

Current Situations of Chinese Tibetan College Students' English Study — A Case Study of Northwest Minzu University

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Abstract: Tibetan, as one of the fifty five minorities in China, is an ethnic group with its own language, culture and customs, which attracts more and more researchers' attention. There have been an immense number of studies on Tibetans. The paper intends to make a survey on the current situations of Tibetan college students' English study by the means of questionnaire, analyzes the problems and puts forward the corresponding strategies.

1. Introduction

According to the Sixth Population Census of The People Republic of China in 2010, Tibetan population in China is about 6,300,000, taking up 4.71 percent of all the population in China. From Figure.1, it is obvious that Tibet, Si Chuan, Qing Hai, Gan Su, Yun Nan are the top five provinces where Tibetans live.

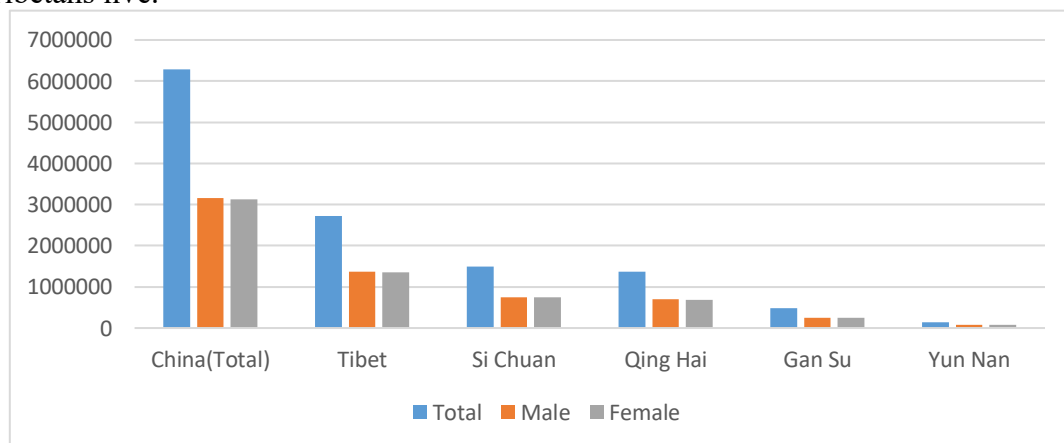


Figure 1. Top 5 provinces of Tibetan population in China

In the past, most Tibetan people lived a nomadic life and so very few people accepted higher education. However, with the development of society, the improvement of people's consciousness and the investment of China's government, more and more people are able to accept higher education. On both Figures 2 and 3, it is obvious that the Tibetan college students' population has increased greatly over the past 10 years from 2000 to 2010. In 2000, the Tibetan college student's population was only 64850, occupying 1.35 percent of all the Tibetan population, while in 2010, the Tibetan college student's population was about 300,000, occupying 4.8 percent of all the Tibetan population.

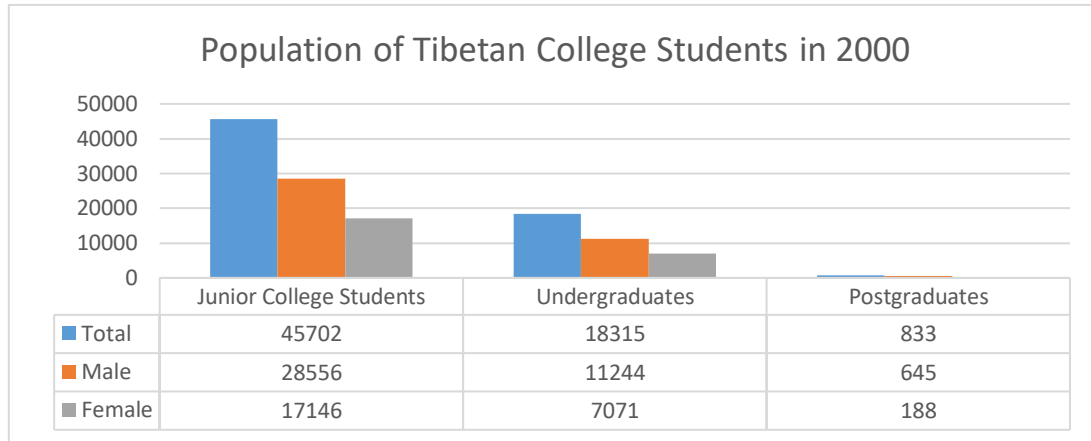


Figure 2. Population of Tibetan College Students in 2000

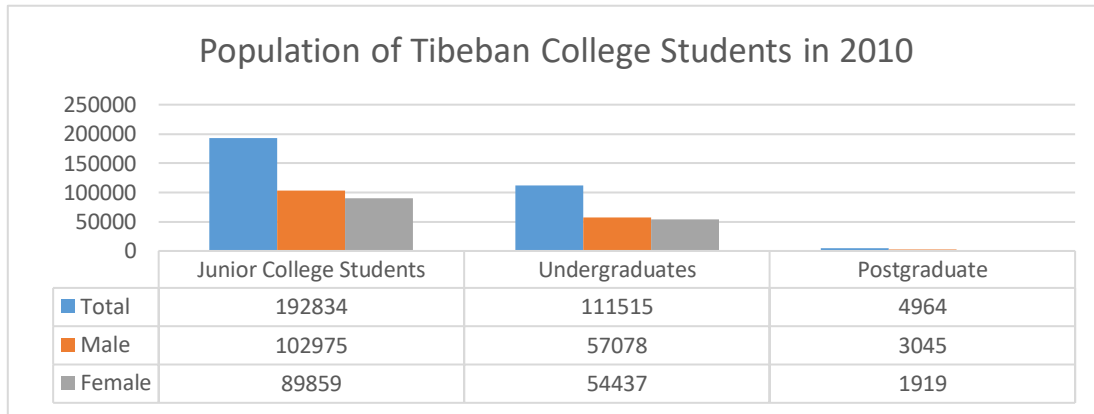


Figure 3. Population of Tibetan College Students in 2010

With the advent of globalization, English, as an international communicative tool, is becoming more and more important. According to the curriculum plannings and teaching syllabuses from primary schools to universities in China, English is a necessary course. For Tibetan college students, their native language is Tibetan; their second language is Chinese; and English is their third language. Most Tibetans begin to study English in primary school, but their English study is barely satisfactory. Intending to find out the problems, the paper studies the current situations of Chinese Tibetan College students' English study by using questionnaire survey. 100 questionnaires were handed out to the Tibetan students in Northwest Minzu University, with 89 effective questionnaires returned, 35 male and 54 female.

2. Discussion

2.1 The Problems of Chinese Tibetan college students' English study

2.1.1 Weak English Foundation and low English level

According to the answers to Q1, about one out of two Tibetan college students start to learn English in primary school, 41.6 percent in junior high school, 5.6 percent from high school, as is shown in Table 1. In most places of Lhasa, the provincial capital city of Tibet, students are able to learn English early; in many places of Si Chuan and Gan Su provinces, students begin to learn English in junior high school, in some remote places, students can't study English until high school even university, which cause the uneven level of English. Because English is not a subject for examination in primary school and junior high school, most students don't attach importance to the study of English and study English off and on, which lead to the weak foundation of English for most Tibetan college students. In Q2, 62.9 percent of them (56 Ss) choose "A" as their answer, proving their low English level.

Table 1. The basic information of the students doing the questionnaire

Total	Sex		The begging time of English study				English					
	Male	Female	The Third Grade (included)	Junior High School	High School	University	very bad	not very bad	good	very good	CET4	CET6
89	35	54	45	37	5	2	56	40	0	0	0	0

2.1.2 Indirect understanding of English

According to the answers to Q8, about 80.9 percent (72 Ss) of the college students have to transform what they have heard into Tibetan and then into English when having English classes. That is, they need one more procedure to learn English, which adds to more difficulties for their English study. Most of them aren't able to understand English directly. From the answers to Q7, 94.4 percent of them (84 Ss) think grammar is the most difficult part. On the one hand, English has completely different grammatical rules from Tibetan. On the other hand, almost all the English grammar books are written in Chinese. (Chen Jianlin, et al. 2018) They also need a procedure of transformation when reading English grammar books. What's more, there are few English teachers who can both speak Tibetan and English, most teachers use Chinese as the medium of teaching language to teach Tibetans English. Chinese becomes their interlanguage. The answers to Q9 prove that 69.7 percent of the college students (62 Ss) agree Chinese level influences their English level.

2.1.3 Lack of motivation

According to Gardner (2010), it is hard to give an accurate definition of motivation, but a motivated person is someone setting a goal and persevering to achieve it. Motivation is usually associated with commitment, enthusiasm, and persistence to achieve goals. Q4, Q5 and Q6 are designed to know the students' motivation of studying English. But the answers reflect the commonly-seen problem—the lack of motivation. 46 Ss think because of compulsory education, they have to study English; more than half of them (54 Ss) don't find it interesting to study English; more than ninety percent of the students (83 Ss) don't think it is necessary to study English to find a good job. Because in their hometowns, there are not many Tibetans with college degree, it is not difficult for them to find a job after graduation.

2.2 Strategies

2.2.1 Try to stimulate the Tibetan students' English-study motivation in English classes

It is commonly believed that motivation has great influence on the the achievement of learners' second language or foreign language acquisition. Generally speaking, motivation has intrinsic and extrinsic types. According to the research made by Marina (2014), intrinsic motivation plays an important part in the performance of the beginners. For the college students, extrinsic motivation is more significant. Answers to Q10 demonstrate that Tibetan college students want there English classes more interesting. Thus, teachers shoulder great responsibility to simulate the students' motivation. But keeping students motivated is the second most complicated challenge for teachers (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013) Teachers should endeavor to create more friendly and interesting environment for Tibetan college students to help them enjoy studying English. Multimedia and e-teaching methods can be put into practice. Stage-English, which is advocated by the teachers in the School of Foreign Languages of Northwest Minzu University and has been practiced for many years, proves to be a new and interesting English-teaching method. Tibetan college students, most of whom are good at singing and dancing, can take advantage of their strengths to study English in role plays. The teachers' encouragement is an important factor to influence goal-setting and goal-commitment. (Long et al, 2013)

2.2.2 Foster more Tibetan English teachers

Tibetan college students have to use Chinese as an interlanguage to translate English into Tibetan. Therefore, their Chinese level affects their understanding of English "... the higher the learner's standard of LN proficiency and the more vivid the LN is in his mind, the more there is of other LN influence on L3" (Ringbom, 1986:160) But the answers to Q11 demonstrate that 76.4 percent of

them (68 Ss) have passed Level 3, 16 Ss Level 2, and 5 Ss Level 4 in MHK, which is a Chinese Proficiency Test (MHK) for Chinese minorities. That is, most of their Chinese is not fluent enough, but they have to use Chinese to help them understand English, which makes it more difficult for them to understand English better. So the best way to change the phenomenon is to foster more good Tibetan English teachers.

2.2.3. Change the attitude and more awards

Tibetan college students don't have much pressure in their English study, which, to some extent, results in their incorrect attitude towards English. From primary school to high school, English class is just a subject for them to learn but not so important as Tibetan or maths. English is often neglected by most Tibetan students. So it is high time that they changed their attitude and took English seriously. In China, there is an old saying "when a high reward is offered, brave fellows are bound to come forward", so with more awards including money and materials, Tibetan college students can study English as well as most Han students.

3. Conclusions

According to the survey, most Tibetan college students have some problems in studying English, such as weak English foundation, low English level, indirect understanding of English and lack of motivation. Though some strategies are put forward here, there are still some problems to be solved, for example how to change the Tibetan college students' attitude towards English, how to strengthen their English foundation....

4. Problems of the survey

a). All the Tibetan college students are the students in Northwest Minzu University. Their English studying situations can't represent all the situations in China.

b). Only 89 valid questionnaires are taken back. In comparison with the population of Tibetan college students, the answers on the questionnaires can not explain all the Tibetan college students' ideas.

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