

# Controllable Factors Affecting Minority Students' Trilingual Acquisition and Strategies\*

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**Abstract**—The foreign language learning of ethnic minority students after acquiring their mother tongue and Chinese belongs to the category of trilingual acquisition. Due to the complex language background and education environment, the minority students in our country encounter some factors that influence the learning result in the process of trilingual acquisition. This paper teases out the controllable factors that influence minority students' trilingual acquisition and puts forward the strategies to improve minority students' trilingual acquisition result.

**Keywords**—minority students; trilingual acquisition; controllable factors; strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

The study of trilingual acquisition originated from the study of trilingual or multilingual phenomena in the west in the 1970s and was introduced into China at the beginning of the 21st century. There are two directions in the development of trilingual acquisition research in China. One is the teaching of English as a second language for English majors in China; the other is the teaching of English as a third language for minority students in China. In recent years, with the popularization of English education, it has become a common phenomenon that minority students in our country learn a foreign language after they learn their native language and Chinese. Minority bilinguals' (native language and Chinese language) third language acquisition has gradually entered the field of vision. The domestic researchers begin to try combining with foreign third language acquisition theory to explore the third language education practice of the ethnic minority in our country.

China is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country, and minority education plays an important role in China's education. Foreign language education is an important part of minority education and an important way to promote the overall improvement of national quality and realize the economic development of minority areas. However, from the perspective of the national situation, the English level of minority students is generally low. So it is necessary to find out the factors that affect the trilingual acquisition of

minority students according to the characteristics of China's multi-ethnic groups, and make reasonable adjustments to these factors, so as to improve the foreign language level of minority students.

## II. PROBLEMS EXISTING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR MINORITY STUDENTS

The research results on the third language acquisition abroad show that trilingual learners show more advantages in language acquisition, but there are characteristics of language loss in the process of third language acquisition, and the interference of the first language and the second language on the third language will affect the efficiency of third language learning. Based on the analysis of the research results and the characteristics and learning process of trilingual acquisition, this paper points out the following problems existing in foreign language teaching in minority areas of China.

### A. Neglecting the Advantages of Meta-language Awareness

The empirical studies on foreign trilingual acquisition demonstrate that multi-lingual learners show more advantages in acquiring additional languages than monolingual learners, mainly in terms of creative thinking and metalinguistic awareness. Metalanguage refers to "a language for talking about language"<sup>1</sup> and "a language for describing natural language"<sup>2</sup>. Metalinguistic awareness refers to the ability to reflect on and use the structural features of language, to understand and think about the nature and function of language, and to think about language itself. Minority students experience a trilingual learning process from mother tongue, Chinese to a foreign language. If this trilingual learning process makes full use of the advantages of meta-linguistic awareness, it will be the key to solve the problem of multilingual learning in minority areas of China. However, in the actual foreign language teaching, most of minority students still accept and use the same foreign language teaching mode as the Han students. The language learning experience and cognitive advantages they gain from bilingual education are ignored, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthews. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* [Z]. Oxford: UOP, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Bussmann, H. *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* [M]. London: Routledge, 1996.

advantages they gain from bilingual learning are not given full play.

### *B. Neglecting the Nature of Language Attrition*

Language attrition is associated with language acquisition, and it is also an important part and process of the whole language development. It is easier to lose a language when it is not in use, and it is easier to lose a second or third language when it is learned in the mother tongue environment. Ethnic minority students speak their own language at home, and speak Chinese or their own language at school. The environment and current situation of minority students are not conducive to English learning and lack of opportunities for practice. However, the existing curriculum, teaching plan and organization of teaching activities fail to take into account and pay attention to the language loss caused by the third language learning of minority students under the influence of bilingualism and the consolidation of new information interfered by the first language and the second language.

### *C. Neglecting the Impact of Language Transfer*

Odlin (2001) points out that when learners have mastered two languages, both languages will affect the languages later acquired.<sup>3</sup> The closer the meta-language is to the target language in type, the more likely it is to be borrowed into the vocabulary of the third language. The transfer phenomenon of the original language knowledge to the acquisition of the third language can occur at different levels of the language, such as the transfer of pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary and so on.

In trilingual acquisition, inter-lingual transfer occurs when the three languages are related to each other, including a series of processes such as transfer inference, code-switching and loanwords. In the process of learning English, minority students will be disturbed by their mother tongue and Chinese.

## III. CONTROLLABLE FACTORS INFLUENCING MINORITY STUDENTS' TRILINGUAL ACQUISITION

Wen Qiufang (1995) divided factors affecting language learning into controllable factors and uncontrollable factors.<sup>4</sup> Controllable factors refer to factors that can be changed through students' own efforts, such as motivation, concept and strategy. Uncontrollable factors refer to factors that cannot be changed by one's own efforts, such as intelligence, language ability, personality characteristics, students' past English level, teachers' teaching quality, etc. There are both controllable and uncontrollable factors influencing minority students' trilingual acquisition. Controllable factors can play a positive role in promoting trilingual acquisition through in-depth research by researchers and students' own efforts.

<sup>3</sup> Odlin, T. *Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic Influence in Language Learning* [M]. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Wen Qiufang. *The Difference in Methods between Successful and Unsuccessful Learners of English* [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 1995(3).

### *A. The Influence of Background Language Level on Trilingual Acquisition*

Generally speaking, learners' high level of background language (mother tongue or second language) will have an impact on the learning of a new language, and a low level of background language is also one of the factors affecting new language acquisition. According to Bardel (2007), when the level of the language mastered is higher than that of the target language, the language mastered is easy to be activated, thus having an impact on the learning of the target language. On the contrary, if the level of the target language is lower than the level of the background language, the target language will in turn promote the reconstruction of the background language system.<sup>5</sup> The process of learning a third language is a complex process of language movement. The development level of a learner's first language, second language and third language is usually unbalanced, which leads to the complexity of language activation and language transfer direction.

The order of trilingual acquisition of minority students is mother tongue, Chinese, English. The three languages belong to different language families. The research and practice show that the higher the learners' meta-linguistic knowledge is, the more they can perceive the distance between the two languages and choose knowledge transfer from the closer languages. Ethnic minority students with a high level of mother tongue often have a relatively high level of Chinese. When they learn a third language, the level of Chinese as a second language becomes a restrictive factor, which directly affects the results of the third language acquisition. As Chinese is the medium language for minority students to learn the third language, the level of the medium language becomes the key factor restricting the level of the third language.

### *B. The Influence of Learning Motivation and Strategy on Trilingual Acquisition*

Motivation is an important social psychological factor in language learning. Social psychologists Gardner and Lambert (1972) put forward the theory of motivation type, which can be divided into "instrumental" and "integrated" motivation.<sup>6</sup> The instrumental motivation refers to the language learning drive to achieve a realistic external goal, such as finding a job, passing an exam, etc. The integrated motivation refers to the interest and desire to contact, communicate with or integrate into the target language group. They believe that the integrative motivation is more motivating to the results of language acquisition and students' engagement behavior than the instrumental motivation. Similarly, the recognition and yearning for the target language group will also drive learners' integrative motivation, thus bringing about positive learning effects. It can be seen that the influence of motivation on language

<sup>5</sup> Bardel C. Falk Y. *The Role of the Second Language in Third Language Acquisition: The Case of Germanic Syntax* [J]. *Second Language Research*, 2007(4).

<sup>6</sup> Gardner, R.C. & W.E. Lambert. *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning* [M]. Rowley Mass: Newbury House, 1972.

acquisition cannot be ignored, and better adjustment to the learning motivation of minority students can promote the results of language acquisition.

English learning strategies include learning language knowledge, language skills and communication skills. A large number of empirical studies show that learners' use of learning strategies is closely related to their language acquisition results. Making full use of or improving learning strategies is a necessary means to improve the effectiveness of the third language acquisition. Therefore, encouraging students to improve their learning strategies, form a good learning style and improve the language environment can effectively improve learners' language learning ability and optimize the language processing mechanism.

#### *C. The Influence of Educational Environment on Students' Trilingual Acquisition*

The educational environment that influences trilingual acquisition includes macro educational environment and micro language learning environment. Due to the differences in economy, culture, education level and resources in the areas where ethnic minorities live, their language teaching environment is also different, and the language education mode in different regions is also different, which directly affects the output effect of trilingual acquisition. Students from backward areas are still in monolingual environment in high school, while students from relatively developed areas begin to accept bilingual courses of mother language and Chinese, or even trilingual courses of mother language, Chinese and English when they enter kindergarten or primary school. Due to the different educational modes, the starting time of trilingual acquisition is also different, which affects the effect of trilingual acquisition.

The environment of trilingual learning varies greatly from region to region, and the level of teachers is different. Most of the teachers are Chinese-English bilinguals, and Chinese is the medium of trilingual teaching. There is a shortage of trilingual teachers, which limits learners' bilingual advantage to a large extent. Besides, so far there are no foreign language textbooks for bilingual minority students in either middle schools or universities. From primary and secondary schools to universities, national and regional education authorities still do not develop a unified syllabus or teaching requirements just for ethnic minority areas, while usually set by the school or university itself. All these negative factors will have a negative impact on minority learners' trilingual learning.

#### **IV. EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR MINORITY STUDENTS' TRILINGUAL ACQUISITION**

According to the characteristics and existing problems of minority students' English learning under the background of trilingual learning, this paper analyzes the relevant factors. Based on the analysis of influential factors, the following strategies and suggestions will be put forward to promote the trilingual acquisition of minority students.

#### *A. Optimizing the Teaching Environment*

The unbalanced development of regional economy and the unbalanced coverage of high-quality educational resources is one of the obstacles. The lack of educational resources further hinders minority students' language acquisition and the improvement of their language proficiency. Therefore, it is necessary to promote the development of ethnic economy constantly, to improve the strategic awareness of ethnic minorities' education and to strengthen the support for ethnic minorities' education. It is also important to improve the local social education and teaching environment, to add a corresponding number of multimedia classrooms, to introduce English audio and video materials, to improve teaching facilities and equipment actively, to expand the coverage of quality education resources and to narrow the regional gap with information as the carrier so as to make the balanced allocation of education resources. We should make a long-term language policy plan, define the foreign language teaching and examination objectives for minority students, pay attention to the connection between basic education and foreign language teaching in higher education, and avoid discontinuity.

#### *B. Exploring the Mode of Trilingual Education and Cultivating Trilingual Teachers*

As a new teaching mode, the application of trilingual education in minority areas and ethnic colleges and universities in China is still at the exploratory stage. Therefore, foreign language teachers are required to constantly explore the rules and methods of trilingual teaching mode in teaching practice, make new educational concepts, and strengthen the research and exploration of the trilingual teaching mode and method.

The faculty is the guarantee of talent training. It is necessary to strengthen the training of existing teachers, supplement teachers of trilingual languages, strengthen the construction of teachers of trilingual languages, and constantly improve the comprehensive quality of teachers in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. On the one hand, the teachers who teach minority students English should be strengthened the training of minority languages and English proficiency, so that they can gradually meet the requirements of trilingual teachers and reach the level of trilingual teaching. On the other hand, we should make full use of relevant national policies to select outstanding undergraduate students of ethnic minority languages for further study by means of recommendation so as to cultivate them into teachers of three languages. At the same time, the school can hire a group of teachers with expertise and ability in three languages to enrich the existing teaching staff and promote the construction of three languages teaching staff. In a word, we should devote ourselves to cultivating interdisciplinary teachers who are proficient in national languages, Chinese and English at the same time, so as to build a solid talent reserve for better teaching of the three languages.

### *C. Strengthening the Guidance of Learning Motivation and Learning Strategy*

In foreign language learning, minority students must change their learning concept, stimulate their learning motivation and improve their learning initiative. Students should make their study plan and objectives according to their foreign language level and goals. In addition, students should choose their own learning strategies according to their learning habits and learning styles, and often reflect on the learning progress and the effectiveness of strategies to make timely adjustments.

The minority nationality students' study strategy consciousness is weak. Their study strategy and methods are single. With a series of problems, such as disconnection between the idea and the strategy, lack of self-monitoring ability and metacognitive strategies, it is suggested to combine the training of strategic awareness with the training of strategic skills. Students' initiative can stimulate their interest in learning, improve their metacognitive strategies and cultivate their subsequent independent learning ability. By using learning strategies reasonably, mastering learning rules, cultivating good foreign language learning habits, and paying attention to the improvement of learning methods, learning efficiency can be improved.

### *D. Adopting Diversified Foreign Language Education Strategies*

In view of the differences in language learning characteristics between ethnic minority students and Han students, it is necessary to combine the teaching method of diversified foreign language classes with the characteristics of minority students' trilingual acquisition to improve their foreign language teaching.

In the process of foreign language teaching, teachers should create new means of foreign language teaching and arouse the enthusiasm of minority students in learning foreign languages. On the basis of understanding students' learning style, teachers should provide diversified and personalized teaching, change and adjust the traditional teaching method and strategy to adapt to students' different learning styles. Different teaching methods and learning strategies are determined according to different students so as to improve the teaching effect.

Teachers should focus on students and give full play to the leading role. A good atmosphere should be created for foreign language learning in class and a relaxed and pleasant learning environment should be created for students to improve students' learning initiative. We should make full use of modern teaching methods and strengthen multimedia teaching. Various teaching modes, such as oral explanation, slide presentation and classroom activities can be combined to strengthen the training and improvement of students' basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in foreign languages. In classroom teaching, flexible and diverse teaching forms are adopted with TBLT as the leading role. Teachers' teaching methods should match students' learning styles so as to achieve the best teaching effect. Heuristic, discussion, discovery and other methods are used to carry out

various forms of teaching activities. Students' interest in English learning is stimulated in the process of participating in the activities. Students gradually complete the language acquisition in the participation so that language skills are gradually improved.

In addition, in the teaching of the third language, teachers should not only pay attention to the level of the third language, but also give due consideration to the existing status and level of other languages of learners, and do a good job in the connection of various language teaching models and acquisition.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the third language acquisition of minority students, various factors are likely to exert their influence. With learners' internal and external actual changes, the impact of various factors will change. Under different learning backgrounds, different individuals are influenced differently in the acquisition of the third language. Different effects of various factors affect the degree of dynamic changes in the third language acquisition.

Trilingual education is not only to teach students to use three kinds of languages, but also to let the students fully understand the multi-culture and foster their ability to adapt to and accept different cultures in the process of language learning so as to promote students with different languages and culture background to understand and cooperate mutually. Thus it can lay a solid foundation for the development of foreign language teaching for the minority students under the background of multi-culture.

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