

Language learning in minority China: oral language

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Abstract

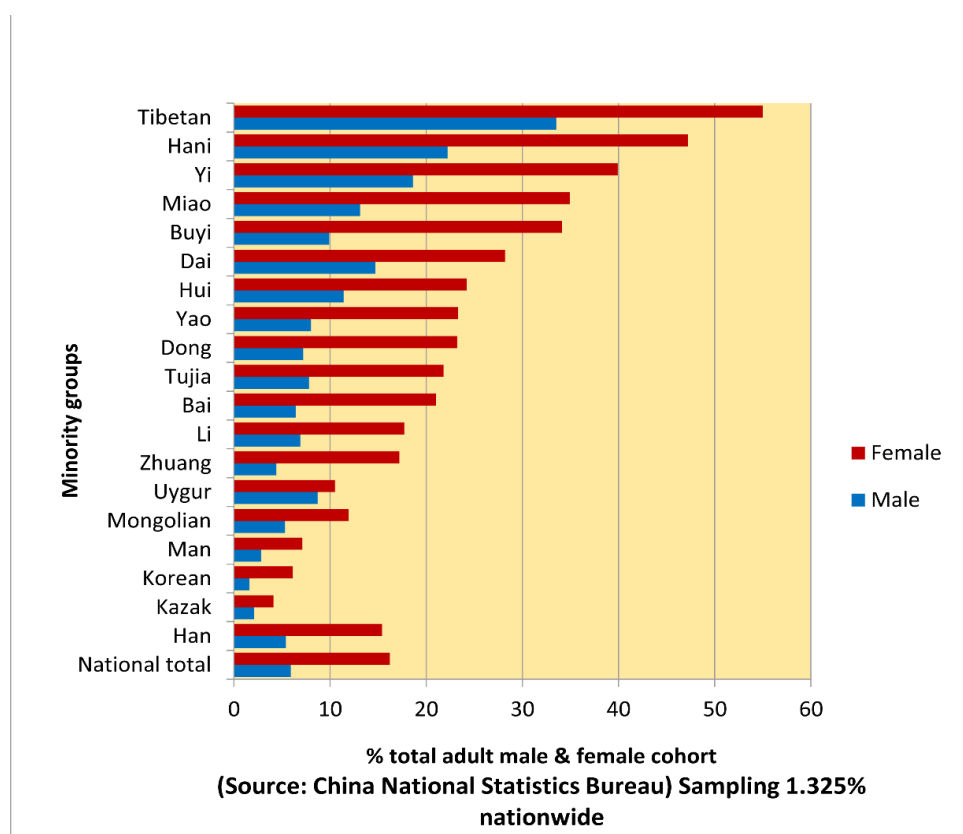
This paper concerns minority first languages in China and their potential role in the process of acquiring the national language (Mandarin). It is especially focused on the importance of oral language development in both languages, beginning with the minority language which is often the only language students know when they start school. The paper gives strong reasons for extending the student's ability to think and use their own language well, because these skills affect all future learning. Particularly important is establishing an oral foundation in the national language before learning to read and write that language. Even with only one year of oral language teaching in Chinese, students are more likely to have a better sense of the language's structure, its sound and rhythm while also acquiring some useful vocabulary.

Keywords: first language education; second language education; oral language development; language learning skills and strategies

Introduction

According to *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, China has around 300 living languages including Mandarin which is the national language. (Lewis et al, eds, 2013) Of these, some 90% of the minority population speak at least one of 15 languages – Zhuang, Uygur, Yi, Miao, Tibetan, Mongolian, Buyei, Korean, Dong, Hani, Bai, Kazak, Dai, Li and Yao – as their first language.¹ (Huang, 2003, 2) Bilingual education has been tried in some of these minority groups with some success but the pressure to learn the national language has very often meant these programs are restricted by the push to learn Chinese and do not continue beyond a limited period or spread across counties. The Korean minority group, however, has been most successful at promoting bilingual education in Korean and Chinese since 1952 and only during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was it restricted. (Shih, 2002, 175) Their literacy levels in Chinese as shown in 2005 survey data are amongst the highest in China. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1 - 2005 1% sample survey of illiteracy rates for males & females in 19 ethnic groups in China



Learning a second language

For those learning a foreign language in a school or university context, education in a first language is usually presumed and establishing that educational foundation is considered a priority during the first few years of schooling. Minority students learning a national language, however, very often do not have this advantage and rarely is the national language taught as a second language. Some foreign language students may have the opportunity to

¹ Some of these minority groups e.g. Yi, have several more language groupings within them and others e.g. Bai, have different dialects of the same language.

spend time in the target country and have the advantage of being immersed in their second language. Nevertheless, many foreign language students lack confidence in understanding and speaking their second language because they lack such a language environment and the main focus of lessons is usually on translation. In China, many minority students living in rural areas live in regions where the regional language is their own language or another minority language, with the national language not being spoken much in their villages and towns. In this respect, they are like most foreign language learners without opportunities to be immersed in their second language but unlike foreign language students, they have no educational foundation in their first language. As a result, they are *doubly disadvantaged* and their education in the national language is compromised and their academic performance usually suffers. This paper discusses:

1. the importance of first language education to the success of second language acquisition;
2. the advantages for students after having had at least one year of oral language learning in the target language before they start learning to read and write that language; and
3. the benefits of using an *active learning* teaching methodology promoting student participation and builds confidence in speaking and listening.

The importance of first language skills to learning a second language

For majority populations, education begins in a language they already know which is usually a national language. There are many minority students, however, who *must* learn a second language *to be able to receive their education*. Even so, second language teaching practices often differ markedly according to whether the new language is a foreign language or a national language. For example, foreign language teachers have access to special curriculum plans and teaching resources, student text books and lesson times dedicated to teaching a new language. Their students also have all the skills and knowledge they have acquired so far during their first language education which they can now apply to learning this new language. They do not need to learn *how* to read and write again and have developed a considerable vocabulary and understanding of associated concepts. Minority students, on the other hand, are often expected to learn a national language when they start school without access to special lessons or resources dedicated to learning it as a new language and are expected learn to read and write texts in a language they barely understand. When teachers are able to speak the local language, it is usually used to teach new concepts and explain texts written in the national language. According to a Chinese professor from Yunnan Minorities the University who was visiting a model bilingual preschool education project in south western China, there are around seventy million minority children living in remote areas of China in this kind of situation.²

Foundations for language learning

Children first learn language in the informal environment of the home when they learn to use their mother tongue. It is the first language they use to express themselves and communicate with others and the first language used for thinking about and understanding the world around them. Before formal education begins, children already understand that words have specific meanings and instinctively know that words are put together to make patterns which convey greater meaning, even though they have never been taught any grammar. Spoken language is

² Comment made to the project manager assisting with the establishment of a model Bai/ Chinese bilingual education preschool in Shilong Village, Jianchuan County, Bai Nationality Autonomous Region in Yunnan Province, Peoples' Republic of China (PRC).

their first experience of language and it will form the foundation of any future language education, whether it is first language education or second language learning. From an educational point of view, using what students already know about language to learn a new language is not just good educational practice, but it acknowledges that students can *only* use what they already know to make sense of new information. First language education begins with the language the students already know and develops basic skills and knowledge using that language so it can be used to learn a wide range of different kinds of knowledge including new languages. This has been recognized recently with a shift to using the mother tongue as a tool to help promote the learning of new languages more effectively in the classroom. (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009, 15; Forman, 2012, 239)

Reasons given for not providing first language education to minorities

There are several reasons why first language education is not generally provided for minority groups in many countries, including China. The first is that most parents want their children to begin their education in the national language as soon as possible. They feel any time invested in mother tongue education may compromise or delay their children's education in the national language. They fear their children may not do well enough in their studies to go on to higher education if they do not begin studying the national language immediately, or they will be unsuccessful when applying for the better jobs. (Porter, 1990, 8) Even so, research has already shown that students learn to read in their own language quickly and acquire skills and knowledge in that language which they can then apply to the learning of a second language. Rather than being a waste of time, they learn the second language much faster than the students who start their education in an unfamiliar language. (UNICEF, 1999, 41, 45) Furthermore, they are able to use the linguistic and cognitive skills acquired while learning to read their own language to help them read a second language *if* they also have sufficient oral skills in that language when they start. (Cummins, 1991, 70-89)

Another reason sometimes given is that learning to read and write a language which has a different kind of script to the national language will not help children learn the national language. Nevertheless, there are studies which show that many of the same basic skills and reading strategies already learned in Japanese, Vietnamese or Chinese are also used when learning to read English. (Cummins, et.al. 1984, 60-81; Hoover, 1983, as quoted in Krashen, S. 1996, 27) These skills may include: (1) visual strategies, (2) putting sounds to symbols, and (3) making meaning from strings of 'code'. For example, some visual skills include: recognising the shapes of individual characters³, becoming familiar with the components of characters and the different combinations of characters, awareness of the position of words in sentences, as well as recognising common word and sentence patterns. In other words, new readers learn to look for regular patterns occurring within characters, words and sentences. Linking symbols (characters and combinations of characters) to sounds while reading, however, *should be primarily about linking them to the spoken language the student already knows* and thus, the ability to understand the content. These two skills, together with increasing familiarity with strings of code (words, phrases and commonly used sentence patterns), are regularly used by readers of all writing systems providing students are not limited by a lack of first language reading materials and have sufficient reading experience in that language. (Cummins, et al, 1984; Krashen, 1996, 27)

Then there are some people from minority groups who have been successful without mother tongue/national language bilingual education who claim that it is not needed because they did not need it. Further investigation often shows, however, that these people had

³ Characters in this paragraph refers to any written symbol including letters of the alphabet.

advantages that rural villagers do not have. They include: living in a town or city where the national language is used on a daily basis; having access to children's books from an early age in a language they already understand; being able to start their early education in a language they already know; as well as having access to better schools and teachers.⁴ On the other hand, there are many minority children living in rural villages, who are not immersed in a national language environment and find themselves beginning their education in a totally unfamiliar language. Rarely do they have access to books in a language they understand, nor are they familiar with handling books and using pencils or crayons before they start school.

Finally, there is concern about the lack of teachers who are proficient enough in the two languages needed for bilingual education in minority areas and the fear that teachers may be forced to learn a minority language. (Krashen, 1996, 48) The simplest way to ensure there are teachers who are bilingual and literate in both Chinese and a minority language, for example, is to train the best high school graduates from these minority areas to teach in those areas. Teacher training would need to include the development of literacy skills in that minority language as part of their initial teacher education as well as providing opportunities for further training and regular use of this literacy outside the classroom. This problem would eventually be solved once there are enough teacher graduates who became literate in their own minority language from the time they entered school.

Use and transferral of first language skills

Some of the ways the skills and knowledge learned during first language learning transfer to second language learning have already been discussed above in relation to different types of written scripts. Experienced readers will continue to look for regular patterns in the various structures of the new language *if* encouraged to do so. A minority student who has not yet learned to read or write a first language will not have any such skills and must go through the difficult task of trying to acquire them for the first time in an unfamiliar language.

Reading skills. Early experience with language has taught students that language is made up of sequences of sounds which imply meaning and how to produce these sounds or combinations of sounds. They also understand that these sounds represent something and are not the actual thing itself. The ability of spoken words to evoke images in the mind is an important skill which is taken a step further when learning to read. Students who have learned to read in their first language already understand what reading is and know that reading is much more than the mechanics of matching sounds to symbols on a page. One is truly reading when the words on the page evoke the appropriate images and ideas in the reader's mind as they read. This phenomenon occurs most easily if students are reading their own language and with great difficulty or not at all if the language being 'read' is unfamiliar. Confusing this issue are students who are often able to put the correct sounds to the words they are 'reading' without understanding the meaning of the text.⁵ To cope, they often memorise large slabs of text because they are 'read' through several times during choral reading sessions. They do not learn to use commonly used reading strategies that are easily

⁴ Some of these people are now in jobs where they have discouraged the introduction of mother tongue/Chinese bilingual education for village children in rural areas, seeing it as a backward step. (Personal communication)

⁵ This phenomenon was observed in a rural village Chinese preschool in South West China. The students were quite adept at producing the correct sounds but, according to the teacher, they actually did not understand any Chinese. They only knew what the content of the text was because she had already explained it to them in the Bai language, their mother tongue. (Teacher, personal communication, 2003.)

learned when learning to read a familiar language. Most of these problems will disappear if an oral language foundation is established in the second language *before* they begin learning to read and write that language.

Penmanship. Most students have already acquired the fine motor skills needed for good penmanship while learning to write their first language. They do not need to learn to hold a pen again and through experience, are comfortable when writing a variety of strokes. From their first language education, students also understand the orderliness required to form letters or characters correctly when writing. They will expect to see order in the formation of letters or characters of their new language regardless of its form. Students who do not receive any education in their first language have none of these skills to apply to learning their second language.

Cognitive growth. Continuing first language education also ensures that students' cognitive growth is not stalled while they focus on learning a second language and makes sure cognitive development continues at the same rate as students for whom the national language is already their first language. Minority students will also do better scholastically in the second language because their knowledge and ability to think continues to grow without interruption in their first language. The intellectual development that occurs should automatically transfer to the second language as their facility in the second language grows. Starting minority language students' education in their first language and teaching the national language as a second language with dedicated lesson times, appropriate text books and teaching resources would go a long way to overcoming many of the problems these students face in their primary school education.

Linguistic development. Oral language lessons in the first language are also beneficial as it enables students to go on developing skill in that language and become confident communicators. Given opportunities to express their own thoughts, relate events, retell stories, act out role plays, as well as answer questions in their first language, should foster the expectation in students that they can learn the same kinds of skills in their second language. A growing vocabulary in a first language along with opportunities to express ideas orally will also bring with it increasing skills in both oral and written expression. In other words, there will be considerable linguistic growth. According to Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009, 13), the learners' native language is "the greatest pedagogical resource" that they bring to foreign [second] language learning, as it "lays the foundations for all other languages we might want to learn."

Teaching oral language first in second language education

Whether or not minority students are given a few years of education in their own language, when they enter school their greatest language competence is oral. The language young children use is straight forward and practical and most of their oral language facility in their first language has been achieved through listening, doing and speaking. Therefore, dedicated oral language lessons during their first few years of language learning would suit young children learning to speak the national language. These lessons should use appropriately

sequenced segments which give opportunities for listening, speaking and doing.⁶ Segments in these lessons should also provide opportunities for practising what they have already learned in earlier lessons and introduce new language in small doses which can be practised in a variety of contexts (e.g. games, songs and other activities).

Older students learning a foreign language use more complex language, are more cognitively developed and have more advanced reading and writing skills. They are also expected to learn more of a new language in a shorter space of time. Nevertheless, a greater emphasis on developing oral proficiency during the first year of language study is important. Success in this area would keep student interest levels high, promote fluency in speaking and better listening skills as well as giving them a basic framework for understanding what they read. In the first year of language learning vocabulary and grammar is usually straight forward and practical making it very suitable for oral language learning. (Knop, 1980, 3) Including other opportunities for developing language interactions involving classroom routines and games will expand their language learning beyond text book suggestions and further increase oral proficiency.

Motivation for learning a new language

The strongest motivation for students who choose to learn a new language is to be able to speak and communicate in that language. Therefore early success in this area will be a great motivator during language learning lessons. It is also important to begin to develop oral proficiency early while the course content is still simple enough to encourage student participation and promote confidence. Undue emphasis on 'getting through text-book material' and concentrating on grammar and vocabulary with minimal oral practice promotes the belief amongst students that learning a new language is difficult and undermines their confidence. Thus, providing plenty of oral activities early is more likely to keep students interested and motivated. It is also more likely to help stave off the problem of resistance to speaking the language in later years and give a frame of reference for all facets of written work as well as reading. (Knop, 1980, 3) As a result, the language they learn will feel more like a living language than an academic exercise.

If placing a greater emphasis on developing oral proficiency is important for students learning a foreign language, it is even more so for minority children learning a national language. They need to be able to understand and speak the national language to be able to gain the same advantages that native speakers of that language already have including a good education. Furthermore, without a strong introduction to the oral form of the language they have no basic framework with which to make sense of the language in its other forms. Reading becomes a difficult code-breaking exercise instead of the usual evoking of images in the imagination that comes so naturally to native speakers. Writing is a mechanical exercise of penmanship, and expressing one's ideas in writing is often limited by the lack of vocabulary and unfamiliarity with the language. These limitations increase the likelihood of language learning becoming a chore. If time was given to teaching these students in lessons purposely set aside for learning the national language with plenty of participatory activities to stimulate listening, doing and/or speaking, motivation levels would surely rise and student confidence increase.

The kind of oral activities language teachers choose to use also plays an important role in motivating student interest and participation levels. Games can provide many

⁶ In China, minority students starting their education are currently required to use text books used by native Chinese speakers and designed for other purposes such as reading and mathematics. In most cases, they usually do not have specially dedicated lessons for learning the national language as a second language.

opportunities for repetition and practice. They also promote maximum participation in non-threatening situations enabling students to practise listening and responding non-verbally *and* verbally. In the context of a game they are able to correct any mistakes when the same verbal cues come around again because of the repetitive nature of the activity. Games are especially useful for very young students learning a national language and help to keep their motivation very high.

Increasing the use of the target language

Developing oral proficiency in a new language can also be achieved by gradually including more language associated with classroom routines and other subject areas. The latter is most easily achieved in preschool⁷ and primary school where the same teacher teaches all or most of the lessons across the curriculum and where the teachers are bilingual. Many classroom routines use language that can easily be substituted in well-known children's songs, used in games, practised in other lessons and incorporated into daily use in the classroom as a matter of routine. Language learning becomes a purposeful and useful subject area which has relevance in all other subject areas. This is especially important for helping minority students to transition more quickly towards using the national language in all subjects during primary school.

Active learning in oral language learning

Active learning is used in this paper to describe the kind of educational activities specifically designed to help students learn or practise new knowledge, in this case, a new language. Such an activity aims to have *all* students physically, mentally and emotionally involved in responding to language or using language so they use their bodies and all their senses. Students work in a variety of settings including going outside the classroom if more open space is needed, or pushing furniture back in the classroom to make more space. They may also sit in different kinds of seating arrangements to make pairs or other small groups. They will move about in the classroom, use different kinds of pre-prepared learning aids, use things made in other lessons, or follow instructions in the second language to make something. The aim of these activities is to encourage quick, automatic responses to instructions and questions. Many activities have multiple levels of participation from listening and doing something, to listening and answering a question, or asking a question and listening to the answer, while some activities can also offer opportunities for students to run the activity themselves.

The task of the classroom teacher then is to create situations in which their students are eager to participate orally and need to know key words, phrases or sentences to do so. Educational activities can begin simply and gradually become more complex as students acquire skills in the language and are capable of playing a greater role in activities. Most useful are activities which allow students to take on roles at various levels according to their confidence and differing rates of progress. Younger students are highly motivated to participate when activities involve movement. Older students also enjoy games designed to assist oral language development and there are other interesting activities that can be designed and used to encourage development in reading and writing. There are several ways in which children can be involved in activities, the most obvious category being task based

⁷ Entry to grade one primary school is generally restricted by age in rural China and a child must already be seven years old to qualify. Thus preschool includes five and six year old children.

activities where language is learned and/or practised during an activity in order to participate in the activity more fully.

Task-based oral interactions

The best task-based learning in oral language lessons gives all the students the chance to participate at the same time. Such activities can be adapted according to the age and language experience of the class. For example,

- (1) Action songs and rhymes can be used to introduce vocabulary, to practise old vocabulary, or for playing a game.
- (2) Traditional games can be adapted or new games created for people of all ages to help them meaningfully practise different sets of vocabulary. (There are many on-line resources.)
- (3) Language for class routines, including subject specific routines, can first be learned and practised in a game or a song before becoming routine in those lessons.
- (4) Subject lesson content using the target language can also be learned in non-language lessons. For example, young children may learn the target language during manipulative activities like counting or comparing tall/short etc. in maths. The new language learned in maths can be reinforced in physical education when forming teams by practising counting or comparing numbers of students in teams.
- (5) Conversations between simple puppets made by students (or purchased cheaply) can be conducted by adding new language to already familiar language. Students may also do simple role plays making up their own conversation as they go along, or by preparing dialogues for practising, memorising and performing.
- (6) Other useful activities may include drawing or colouring a picture while the teacher describes a picture the students cannot see. Students can also follow simple directions to make a craft item.

Activities should be purposeful and should not become entertainment without any specific educational value. The use of several different kinds of activities during a lesson with young children is particularly important because their attention span is short.

Learning chunks of language

Active learning is especially suited to young children learning a national language. Redesigned or adapted for older students, they can also be used in foreign language classes to complement other more formal learning methods. One advantage of these sorts of activities is they provide students with interesting ways of learning language in *chunks*. Sometimes referred to as 'lexical chunks' these chunks may include common expressions, special word groupings, parts of sentences and short sentences. (Duan, 2008, 63-67) Conversation is made up of chunks of language which may or may not be grammatically complete. Thus, learning to recognise and use these chunks is particularly relevant in oral language teaching and can be easily incorporated into oral language learning activities. The activities then give students multiple opportunities to hear them and practise using them in a variety of contexts. The underlying reason for using 'chunks' is to help students develop ... "the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalysed wholes, or 'chunks', and that these chunks become the raw data by which learners perceive patterns of language traditionally thought of as grammar." (Lewis, 1997; Chu & Wang, 2011, 223-226) Thus, using chunks of language with young children learning a national language enables them to learn language patterns without

the need to teach formal grammar and leaves analysis to a later stage when learning grammar is more likely to be understood. Idioms, metaphors and similes are best learned as chunks of language. Not surprisingly, the mental processing of chunks of language is much faster than processing conversation using translation and has been found to improve expressive accuracy in speaking and writing. (Jiang, 2007, 84-89) However, these chunks must be practised in a variety of contexts so students can learn how to use them appropriately.

Increasing exposure to language

Some research shows that foreign language programs only have impact if the language is actually *used* for at least 25% of a lesson or if it is used in one or more subjects.⁸ (Lange, 2001, 93) Opportunities for responding to or using language can increase to above 70% of lesson time when educational activities are used in oral language lessons. They provide a mechanism which maximizes student participation and practice which is more likely to result in a higher level of competence than formal instruction. Activities for young children can follow the same progression they experienced when learning their mother tongue. Just as they spent some time listening and responding to speech as infants, these children need opportunities for listening and responding to speech in the second language. According to Lange (95), speaking should not be overemphasized in the early stages.

Listening, responding and speaking

The natural progression for children learning their mother tongue includes a long period of listening during which children begin responding physically before speaking. Nevertheless, most students want to learn to say something in the new language in the first lesson so it is important to give them something to say. Young children, even pre-schoolers can learn to respond to the teacher with a one word answer on day one of their language learning. In this way, the desire to say something in the first lesson is satisfied and any resistance or barrier to speaking is already being broken down. The sound of the language is no longer so strange because they have already learned how to say something and know what it means. However, much more can be achieved if other activities are designed to encourage students to listen and respond non-verbally in the earliest stages of language learning.

All sorts of games can be adapted to help students recognise new words, phrases and even whole sentences and show that they understand by responding. Such activities can be repeated many times using a limited vocabulary and later, reused with different sets of vocabulary. For example, the traditional game, *Simon says*, can be adapted to *Teacher says*. If the teacher does not use the words *Teacher says* when telling the students to do an action, those who do it are eliminated. Even while being side-lined these students will still listen to the teacher as the game progresses to see who amongst those still participating should be eliminated. Later, teachers just *tell* the game participants what to do without doing any actions themselves to see how well their students understand. The children do not have to say anything to play this game. When they are ready, however, students can take over leading this activity which naturally gives them a reason for speaking. It is best to offer this opportunity when the content is still simple.

⁸ See <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/content-language-integrated-learning> for more information on this European Union wide language program.

Summary and outcomes

This paper has focused on how to make learning an unfamiliar language in a classroom setting more successful and how first language education provides a strong foundation for all future language learning. The benefits of beginning with oral language have been discussed, especially the benefits for young children who are still within the ‘language sensitive’ period of their development and thus, very open and used to oral language learning. Harnessing this natural developmental phase for learning a new language while still extending the children’s first language abilities will produce many benefits. Students will be much more likely to acquire confidence in these areas quickly by participating in a range of activities which promote ‘natural’⁹ opportunities for listening and speaking. Such activities also facilitate considerable repetition of words, phrases and sentences without this repetition becoming tedious.

The paper has also shown why a strong oral language foundation in a new language should be established first so that students are able to recognise and respond to phrases and sentences quickly without having to translate. Such an oral language foundation will also provide an important reference for students of all ages to relate what they already know orally to what they are learning to read without always resorting to translation. A good oral language foundation can also speed up student progress in reading and help them express their ideas in writing more appropriately. The above approach to language learning would especially benefit minority children who must learn Chinese so as to avail themselves of all the opportunities available to people with a good education in China.

The Bai/Chinese bilingual education preschool project

The model Bai/ Chinese bilingual education preschool in Shilong Village, Jianchuan County has used the oral language approach outlined in this paper since the preschool opened in 2006. The first year of preschool for children aged five years has ten Bai (mother tongue) oral language lessons each week. When oral Chinese is introduced at the start of the following year, five of the previous ten lessons are given to oral Chinese while the remaining five lessons continue to develop the children’s oral skills in their first language. The Bai oral language lessons include a variety of activities that encourage participation and cover a wide range of subject matter. The oral Chinese lessons use similar activities which give many different kinds of practical opportunities for using Chinese naturally. This attention to oral language development has borne much fruit.

First, this preschool has produced oral language development in the children’s Bai language. According to one village leader, the Bai language previously learned at home was poor quality, but according to him, the children now know how to ask questions well and to be respectful. (Notes from interview, June 22, 2003)¹⁰ The grade one teacher commenting on his current class said that this class was much livelier, having more initiative and wider interests. They are not afraid of him and enjoy talking with him which is very different from before when students were really afraid of the teacher. The primary school principal said the Bai language is frequently used in grades one to three to explain the meaning of Chinese. (Notes from interviews, June 26, 2009) The need for Bai explanations during the first few years of primary school means that oral development in this language during preschool will enhance their Chinese language learning during their early primary years. Otherwise, students

⁹ That is, the activities invite participation by their very nature e.g. a game, to participate the student needs to listen and do something, or listen and answer with the appropriate answer(s).

¹⁰ This interview was part of a nine day formal review of the preschool program and its outcomes conducted by Glenys Waters. SILA, 70 Graham Road, Kangaroo Ground, Victoria 3097, Australia.

trying to grapple with concepts without having first learned the appropriate Bai language would find their understanding of the Chinese similarly limited. Most of the grade one maths concepts have already been learned in the preschool so the main focus in grade one maths can now be on learning the appropriate Chinese. A further bonus is that many of the practical activities used in the preschool program could be reused in grade one to learn the necessary Chinese and thus, connect it to the concepts already understood.

Second, according to the village mayor, the children who have been through this preschool program now have a good foundation in oral Chinese when they move into the first year of primary school. He said, before this, the students entering first grade had no understanding of Chinese at all. (Notes from interviews, Jun 19, 2009) The primary school principal said that this preschool program was very different from normal village programs because it doesn't just teach them how to learn Chinese, it also teaches them how to think. While they may not do as well in [written] language for now [in grade one], they will very likely catch up to the children who went to Chinese preschool. (Notes from interviews, June 26, 2009)

In May 2011 a media team from the Chinese national education department in Beijing visited the Shilong preschool to video classes in progress. During the filming one of the media team took the opportunity to go to the primary school and talk to some students in grades one to three who were all graduates of the preschool. Afterwards, she told the project manager¹¹ she was very impressed with the students she spoke with and their ability to answer her questions and express themselves so confidently in Chinese. This is a very different response to an earlier time in 2003 before the bilingual education preschool started, when primary students in grades two and four in the same school did not want to speak Chinese at all. They refused to answer any questions in Chinese about the Bai songs they were singing and would only answer using the Bai language, and only if the questions were first asked in Bai. (Author observation, April 23, 2003)

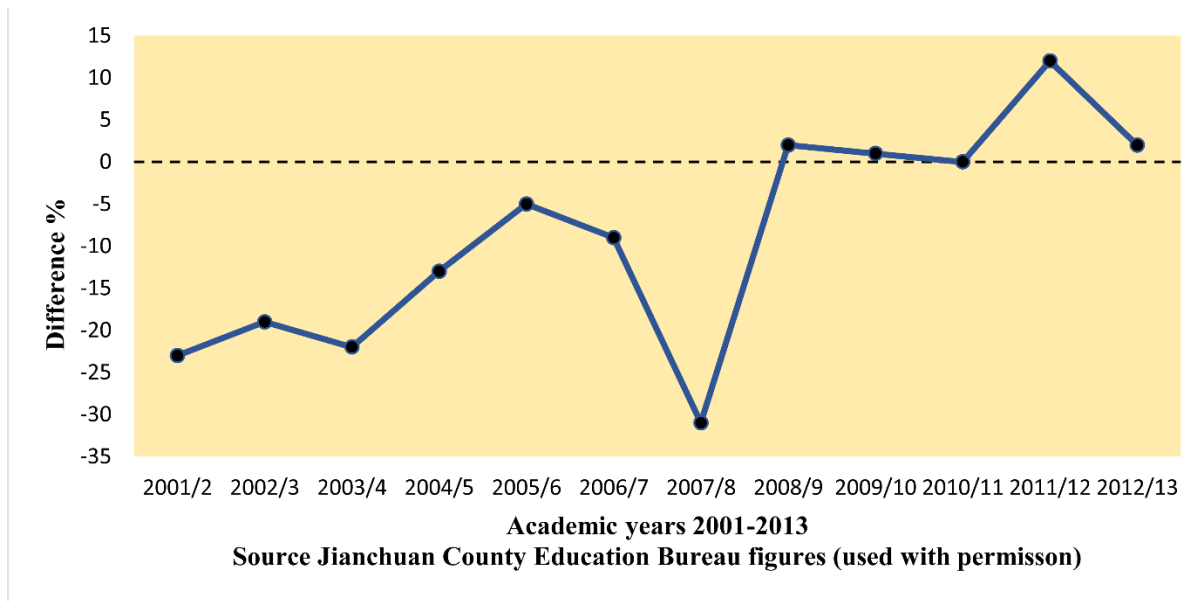
Conclusion

Therefore, time spent expanding oral language capacity in a first language is not wasted time as it impacts all aspects of language education in the future including learning to read, write and express one's thoughts in writing. The students going through the Shilong Village model Bai/Chinese bilingual preschool are confident, articulate and eager to engage in conversation in their own Bai language. Their ability to read and write and express their ideas in their own language began much earlier than it would have if they had to wait until they were able write enough Chinese characters.

Furthermore, beginning and extending their oral language development in Chinese before focusing on reading and writing Chinese has also resulted in students entering the first grade of primary school being confident speakers of Chinese. And, as their vocabulary has expanded, so has their ability to apply all the language skills already gained orally, to learning to read and write Chinese. Since the graduates of the preschool have entered grade one, the grade one written Chinese examination results for Shilong have consistently been above the district average instead of always being below it. (See Figure 2 below.)

¹¹ The project manager at that time was Dr Liz Lee.

Figure 2 – Shilong Village preschool graduates' grade one Chinese results relative to Shaxi district (TIFF)



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