

Chapter 1

Introduction

Although the concept of bilingual education was not new to certain areas in China, the People's Republic of China has promoted bilingual education programs for ethnic minority students since the 1980s. Bilingual education takes place when the minority students study both in their own language and Chinese. The number of bilingual schools decreased in the 1990s despite reports that bilingual education programs helped students to perform better in their exam results. This study suggests that bilingual education programs in China continue to face a number of difficulties in the development of their students' Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

The concept of CALP was introduced by Cummins in 1980. CALP is an underlying part of human language proficiency which commonly exists over two languages of bilingual speakers. That makes CALP able to develop through either first language (L1) or second language (L2). Cummins (2000, 2001) suggests that the CALP development of bilingual speakers is a key factor in their successful academic achievements. When the CALP is fully developed, bilingual students are not just able to communicate but also to use both L1 and L2 in their academic activities. In other words, an effective bilingual education program must be supportive of the students' CALP development. Cummins' theory is widely accepted by many researchers and educators all over the world (more details will be provided in Chapter 2).

This study uses an evaluation model associated with the concept of the total literacy system. This will examine whether the bilingual education programs in China are supportive of the students' CALP development. Bhola introduced the concept of the total literacy system in 1994. This system consists of three levels and eleven subsystems which indicate various components of a literacy program. He originally meant the system to contribute to the adult literacy programs of UNESCO and related organizations. However, the system also illustrates a wide and comprehensive structure of bilingual education programs as well. This study

adopts the concept of a total literacy system as a framework to evaluate bilingual education programs. Simultaneously, two basic principles of CALP development are integrated into the evaluation processes (Chapter 3).

The Chinese-Dong bilingual education program in Guizhou Province and Chinese-Dehong Dai bilingual education program in Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province are used as case studies. The Dong program is an experimental bilingual education program started in 2000. This study aims to discuss how the Dong program differs from the other bilingual education programs since the 1980s. The Dehong Dai program represents the standard bilingual education program. It is used as a comparison to the Dong program (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

In the following section, research questions, sites, methodology, benefits, and limitations of this study are introduced.

1.1 Research questions

The research question of this study is: **Does the Chinese-Dong bilingual education program overcome the typical problems of other bilingual education programs in China?**

In order to answer the research question, this study answers the following questions:

- (1) What are the typical problems found in most bilingual education programs? To answer this, an introductory case study is made using the Chinese-Dehong Dai bilingual education program.
- (2) What are the specific differences between the Chinese-Dong bilingual education program and the Chinese-Dehong Dai bilingual education program in the literacy subsystems?
- (3) Is the Chinese-Dong bilingual education program more supportive of the students' CALP development?

1.2 Sites

This study investigates two bilingual education programs in China. One program is the Chinese-Dehong Dai¹ bilingual education program in Dehong Dai-Jinpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. The program has been conducted by the

¹ Dehong Dai, which is also called Dai Na or Dai Nua, is classified as one dialect of Dai language by the Chinese government. Because of it, Dehong Dai is often confused with other dialects of Dai, such as Xishuangbanna Dai (Dai Lu). However, they have different linguistic figures and education systems. They can not be discussed together.

Dehong government since the 1980s. The other one is the Chinese-Dong bilingual education program in Guizhou Province since 2000, This is a cooperative program between the Guizhou government and two NGOs: Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) International and Guizhou University. Both programs are designed for ethnic minority students to study using the national language (Standard Chinese) and their own minority language (Dehong Dai language or Dong language).

Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces are located in the southwest of China. Southwest China generally refers to these two provinces and Sichuan. Most of the discussion in the thesis focuses on this region (see Figure 1)

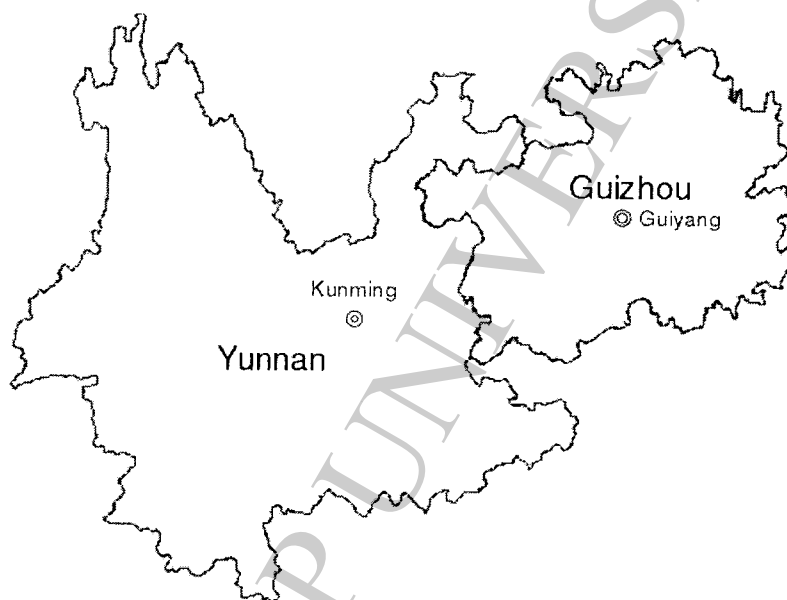


Figure 1: Map of Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces (sketched by the author)

These programs are selected in this study for two reasons. Firstly, both languages of Dehong Dai and Dong are classified into Tai-Kadai language family (see Figure 2). Their difficulties in learning Chinese are considered relatively similar.²

² Dehong Dai and Dong use different orthographies. Dehong Dai uses the unique traditional alphabets while Dong uses Chinese Pinyin (Roman alphabets pronunciation guide for Chinese) based alphabets. In the strict sense, Dong students using Chinese Pinyin based alphabets may have an advantage to learn Chinese at the beginning.

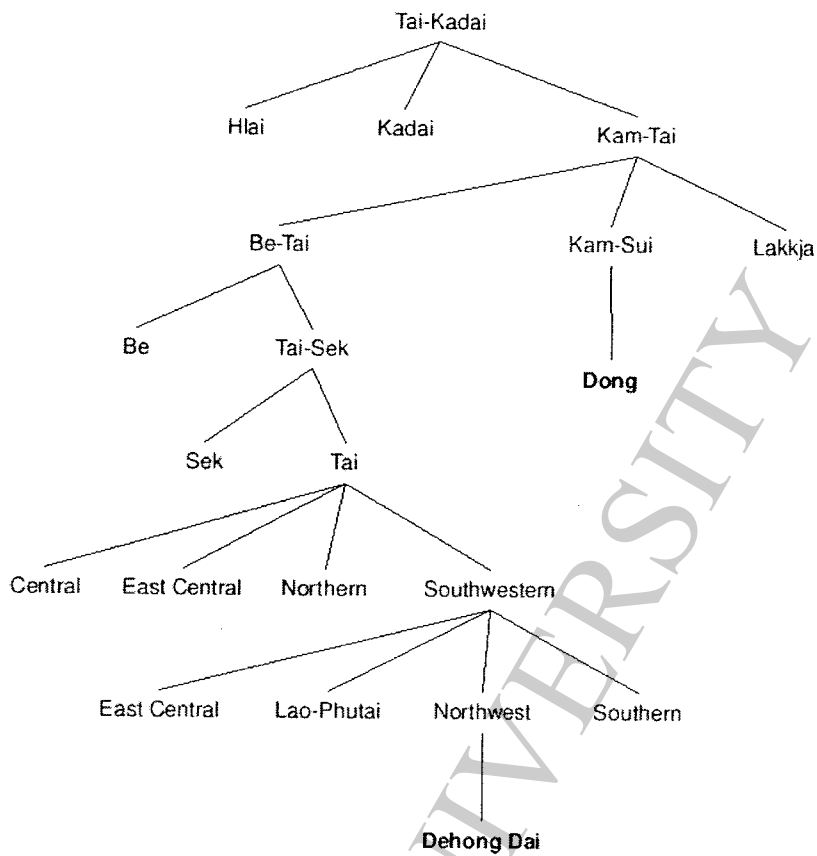


Figure 2: Tai-Kadai language family tree (sketched by the author based on the information from www.ethnologue.com on 28 December 2009)

Secondly, these programs are operated by different agencies and began in different decades. This study will present differences between a standard governmental program (Dehong Dai program) and an experimental NGO-initiated program (Dong program). The characteristics that make the Dehong Dai program represent a standard bilingual education program and differ from the Dong program are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Features of selected bilingual education programs

	Chinese-Dehong Dai BLE program	Chinese-Dong BLE program	(A standard program in China)
Target group	Dehong Dai students	Dong students	Ethnic minority students
Language	Chinese and Dehong Dai	Chinese and Dong	Chinese and a minority language
Date started	Early 1980s	2000	Early 1980s
Sponsoring agency	The Dehong government	Cooperation between the Guizhou government and two non-governmental organizations	A provincial or prefecture government
Status	Formal education	Formal education (an experimental program)	Formal education

BLE: bilingual education

1.3 Methodology

This study employed three methods of data collection: library research; observations; and interviews.

Library research in this study targeted any sorts of documents, reports, and academic research papers related to the selected programs. For example, in the Dong program, official documents from the government and program reports for stakeholders were used. The program reports included reports from workshops, financial reports and research reports. Email exchanges with the program coordinator were included as well. All these reports were important sources for this study.

Observations used in this study were considered structured observations. The evaluator was present in a classroom observing the following issues: Which languages were used for instruction by the teacher; Which languages were written on the board by the teacher; Which languages were used for students' communication with their teachers and their peers. The results of the observations were counted as quantitative data (which is represented in percentages). Qualitative observations were also made, because the structured observation did not give the answers as to the attitudes of teachers and students involved in the lessons. For example, if it was observed that teachers insist the students use Chinese instead of their local

languages, this meant that students were not encouraged to use both languages. (The observation check sheets are found in Appendix 1).

This study used questionnaires in formal interviews with the local teachers. The questionnaires covers all eleven subsystems of the total literacy system both in direct and indirect ways. They were designed to explore whether the basic principles of CALP development are supported in the program. There are 53 questions in total under three categories. The questionnaires begin with asking background information of the interviewees: age, gender, first language, and so on. (The questionnaires are found in Appendix 2 and 3)

1.4 Benefits

This study aims to evaluate the Chinese-Dong bilingual education program. From 2000 to 2009, the first bilingual curriculum was applied to a local primary school in Guizhou (the observations and interviews were conducted in 2008). Therefore, it was a good time for the program to decide whether the bilingual education should be extended. In order to find appropriate ways to do future evaluation and improve the program, feedback of these research results were distributed to the facilitators of the program.

This study also presents an evaluation model based on Applied Linguistics theories to reflect the quality of bilingual education programs in China. The evaluation model examining all the eleven subsystems of the total literacy system gives a more complete picture of the weaknesses and the strengths of each program. The study also tests an evaluation with external criteria created by CALP theory rather than an evaluation according to the program goals. Since the model focuses on language of instruction in the selected programs, it could encourage the program facilitators in China to use approaches of bilingual education which include two languages of instruction. This model has potential to contribute to the improvement of educational quality among ethnic minority students in China.

1.5 Limitations

Since the researcher had limited connections with the local schools, only a few schools were suggested for the field research. The lack of time and financial support was also a difficulty in this research. Therefore, the field research was conducted at only one school for each program. The Chinese-Dehong Dai bilingual education program is conducted at numerous schools in Dehong Prefecture, therefore it is

difficult to generalize the results from one school to represent a whole program. Efforts were maximized in library research to support the whole study. More research will be conducted in the future in order to provide a more thorough and accurate understanding of the Dehong Dai program.

Another limitation of this study is the researcher's language skills in the minority languages. Since the researcher is not familiar with either Dehong Dai or Dong language, one or two interpreters were used during observations and interviews. During the interviews, when local teachers were asked questions in Chinese, the teachers often answered in their own languages. The interpreters translated the answers to either Chinese or English immediately. However, this study can not capture the full details of information from the interviews and observations due to their language structures and expressions. Therefore, it only discusses certain significant results and historical facts of the programs.