

# English in minority areas of China: Some findings and directions for further research

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*This paper discusses a neglected aspect of English in China, its impact on ethnic minorities and their languages. It begins with an overview of the current situation of the minorities and their languages then, based on fieldwork conducted in Jilin and Guizhou Provinces, it shows two trends: English currently has a limited presence in minority areas and there is a strong desire to learn it. However, achieving additive bilingualism is made difficult by lack of minority cultural content on the curriculum and lack of educational resources. It is argued that the context approach (Bax, 2003) can be used to help overcome these difficulties and as a guide for further research.*

China, ethnic minorities, English language teaching and learning, context approach, additive bilingualism

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s English language learning became an essential part of China's modernisation drive and this has continued to the present day. English is now used more and has a higher status than at any time in the past and there is much activity, both academic and practical, surrounding it. However, the impact of English on China's minorities and their languages has been largely ignored by both Chinese and Western scholars. As with minority languages in many parts of the world, China's minority languages are under threat and the power and influence of English in both China and the world has significant implications for their ongoing survival. This paper presents some findings about the use and status of English in minority areas, explains the difficulties of learning English for the minorities, which suggests that the context approach can be used to teach English in a way that does not lead to the loss of minority languages, and presents a guide for further research<sup>1</sup>.

## CHINA'S MINORITIES AND THEIR LANGUAGES

In addition to the Han Chinese, there are 55 minorities in China who make up 8.41 per cent of the population (National Bureau of Statistics China, 2004, p.97) and speak over 80 languages<sup>2</sup>. Although legally guaranteed equality in the Chinese Constitution, minority languages are in a subordinate position in comparison to Chinese (Dwyer, 1998, p.68; Zhou Yaowen, 1992, p.37). As Lin Jing (1997, p.196) points out, the Han Chinese are the power holders in society and it is their language, Chinese, that is overwhelmingly used for important functions such as government and the media while minority languages "are limited in use and of low social status". Under such circumstances, it should come as no surprise that many minorities neglect their own language in

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<sup>1</sup> All data quoted here originally appeared in the author's PhD dissertation, *English in China: The impact of the global language on China's language situation*.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates of the number of languages in China range anywhere from 80 to over 100 (Stites, 1999, p.99). According to Zhou Minglang (2003, p.23), in the early 1990s Chinese linguists generally put the number of languages at around 80 and by the late 1990s many believed there to be more than 120.

favour of Chinese (Xiao Hong, 1998, p.232). On top of this there is English, the dominant language in the world outside of China. According to the information available, English has indeed reached minority areas. A report in *People's Daily Online* (9/3/2000) for example tells of Yao women in Sishui village of Longsheng Multinational Autonomous County in Guangxi Province learning tourism English at the village school and another report claims that increasing numbers of people in Tibet are studying English at universities or in classes outside of school (*People's Daily Online*, 19/11/2001). However, the nature of English in minority areas is still far from understood. Based on observational and interview data from Korean and Manchu areas in Jilin Province and Miao areas in Guizhou Province, this paper argues that there are two trends regarding English in minority areas:

1. English has a limited presence in minority areas. It appears on a few signs, in a kind of peddler's English and in schools. Apart from teachers and students, few minorities can speak it.
2. There is a strong desire to learn English among the minorities.

### **THE USES AND USERS OF ENGLISH IN MINORITY AREAS**

Compared to the widespread use of English in China as a whole, English has very little presence in minority areas. Furthermore, this presence is fairly superficial – it is used in a limited number of domains that are for the most part not very meaningful.

#### **Limited and Superficial Use of English**

The main domain in which English is used is on signs, of which there are two types, official and commercial. Official signs appear on government buildings while commercial signs appear on businesses, shops and in advertising.

##### ***Official signs***

Most of the official signs listed here were seen in Korean areas where it is common for signs to have Korean on top, Chinese in the middle and English on the bottom. In Tumen, a sign at the train station ticket office followed this pattern. The first line was Korean, followed by Chinese then the English words 'Handicapped First'. At the entrance of the customs building there were two signs, one either side of the gate. One was in Chinese and the other read:

People's Republic of China  
Tumen Customs

An official sign featuring English was also displayed on the door of the local government offices in Aladi, a Korean village outside Jilin City. With Chinese characters on top and English underneath, it read:

A MODEL UNIT JILIN BRANCH OF COMMUNIST PARTY

In one of the Miao areas of Guizhou there was an official sign that had Chinese characters on top and English underneath:

Leishan National Health Inspection

##### ***Commercial signs***

Commercial signs were much more numerous than official signs. English was featured in signs on banks, businesses and in advertising as the following examples show.

In Aladi, there was a sign for China Unicom, which read:

### China Unicom A La Di Service Branch<sup>3</sup>

The signs below are from Yanji, all of them had Chinese and English with some also having Korean in the same layout as the official signs described above:

China Industrial and Commercial Bank  
China Tobacco  
Bank of China

A sign for China Mobile in Tumen also looked like this. Several signs of a similar type with Chinese on top and English underneath were seen in the Miao village of Leishan:

China Post  
China Unicom  
China Life Insurance  
Construction Bank of China

The following sign is from a banner atop a building in the main square of Xijiang village:

MIAO'S FOLK HANDICRAFT GALLERY

The same place also had a board of photos advertising various services:

INTERPRETER ENGLISH  
TAKE PHOTOS  
SELL FILM  
DEVELOP FILM

An advertising banner over the basketball court in Xijiang featured mainly Chinese characters but in one corner had the English words China Mobile.

Although in some cases the use of English on signs gives it official standing, this is hardly a significant intrusion into minority areas.

## Limited Knowledge of English

The English spoken by minorities is usually simple greetings and attention getting phrases and while ability of this kind was found among a wide variety of people knowledge of English beyond this point was largely confined to students and teachers.

### *Greetings and attention getting phrases*

At a market in Yanji a Korean woman yelled out “okay” and there was the usual “hello” in Tumen, Xijiang and Langde. Old women in Xijiang frequently said “hello” or “hello *ni hao*” and children in the same village approached the author by saying “hello *gei wo shi kuai* (hello give me 10 *kuai*)”. However, knowledge of English does not seem to extend much past these simple greetings and exchanges. In Tumen for example Korean shopkeepers called out in English: “Come into my shop” but when asked if they could speak English one replied that she had learnt it at school but could only say simple things such as “how much is it?” while the other said she could not speak English although studies it with her son, who can say simple things like “what’s your name?” and “how old are you?”

A similar theme emerged in a conversation with a Manchu man on a bus trip to Wulajie, a Manchu town near Jilin City<sup>4</sup>. When asked if he could speak English he replied:

<sup>3</sup> The correct *pinyin* romanisation for this village is Aladi but because it appeared as A La Di on this particular sign it has not been changed here.

<sup>4</sup> All interviews were conducted in Chinese and these are my translations.

I can't speak it. I can only say "okay", "hello". I didn't study it. In the 70s I studied Russian at school because China had a close relationship with the Soviet Union. But I've forgotten it.

In Xijiang a waiter was able to say, "okay" and "thank you" but when asked if he spoke English he said no. At a store selling Miao handicrafts, the shopkeeper responded to an inquiry about an item's price by saying "*Er shi wu*, okay" (25 okay). The conversation then went as follows:

Jeff: Do you speak English?

Shopkeeper: Only a few simple words.

Jeff: Are there many people here who can speak English?

Shopkeeper: Very few. I can only say a few simple words. Hello, Okay.

### ***Students and teachers as the main English speaking group***

As mentioned above, in the areas visited only students and teachers had any regular contact with English and beyond basic proficiency in the language. This was the case in Hantun, a Manchu village near Jilin City. The village head, himself a Manchu, had this to say:

Jeff: Are there people here who can speak English?

Village head: Very few. Only senior high school students and English teachers. One [English teacher] can speak English but the other can only say and understand simple things.

The Miao waiter mentioned earlier expressed similar sentiments about the situation of English in Xijiang. He claimed that there were at least 100 Miao who could speak English but specified that:

Waiter: The majority [of English speakers] are students and young people.

Jeff: Where do they learn English?

Waiter: Some of them go outside [the village] to work or study. Some people from Han areas come here to be teachers. They speak English.

According to the hairdresser in the same village, "the middle school teacher can speak English" but "ordinary people can't". It is also interesting to note that people are going outside the village to learn English and Han Chinese are coming to teach English which confirms the view that English is still largely confined to Han areas.

Based on this data, the English used by minorities is largely limited to what has been described as peddlers' English, the kind of English used to attract the attention of and bargain with foreign visitors (Pride and Liu Ru-shan, 1988, pp. 49-55; Zhao Yong and Campbell, 1995, pp.385-8). The fact that students are the main group of English speakers does however have some important implications and these will be discussed later.

### **Desire to Learn English**

Despite the limited presence of English, there is a strong desire to learn it as exemplified by the response of a Korean woman to the question "is English useful?": "*You yong. Zenme mei yong?*" or "of course English is useful, how couldn't it be?" Among everyone the author spoke to there was a perception of English as being associated with modern technology and prosperity as these extracts show, the first from an interview with a Korean worker at the government offices in Aladi:

Jeff: Will English have an influence on the minorities one day?

Worker: It will have a big influence. China has joined the WTO so we will use more and more English. We have to communicate with foreign countries. If you speak English it's easier to find a job.

A similar theme emerged from a discussion with a Miao family who made money by renting rooms, having tourists over for dinner and selling handicrafts:

Jeff: Is English useful?

Wife: Yes, it's useful.

Husband: It's useful. To do anything you need English. It's useful for hi-tech things, they all use English. After joining the WTO we have to study many languages. We don't just have to study English but also German, Japanese and other languages. Like Zhou Enlai, he could speak many languages.

Likewise, a Miao English teacher at the Leishan Nationalities Middle School felt that English was useful "because English is used in medicine, advertisements, machinery and computers. If China wants to develop we have to learn English".

The view that English is useful came with the caveat that its usefulness applied more to the outside world than one's immediate surroundings. One of the Korean shopkeepers in Tumen felt that English was useful but not in small places like Tumen, only in bigger places, while the Manchu village head felt that English was useful "but in small villages very few people speak it".

### **English as a Potential Threat to Minority Languages?**

This obvious desire to learn English leads to the question is English a threat to minority languages? This is certainly a possibility but when this question was put to the minorities most thought English was not a threat but did express some concerns about its potential implications.

The Manchu village head felt that English was not a threat to Manchu because "English and Manchu are not in opposition to each other". The Korean worker at the government offices in Aladi was not concerned because of the strong position of Korean both in China and Korea:

Jeff: Is English a threat to Korean?

Worker: No it's not. Koreans can all speak Korean and Korean has a country. We have close contact with Korea. [showing a Korean language magazine] This is published in Yanbian. We have these kinds of things, Korean won't be like Manchu.

The Miao family however did raise some concerns over English, specifically that both Chinese and English are widely spoken whereas minority languages are confined to limited areas:

Jeff: Could Miao be replaced by Chinese and English?

Husband: No, not now but there's a danger. Now few people speak Miao and it's not widely used. It's only spoken at home. English is used all over the world. You can't just study a bit. You have to learn it well. I told my son to learn it well. Chinese is also widely used. Mongolian, Tibetan and Miao people are in the same situation. These languages are only spoken in one place. If they want to develop they have to communicate with Han people. There will be more and more Chinese spoken. So there's a bit of a risk. Few people can write Miao. At school they don't teach it, they just learn themselves.

Another Miao English teacher at the Leishan school expressed similar sentiments although seemed to think that Miao was in more danger from Chinese due to the difficulties students had with learning English:

Jeff: If the children study Chinese and English everyday will Miao slowly disappear?

Teacher: Yes, there's that risk. We have to speak to Han people. People don't neglect the language on purpose, they don't notice it happening.

Jeff: If more and more people study English, is that a danger to Miao?

Teacher: No. It's difficult for Miao children to study English. They speak Miao then when they go to school they slowly learn Chinese. At middle school they also study English. If they want to speak English they have to first think of how to say it in Miao, then translate it into Chinese then translate it into English. Vegetables in Miao is '*cai bai*', in Chinese it's '*bai cai*'. It's hard for them to speak English. Their writing is ok but oral English is not. Teacher's English is also not good.

There are certainly some valid concerns about English among the minorities but for the most part they do not seem overly worried.

### WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS TELL US?

Perhaps the most significant point to emerge from this study is that students are the main English using group among the minorities. This group is important because they are the ones currently using (or not using) minority languages and will one day pass on (or not pass on) minority languages to the next generation. The decisions they make will be affected by a number of factors. Although minority areas are still less developed than Han areas, the current crop of students is likely to have more opportunities, be economically better off and more mobile than previous generations. Changes in China's educational practices are also likely to influence decisions about language. One of the goals of minority education policy is to produce qualified and skilled people to work in minority areas and help them develop but university graduates are no longer assigned jobs by the government (Postiglione, 1999, pp.11-12) which has led to "a recent trend for minority graduates to seek economic opportunities outside their relatively poor native regions" (Sautman, 1999, p.196). Many of the most developed areas are where English has its greatest presence. All this means that minorities may well get more exposure to English and see it as a way to advance further and it is therefore their decisions that will determine the fate of minority languages and the role English will play in this process. The best outcome is for minorities to achieve additive bilingualism, that is to acquire English without the loss of the minority language<sup>5</sup>. Unfortunately, there are two major obstacles to this, lack of minority cultural content on the curriculum and lack of educational resources<sup>6</sup>.

### Lack of Minority Cultural Content on the Curriculum

For additive bilingualism to occur the language learner must have a positive attitude towards his or her native language and culture as well as the target language and culture. However, China has a highly centralised education system and the curriculum is basically the same all over the country (Harrell and Ma Erzi, 1999, pp.218-9). The minorities are allowed some leeway in deciding what to teach but "most schools in minority areas or schools expressly for the minorities do not deviate from the unified national model in their basic philosophy, methods, or, except for classes in minority languages and literature, their content" (Harrell and Ma Erzi, 1999, p.220). In cases where subjects relating to the history, culture or other characteristics of the minority are taught, this is always done in addition to rather than instead of the standard curriculum (Mackerras, 1995,

<sup>5</sup> This is actually a question of minorities acquiring a minority language, Chinese and English but as bilingualism is defined as using two or more languages (Myers-Scotton, 2006; Romaine, 2004) the term applies here. This paper focuses on ELT among the minorities because much has already been written about the minorities and Chinese and ELT in general or as it applies to the Han majority.

<sup>6</sup> Due to space restrictions, these issues are discussed only briefly, for more detail see Gil (2005, Ch.7).

p.136). This means that although there is some scope for the inclusion of minority cultures in education, they are not supported as much as they could be.

### **Lack of Educational Resources**

Encouraging additive bilingualism also requires resources and this is the second obstacle as far as the minorities are concerned. While some significant advances have been made since the beginning of the PRC, the overall situation is still one where “especially in rural areas, there are shortages of teachers, schools, books and all other educational facilities” (Mackerras, 1995, p.139). Indeed, it is not hard to find examples of extremely poor schools. As late as 1982 the Chengchu Primary School in Wuwu County, Guangxi Province had only one toilet to cater for its 2000 students, the school building was unsafe and teachers had to use their legs as desks (Postiglione, 1992, p.324). Perhaps the most important constraint on minority education is lack of qualified teachers and while numbers have increased in recent years there are still shortcomings. Some teachers are unwilling to work in minority areas as they believe it will be detrimental to their careers (Postiglione, 1992, pp.323-324) and in cases where there are qualified teachers, they usually want to leave as soon as possible for a job in a more developed or urban area (Shih Chih-yu, 2002, p.186).

In some cases circumstances prevent minorities from using existing resources. In Baiwu Town of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, for example there is an elementary school capable of teaching from grades one to six. Schools in surrounding villages stop at grade three, four or five so students from these villages must come to Baiwu if they want to continue their education. Depending on where one lives, it can take up to two hours each way to walk to the school (Harrell and Ma Erzi, 1999, p.224).

For minorities to gain the kind of language abilities argued for here would therefore require the allocation of an enormous amount of resources and significant changes in the government’s attitude towards minorities. While this is probably unrealistic, something can still be done towards improving English language learning and teaching.

### **THE CONTEXT APPROACH**

There is growing recognition of the importance of context in language teaching and learning and the need to cater teaching to a particular situation (see for example Ellis, 1996; Holliday, 1994; Kramsch, 1993; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996). The context approach developed by Bax (2003) is in a sense an operationalisation of these ideas and has the potential to improve English language education among the minorities. It came out of what Bax (2003) sees as an overemphasis on teaching methodology at the expense of the context that language teaching takes place in and, as Table 1 shows, the central tenet of this approach is that any decisions about methodology and content must be based on a thorough understanding and analysis of the context which includes factors to do with individuals, classroom culture, local culture and national culture.

In order to develop a language course around the context approach the teacher would gather and analyse information about the context then use this to make decisions on an appropriate method(s) and course content. The aim here is not to restrict choices –any method(s) that are likely to be useful can be chosen regardless of their origin or popularity and the same applies to course content. These decisions are then put into action and throughout the course the teacher monitors contextual factors for any changes which may in turn require a change in methodology (Bax, 2003, p. 285).

**Table 1. The context approach to language teaching with priorities and procedures****First Priority:** Context**Step 1:** Teacher will develop analytical tools for analysing and understanding the learning context**Step 2:** Teacher will analyse the context carefully and systematically as far as possible. This includes enhanced awareness of these areas, for example:

Individuals	Classroom Culture	Local Culture	National Culture
Personal differences	Group dynamics	Regional differences	Political context
Learning styles	Group motivation	Status of teacher and students in community	Religious context
Learning strategies	Classroom environment	Attitude and behaviour of parents	Social context
Personal motivation	School environment	Local environment	National environ.
Etc.	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

The above analysis would have priority over the next two areas:

**Second (or third) Priority:** Teaching Approach. This may involve decisions related to methodological aims and means, including decisions relating to: syllabus, classroom seating, materials, methods, student groupings etc.**Third (or second) Priority:** Language Focus. This will involve decisions related to the aspect of language to be focused on, such as lexis, for example, or phonology, or grammar.*Source:* adapted from Bax (2003, p. 287 with table section originally adapted from Holliday, 1994)

### Applying the Context Approach to ELT among the Minorities

The factors in the National Culture column are fairly well understood in the case of China but for information on the other factors ethnographic research will be necessary. Ethnographic methods are well suited to research on minority education because they can show how education fits into the local context and how education is perceived by the minorities (Postiglione, 1999, p.12), which is all relevant to the areas identified in the Local Culture column. In order to get information on the factors relating to individuals and the classroom, we need to turn to those who know the situation best, the teachers and students themselves. There are two aspects to this. First, information is needed on the 'what is' of language teaching, that is what actually happens on a day-to-day basis in the language classroom (Nunan, 1992, p.230). This means classes should be observed as they happen, without placing any constraints on or attempting to control what happens (Bailey and Nunan, 1996, pp.1-9). Classroom observation of this kind is a useful tool for gaining information about teacher and learner behaviour, the learning and teaching process and the interaction between them (Allwright, 1988, pp.256-8).

Second, it is necessary to get the perspective of students and teachers. In other words, we have to listen to the concerns and ideas of those involved in the learning and teaching of English (Bailey and Nunan, 1996, pp.1-9). Because of their experience teaching English in minority areas teachers are likely to have developed ideas about what works and does not work in their classrooms. Freeman (1996) argues that teaching is in fact knowing what to do in a particular context and it is this knowledge which needs to be brought to light. Students too have a part to play and studies have shown that students can articulate their needs and desires about language learning more clearly than they are often given credit for (Murray, 1996; Snow et al., 1996). This information can then be used as a basis for developing methods, a curriculum and materials for teaching English to minorities. If the aim is to encourage additive bilingualism, minority content should be included. Lessons could be built around a particular aspect of the minority's culture and teaching methods should also focus on the characteristics of the minorities. For example, if singing is a significant part of a minority's culture then English could be taught through songs.

Of course, the context approach cannot make resources suddenly appear nor can it change government attitudes or policies. Its value is in its potential to develop appropriate and realistic ways of teaching English to minorities by taking full account of the situation in any given locality. However, while an emphasis on context means flexibility and the potential to develop locally based solutions, it also means that minorities have to be aware of the limits their situation places



on them. As mentioned earlier, questions remain over the political will of the Chinese government to let minorities maintain and develop their languages and cultures. Even though any application of the context Approach will have to take place within the parameters set by the Chinese government, it is likely that on a small scale positive results can be achieved. Small village schools for example can use this approach to make adjustments to teaching to make it more suited to the local situation without contradicting the directives of the central government and if this approach does prove to be successful, it will gain momentum and could then be used on a larger scale.

### **THE CONTEXT APPROACH AS A GUIDE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

As hinted at above, the context approach can be used as an agenda or guide for further research into the impact of English on minorities and their languages. The two areas it identifies are in-depth sociolinguistic studies of particular minorities and areas of China and issues associated with the implementation of the context approach.

#### **In-depth Sociolinguistic Studies of Particular Minorities and Areas of China**

This paper mentions a number of minorities from different parts of China but many are left out and much more needs to be done to further our understanding of the dynamics of the English language in minority areas. The context approach, with its list of pertinent aspects of a teaching and learning situation, provides a guide for in-depth sociolinguistic, ethnographic studies of particular minorities or areas inhabited by minorities. Such studies can also include information about the use and status of English and attitudes towards English.

#### **Using the Context Approach**

There are many advantages to the context approach but at this stage they remain hypothetical, research is needed to show whether it can actually be used in China and whether it does produce the desired results. Such research will also identify any problems involved with its use and any refinements that may be necessary. For example, will teachers be willing to use this approach? What are the attitudes of local leaders, parents and students towards its use?

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has presented a preliminary sketch of the use and status of English in minority areas of China and the opinions of minorities about English. It has shown that English currently has a limited presence in minority areas, and, perhaps more importantly, that there is a strong desire to learn it. Efforts must be made to ensure English is acquired without the loss of the minority language and the context approach are suggested as a way of doing this and as a generator of further research. Regardless of whether or not the context approach turns out to be useful, such research will hopefully result in a way of teaching English to the minorities that encourages additive bilingualism.

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