

The educational foundations of the Bai preschool program

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Abstract

Not many experimental bilingual education (BE) projects in China begin by teaching minority students to become literate in their own language before beginning their Chinese education. This paper, "The educational foundations of the Bai preschool program" (author: Dr Liz Billard PhD), is primarily concerned with the educational approach used in such a program for pre-schoolers in a remote mountain village in southwest China. The curriculum is designed to teach Bai children aged five and six years to read and write in their own language before beginning to learn oral Chinese in the second year. What is different about this preschool program from others in the region is the use of mother tongue literacy and active learning methods across all subjects. The results of a survey of villagers' attitudes, educational experiences and economic circumstances informed the decision about the educational approach to be used and the support needed to enable village children to participate. The project aims to provide evidence that this type of BE will benefit minority children in rural villages across China who do not do well at school. This project is in its seventh year of operation and is already attracting wide interest from government officials and academics. Results so far are also very encouraging.

KEY WORDS: mother-tongue education, Chinese as a second language, active learning, concrete to concept, integrated learning, educational levels.

Introduction

This paper introduces a bilingual project devised for Bai minority preschoolers presently being carried out in a mountain village in Jianchuan County. In this village, children have had a long record of poor educational achievement and minimal progress beyond compulsory education requirements.¹ Many of the villagers interviewed during a household survey carried out in 2002/3 before work started on the preschool program said they felt unengaged by the whole educational process. Several said that working in the fields with their parents was more interesting and more fruitful than going to school. They also hated being cooped up in the classroom all day. My own classroom observations at that time revealed several reasons why students in rural preschools and primary schools are generally not very motivated about school.

Teaching methodology: The traditional teaching style where the teacher always talks and the students are expected to listen contributes to student boredom and lack of achievement. It presumes that listening to the teacher is the only suitable way to learn. Rote learning which involves the students reciting what the teacher says or reads from the textbook has also been the main method for learning Chinese and acquiring knowledge in these village schools.

Language difficulties: Village children enter the first year of their education not knowing any Chinese and hence encounter difficulties because the textbooks are in

¹ Some children have been close to or already aged 15 years (the upper limit for compulsory education) when they graduate from primary school.

Chinese. The teacher has no choice but to use Bai as the language of instruction if there is to be adequate communication between the teacher and students. There is no time set aside for learning oral Chinese in a structured way and the students are expected to pick it up through rote learning and using the text books.

Reading methodology: Instead of reading for understanding right from the beginning, students are taught to associate sounds with characters and can become quite adept at decoding the sounds of words in a sentence without understanding its meaning. Choral reading also causes students who ‘read’ slowly or poorly to give up or say the words as soon as they hear other students speak. The students with the greatest confidence or the loudest voices usually give the lead. It also gives the teacher the impression that all the students are able to ‘read’ whether they can or not. Because the children are not able to understand the text, they are unable to use the normal reading strategies that help readers make meaning from texts and bring them to life. This kind of ‘reading’ becomes a difficult chore with little reward for effort.

Student activity: Except for physical education or compulsory exercise times outside, the students spent all their time in the classroom sitting at their desks. There were no structured learning activities which would help students grasp concepts for themselves. There were sixty-five students sitting three to a desk in one preschool class observed in 2003 which would have made it difficult to supervise a more practical approach to learning even if the teacher was inclined to do so.

Solving the problem

Since the official age for entry to grade one is seven years in rural areas, it is possible to fit in a two-year program of mother tongue education with the introduction of oral Chinese in the second year before entering grade one. Such a program could give education authorities, teachers and parents the opportunity to see first-hand how well this kind of program would prepare children for entry into primary school. It would also be an opportunity to demonstrate a different style of teaching which would enable students to be much more actively involved in the learning process. In this paper this teaching style is referred to as “active learning”. Its main characteristic is that students are actively engaged in the learning process, physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. The combination of this teaching style with mother tongue education and introducing oral Chinese in the second year should address many of the issues that became apparent during the period of preliminary research in 2002/3.

This approach would:

- (1) start the students’ education in the language they already know before transitioning to the national language;
- (2) encourage student participation in activities which are designed to be more experiential, thus promoting greater understanding, facilitating interaction, aiding memory and raising interest levels;
- (3) change the role of the teacher to one of facilitating in the learning process by supporting and encouraging students to participate more in lessons in a *variety* of ways;
- (4) use the natural tendencies of children such as curiosity, playing, experimenting, exploring and so on as learning strategies; and
- (5) give students plenty of opportunities for applying what they learn in situations relevant to their village life.

Educational foundations established in the Bai program

Mother tongue² education first

Research shows that students learn to read in their own language more quickly and acquire skills and knowledge in that language that can be applied to the learning of a second language. This means that they learn the second language much faster than students who start their education in an unfamiliar language. (UNICEF 1999 41, 45) Furthermore, the linguistic and cognitive skills learned while learning to read their own language transfer across to the second language once they have sufficient oral skills in that language. (Cummins 1991) The Bai program gives students an exclusive mother tongue only education during their first year of preschool to establish the basic foundations for building the rest of their education. These include learning appropriate strategies that will help them learn to read their own language as well as develop suitable vocabulary to express their thoughts confidently when speaking and writing. Both these skills will have benefits when learning Chinese.

Principles for teaching reading and writing

The students learn to read text in their own language and understand its meaning as soon as they start learning to read. The reading methodology used is based on the premise that words, phrases and sentences form units of meaning in a text and that reducing reading to only sounding out letters limits the students ability to understand the text easily and quickly. Students learn to recognize words quickly by noticing the length of words, their shapes, different letter patterns and the beginning and ending letters. They are also able to use other ‘cues’ such as pictures, context of words and their position in a sentence as a basis for predicting or strategically guessing an unfamiliar word in a new text. In the same way they are able to make meaning from groups of words very quickly. This approach is supported by Gestalt psychology³ which follows the principle that the whole (e.g. combinations letters and words in texts) is greater than the sum of its parts and carries a greater meaning than the individual parts (e.g. single letters and words). The mind makes a cognitive leap from the parts to comprehending the whole very quickly.⁴ In the Bai project phonics⁵ is the focus of writing lessons rather than being used as a method for sounding out words in order to read. Using phonics then becomes a useful strategy for learning to spell words according to a standardized spelling. Because pronunciation varies from village to village in Jianchuan County, using these strategies and encouraging readers to be

² **Mother tongue instruction** generally refers to the use of the learners’ mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Additionally, it can refer to the mother tongue as a subject of instruction. It is considered to be an important component of quality education, particularly in the early years. The expert view is that mother tongue instruction should cover both the teaching *of* and the teaching *through* this language. UNESCO Position Paper October 2002 “Education in A Multilingual World”

³ <http://desktoppub.about.com/od/gestalt/Gestalt.htm> (Referenced: March 10, 2011; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gestalt_psychology (Referenced: May 12, 20011). The most relevant parts refer to perceptions of shapes in art. This principle can also apply to reading using visual cues to decode texts.

⁴ Introducing reading strategies which focus on units of meaning (words, phrases and sentences) and context should transfer across to reading Chinese which requires this approach to understanding text.

⁵ The phonics is based on the pronunciation of Bai spoken in Jinhua Zhen (County Seat) being used as the standard. The children recognize words according to this spelling when reading. This is the usual practice in other countries where English is spoken differently but there is only one standard for spelling.

more concerned with the meaning of the text enables them to use their own local pronunciation when reading aloud and avoids confusion when the spelling of words does not reflect local pronunciation. As a result, the same text books can be used anywhere within this dialect region without needing adjustment.⁶ However, phonics is still helpful as an extra resource when reading if needed, but it is rarely the first strategy readers use and they seldom use it to decode the whole word (Adams, Clay). Apart from the strategies related to a Romanized script, the above reading cues will transfer across to reading Chinese. Making meaning from groups of characters, context of words and phrases, the position of words in sentences, learning to strategically guess unfamiliar characters from the meaning understood so far is generally required when reading Chinese.

Teaching Chinese as a second language

Because learning to read and learning a second language require different strategies to gain maximum benefit, teaching Chinese separately as a second language subject has many advantages. Students are not faced with learning two tasks (i.e. learning the Chinese language, its meanings and its grammar patterns, and learning to read or decipher a written code) as if they were only one process. Importantly, starting by learning oral Chinese, the students quickly gain confidence in their ability to listen and speak Chinese. The Bai program uses ideas developed by James J Asher (1969, 3-17) in his “Total Physical Response” (TPR) approach which acknowledges that children learn language by listening for some time while developing comprehension before they begin responding. They usually respond physically before responding verbally. The teaching approach is designed to encourage children to learn oral Chinese (words, phrases and whole sentences) through playing games, singing songs, learning rhymes, looking at pictures, making up new phrases and sentences from what they know, answering questions asked in Chinese and so on. What they learn fits in with the theme for the week so their Chinese classes are given context that is relevant to their other learning. The emphasis in these lessons is on learning the meaning of the Chinese while being encouraged to use it. Activities are specially designed to give them many opportunities to try out their Chinese and practise what they already know. This teaching approach makes the repetition of words, phrases and whole sentences much more enjoyable. A limited number of Chinese characters are introduced later to help students understand the concept of characters and learn some less conventional ways of memorizing them. These may include responding physically to a character or applying what they have already learned in mathematics about shapes and patterns. A deliberate decision against including character writing was made to enable students to enter grade one with a good oral basis for learning written Chinese.

Active learning

The term “active learning” refers to the variety of learning approaches used in the Bai program. Well established educational principles include:

- (1) starting with what the child already knows or has experienced to introduce new knowledge;
- (2) using concrete experiences as the basis for forming more abstract concepts;

⁶ There are an estimated 700,000 people within this Jianchuan dialect region. See Allen, Bryan 2004.

- (3) appealing to all the senses to maximise impact because people have different learning styles;
- (4) capturing the young child's natural tendency to be physically active and channelling it towards learning.

In keeping with the “active learning” basis of the program, lessons are structured to include activities which are designed to promote learning. Learning will always be more enjoyable for students just by adding some activities, but activities which are specifically designed to teach something in particular or provide a more interesting way of practising something, are even better. As a result, students often move about the classroom or do lessons outside when activities call for it. Because the children are active during the lesson, they are able to maintain concentration over longer periods of time. By using concrete experiences students also have a better understanding of what they learn and are given opportunities to use this knowledge straight away.

Introducing mathematics – concrete to concept

In mathematics classes the emphasis is on understanding concepts, developing simple reasoning, following instructions and solving simple problems. The children begin to understand mathematical ideas and processes by manipulating objects, doing activities or playing games. When the time comes to write in their books, they already understand what the numbers and processes they are using represent. They also learn to use informal and formal approaches to solving problems. Informal approaches such as using string or ropes for measuring length, stepping out distance or pouring water into containers of different size and shape to compare the capacity of containers. Activities such as these build good understandings of key concepts and encourage resourcefulness in problem solving. Much of what students learn is immediately useful at home with the content of their text books also reflecting everyday village life situations. The aim of the above approach is to build a strong foundation based on understanding and developing skills which will help them in future mathematical studies.

Integration of learning

The Bai preschool program links different subjects together so that they reinforce each other. What the children learn in mathematics is often supported in other lessons such as physical education, music and language activities. Reading, writing and oral language are similarly supported. For example, puppets, masks, pictures and objects made in art lessons often provide different ways for the children to practise their listening and speaking skills. Especially composed Bai action songs also help support the learning of such things as counting, colours, and healthy habits. A weekly theme also provides the children with different things to do which enable them to repeatedly practise skills and knowledge without losing interest. Themes also provide opportunities to use the children's art and craft to brighten the classroom atmosphere thus creating an attractive learning environment.

The text books, activities, songs, themes strongly reflect aspects of everyday village life. The aim is to help the children see that what they learn at school has a direct application to daily life at home. The reflection of local culture in the texts they read, text book illustrations, action songs and traditional songs plus becoming literate in the Bai language also encourages them to be proud of who they are.

Educational levels

The educational levels set for the Shilong preschoolers are generally based on expectations for five and six year old children in Australian schools. These expectations also seemed reasonable when compared with the International Baccalaureate goals for the same ages.⁷ The aim is that these preschoolers enter grade one at the age of seven having acquired educational skills, concepts and attitudes while using their own language and that they will use these skills in grade one to learn in Chinese. Instead of struggling to learn both, they will be able to concentrate on learning the Chinese terms for concepts they already understand. The first six weeks for those entering preschool gives the students a period of adjustment to classroom routines and eases them into the new style of learning. It also acknowledges that these village children do not understand many aspects of reading and writing which other children who have had books from babyhood know when they start school.

Implementation of the educational program

Teachers' guide

In the past, teachers in China were supplied with text books and teaching materials and expected to teach exactly what was in the books. This is still the case in much of rural China including village schools in Jianchuan County⁸. Until recently, teachers in schools were rarely encouraged to be creative when preparing lessons and even if they were, they lacked the ideas and resources necessary to help them. Recently designed resources and short courses run by the 'Save the Children' organisation have started to address this problem but they rely on teachers making the effort to prepare resources for their lessons. Motivating teachers to change their teaching methods when it is so much easier just to 'teach the text book' is not easy. Furthermore, experience working directly with Education Bureau officials and teachers on this project in the early years also showed that no amount of talking or small scale demonstrations persuaded them that there could be any other teaching methods better than the traditional rote learning methods they already used in schools in Jianchuan County. That is, until they had the chance to see the full benefits of this program in action.

The first opportunity to see if a detailed teachers' guide might help occurred during the first adult Bai literacy course in 2004. Almost as if they were actors' learning a script and using props, the teachers were gradually coached in the use of modern teaching methods. Later, as they taught in the classroom they saw that the students' learned more quickly and really enjoyed the new active style of learning. In fact, one of the teachers who previously had said he didn't think these teaching methods would work became a strong advocate for this style of teaching from that time. As teachers became more familiar with the activities they were using and the

⁷ In Australia this equates to reception year and grade one in primary school. This would also leave room for the future development of an extra year of preschool having a more informal basis for four year old children in the future if so desired.

⁸ In recent times, there have been attempts to introduce more activity oriented lessons in a government run preschool in Jinhua town. However the teaching of Chinese even in this preschool is still very formal.

role the activities played in the learning process, experienced teachers were able to add some ideas of their own.

Because the potential preschool teachers' own educational experience was limited to rote learning and because Shilong primary school was still employing rote learning methods, the danger was that the newly trained preschool teachers would revert to rote learning methods with the pressure of classroom teaching. These new teachers needed a detailed teachers' guide even more than the government trained teachers who had taught during the first adult Bai literacy course. Such a teachers' guide could also be used as part of the initial teacher training and afterwards, continue to provide the teachers with enough detail to help them prepare lessons and learn 'on the job'. The Chinese text in this teachers' guide also had to be comprehensible to junior middle school graduates to cater for their limited education.

Production of teaching aids and text books

In addition to the teachers' guide, teaching resources (e.g. games, songs, puzzles, picture and word cards etc.) were needed and text books had to be developed. The latter were designed to complement and consolidate what the children would learn during activity times rather than being the entire focus of learning during lessons. Other teaching tools were collected, such as different coloured plastic bottle tops, plastic bottles, buckets and other commonly used household items, to provide cheap and easily available objects for the various learning activities. The aim was to provide inexpensive, easy to reproduce, simple helps for use in the classroom.

Different learning environments

The lessons plans are designed to use a variety of settings inside the classroom and outside the classroom. During story book lessons, reading lessons and oral language the children bring their chairs and sit next to the teacher. This closeness encourages more natural conversation and an intimacy more like that of a mother sharing with a child. Furniture is often moved around and the children quickly learn how to do it efficiently. Games in mathematics requiring space and groups of tables with students sharing art materials and conversation are commonplace. Some lessons are more suited to being outside such as pouring water into containers during mathematics. The different settings help break up the day, create variety and encourage different kinds of student interaction.

Teacher training

The usual practice with teacher training for a project like this is to give a block of three or four weeks of special training with later follow up. It was not possible to do this for the Bai project in Shilong village. First, trained teachers were not made available, which meant that the potential teachers had no training or experience in teaching at all. Moreover, four of the potential teachers were junior middle school graduates and one was only a primary school graduate. The second reason was that there was no time to do extensive training while the production of teaching materials and other resources was still taking place. The solution was to bring these recruits down to the project office in Jianchuan and train them so they were able to help with the production of materials and carry out teacher training using the extra time gained. It meant that the local staff in the project office was also able to receive the same teacher training.

This longer-term arrangement proved to be more positive than initially thought. Over eighteen months they had plenty of time to learn how the teaching style differed from their own experience as students. There was time for them to learn how to motivate children for learning, how children learn much better if they are active in the learning process, how to use everyday items as teaching aids, and how activities can help children understand and practise what they are learning. The preschool teachers were also able to have basic computer training and practice, training in story writing and composing new songs in the traditional style for teaching purposes (e.g. learning colours, counting etc.). They were also trained in classroom management, the preparation and presentation of lessons based on the teachers' guide and there were plenty of opportunities for semi-supervised teaching practice amongst themselves.

Principles used in classroom management practice⁹

The key word used when training the Bai preschool teachers in classroom management was "connection". There are several useful teaching techniques that help teachers connect with individual students and with the whole class. Two of these are using the eyes and using students' names. For example, teachers use their eyes to connect with a single student's eyes and continue to look at the eyes of that student until the connection is made before moving on to another student. This can happen very quickly or it may take a little longer if that student is not looking at the teacher. The teacher continues to scan the whole class, pausing momentarily to engage individual students in this way. It is a powerful tool because students feel the teacher is interested in them individually and it helps maintain students' attention. A smiling teacher also aids in positive eye contact.

Using student names is another way to connect and establish a code of appropriate behaviour. Asking a named student to answer a question while ignoring other students who call out answers will also help involve more timid students. It also provides an opportunity to encourage greater participation by those not paying attention or misbehaving. Expectations of good manners and consideration of others is best demonstrated by the teacher who waits for students to quieten before speaking and expects students to listen when other students speak. A more positive classroom atmosphere is also created by commending good attributes of student behaviour before addressing poor behaviour. Students who improve or are trying hard will also respond well when encouraged as well as those commended for good work. Connection with students can also be achieved by walking around the classroom encouraging students as they do their own work, asking questions and showing interest in them. Once students feel a strong connection with the teacher they enjoy lessons and are eager to learn.

Team teaching

Despite having a year to learn a new teaching style, there was still a risk that the teachers would revert to traditional teaching methods when under pressure. To ease the pressures that usually come with starting out teaching and so they could encourage each other, four teachers were put in teams of two so they could support each other in lesson preparation and in the classroom. Another benefit would be that all the teachers could continue to develop and maintain their teaching skills and fill in for each other

⁹ Classroom management practice refers to the teachers' expectations of students in class and dealing with inappropriate student behavior.

when a teacher was absent. The fifth person, a male musician with good teaching abilities, manned the project office in the village and became responsible for organizing and teaching adult Bai literacy classes, filling in as a substitute teacher when needed and working on VCDs of Bai music which showcased the preschool students. Teacher training continued in weekly blocks during term and semester breaks with the teachers also coming to Jianchuan to help with the preparation of more materials.

Initial results

With the educational approach decided, the supporting materials for the first semester completed and the teachers trained ready to start, the new preschool at Shilong opened its doors in September 2006. It began with two classes: one for five year olds and the other class for six year olds and others older who had not yet started school.¹⁰ Because the children in what would become the “upper class” had not been to preschool, both classes used the same teaching materials during the first year of operation. It was also advantageous for all the teachers to learn to teach the course for the lower level first so they would be familiar with the content and teaching style and work together to overcome any problems encountered.

At the end of the academic year 2008/9 the preschool completed three years of operation with the first group of preschool graduates completing grade one. The initial results are overwhelmingly positive. Discussion of these results will cover

- (1) the teachers’ abilities to master the new teaching style;
- (2) the preschool children’s response to the different teaching style;
- (3) the impact of mother tongue based bilingual education on the children’s academic development during preschool;
- (4) parental and official response; and
- (5) grade one for the first group of preschool graduates.

Before discussing the above, the unforeseen presence of Yi and Lisu students in preschool classes must also be mentioned in order to understand how they fared.

Yi and Lisu students

Because of the improved boarding conditions, the new preschool classes included four Yi and three Lisu students. These students live within the educational jurisdiction of Shilong Primary school, however, no Yi or Lisu students had attended the old village preschool. The presumption had been made that their parents considered they were too young to board at the school and therefore would not attend the new preschool. When they arrived to start preschool these children could not understand or speak any Bai. In the past Yi and Lisu children starting in the primary school would have been in exactly the same predicament. The ideal would be for each of the Yi and Lisu groups of children to have their own mother tongue bilingual education, however, this ideal had not been possible. Since Shilong primary school mostly teaches in Bai, learning Bai for these new preschool students was essential.

To help them learn Bai as quickly as possible, the teachers seated these students in the centre near the front of the class so they were more likely to be caught up in the activity of each lesson. Because the children would have opportunities to be

¹⁰ The age range in the upper class was considerable, including some nine and ten year old Yi students who had never before attended school.

very active in their learning, the expectation was that seeing, hearing, manipulating objects and doing activities would help the Yi and Lisu students to learn the Bai language associated with these activities and that proved to be true. In fact, some students had a reasonable grasp of Bai after six months and started translating for others who were a little slower.¹¹ By the end of the first year, they were all able to speak and understand enough Bai to cope in the classroom and their test results in mathematics and language (Bai) were similar to those of the Bai children. On a social level, being able to communicate in Bai has promoted friendship and unity amongst Bai, Yi and Lisu students not seen before. A much greater problem than different ethnicities has been the presence of one or two Bai children who were only four years old when they entered preschool.¹²

Teacher achievement

To assist the teachers as they settled into their new role, one of the Jianchuan Bai project staff, a preschool teacher herself, stayed in the village during the first week. Her job was to help them learn to deal with the many issues that arose at the start of an academic year and induct these novice teachers into their new teaching career. This included observing lessons, answering questions, pointing out problems and encouraging them. She continued visiting the preschool once a week to continue this assistance as well as answering questions on the telephone after returning to Jianchuan. This assistance was essential for helping the new teachers to fully accept their responsibilities, to settle into a regular habit of preparing lessons, to overcome shortcomings in their teaching and to learn to cooperate with each other better.

At the end of the first year of teaching the teachers were asked to write a short report. Each of the teachers mentioned that their first year was not easy but that they along with their students had learned much. One teacher wrote, “The past year had its frustrations and difficulties but I was never discouraged.” (Teacher of the younger class) Despite having to learn a new job and an unfamiliar teaching style they all felt this different style of teaching had significant benefits for themselves and the students. Another teacher said, “I have achieved encouraging results by applying these new teaching methods. My own teaching ability has also been considerably enhanced.” The above teacher of the older class also went on to say, “After one year of observation and testing, I can say that the new teaching methods are indeed ideally suited to the children of my village.” (Teacher of the older class) The teachers also commented that the activities were not just an enjoyable way to teach but saw the children “... learning much through their involvement in these activities and games. This approach is not just so that students will like it.” (The other teacher of the older class)¹³

After completing three years of teaching the teachers reached a point where they became relatively relaxed and professional in the way they taught. During an interview in June 2009, the teachers were asked how they found teaching in this different style. Their response as a group was that they didn’t find the new teaching methods difficult to learn at all. (G Waters, 2009¹⁴) Such a response underlines the relaxed confidence they now have.

¹¹ Summary of preschool teachers’ answers to questions asked by Glenys Waters.

¹² These students were slipped in despite rigorous checking but they showed they lacked the general maturity to cope with more formal learning and ended up repeating the course the following year. This has been a continuing problem.

¹³ Cited from the reports the teachers wrote in 2007.

¹⁴ Separate review reports were written for project staff, SIL East Asia Group leadership, and Chinese

Student response

The only teaching style these preschool students have experienced is that used in the new preschool. They have never experienced rote learning methods or had to sit in the classroom for long periods and try to learn to 'read' an unfamiliar language. The students' active involvement in the learning process has met with an enthusiasm never before seen in students in this village. In her first year report one teacher said,

I have had a large portion of the students come to my home before school starts [in the morning] and ask me to go to school immediately. In the middle of a vacation period I have also had students come to me and ask, "Teacher, why don't we begin school now?" I have even had some students say to me, "Teacher, I must sleep over at your place as I am afraid I might forget the day when school begins." (Teacher of older class)

All the teachers commented that the new teaching style facilitated the fostering of good relationships between students and teachers. [The students] "... are very well behaved and united in friendly affection for each other." (Teacher of the younger class) "The new teaching methods also build a bridge between teachers and students. We are like friends now. I can talk openly with the children to understand the children's point of view and get to know [what is on] their minds." (Teacher of the older class) Instead of fearing chastisement from the teacher ... "now the students are more daring and willing to communicate with others and share their ideas." (The other teacher of the younger class) One teacher said,

This is not like it was when we were young. Every day we dreaded school then. We feared studying very much. If we saw the teacher we would hide. Every day we were sitting and studying without purpose and without any freshness, but the experience is so different now. (The other teacher of the older class)

The unprecedented enthusiasm for going to preschool that these students have shown is a reflection of the child friendly, activity oriented and confidence building style of teaching where the incentive to learn is based on encouragement. That this is the case is confirmed by the continual visiting during between primary school lesson breaks by former graduates of the preschool who now are in grade one.

Impact of mother tongue education on academic development

During the project review the teachers confirmed that these students are not memorizing text as they would have done for Chinese in the past but understanding what they read. Visitors observing classes have seen how enthusiastically the children answer questions about all aspects of a reading lesson showing that they do indeed understand what they are reading. Their love of stories is also apparent in big book story lessons as they listen to a story and interact with the ideas in the text and pictures.

While reading lessons teach a variety of strategies and cues which help students recognize words rather than sounding them out, writing lessons use the phonics system developed for use in schools all over China. The children gradually become familiar with the various parts of words starting with the shengmu (onset letters) and yunmu (the rhyme). The children see the letters in the rhyme including the tone marker as a whole sound which is much simpler for beginning writers than

treating them separately. Over time the smaller components in the ‘shengmu’ and ‘yunmu’ are taught after the children have already learned to recognize the whole sound. When asked how well the children know their sounds the teachers said that the children in the second year know them well and are able to write them but in the first year the children are still learning them so they are only able to write out the simpler sounds by themselves. (Transcript of interview, G Waters 2009)

Test results

Textbook exercises and testing for the first year students mainly focus on phonics aspects in written language. Results from the final test July 2007 showed an average for the older class of 85.88% and 81.67% for the younger class in this test.¹⁵ The averages according to ethnicity across both classes were: Bai 84.00% (22 students), Yi 82.75% (4 students), Lisu 88.00% (3 students).

The final test for the following year (July 2008) for the lower class produced an average of 74.9%.¹⁶ The upper level students who were in their second year of preschool did a different test reflecting their different course materials and more developed learning ability in July 2008. The test included a paragraph with questions for reading comprehension as well as questions related to word structure. The average for written language in this class was 86.5%. According to ethnicity the averages were: Bai 85.4% (19 students) and Yi and Lisu 90.6% (5 students). Some six Bai students in this class were unable to progress to grade one because they were not seven years of age at enrolment time for the primary school. Their results were close to the average or higher with only one exception. One boy shared top place with another student scoring a mark of 96%. These children had no choice but to repeat the year.

During the project review the teachers were asked if the students are able to write their own stories by the time they finish preschool. One of the upper level teachers responded saying that the better stories are longer with the best students writing around six or seven sentences, but some students still only write one or two sentences. (Review, G Waters 2009) No assessment of written expression is carried out during preschool lessons as the aim is to encourage the students to enjoy writing. According to the teachers the older children like writing and in the mornings often show their teachers what they have written the night before. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009) This compares with children in local Chinese preschools not being able to write enough characters to write their own stories. (Bai teachers on the project staff, 2009)

Parental and official response

Most parents across the county think that teaching Bai during preschool is a backward step. This is especially so in towns and villages which already have Chinese preschools. They feel that their children will do better in their education if they learn Chinese as early as possible. Shilong parents were no different when a Bai preschool was proposed for their village. Now they really want the program to continue as they have seen how the Bai teaching program has helped their children. They would also like their three and four year olds to attend. Village leaders confirm that everyone in the village is very supportive of the Bai preschool program and want it to continue. One leader pondering how long the project might last said he hopes the government

¹⁵ During the first year of the preschool starting the older students also did the same work and testing. The lower class included one child aged four years who scored 59%.

¹⁶ Two Yi students did very poorly in this test. The older Yi student had missed several months of preschool while she had hepatitis. One Bai student was under age.

will eventually take it over and it was important for it to continue until that can happen. (Review, G Waters 2009)

The use of Bai across all subjects has enabled the preschool students not only to participate actively in class, express their own ideas, answer questions in class and learn to read and write their own language, but the knowledge they have acquired is also relevant to their own culture and village life. One important official proudly showed visitors his mobile phone screen with his daughter singing a Bai song learned in preschool and commented that his daughter had learned so much that was useful in her first year of preschool. (October 2006) The response of parents and other officials has also been very positive.

Cultural relevance

Village leaders commented that village culture has been stimulated since the children started learning Bai songs and dances. The previously mentioned official said his daughter's performances at home have stimulated his own interest in Bai singing and dancing. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009) This kind of cultural revival has been in progress since the first year of the preschool's operation when one teacher wrote in her first year report, "Many of the students' parents are teaching the children to sing Bai folk music again." (Teacher of the older class) The above official also said that he knows that his daughter needs to learn Chinese but says he now knows she won't forget her Bai culture. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009)

Educational benefits

The village leaders have also said that the teaching methods used in the preschool have helped the children learn to think. One leader says that he can actually see that the children are developing mentally whereas he said they did not appear to learn anything in preschool before. He said the children feel they are similar to city children now and are physically and mentally healthier. One parent of a preschool graduate commented on the active learning style and said that the villagers did not know that children could learn so much from games and activities. He said that the children now love coming to school, even the grade ones like school whereas students in the past did not even want to go into the classroom. His personal observation was that the program helps all the children not just the clever ones. The leaders say that the children are entering primary school now with a strong educational foundation. (Review, G Waters 2009)

Yi and Lisu parents

With much improved dormitory conditions for their children boarding at the school plus help with boarding fees (including primary students)¹⁷, the number of Yi and Lisu students increased from only five primary students in May 2001 to 35 as of July 2009, sixteen of these being in the preschool. One village leader said Yi and Lisu parents are now able to send their children to preschool which they could not do before because they were too poor. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009) The Yi parents' enthusiasm for the educational program has also resulted in a number of these parents attending Bai literacy classes so that they might participate more fully in their children's preschool education. The project liaison officer in the Minority Languages

¹⁷ The project finds sponsors for the preschool children's boarding costs and the government has been helping with primary students' costs.

Commission has said that she likes to see the Yi and Lisu people involved in the project and doing so well which, she says, shows the teaching approach being used is very effective. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009)

Minority Languages Commission

Provincial authorities in the Minority Languages Commission and its umbrella organization, the Minorities Commission, are also very supportive of the Shilong project and there is a strong sense of ownership by those involved with the project. The project liaison officer in the Minority Languages Commission refers to the Shilong project as ‘our project’ not only because she is Bai but because she has been involved in the negotiations regarding the project from the beginning. She has also been personally involved in the approval of the teaching materials. She has observed lessons in the preschool and seen how the teachers who were not formally trained teachers overcame problems as they learned to use the new teaching methods. In her opinion, they now compare well with primary school teachers in the city. She believes that the educational approach used in this project could also be used to teach Chinese and later English to minority students. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009) The deputy director of the Minorities Commission who visited the project several times has said that he wants other provincial government officials to be informed of the work this project has been doing and to be briefed on the educational methodology being used. He said he does not want to see the project come and go without the relevant authorities being informed of this type of educational approach. (Speaking in January 2009)

Local education authorities

The district principal is a strong advocate for the use of more child friendly teaching methods and supports the educational approach being used in the Shilong preschool. He hopes younger teachers in primary schools will be more willing to change their teaching methods as students are unduly stressed when so much pressure [to pass examinations] is put on them. He says he is less concerned with examination results and more concerned to promote a better learning atmosphere in the classroom. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009)

The head of the Education Bureau in Jianchuan in a speech to visiting officials from Kunming and other provinces recently said that bilingual education had been tried without success in Jianchuan before. He said that this project is successful because of the high quality of the curriculum materials. (May 2009)¹⁸ The visiting officials he was speaking to also commented about the high standard of the teaching materials. After observing classes in progress they said, “The educational model is novel in many ways, highly inspirational and worth promoting” and noted that “the students’ learning initiative is very high”. (Summary of feedback, Martin Chow, May 2009)

Local community response and official interest at many levels of government in all aspects of the Shilong project is very high and increasing. The Minorities University has now established a base for building a capability in bilingual education teacher training. Some of these students visited the Shilong project during November and December 2008 and carried out research which became the basis of their masters’

¹⁸ He has since reiterated this statement Shilong in July 2009 and to the leadership of Qinhu Village, a prospective site for an extension of the project.

theses. Professor Liu said that the university is interested in participating cooperatively with SIL in the future and suggests that SIL's work in bilingual education will be highly valued in the future. (Kunming meeting May 2009 Martin Chow)

SIL independent review

The above citations about the success of the preschool project come from Chinese and Bai sources: preschool teachers, parents, officials at various levels, most of whom have been involved directly as employees, parents of children attending, or participants in the setting up of the Bai project. Several of the citations were collected from interviews conducted by SIL bilingual education consultant Glenys Waters who conducted a review from June 11 to 28, 2009. Before she visited the project she reviewed all the materials for the two years of preschool. In addition to visiting Shilong Village several times and observing preschool classes in progress, she conducted group interviews with the preschool teachers, primary school teachers and community representatives. She also visited Xizhong preschool to provide a reference for the more usual Chinese language preschool practice in Jianchuan County. Her conclusion was that ...

The Bai MLE project is a very impressive project. It has been established on thorough research of the needs and the context, and it has adopted a holistic approach to the total program.

and that ...

Much has been accomplished in the relatively short time of the project operation. The children at Shilong village now have a culturally appropriate educational program which provides an educational bridge that helps them transition successfully to the national education system. Teachers and curriculum writers have been trained and adult literacy classes held. The project provides a strong example of what MLE [multilingual education] should be like and gives people who wish to develop similar educational opportunities for ethnic groups in remote rural China a model to work from and materials that are sound and easily replicated. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009)

Preschool graduates in grade one

As can be seen from the individual citations presented above, the academic outcomes at the end of preschool are excellent and the students have acquired an enthusiasm for learning and a variety of useful learning skills which they can apply to their future education. While they entered grade one without the same written Chinese language skills preschool graduates have from Chinese language preschools, they are able to listen and respond in Chinese confidently using the oral Chinese they learned in preschool.¹⁹ The principal of the primary school speaking of the first group of Bai preschool graduates commented,

¹⁹ This was my own assessment after questioning a small group of these students who were lingering at the door of a preschool class after school. This compares with students in a Chinese preschool in a village close to Jinhua town who were quite adept at 'reading' characters in class but, according to the teacher, did not understand the meaning of the Chinese they 'read' nor could they communicate in Chinese.

The program here is very different from normal village programs because it doesn't just teach them how to learn Chinese, it teaches them how to think, so even though they may not do as well in language for now because they don't have two years of Chinese preschool, they will very likely catch up to the Chinese preschool kids in a few years.²⁰

The grade one teacher also commented on the difference between this class and his previous classes and says that this class is much livelier, having more initiative and wider interests. They are not afraid of him and enjoy talking to him which is very different from before when students were really afraid of the teacher. (Review, Glenys Waters 2009) A detailed account of academic progress of these students through the primary school after five years of preschool operation requires a separate paper. Nevertheless, in the five years of preschool operation, the district examination results of the preschool graduates in primary school appear to have moved to the highest quartile of Shaxi district schools, whereas Shilong was previously in the bottom quartile.

Conclusion

This paper began by outlining the problems common to Bai speaking village children in Jianchuan County who have a long record of poor educational achievement. It described a potential solution which was developed for a new preschool in Shilong Village. The new teaching program enables students to begin their education in their own language and introduces a different teaching approach which encourages students to participate more actively in learning in a variety of ways. The lessons and text books are culturally relevant and reflect village life and much of what the students learn can be used immediately in their daily lives. The paper outlined this educational approach in some detail and the educational outcomes from the first three years of Shilong preschool operation.

The educational outcomes show that when Bai children start their education in their own language they not only develop reading and writing skills at the same rate as children of the same age in schools around the world but are also able to express their own ideas, relate experiences and talk about what they are learning with ease across all subject areas. These skills will also benefit them as they master Chinese. Teaching Chinese as a second language during the second year of preschool has meant they have acquired language learning strategies that should enable them to progress more naturally and rapidly while learning Chinese in primary school. The preschool program has been able to instill a love of learning that the old Chinese preschool did not do and present the grade one teacher with a class of enthusiastic learners already unified by solid friendships formed during the previous two years. Such friendships and positive attitudes have been strengthened by the Yi and Lisu children's knowledge of the Bai language and the children's genuine respect for their different cultures. Finally, seeing the government now taking responsibility for implementing bilingual education based on the program in Shilong Village is a most gratifying outcome for those who have been involved in the program's development.

²⁰ From a transcript of an interview conducted by Glenys Waters.

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