschoolers' language learning strategies would be recommended. The researcher expected, to some extent, further promotion of bilingual education, guiding and lightening up for parents and teachers to more clinical model to carry out bilingual education in minority ethnic regions was possible and favorable.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how bilingual ethnic preschoolers simultaneously acquire Yi and Mandarin by examining the influence of bilingual environment, amount of language exposure and input on bilingual competence.

Research Methodology

The methodology applied in the study is ethnographic research methods. Myers (1999: 5) stated simply that "ethnography refers to both a



way of seeing and observing life in particular social groups, and a way of recording, analyzing and representing this life. Ethnography is more than a set of field methods, data collection techniques, analysis procedures, or narrative description. Ethnographers immerse in the life of subjects they examine (Lewis. 1985) and seek to place the phenomenon studied in its social and cultural context. In the field of bilingual development, researchers have employed a variety of techniques, including ethnography, case studies and structured interviews (Cargo. 1992; Moore. 1990; Teale & Sulzby. 1986). Concerning about ethnographic approaches' application in bilingual acquisition, following Vygotsky's (1978: 113) view of learning as a social activity, ethnographers can closely observe how individuals interact with people and environment in activities in certain domains. To study in-depth and breadth how ethnic bilingual preschoolers acquire two languages, ethnographic methods are powerful tools. Therefore, utilizing ethnographic approach to language acquisition of ethnic bilingual preschoolers is undoubtedly favorable, as they coincide with special social group living in diversified linguistic community.

Population and Sample

The population in this study was 11 children from the kindergarten at Dawan Village, Luohe Township of Yuxi Municipality, Yunnan Province. The population ranged from 3 to 7. 3 years old and they were different in language ability. Three informants were selected from the population for the further case study. The informants were different in the bilingual proficiency of Mandarin and Yi. That is, the language ability of the informants was asymmetric, arranging from 'proficient', 'fair' and 'poor'⁵.

⁵ "proficient" presents a good master of speaking and listening to a language and being able to fluently communicate with it without any difficulties; "fair" presents being able to speak and listen to a language in daily communication with some difficulties; "poor" presents being unable to communicate with a language but can express some daily words and understand to some extent.



In selecting the informants, purposive sampling was applied. According to Lohr (1999), in the purposive sampling, the researcher can sample with a purpose in mind. Thus, it can be very useful for situations where the researcher need to reach a targeted sample and where sampling for proportionality is not the primary concern. With purposive sampling, the researcher might get the information of informants' language acquisition. Therefore, utilizing of purposive sampling in the current study would assist in sampling typical informants.

Research Tools

Applying ethnographic research methods, the data were collected through observation, interview and audio-recording. Approximately five weeks were lasted for data gathering. During the observation, observational field-notes of language use in various settings which were enacted by the bilingual children were sequentially kept. Mainly, the observations of the informants' repertoire in the kindergarten, activities with their playmates after school and home environments were emphasized. The interviews were carried out with the teacher, parents and village people in relation to bilingual raising and bilingual education. The recording processes were coincidentally carried out with observations and interviews.

Data collection

In the course of collecting related theoretical and field data, the systematic approach of ethnography was strictly followed with a planning phase and a discovery phase. In the planning phase, the research goal was clarified and related literature was reviewed. The discovery phase was the vital stage for the success of the study. It focused on data gathering in the following dimensions: describing linguistic community, clarify various language environments, taking field notes, reflecting and considering similarities and differences of the informants' language acquisition.



Data Analysis

Through applying ethnographic methods and some perspectives of language acquisition, the analytical process was divided into 3 phases. In the first phase, the data was classified, the description of the population's language backgrounds and language performance were provided. In the second phase, the informants' bilingual corpora were described in detail with highlighting their bilingual environments and bilingual competence. In the third phase, the informants' bilingual language acquisition in terms of amount of exposure and input in bilingual environments and competence were compared and contrasted. Also, the parents and the teacher's ratings of each language use and where, why, when, how to use a certain language were presented.

Conclusion

The result showed that the overall language use of the population was satisfied. That is, among the 11 children age from 3 to 7, all were capable of conducting two languages even though the majority of them held different levels of language proficiency. Based on the results of the population's language use, 3 children who were in different language levels and ages were sampled for further study concerning about language exposure and input in family settings, community, school, and outside the community.

The results indicated that the first informant's dual languages were well-developed during the recording period due to the balanced input with all interlocutors of her input speaking Yi and Mandarin. For the second informant's pattern of language development, Yi developed faster than Mandarin as he was dominant in Yi over Mandarin. This problem was quite transparent and was easily traced from the recording materials. This was the result of less than balanced input with parents other than other people spoke predominantly Yi. Therefore, he had a long journey to go in understanding Mandarin from both oral and listening. For the third informant,



his Mandarin developed faster than Yi. This feature was quite transparent and was easily traced from the recording materials. It was the result of less than balanced input with parents other than other people spoke predominantly Mandarin. Therefore, he had a long journey to go in having a good master of Yi, especially, oral ability, which is what should be possessed by a Yi native.

The results of comparison of 3 informants' bilingual environments and bilingual competence indicated that the first informant was most balanced in bilingual development with being excellent in two languages, and the other two informants were unbalanced in bilingual development with each being poor in one language respectively. The interview of attitudes of language teaching for children from parents, teachers and other interlocutors indicated that the parents and the only teacher were engaged in carrying out bilingual teaching to the younger generation in the village, and the village people also influenced children's bilingual acquisition. Obviously, their application of bilingual teaching to the preschoolers was motivated as them all held peculiar attitudes toward bilingual teaching.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to examine how ethnic bilingual preschoolers simultaneously acquire two languages in a special speech community. It was primarily observed from the study that 3 informants grew up with simultaneously acquiring bilinguals from birth and both Yi and Mandarin could involve the first language acquisition. Until the period of investigation, involving listening and speaking, the first informant was well-developed in two languages, the second informant was well-developed in Mandarin but poor in Yi, and the third informant was well-developed in Yi but poor in Mandarin. If followed Haugen's (1953: 7) definition of bilingual: an individual who can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language, and recent definition by Edwards's (2004: 7): an individual who is capable of mastering four basic skills: speaking, listening, reading, writing, whether



the informants grew up with real bilingual was questioned. In a sense, as they were weak in some dimensions of each language respectively, such as speaking. Thus, further requiring of writing and reading ability to be full bilinguals was even impossible for the preschoolers.

However, the researcher holds the opinion that the purpose of using language is for communication. As the informants were all almost good at listening in two languages, and at least capable of speaking a little in the other language, it apparently did not effect interaction among people in the speech community. So based on the investigation, the researcher defined bilinguals as individuals or groups of people who obtain communicative skills, with various degrees of proficiency and fluency, verbal and non-verbal communications, in order to interact with speakers of one or more languages in given social contexts.

Besides, the informants' parents mentioned that the children exposed some language mixing in their early ages. For instance, they initially produced mixed lexicon and utterances with one undifferentiated system. But until the period of investigation, 3 informants' ages had been around 6 to 7 years old, it was observed that they could separate and differentiate two languages from lexical systems and grammatical systems. This fitted into the evidence proved by Genesee et al (2004), in which they stated bilingual children own two separate lexical systems, and it reflects the child's capacity to differentiate between the two languages prior to speaking.

On the contrary, to some degree, the informants accidentally exposed some degree of confusion, mixing, borrowing in the process of language development. Especially, lexical level borrowing and mixing refer to nature were regularly occurred. For instance, in the first informant's case, when she described substances in Mandarin, she often borrowed the equivalent in Yi instead or mixed two languages in inter-sentence level. In contrast, the finding was not in favor of Owens's (2004) statement that the child learns one word from either language for each referent and differentiates



two languages in lexical level. Nevertheless, the informants had the problems of confusion, mixing and borrowing because of their special bilingual environment in which the interlocutors of language input addressed the informants in Mandarin, but Mandarin is not their native language. Sometimes, they were not capable of expressing meaning in various social contexts to their full. Moreover, it might occur that the input of such words was absent or interlocutors of input did not know its equivalent in Mandarin. In account of the special bilingual environment, it was reasonable to expose mixing and borrowing by the informants.

In addition, it was observed that the informants exposed heavy Yi accent and employed Yi grammar when speaking Mandarin. This was caused because of differences of Yi and Mandarin in phonology and grammar. Thus, the findings were consistent with Ma (1958: 46) and Chao (1968: 21)'s statements. As Ma (1958: 75) stated that Yi phonology is consonant-centered phonetic and some phonemes in Yi are not existed in Mandarin, while some phonemes in Mandarin are not existed in Yi. And Chao (1968: 36) contended that Yi follows the formula of subject - object - verb, while Mandarin follows the formula of subject - verb - object. Likewise, mixing of phonology and grammar between two languages was quite transparent in each informant. For example, when speaking Mandarin, in phonology, they often added unvoiced lateral /,/ when pronounced wo (me) and neglected back vowel /au/ when pronounced yao (want). And in grammar, Yi grammar was applied, for instance, ni na li qu (where are you going) is (s-o-v) structure, and its correct use in Mandarin should be ni qu na li, but this structure was often used by the informants. Therefore, it is normal even the informants exposed Yi accent and misused Yi grammar when conducting Mandarin as they were originally affected by Yi phonetics and grammar.

Moreover, based on the informants' language environments and their caregivers' ways of bilingual teaching, it was observed that the informants' primary social tool was language. In the process of acquiring two languages,



they were influenced and shaped by parents' and other caregivers' reinforcement, and the speech community, as the bilingual environment for them, played a significant role in nurturing their bilingual competence. The way of their bilingual development was insistent with behaviorists' views, such as Essa (1999) contended that language does not emerge automatically rather than triggered by exposure to verbal communication in the environment, and interactinists' views, such as Vygotsky (1978), considers that the young child's primary social tool is language. However, whether the informants were born with a linguistic structure was not traced in this study.

Furthermore, Code-switching was frequently occurred in the informants and their code-switching was mainly depending on the person being addressed, such as to family members, playmates, and other various people and depending on the location, such as at home, in kindergarten and in other settings. Especially, this phenomenon was quite apparent in the first informant's case as compared with other two informants, she is parallel in two languages. The frequent exhibition of code-switching by the informants was in favor of Crystal's (1987) interpretation that a speaker may not be able to express him/herself in one language so switches to the other to compensate for the deficiency and Holmes (1992)'s statement that code-switching may be used in order to build intimate interpersonal relationships among members of a bilingual community. However, code-switching owned more purposes for the informants in the current study, such as to create a special effect, to maintain linguistic solidarity and ethnic identity. And in some special circumstances and to some special people, they felt accustomed to conversing in a particular language. For a bilingual preschooler who is in a vital stage of acquiring two languages, apparently, code-switch is helpful tool for them. In addition, due to their different degree of proficiency in a certain language and the lack of input of equivalents in that language, their frequently borrowing between two languages by using



single words or entire phrases from that language was reasonable and applicable.

Apart from that, it was observed that, as a whole, minority language Yi was dominant over majority language Mandarin in the small speech community as it was widely conducted among the village people. On the contrary, although Mandarin is neither the dominant language of the community nor native language of the caregiver, to some degree, Mandarin is the dominant language of preschoolers. Therefore, they had greater exposure to Mandarin and used it to communicate with people in various environments. However, this finding did not fit into the range interpreted by Schlyter (1993). He suggested that the dominant language often represents the majority language, while the weaker language is usually the minority language. On the contrary, the dominant language in this community is minority language Yi instead of majority language Mandarin. Even though the informants were nurtured in such a bilingual environment, to some extent, they were capable of conducting both Yi and Mandarin.

In other words, this study illustrated that language dominance, in the sense of the amount of input the bilinguals obtain in each language, can actually affect bilingual competence and proficiency of the bilingual children. This is because the amount of input in the majority language increases as soon as the bilingual child were born, and from then on, the majority language is the language of instruction and the language used in most of the children's social interactions (Döpke, 1992) and the community language is also widely used by the group of people in the community. Otherwise, In contrast to De Houwer (1995)'s claim that both the type and the amount of input the bilinguals receive in each language are seen as being important in the developmental process, the informants in this study were raised in special environments in which the types and amounts of exposure and input for each informant were different as they grew up in different family



backgrounds. Therefore, it was of great importance for the parents and other interlocutors to establish a successful bilingual environment in order for the child to have a relative balanced exposure to both languages.

Additionally, it was not observed that language input of the interlocutors followed a strict one-parent one-language approach; apart from some parents mainly address the children in Mandarin or Yi. It was further observed that the informants' bilingual acquisition was not fully successful except that one informant was capable of conduct two languages fluently, but two informants still encountered much difficulty in understanding or speaking a certain language. The phenomenon of sole or main input of a certain language was fairly obvious in this speech community. Therefore, whether bilingual teaching to the preschoolers was successful in this community is still questioned. As Lanza (1997) reported that the amount of input in each language played a role in the process of bilingual acquisition. For the informants, it was far to reach balanced input in two languages due to their unbalanced exposure to two languages which were mainly manipulated by the interlocutors of input. While the key to development was to consistently use the two languages.

Beyond what mentioned, it was observed that each informant spent at least 2 to 3 hours a day watching TV, so Television is a possible source of language learning for the informants. According to Anderson et al (1986), Children about 5 to 6 years old spend 70% of TV time to look at the screen. In contrast, the investigation did not find how much percentage of TV time the informants spent to look at the screen. While it was guaranteed that the informants naturally acquired standard Mandarin from TV, and were shaped and influenced by various TV programs. Especially, this characteristic was quite apparent in one informant's case as he showed greater advantage in Mandarin and his amount of time being a couch potato almost reached 5 to 6 hours a day.



However, from interviews with the parents of informants, it was found that only two parents considered TV as language-teaching device for their children, and they watched TV with children just for enjoying the quality time with family, while other parents watched TV for killing time. This finding was quite different from finding of Anderson et al (1986) in which they stated that in home settings parents intuitively respond to television as a language-teaching device and that parents use the medium, particularly "Sesame Street," as a talking picture book for their children. On the contrary, even if some parents in this study considered TV played negative role in the informants' bilingual learning. In a sense, it could be a favorable tool for the informants' standard Mandarin acquisition.

Suggestion

Through conducting a study on bilingual acquisition of ethnic preschoolers, valuable findings were probed. Based on the findings, recommendations for parents and teachers, language policy makers, and further research were put forward.

Recommendation for parents and teachers

For the purpose of helping the ethnic children receiving more scientific and clinical methods of bilingual teaching, parents and teachers were recommended to improve in terms of creating a better bilingual environment from family setting to the whole speech community and focusing on strengthening quality of language input in the following dimensions:

(1) One person one language strategy is highly recommended for family members as it is common rule for nurturing a successful bilingual child.

(2) Both parents and teachers should create a favorable language environment for the children instead of simply using daily use utterances to address the children. For instance, regularly taking the children to large and versatile speech communities and having contact with people from different social classes.



(3) Parents and teachers are recommended to input a language in the condition of their excellent proficiency in that language.

(4) Parents and teachers are advised to emphasize the quality of language input. In a word, in the course of raising bilingual children, both parents and teachers are encouraged to do benefits to the children in various aspects.

(5) Both the minority language and majority language should be symmetrically encouraged in the process of teaching bilingual to the children for showing their ethnic identity, following the tradition of their ancestors, preserving and maintaining their language, and inducing the children to involve in public school education;

Recommendation for language policy makers

In this study, some problems existed in ethnic bilingual children were discovered. For decreasing or eliminating these problems and promoting the bilingual teaching in a wider range, the language policy makers in the ethnic concentrated regions are suggested to stipulate related language policies in favor of both the minority language and majority language and consider equal status of both languages. Thus, the favorable policies could enhance the status of the minority language and stabilize the status of the majority. Meanwhile, it might guide all interlocutors to treat two languages equally and enable the children to be parallel in both languages.

Recommendation for further research

The vast majority of previous studies in bilingual acquisition have addressed the issue of how the bilingual children acquire two languages in various social contexts. Involving this study, it only touched the significant roles that bilingual environment, amount of language exposure and input played in ethnic bilingual children. However, some common phenomena frequently occurring in bilingual children were referred, such as code-switching, borrowing, mixing and separation of two language systems. Therefore, studies of the influence of cross-linguistic borrowing and transfer on bilingual children were recommended in further research.



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