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in Xinjiang, People's Republic of China

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Multilingual Education in Minority-Dominated Regions in Xinjiang, People's Republic of China

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Abstract

Recent developments in multilingualism and multilingual education in minority-dominated regions in China highlight the importance of policy studies to support the national goals of achieving multilingualism (Feng and Adamson, 2015), especially in remote western regions such as Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) that pose geographical, socio-political, and educational challenges. This study investigates the effectiveness of language policies and the implementation of multilingual education for minority dominated regions in XUAR, and of the extent to which those policies support multilingual education. The data mainly comprise policy documents issued at the national, regional and institutional level, supplemented by interviews with policy makers at regional and local levels. The study finds that, while the policies at both national and regional levels regarding language education in China are generally supportive of multilingualism, in reality, some of the implemented practices at local school levels in XUAR are not totally consistent with the policy goals, while weak local capacity also hinders the implementation of multilingual education.

Key words: language education; language policy; ethnic minorities; Xinjiang; bilingualism; multilingualism

Introduction

The 56 officially recognised ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are important components for the government in terms of strategies to enhance national unity and social stability, and for the country's economic development. The PRC has a huge population of over 1.39 billion people, of which the Han, which is the majority group, comprises approximately 91.51% according to the 2018 census (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018). In addition to the Han, there are 55 minority groups mostly located in five autonomous regions, which tend to be resource-rich but economically under-developed (Adamson and Feng 2009): Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. These regions are significant because they cover 62% of the total area of the country; they share borders with 90% of neighbouring countries (where, in some cases, there are political tensions); and they possess a large amount of natural resources, including minerals, oil and gas, tropical crops and forestry (Duan 2011). There is a rich diversity of minority languages and dialects, although it is estimated that only about 60 million people (5-6% of the population) speak minority languages, and the Mandarin variety of Chinese (known as Putonghua) is the official language in the country (Feng 2005). Thus, the education of these ethnic minority groups, who are the majority living in several of these regions, is vital for the country's stability, unity and economic development. At the same time, education—and language education in particular—can present challenges in ensuring that minority group

members accumulate the linguistic, social, political and economic capital to contribute to, and benefit from, national development.

XUAR, the focus of this paper, is located in the northwest of the PRC and occupies one sixth of the country's total land mass, making it the largest Chinese administrative and geographic region in China. It shares borders with eight foreign countries (Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Russia, the Republic of Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) including five Central Asian Islamic states, as well as three provinces or regions in the PRC (Gansu, Qinghai and Tibet) (Zhang and Yang 2018). Some of the bordering countries may include powerful political and religious forces that might be perceived as a potential threat to national security and the integrity of China (Zhang and Gong 2016, Sun and Chang 2017). On the other hand, XUAR is also regarded as having 'great potential for international exposure both in sociocultural terms and economic activities' (Sunuodula and Feng, 2011, p.261). Within the province, there are a complex mix of ethnicities which included 13 main officially recognized ethnic nationalities. Uyghur is the largest ethnic group in the region making up more than 48% (around 11.3 million) of the population, and over 37% of the population is Han (8.5 million in 2014) (Zhang and Yang 2018). Of these groups, many have their own oral and written language system, such as Han, Uyghur, Kazak and Mongolian. Putonghua and Uyghur are the two major languages used by most of the people. Despite the ethnic and linguistic diversity, many ethnic minority groups generally inhabit the oasis villages in the south of XUAR, whereas Han Chinese tend to live in urban areas in the north (Ma 2009).

This paper examines how language policies in education have been designed for XUAR, and finds that decisions at local school levels as well as practical obstacles to the implementation of language education, such as school conditions and the shortage of qualified teachers, may weaken the achievement of national policy goals of allowing for cultural and linguistic diversity and hinder the implementation of multilingual education. The modes of education at local primary and secondary schools are greatly influenced by geographical and demographic factors. The education system of XUAR was characterized for many years by a balanced model (Feng and Adamson 2015) with two principle parallel subsystems to reflect ethnic diversity. For minority students in minzu (ethnic minority) schools, their language was the medium of instruction with Putonghua, which is the national lingua franca, taught as a second language school subject. Meanwhile, for the Han students in hanzu (Han Chinese) schools, Putonghua continues to be the medium of instruction for education with English as a preferred second language school subject (Sunuodula and Feng 2011, Zhang and Yang 2018). As the Uyghur language is one of the major languages used in XUAR, most Uyghur students were educated in their mother tongue with varying levels and degrees of Putonghua acquisition. Their competence in Putonghua mostly depended and still depends on where they live, the

opportunities for them to access resources, such as qualified teachers and textbooks, and the possibilities to interact with the Han population (Zhou and Zhang 2016).

In 2001, there were 3507 Uyghur language medium schools making up 56.37% of all 6221 primary schools in XUAR (Sunuodula and Feng 2011). The percentage of ethnic minority students receiving education in the schools adopting their native language as the medium of instruction varied according to locality, comprising around 65% of the total number of schools in northern XUAR but approximately 96% of the total in the south, where Uyghurs are dominant (Zhao 2004; Sunuodula and Feng 2011). However, this situation has changed rapidly with the promotion of bilingual education. A series of strategies have been introduced, not only to help students achieve bilingualism, bi-literacy and biculturalism for better communication among different ethnic groups within and outside of the region, but also with the aim of maintaining unity and stability in this multicultural region due to its particular location close to the national borders with the countries where there may be some tensions and its complex social environment. The strategies have included training bilingual teachers, encouraging minority children to attend pre-school bilingual classes (Zhang 2010), and merging the minority language medium schools with mainstream schools where Putonghua is the medium of instruction by 2008 (Tsung and Cruickshank 2009).

Another policy strand has extended bilingual education to trilingual education. With increased recognition of the importance of foreign language acquisition for economic development, a policy promulgated by the State Council in July 2002 stated that one foreign language could be added to the school curriculum in some areas if conditions permitted (Tai 2008). Therefore, English appeared in many XUAR schools. The extra dimension adds a new dynamic to the balance of languages. In the case of XUAR, trilingual education policies have varied according to demographics. In areas where Han students are in the majority, according to the document issued by the Ministry of Education (2001), English is taught as a second language, from Grade 3 in elementary schools or even from kindergarten in some economically developed cities. For minority students, English is taught as a third language where conditions permit and, despite the lack of resources, they tend to show enthusiasm towards learning English (Sunuodula and Feng 2011).

Multilingual Education

Multilingual education refers to ‘the use of two or more languages in education provided that schools aim at multilingualism and multiliteracy’ (Cenoz 2009, p.4). One goal of fostering multilingualism is to provide quality education that attends to learners’ needs whilst balancing them with contemporary political, cultural and social demands (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 2012). In recent years, an increasing number of multilingual education models have been

implemented in the last decade all over the world—Cenoz (2009) lists more than 90 varieties, while Ytsma (2001) identified 46 types of trilingual education. Extrapolating from Baker's (2006, 2011) work on bilingual education, the models may be loosely categorised in three forms: monolingual (leading to subtractive multilingualism and assimilation), weak (leading to limited multilingualism) and strong (leading to stronger levels of multilingualism). Strong models are premised on the belief that multilingualism can bestow cognitive, communicative and cultural advantages. Multilinguals may be able to think more flexibly and creatively than monolinguals (Lu 2009; Yao 2013; Baker 2003) and their progress in early cognitive development may also be accelerated through multilingual education. Multilinguals tend to have the capacity to engage in wider communication, resulting in more alternatives in patterns of communication across cultural groups, generations and regions (Cummins 2000), as well as mutual respect and understanding (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 2012). Multilingual education can develop a more tolerant, sympathetic and appreciative view of different cultures (Francis and Reyhner 2002; Cenoz 2009).

In the PRC, Adamson and Feng (2015, 243) identified four models of trilingual education based on empirical research across 13 regions, namely the Accretive, Balanced, Transitional and Depreciative Models. The Accretive and Balanced Models promote additive trilingualism in students in order to help them become trilingual and facilitate advantages in areas such as education and the economy; as such, they are strong models. Additive trilingualism in the Chinese context is defined as 'the development of very strong competences both in L1 (minority pupils' home language) and L2 (Putonghua) and peer appropriate competence in L3 (a foreign language, usually English). Peer appropriate competence in L3 refers to oral proficiency and literacy in L3 comparable to that of the peers of the majority Han group' (Feng and Adamson 2015, 8). In comparison, the Transitional and Depreciative Models aim to achieve limited multilingualism (even bilingualism or monolingualism) and are more likely to have negative consequences to their language acquisition and academic development. Additive trilingualism could be achieved if the learning of three languages had no detrimental effect on any of the languages (Adamson and Feng, 2009). Within the school context, this means that three languages would have to be equally valued, and when taught in schools, they should form an integral part of the school curriculum. Moreover, the three languages can be developed consecutively or in a more balanced approach.

However, the unevenness in the distribution of the four models reflects that issues involved in multilingual education are never purely linguistic. Economic challenges include the availability of sufficient resources, including qualified teachers and suitable teaching materials. Policy decisions are also strongly influenced by social and political considerations (Wang 2011; Baker 2003), and this is particularly apparent in regions such as XUAR where the demography

includes two broad groups—the Han, for whom Putonghua is the first language, and the minorities, who are the majority in the region, whose first languages are often linguistically distant from Putonghua. Ethnolinguistic vitality, the commitment of a local community to the sustenance for a language, is a key factor in determining the implementation of language policy. The combination of Putonghua and a dominant international language like English can have positive impacts on those (such as Korean in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture) with strong ethnolinguistic vitality or negative impacts on minority languages with weak ethnolinguistic vitality (Adamson 2015). According to Adamson and Feng (2009, p.331), the low social status of minority languages would be one of the important barriers to additive trilingualism due to their lack of associated political and economic capital. Feng (2007) argues that Putonghua is always placed before minority languages in importance in the education system, in order to facilitate socio-economic development in regions, and ‘linguistic and cultural hegemony and ethnic harmony are set as the aims in multilingual education’ (Feng 2007, 272). Thus, multilingual education is interwoven with politics and society.

The Study

This paper, which forms part of a broader research project (i.e., Zhang, 2016), is a study of the effectiveness of language policies and the implementation of multilingual education for minority dominated regions in XUAR, and of the extent to which those policies support multilingual education. The study is based on a view of language policy making and implementation as a managerial interaction between macrolevel planners (authorities in the national and regional government) and microlevel implementers (typically local government officials, school leaders and teachers) in a process that is influenced by political, ethnolinguistic, economic, educational, geographical and demographic factors (*inter alia*) in the respective contexts of decision making (Adamson and Davison 2003; Adamson and Feng 2015).

Given the complex ecology of XUAR, the study seeks to access rich data by combining documentary analysis of policies with interviews from implementers. Content analysis of the policy documents, which is regarded as a ‘useful research approach that can be applied to a wide variety of small and larger content or text data’ (Allen 2017, 248), allows researchers to examine and describe both the manifest and latent content meaning in the text, from describing the characteristics or visible features in the text that needs little interpretation by the reader to making implications about deep meaning in the content or the underlying features that requires more interpretation (Allen 2017, 245). Deductive methods were used in deriving the coding categories and coding a unit of content (e.g., national policy documents, regional policy documents, school curriculum, etc.) into categories in order to examine, explain and interpret the results by providing qualitative exemplars. The data mainly comprise 12 policy documents

issued at the national, regional and institutional level (see appendix) obtained from official websites and the Educational Bureau of XUAR which is responsible for language education for the whole region, supplemented by 4 semi-structured interviews with policy makers at regional and institutional levels. Additional data were sought in the form of provision-related documents such as curriculum design, course guidelines and other relevant documents in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of the context. Institutional policy documents in respective of language policy at the tertiary level were collected from a teacher training university (TTU hereafter), which is the main university in XUAR for pre- and in-service language teacher training; it also houses a regional bilingual education research center and 2 out of the 4 interviewees who were involved in curriculum design were from TTU. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy makers, including curriculum designers, decision makers and institutional leaders (see Table 1). The interview questions mainly asked how (in)effective current language education policies and practices are with regard to bi/trilingual education and language education in general for minority-dominated regions in XUAR, and key stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions of the languages in use and in education. The follow-up questions provided the participants with the opportunity to express their own perceptions towards language education in this region with greater freedom.

Table 1 Demographic information of interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Ethnicity	Affiliation	Role	Language proficiency
HP-1	Female	Han	Regional Department for Education	In charge of regional language teaching and language teacher training	Fluent Mandarin No competence in minority language Limited English
MP-1	Male	Ethnic minority	Regional Bilingual education research center	Key member and researcher	Fluent Mandarin Fluent minority language Limited English
HP-2	Female	Han	TTU	Curriculum designer of language teacher training programme	Fluent Mandarin No competence in minority language Fluent English
HP-3	Male	Han	TTU	Curriculum designer of language teacher training programme	Fluent Mandarin Limited competence in minority language

					Fluent English
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Positionality and reflexivity are two important elements which have the potential to influence the research outcomes (Hall and Callery 2001), especially in a sensitive region where the participants tend to be cautious to accept a request for an interview, and these two aspects were always borne in mind when conducting the research in order to increase the validity of the results. For all the interviews, a friendly approach was instigated and an effort was made to make the participants feel no pressure. In the interviews (which were conducted by the first author in Putonghua), the interviewer’s position was foregrounded as a listener and a co-creator of knowledge. It was found that the interviewees became more relaxed as the interviews progressed. For the purposes of this paper, quotations from the interviewees in Putonghua have been translated into English.

National policies

National policies in the area of multilingual education emerge from three separate strands (Adamson 2015): the establishment of regional autonomy concerning minority languages; the promotion of Putonghua as the standard *lingua franca*, and the linkage of foreign language education to state economic goals.

Regional ethnic autonomy is applicable in areas where minority nationalities are concentrated (Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People’s Republic of China 1984, modified in 2001; Autonomy Law hereafter) and it is the fundamental policy basis of the state for addressing issues concerning ethnic minority groups in China. The government in autonomous regions is mandated with the authority to implement distinct policies and to adapt measures in the light of local conditions, according to Article 119 of the Constitution (National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China 2004, Constitution hereafter; Article 6, Autonomy Law 2001). The Constitution (Article 4) states that “all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages”.

In Article 19 of the Constitution and Article 2 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China 2000, Standard Chinese Law hereafter), the normalization and standardization of Putonghua as the official language was guaranteed constitutionally. Putonghua is to serve as the main language in various public domains, such as for service industries, broadcasting, films, TV programmes and facilities and notices in public places

(Article 12, 13 and 14, Standard Chinese Law 2000). Staff in related occupations are expected to use Putonghua as their working language and need to reach the competence level set by the state; those who have not yet achieved the necessary standards should receive further training (Article 19, Standard Chinese Law 2000). In schools, Putonghua and the standardized characters are to be used, unless there are exceptions permitted in the law (Article 10, Standard Chinese Law 2000). The learning and use of Putonghua is described as essential for minority people in an autonomous region in the Autonomy Law and Standard Chinese Law, and local governments at various levels are encouraged or required to take measures to popularize Putonghua and the standardized characters (Article 4, Standard Chinese Law 2000). The purpose, it is claimed, is to promote both economic and cultural exchange amongst all the ethnicities and regions so that a common language would contribute to national unity and stability (Article 1 and Article 5, Standard Chinese Law 2000).

With the rapid development of China's economy and the global economic influence on China, the demand for acquiring English—which is regarded as a key international language—has “grown to an all-time high” (Sunuodula and Cao 2015, 66) in the nation. In order to develop English education, three documents were promulgated and issued by the Ministry of Education on the topic of students' English language learning in primary schools, secondary schools and universities (Sunuodula and Cao 2015). Since 2001, English language lessons have been offered from Grade Three in primary schools located in cities and county seats and ‘gradually’ to be offered in primary schools located in towns and townships since 2002, while specific English standards have been established for students finishing their schooling (The Ministry of Education Guidelines for Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English in Primary Schools, Ministry of Education of PRC 2001). The release of this document ‘marked the birth of a new foreign language policy in China’, which brought English language teaching and learning forward from Grade Seven—the first year of junior secondary school to Grade Three of primary schools (Hu 2007, 360). However, not all the schools in XUAR offered English for minority students from Grade Three in primary schools, due to insufficient resources, especially the lack of qualified teachers of English (Abulimiti 2017). Some of the minority students start to learn English from junior middle school, or even after they enter university (Shen 2017), where they face the challenge of a requirement that five to ten percent of undergraduate courses should be conducted in English (Ministry of Education of PRC 2001). Minority students may have pressure from these policies if they are to access educational opportunities.

The government, at both national and regional levels provides financial support for language education. Since 2008, a national training project for primary and junior middle school teachers, established by the Ministry of Education, has been conducted for schools in the

western part of the PRC and in rural areas. The state investment for this project amounted to 35 million RMB and was free of charge for the trainees (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2008). It was intended for regions such as XUAR.

Regional policies in XUAR

The autonomy offered to XUAR to manage the implementation of language policies in education provides scope for the adjustment of national policy goals at the regional level (Adamson and Feng 2009), but, as Schluessel (2007) argues, the details for implementation of the policy might be negotiable on a local regional basis, however, how far they can be negotiated is unclear. By law, the two major languages in XUAR, Uyghur and Putonghua, are to be used together by the organs of self-government of XUAR; while in cases where more than one language is used to perform a function, the language of the majority ethnic group in that area can be used as the main language (Article 7, The Language Regulations for Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, 1993, amended in 2002, Language Regulations hereafter). Under the Language Regulations, the primary and junior middle schools where a minority language is the medium of instruction should strengthen their minority language teaching while Putonghua should be offered as a subject from Grade Three in primary schools, or introduced earlier where appropriate (Article 18). The goal is to enable the ethnic minority students to become multilinguals in their minority language and Putonghua when they graduate from senior middle schools. In ethnic minority dominated areas, Putonghua medium schools may offer a course in the minority language. Schools are encouraged to provide the ethnic minority students with the freedom to choose Putonghua medium schools or minority language schools, and Han students are allowed to choose to attend minority language medium schools if they wish to (Article 19 and 20, Language Regulations 2002). Bilingual/ multilingual education (the minority language and Putonghua) at the tertiary level should be further strengthened with the aim of developing excellent bilinguals/multilinguals (Article 18, Language Regulations 2002). However, no explicit measures to implement the policy are offered in the document.

Multilingual education has been favoured since 2004 with the document named "Decision on vigorous promotion of 'bilingual' teaching and education" issued by XUAR government regarding Putonghua and minority languages, and a separate national policy promoting the learning of a foreign language as well¹. The XUAR document incorporates bilingual education into the main work of party committees and XUAR governments in their agenda at all levels. The implementation of the bilingual education policy includes comprehensive requirements. In 2005, the scope of bilingual education expanded to pre-school; learning from childhood and teacher training and education have been emphasized ("Ideas on strengthening bilingual education for pre-school minorities" 2005, No.28, issued by XUAR government and

General Office of Party Committee). Amended policies and measures were proposed in 2008 in order to further strengthen the implementation of bilingual education for minority students in pre-school, primary and junior middle schools (“Ideas on further strengthening bilingual education for minority students in pre-school, primary and junior middle schools” 2008, No.19, issued by XUAR government and General Office of Party Committee). In 2010, bilingual education in XUAR was promoted as a national strategy during a forum on Xinjiang issues. After this forum, a series of documents was issued jointly by the Minister of Education and other Ministers of the PRC, such as “Opinions on promoting the implementation of bilingual education in XUAR”. In these documents, further measures were proposed to guarantee the development of bilingual education in XUAR, such as financial support from the State for teacher training, teaching research and textbook design (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China No.6, 2010). In the “Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” (National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, 2010), the promotion of Putonghua and enhancing bilingual education were emphasized again.

In line with the national long-term plan mentioned above, another document named “XUAR long-term development plan on bilingual education for minority students from pre-schools to junior middle schools (2010-2020)” was drafted and published in 2011 (Government of XUAR 2011, Long-term Plan hereafter). This plan reports the outcomes of bilingual education from 2004 to 2010, where it states that 22.2% of the minority students had received bilingual education in their primary and junior middle schools until 2009; 11.6% of the minority students were educated using Putonghua as the medium for instruction to learn school subjects. The plan defined the objectives of the next 10 years of bilingual education stating that, by 2015, bilingual education would be implemented in all the minority dominated primary and junior middle schools; the percentage of minority students who have received bilingual education was to reach 75%-80% by 2015, and 90%-95% by 2020.

Three models of multilingual education were discernible in XUAR until 2011, when they were reduced to two (Table 2). With the promulgation of the Long-term Plan, the previous Model 2 was removed from the list (Zhao 2012). The two remaining models demonstrate the two-stream approach. Model 1 provides education in cultural subjects and social sciences in the minority language, while sciences and other language subjects except the minority language are taught through the medium of Putonghua; this stream is mainly intended for minority students in areas in which there are limited numbers of bilingual teachers able to use Putonghua as the medium of instruction. The other stream which is Model 3 has Putonghua as the medium of instruction, with a course in minority language literacy taught through the minority language (Ma 2011; Zhao 2012); this stream is the preferred model according to the Long-term Plan, as it enhances

Putonghua, and was expected to be used for most minority students in primary and junior middle schools by 2020.

Table 2: Models of multilingual education in XUAR

Model	Putonghua as the Medium of Instruction	Minority language as the Medium of Instruction
Model 1 (2007-2008)	Science Courses (Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, information technology) Foreign language	Other courses, such as Language literacy, History, Geography, Citizenship, PE, Music, Art, Computing
Model 2 (2007-2008)	Citizenship, Science Courses (Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, Physics), History, Geography, PE, Computing	Language literacy, Music and Literature
Model 3 (2009-2010)	All the courses, except the minority language	Minority Language literacy
Since 2011	Model 1 and Model 3	

(Long-term Plan 2011; Zhao 2012)

Among the models presented above, Model 3 has been encouraged to be implemented for minority students who have joined the pre-school multilingual education programme from Grade One in primary schools, which is all the courses taught through Putonghua except minority language literacy (Long-term Plan 2011). Meanwhile, foreign language courses have been added into the school curriculum from Grade Three onwards in primary schools. English language courses were offered in schools where Putonghua is the medium language for instruction; however, for many of the schools where the minority language is used as the medium of instruction, English language courses were not listed in their curriculum.

At the tertiary level, from 2009 to 2011, the minority students (except those who studied in the track that uses Putonghua as the medium of instruction) in TTU would have one extra pre-session year for Putonghua learning compared to Han students. Then the minority students were required to pass the Chinese Language Proficiency Test (*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* or HSK) in order to move on to their major studies. For Han students, the Uyghur language was added into their curriculum with two classes per week in the third semester from 2009 in order to prepare for their future internship in the last semester. A Japanese module was still available on their curriculum. The curricula for both Han and minority students were further modified in 2012 and the revised versions are still in force at the time of this study. As well as English which takes up 45% on average, the minority students were required to continue with Mandarin classes after spending a pre-session year learning the language; Putonghua classes took up 7% of the total spread across three semesters. They were required to pass the Chinese Language

Proficiency Test for Minority Students (*Minzu Hanyu Kaoshi* or MHK) examination instead of the HSK. Han students learn Uyghur for one semester, replacing Japanese, which was formerly taught. Another part of the curriculum for both Han and minority students is other skills related to becoming a teacher, which take approximately 30% of the timetable. The courses include: Computing; Appreciation of Music and Art; Cultivation of Professional Ethics of Teachers; Career Guidance; How to Be a Good Head Teacher; and the Internship, which are all delivered through Putonghua.

Challenges

The policy documents are supportive of bilingual education, but the implementation stage is where challenges are most apparent. One challenge is finding a balance, in the first instance between Putonghua and the minority language—and when a foreign language is added, the relationship becomes more complex. All policy makers who were interviewed for this study stated that Putonghua is the most important language for both Han and minority students. A Han policy maker (HP-1) who is working in the Department for Education in XUAR argued that:

Putonghua is the national language; it should be known by all Chinese people. More than half of the people in this region could only communicate in Putonghua. And most of the exams are in Putonghua now; even some of the job interviews require Putonghua only instead of the minority language. Putonghua should be further enhanced in XUAR.

One problem was the perceived poor competence of minority students in Putonghua. An experienced researcher (MP-1) commented:

I agree that Putonghua is the most important language for all the students. But I am afraid the outcome of multilingual education and trilingual education is not satisfactory. Because the passing rate of MHK is low, in TTU, only 40% of the minority students could pass it after one year's Yuke [pre-sessional programme learning Putonghua]. We need to reflect on this and think about the reasons.

The case for minority students to learn the local minority language was weakened by two factors. First, although policy makers recognised that the mother tongue conveys the cultural heritage of the minority group, which should be treasured, they feared that minority language only may lead to limited information and be taken advantage by other people who intended to foment terrorism and separatism, that might threaten national unity and stability. One policy maker (MP-1) noted:

It is a pity that some of the minority people could only speak their minority language. Their access to the information is very limited; they don't know exactly what is going on in the world; they immersed themselves in religion and didn't learn their culture and religion in a good way. Even worse, some of them were taken advantage by other people who intended to foment terrorism and separatism in XUAR. It is also one of the reasons why the minority students should learn Putonghua and why multilingual education should be promoted unceasingly in XUAR.

Second, Han students showed reluctance in learning a minority language, even though they could see some value of they intended to work in XUAR. An institutional level decision maker (HP-2) in TTU pointed out that they lacked intrinsic motivation:

On the one hand, Han students have the awareness that learning Uyghur may be helpful both in daily communication and career in future; on the other hand, they have no strong motivation, interest or pressure to learn Uyghur. They couldn't see the advantages or disadvantages.

According to the findings of this research, when implementing these policies at the tertiary level, the focus was on Putonghua; no minority language was included as a course in the curriculum for minority students. With regard to Han students, it was found that a minority language course was included; however, there was no specific requirement either for assessing the teachers' pedagogical competence or for students' learning outcomes regarding this course.

Foreign languages were more strongly embraced by policy makers as they posed less risk. The policy makers viewed English as an important international language that influences life in various aspects, however, they still believed enhancing Putonghua was the most urgent task for them. The policy maker (HP-1) said:

Because of the particular location of XUAR and the situation now, the very first important task for minority students is to learn Putonghua well, at least within the next 5 years. The focus in XUAR will still remain on bilingual education. English will be taken into account, but not now. And it is unavoidable and should be admitted that we have difficulty in finding adequate teachers; it is also one of the reasons why English is not offered in so many schools in Southern Xinjiang.

English, in particular, was popular with minority students, even though their opportunities to learn English at primary or secondary school had been limited for various reasons. A curriculum designer (HP-3) in TTU commented:

I feel puzzled that it seems many of the minority students have a talent in learning English rather than Putonghua. They could learn English better than Han students, especially in speaking and listening. It is not isolated cases. I have heard it from many practitioners in both schools and universities.

The attitude that Putonghua is the most important language for the students predominated at the tertiary level. In TTU, institutional leaders believed English should be acquired after the students mastered Putonghua. The curriculum designer (HP-3) in TTU explained:

Almost all the teachers including minority teachers learned English via Putonghua; all the textbooks related to English learning are in Putonghua, there is no Uyghur as the medium language for instruction in textbooks; and most of the resources used Putonghua to facilitate their English learning. In this sense, it is not feasible to use another language as the medium language for instruction except Putonghua.

Multilingual education has been severely restricted by the shortage of suitable teachers. HP-1 stated that:

Although great support and effort from both national and regional level has been invested in addressing the shortage of qualified teachers, multilingual education is still hampered by it, with bottleneck restrictions, and it seems hard to solve. There are two kinds of problems: one is how to supplement the numbers of multilingual teachers; the other is how to maintain the current multilingual teachers still willing to continue to teach in ethnic minority areas. In my opinion, more Han teachers could be recruited without them needing to know a minority language well before they join; they could learn the minority language while teaching. It is similar to a foreign teacher coming into Chinese education; they don't have to know Putonghua well. It is one way, but eventually, we need more minority teachers who are multilinguals to solve the problem.

The scale of the problem has been growing. During the development of multilingual education in XUAR, the number of students in primary schools offering a bilingual education increased dramatically (from 12,761 to 469,568), while the number of students in junior middle schools also increased (from 23,187 to 157,373) from 2004 to 2010. By 2016, XUAR needed an extra 13,000 bilingual teachers (Hu and Jiao 2017). Exacerbating the problem is the fact that the current multilingual teachers tend to have low Putonghua proficiency and pedagogical competence (Wang 2011); many of the in-service bilingual teachers were not capable of conducting bilingual teaching—in some cases, less than 10% of them could do so (Hu and Jiao 2017). With English added to the curriculum, the shortage of multilingual teachers has become

even more severe. At the same time, the positioning of Putonghua at the core of language education and the growing importance of English has a knock-on effect in teacher education. The difficulties that the minority trainees of language teacher face are to achieve the required proficiency level of both Putonghua and English within four years; for some of them, English was not offered during their primary and secondary schooling and it is a new language for them.

Discussion and Conclusions

The issue of multilingual education policy in XUAR demonstrates the tensions and challenges that can arise in the implementation of broad national goals in a local, complex ecology. Analysis of policy documents indicate that the national and regional policies with regard to language and language education are supportive of multilingual education. The argument underpinning this support is that multilingualism can strengthen the cultural heritage of a minority group within their Chinese national identity, and empower them to engage in the social, political and economic activities of the PRC both domestically and internationally (Adamson 2015). However, in the process of implementation, the acquisition and promotion of Putonghua is clearly prioritized. The preferred Model 3 focuses on teaching all the subjects in Putonghua except for minority language literacy. Although the other, Model 1, favours the minority language as the medium of instruction to teach school subjects, its implementation is hampered by considerations about the incompetence in Putonghua which may lead to the possible fomenting of separatist sentiments. Thus the sentiments expressed in the constitutional framework and in regional policies to develop multilingual education in XUAR and to encourage Han and minorities to learn each other's languages in autonomous regions affected by political and logistical factors.

The language ecology in education in the region presents challenges to all students, ethnic minority and Han alike. Edwards (2004) claims that policies can serve to provide enhanced access to mainstream opportunities and strengthen sense of identity; meanwhile, they can result in marginalisation and social disadvantage. The minority language may help to preserve the minority group's cultural integrity, but if Putonghua, the national lingua franca is not promoted, it may result in denying opportunities to access economic development and political capital. The minority language may also help the majority Han group to integrate more easily into daily life in XUAR, but many show little inclination to make the necessary investment, a judgement that might be influenced by the promotion of Putonghua in the region. However, additive multilingualism might not be achieved if Putonghua, the international language, such as English, and the minority language are not promoted in a more balanced way.

The resolution of the political tensions extends beyond language policy. The exercise of the autonomy in educational policy making that is, in theory, available to the government of XUAR could address some of the logistical challenges by allowing the regional government to design policies which meet the needs of ethnic minority groups, in accordance with the general principles formulated by the state, with the further development of language teacher education and training of multilingual teachers from both minority and Han groups being an area of pressing need. Policy action in this area might not only have the practical value of increasing the pool of qualified and competent teachers for multilingual education, it would also have the symbolic value of strengthening the linguistic capital of all groups and thereby balance the relationships among Putonghua, the minority languages and foreign languages. It remains to be seen, though, the extent to which the current ecology is conducive to such policies.

(Total words: 6660)

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Appendix 1: Policy documents

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Endnote

¹ In government policy documents, the term ‘bilingual’ (*shuangyu*) is used for policies covering Putonghua and the ethnic minority languages. It is also used for policies that incorporate a third language, such as English, rather than adopting ‘multilingual’ (*duoyu*). For consistency, in this paper we use ‘bilingual’ in the context of policy documents on the understanding that it may be referring to multilingualism.