

A Comparative Study of Multi-ethnic Bilingual Education Policies in China and the UK

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Abstract. Multi-ethnic bilingual education policies are crucial for multi-ethnic nations in safeguarding ethnic minorities' rights, maintaining stability and improving national cohesion. Both China and the UK are multi-ethnic countries that developed bilingual education policies. This study uses documentary, comparative and historical research methods to review the multi-ethnic bilingual education policies of the two countries and to compare their similarities and differences. The study finds that the two countries have similarities in terms of policy objectives, development processes and linguistic perspectives. However, due to the national and ethnic backgrounds and cultural differences between the two countries, there are differences in terms of legalisation and mainstream language functions. The study recommends that China should provide higher-quality bilingual education resources in ethnic minority areas. In addition, a variety of bilingual education teaching models should be provided to further help build ethnic confidence in ethnic minority areas. Finally, the Chinese government could regularly monitor the status of minority languages to protect endangered languages and valuable ethnic heritage promptly.

Keywords: Bilingual education; language policy; ethnic minorities; comparative study.

1. Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communication but is also tied to social power and political institutions. Ruiz suggested three perspectives on language in 1984: language as a problem, a right, and a resource [1]. While the three tendencies are academically controversial due to their roots in politics, they provide the basis and direction for bilingual education [2]. Tsung states that, especially for multi-ethnic countries, bilingual or multilingual education is the ideal solution to guarantee the linguistic rights of minorities and to protect their cultural heritage from generation to generation [3].

As a country with 56 ethnic groups, China shelters about 2,000 dialects [4]. The Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese group makes up 91.5% of China's total population, while more than 290 languages are spoken by the other 55 ethnic minorities [5]. Therefore, unifying a standard language for education in China is undoubtedly complex. Britain is also a multi-ethnic country. Minority groups in the UK can be divided into native minorities and foreign immigrants. The former includes the Scots, Welsh, Irish and others, accounting for 16% of all ethnic minorities. The latter comprises over 100 categories, including white and coloured immigrant minority groups [6]. This is despite many believing that the use of minority languages may disappear as multilingual communities integrate into British society and immigration slows. The fact is that survey shows that in 2021/22, 34.5% of students are from an ethnic minority background and 19.5% of students have a first language that is known or perceived to be other than English, an increase compared to 2020/21 [7].

At present, few studies involving multi-ethnic bilingual education in China and the UK have conducted comparative analyses of relevant aspects of the two countries' bilingual education policies. By comparing the frameworks and practises of bilingual education policy for ethnic minorities in China and the United Kingdom, this study intends to draw on the experiences and lessons of British policy in a focused manner. It is hoped that this study will enrich the research results in related fields and have some theoretical significance.

2. Ethnic-Chinese Bilingual Education Policy in China

In China, different stages of development of bilingual education policy parallel to the political agenda can be witnessed.

2.1. The Initial Period (1949-1957)

The incipient period of bilingual education policy was from 1949 to 1957 [8, 9]. In 1949, when New China was founded, China began to formally implement legislation on ethnic education. In September 1949, a provisional constitution was adopted, which stipulated that all nationalities are equal within the territory of China and regional autonomy for nationalities shall be exercised in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities [10]. This indicates that China has officially begun to develop the education of ethnic minorities, which not only marks the formal establishment of the regional autonomy system for ethnic minorities, but also marks the legislative guarantee of Chinese Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education policy.

According to the first Constitution of China, which was established in 1951, every ethnic group in China is allowed to utilize and develop their native languages and scripts [8]. To accommodate the requirements and preferences of the local minority, schools of all levels for ethnic minorities should offer courses in Chinese. This policy was first enacted by the Chinese State Council in 1951 and applies to all ethnic groups using the common script [11]. It can be seen that China promoted monolingual education in ethnic languages at this time, aiding students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in using their native tongues in classrooms.

2.2. The Stagnation Period (1958-1977)

In early 1958, China set up a minority language and script investigation team to go into ethnic areas and conduct a comprehensive survey of the ethnic language and script situation [8]. However, at a time when linguistic research and studies on ethnic minorities were in full swing and yielding remarkable results, *the Great Leap Forward* and *the Cultural Revolution* led to a left deviation thought on Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education policy in 1958. The years 1958 to 1977 are considered to be a period of stagnation in the policy of Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education, during which the number of policy texts issued on minority education was extremely small, and the content of the policy texts was mostly related to the prohibition of education in ethnic languages. At this time arguments emerged about the uselessness of ethnic scripts and the trend towards ethnic integration, arguing that minority languages should be integrated or extinguished. In an attempt to achieve rapid linguistic unification, minority languages were labelled as useless, backward and even divisive to the country [12]. As a result, bilingual education was replaced by monolingual Mandarin education during this period [13].

2.3. The Recovery Period (1978-1999)

The instability gradually eased and the bilingual education policy started to be implemented again after 1978. China's education policy acknowledged and valued minority languages from 1978 to 1999. For instance, the State Education Commission mandated in 1980 that while taking into consideration the study of Mandarin, all ethnic groups who have their native languages and scripts should be instructed in and correctly master their own languages. [14]. *The Constitution* from 1982 declared that the government will encourage the widespread use of Mandarin [15]. Another policy which was issued in 1985, recommended that bilingual education be vigorously carried out and that a policy of assistance be put in place for isolated minority communities [16]. The phrase "bilingual education" was first used in a formal sense during this time. These policies were characterised by the necessity that schools with a preponderance of students from ethnic minorities instruct in the language of the minority, but they also encouraged flexibility in the scheduling of Chinese classes in accordance with the actual situation [9].

2.4. The Development and Reform Period (2000-Now)

As China enters the 21st century, its Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education policy has entered a period of comprehensive development and deepening reform. This is reflected in the increased attention given to the teaching resources, the inclusion of bilingual education in pre-schools and the mandatory introduction of Mandarin language courses in minority schools. In July 2002, the support for the education of ethnic minorities in distant western areas was emphasised, along with the training of bilingual teacher teams and the popularisation of economically useful teaching materials for ethnic minorities [17]. At this time, China formally put forward the requirement of Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education.

In the policies after 2015, the term “bilingual education” began to replace “ethnic languages education” and “Chinese education”, which means that the policymakers have pointed out the functional significance of bilingual education efforts in forging a sense of community of the Chinese nation [18]. The outlook for the future of Min-Chinese bilingual education exists in both the 2009 and 2015 policies, including the promotion of bilingual education at the obligatory education level. In 2020, the Qinghai Provincial Department of Education conducted an inspection of poverty alleviation in poor Tibetan areas. Its feedback revealed a general lack of Chinese language teachers in ethnic elementary and secondary schools in Yushu, Guoluo and Huangnan. In the five ethnic schools in Tongren County, there was a total shortage of 52 Chinese language teachers, and Chinese language courses are basically taught by teachers of other subjects on a part-time basis [19].

Throughout the process of the ongoing growth of the Chinese bilingual education policy, it is evident that there has been a shift from a purely educational policy to one that contains a political core of safeguarding national unity and promoting national unity. The reshaping of ethnicity and the renewal of ethnic education have led to higher educational aspirations for ethnic education itself, which has become an internal motivation for policy change and transformation. The external environment of the country's political, economic and cultural development has led to a reconsideration of linguistic views and an expansion of linguistic values, which have become external forces for policy change and transformation [19]. In the course of policy development, China has gradually emphasised the importance of the national lingua franca while protecting minority languages. The policies of Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education has also facilitated the studying and living of students in ethnic minority communities. However, in terms of policy implementation, the problem of teaching resources in ethnic minority communities has still not kept pace with the development of the policies. The problem of teaching materials as well as the quantity and quality of bilingual teachers still need to be addressed.

3. Multi-Ethnic Bilingual Education Policy in the UK

Since the mid-twentieth century, the UK's multi-ethnic language policy has likewise gone through various stages of variation, which reflect changes in the attitudes and educational philosophies of the UK authorities towards minorities [6].

3.1. Policy for British Native Ethnic Minorities

3.1.1. Bilingual education policy in Wales

In Wales, Welsh is an official language along with English and both are included in local basic education. Many young Welsh speakers today are fluent in both languages [20].

In 1870, the Education Act was enacted and English was made the language of education in schools. During this time, Welsh and Welsh-speaking children were discriminated against. From the early 20th century onwards, the “English invasion” and migration of people from Welsh-speaking areas coincided with a gradual increase in the social status of English and a decline in the agricultural and industrial development of Wales, which led to a decline in the number of Welsh speakers [20].

As the national consciousness grew, the Welsh, as a symbol of national identity, was revalued. In response, Welsh people began to organise various events using only the Welsh language. At the same

time, the government also legislated to protect the Welsh language, gradually restoring the Welsh language to legal status in the judiciary, administration, religion and education, and requiring the opening of Welsh language schools. The two main acts protecting the Welsh are *the Welsh Language Act of 1993* and *the Welsh Language Measure of 2011*, which formally established parity between Welsh and English in Wales and created a process for issuing Welsh language standards [21]. Surveys show that from 2011 to 2018, the number of pupils in primary schools taught in Welsh continued to rise [22]. In 2019, 48% of primary school pupils received primary education using only or mainly Welsh.

3.1.2. Bilingual education policy in Scotland

The official language of Scotland is English and there are two native languages, Gaelic and Scots. In the late 19th century, the number of Gaelic speakers among the Scottish population fell to 250,000, representing only 6% of the entire Scottish population [23]. The historically weak position of Gaelic has slowed the development of bilingual education in Scotland and almost no one would consider teaching the subject in Gaelic. Although the status of the language has not fundamentally changed in recent years, it has increased slightly as the local population has become more interested in the language and culture of the nation [20].

The Scottish Education Act of 1918 required local education authorities to support the teaching of Gaelic in elementary and secondary schools in Gaelic Language Areas. In June 2005, *the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act* received Royal Assent and Gaelic became the official language of Scotland. In 2017, another act took effect. It aims to give parents the right to require their children to be educated in Gaelic and impose an obligation on local authorities to foster Gaelic education [24]. Despite this, the number of Gaelic speakers continues to dwindle.

3.1.3. Bilingual education policy in Northern Ireland

The official language of Northern Ireland is English and Irish is an indigenous language. In the mid-1980s the government began to support Irish language education. The Northern Ireland Education Act 1998 placed a duty on the Department of Education to promote and encourage Irish language schools. The establishment of the Irish Language Board and the Department of Commissioning for Irish Language Education (DCEI) are examples of state recognition and support for Irish language education [23]. Recently, the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill 2022 received Royal Assent and became law in Northern Ireland. For the first time, the Irish language was officially recognised in Northern Ireland [25].

In general, the three native minorities in the UK with a strong consciousness of nationality are aware of the close relationship between language and culture. They have taken various measures to save their languages, which are in danger of disappearing. The introduction of bilingual education and policies relating to indigenous languages in these areas are the main measures taken to preserve them.

3.2. Bilingual Education Policy for Immigrant Minorities in Britain

3.2.1. The assimilationism and English as a foreign language period

The influx of immigrants between the 1940s and 1960s brought different cultures, religious beliefs, languages and habits to UK society. In the 1860s, due to growing ethnic tensions caused by social and educational inequities, the British government enacted the Commonwealth Immigration Act, which represented the first time that an immigrant language was considered. However, language or political policy at this time regarded immigrants as foreigners, which set the stage for a bilingual education model of English as a foreign language (EFL) [6]. In 1963, the British Ministry of Education stipulated that new immigrant children would be placed in language centres where English was the language of instruction and would receive at least one term of training in the British language and culture. Such an educational policy aimed to help students acquire the mainstream language and to enable immigrant students to adapt more quickly to mainstream schooling so that they could

become integrated members of British society and culture as soon as feasible [26]. Ethnic and linguistic amalgamation was thus the goal of the period's bilingual education policy.

However, the discriminatory nature of the idea of immigrants as foreigners left the policies of the period lacking in rationality and fairness, and even more marginalised the language of immigrants [27]. The British government amended the Race Relations Act several times between the 1960s and 1970s to legally establish equality for immigrants in education, employment and social services, but the race problem was not radically alleviated [28].

3.2.2. The multiculturalism and English as a second language period

Multiculturalism became increasingly popular in the 1980s, which advocated public recognition by the dominant culture or state of the cultural identity and national individuality of ethnic minorities or marginalised groups [29]. Since then, English as a Second Language (ESL) has replaced EFL as the dominant philosophy [6]. The shift in language policy demonstrates concern for the human rights and educational rights of ethnic minorities. Research indicates that by 1987 a significant number of local education authorities were providing support for the teaching of minority languages in bilingual courses or out-of-school hours [30]. In 1993, a financial policy was issued to secure funding for minority education.

3.2.3. English as an addition language period

In the 1990s, the British government realised that for some immigrant communities, English might be their third or even fourth language [6]. As a result, the teaching of English as an additional language (EAL) became the dominant philosophy.

In the 21st century, extremist violence in many areas of the UK has led the government to focus on national cohesion, integration and national identity and shared values [6]. In this context, the state has increasingly emphasised the importance of the common language. To this end, the UK government has developed a series of policies that emphasise the professional skills and professionalism of bilingual teachers while reinforcing English proficiency and learning skills among students from ethnic minority groups. The statement that community languages (minority languages) are a national asset was widely accepted, as suggested by a review committee on language education convened by the UK government in 2006 [28]. The group also concluded that instruction in foreign languages should cover more languages. Moreover, the government of the UK devised a set of more specific policies to aid the English language development of pupils from ethnic minorities. Such as specifying the teaching objectives of EAL as learning English pronunciation, grammatical structures and rules, the meaning of words and phrases, and comprehension in context; providing one-to-one tutoring for EAL learners and providing financial security [6].

4. Comparison

4.1. Similarities

4.1.1. Purpose and connotation

A multilingual society will inevitably bring about language contact and language competition [31]. Bilingual education is a problem that all multi-ethnic countries have to face. National interests are the driving force and ultimate goal of education policy [28]. Therefore, the multi-ethnic bilingual education policy in China and the UK both aim to improve national cohesion, protect the ethnic minorities' rights and maintain country unity. For China, the ethnic minorities' languages are important cultural products left behind by the historical changes, which record the trajectory of their cultural development and perpetuate the material conditions on which their survival depends [32]. It is also a significant vehicle for the growth of Chinese diverse cultures and the building of cultural confidence. The development and implementation of a multi-ethnic language policy are therefore of particular importance. For the UK, how to help minority language speakers improve their English

language skills to gain fair access to education and employment opportunities is also an issue that needs to be addressed [6].

4.1.2. The process of monolingual to multilingual development

From a glance at the growth of multi-ethnic bilingual education policies in China and the UK, there are similarities between the two. Firstly, in terms of the scope of language policy, they both evolved from monolingualism to multilingualism. Although there are slight differences between the two during the monolingual period: the Chinese monolingual period placed more emphasis on minority languages, while the British monolingual period placed more emphasis on the dominant language, English. However, in terms of general trends, the history of language policy development in both has promoted the concept of bilingual education through some kind of opportunity to move the country's language system towards plurality.

Secondly, in terms of the values of language policy, they have both shifted from a single value to a plurality of values, from instrumental values to intrinsic values. Instrumental value refers to the role that something plays in order to achieve a certain goal, while intrinsic value is the meaning that something has in itself [33]. Initially, language policy was seen in China as a tool to nurture talent for socio-economic development, and in the UK as a tool to facilitate the rapid learning of English by immigrant ethnic minorities for integration into society. However, following the clarification of the bilingual education policy, both China and the UK developed bilingual education policies that returned to the culture, spirituality and heritage of ethnic minorities.

4.1.3. The linguistic perspective in bilingual education policy

As mentioned earlier, Ruiz introduced the notions of language as a problem, a right and a resource [2]. The process of transformation of language between these three perspectives can be seen in both China and Britain. At the beginning of China's bilingual education policy, language was considered a right for ethnic minorities, then during the Cultural Revolution, minority languages were discarded as a social problem, and during the recovery and development of the bilingual education policy, language was reconsidered as a right. At the same time, minority languages were also considered to be important political and economic resources for social development. Similarly, in the UK, during the initial EFL period, minority languages were seen as a problem and therefore minorities were required to learn mainly English, the dominant language. During the ESL period, minority languages were seen as rights. During the EAL period, the notion of language as a resource became generally accepted by the UK government and the public, and policies to support language learning for ethnic minority students became more specific.

4.2. Differences

4.2.1. Legalisation of bilingual education policy

The comparison shows that bilingual education policy in China has been enshrined in the constitution from the very beginning, and then extended to legal documents, such as *the Education Law of the People's Republic of China* and *the Law on the Common State Language and Script* [34]. In contrast, the policies in the UK are dispersed and incoherent throughout the country's education policy. The political structure, with its shifting ruling party and decentralisation of power, and the vastly varying ethnic composition of the regions have resulted in a bilingual education policy system marked by variation in its goals, substance, and breadth. This discrepancy could be attributed to the dissimilar national circumstances and political systems of the two nations.

4.2.2. Functional change of mainstream language over minority languages

Besides, at different stages of the growth of the UK's bilingual education policy, the dominant language, English, has had different "functions" in relation to minority languages, as a foreign language, a second language and an additional language. This shift is clear and well-defined. The UK's bilingual policy has followed this shift to varying degrees. However, there is no such functional shift in China's dominant language, Chinese, as opposed to minority languages. This may be due to

the fact that the UK is a country with both indigenous and immigrant minorities, whereas China is dominated by indigenous minorities. As such, the former requires the mainstream language to have the functional flexibility to accommodate the needs of minority ethnic groups in order to better protect their rights and interests.

5. Implications on Teaching

Firstly, China should pay more attention to the issue of educational resources for multi-ethnic bilingual education including the upgrading of textbooks and the quality of teachers. Secondly, in the bilingual education classroom, ethnic confidence should be fostered among minority students to encourage them to acquire Chinese utilising their native languages and to pass on their culture more effectively. For example, minority language playgroups can be set up to enhance young students' enjoyment of using their indigenous language. Alternatively, teaching models such as immersion or second language mediated bilingual education could be used to allow students to learn Chinese and improve their ability to speak the minority language at the same time. Folklore events in minority languages should be encouraged to create a good bilingual education environment in minority communities. Finally, the central or local government can also set up language review groups in different regions to conduct regular surveys and studies on the learning status of different ethnic languages, so as to develop more practical policies on Ethnic-Chinese bilingual education in accordance with local conditions. This can also detect the survival status of different minority languages to the extent that local governments can save endangered minority languages in time.

6. Conclusion

The long-term and complex nature of ethnic issues, the social and fundamental nature of education, and the universal nature of language, together give bilingual education for ethnic minorities a special significance that cannot be replaced. How a multicultural nation may preserve a strong, centripetal majority culture while also giving due regard to its minorities and other cultures is a matter of significant relevance. Enhancing mutual understanding among people is the most valuable contribution that bilingual education can make, and it is also the best way to promote peaceful coexistence among ethnic and linguistic minorities. However expensive bilingual education may be, it will be less costly to society than the cost of not being able to do so. There are similarities and differences between multi-ethnic bilingual education policies in China and the UK, but its spiritual core of working for the common prosperity of multiple ethnic groups is paramount.

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