

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Languages in Chinese educational policy

Implementation of a language educational policy at schools is normally concerned with the educational policy of dominant language, minority language and foreign language (Zhang 2009). In the China context, although minorities are legally entitled to use and develop their own languages in accordance with the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, the *Ethnic Minority Region Autonomy Act of the People's Republic of China*, the *Education Act of the People's Republic of China*, and the *Compulsory Education Act of the People's Republic of China*, the *National Language and Writing System Act of the People's Republic of China*, the national lingua franca Putonghua (Mandarin, the standardized common Chinese speech) and the standard (simplified) Chinese written form are stipulated as universal nationwide for all governmental organizations, educational institutions, publications and media, and public service sectors. All teaching professionals in China without exception must pass Putonghua Level tests for their teaching positions, as a mandatory eligibility.

Speaking of foreign language education at the primary and high school level, English remains the only compulsory foreign language. Now English is required as a key subject for town primary pupils from grade 3 and for rural junior high school students. Teachers of English are expected to follow the curriculum specifications of

the objective and 1-9 leveled contents in their teaching of the textbook series *Go for it!* to their students (Chen, 2006). Aimed at development of the students' comprehensive qualities and communicative competence, the teaching involves instruction of five items of linguistic knowledge (sound, words, grammar, function and topic), integrated practice of four skills through task-based and authentic activities, facilitation of positive affective attitudes (interest, motivation, self-confidence, will, and teamwork), adoption of effective learning strategies (cognitive, controlled, communicative, and resource-utilizing), and formation of cultural awareness.

In response to the era of economic globalization and multicultural diversity, China has decided that its language educational policy should also be adjusted accordingly to constitute a 'life of harmonious languages' (Li, 2007; Gao & Ge, 2007), for instance, the Chinese dialects are mainly used to facilitate communication among the local Chinese Hans while Putonghua is to be used mainly in teaching and media; ethnic minority languages should have their legally due statuses as locally universal language while they are encouraged to learn local Han dialect or Putonghua, for both protection of the ethnic language and at the same time to gain opportunities to enter society; as a means to permit a person or a nation to go to the outside world, in China EFL should not be regarded as more important than the national Chinese language, which is also becoming quite popular along with China's rapid development. So future policy may focus on dual weighting of continued generalization of Putonghua at home and abroad, respecting the regional or situational use of dialect or minority language use, and changing the image of "the largest EFL learning country but the smallest user of the language", as well as offering a broader spectrum of foreign languages (Li, 2007).

2.1.1 Demographics and nationhood

A vast developing country where 65% of its people live in rural areas and 35.9% of them are illiterate and semiliterate (Tan, 2003), China started its integrated rural education reform from the early 1980s with remarkable achievements thanks to greater than ever preferential policy, administrative and financial support from government at all levels, and implementation of the nine-year compulsory education for all rural children aged above seven. However, according to Liao and his followers (2005), through his nationwide interview with 1,423/1800 valid questionnaires (analyzed by Solutions Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) designed for rural school teachers, administrators and a group of interviewees of other walks of life over a period of nearly 20 months and extensive textual reviews, it was found that there still exist a number of problems to be addressed with respect to rural primary and high school education (See Appendix C for details). The prominent problem is an unsupportive learning environment of the surrounding society for the rural students, from their parents, school teachers, and administrators, which has brought about several problems such as the teacher's underperformance, the learner's low-motivation and underachievement, and the increasingly serious dropout issue which, according to Wang (2003) and many others, are attributable to "five types of difficulties": (1) household poverty unable to cover increased fees (though there are tuition waivers for primary and junior high school students since 2000); (2) learning difficulties after leaving the village primary schools for a community junior high school; (3) inadequate funds for school facilities and teacher salaries; (4) lack of qualified teachers who are relatively immobile, and (5) unpromising expectation from current and future investment.

2.1.2 Social and linguistic norms of rural schooling

The rural minority learners of China, may have a very complicated linguistic repertoire. For this case study, their mother tongue is Lisu, but they learn to speak local Han dialect and Yi for daily life at school; they also have to learn in the classroom standard spoken Chinese Putonghua as the instructional medium, and the foreign language English. Apart from local Chinese dialect and Putonghua, this involves three language groups, with marked differences distant from one another in both speeches and writing systems.

In China, a country with great ethnic diversity and sociolinguistic complexity, bilingual education for primary school students in most rural minority areas is adopted, in the media of both the national language Putonghua and an ethnic minority language, for unity, stability and prosperity. Both the dominant ethnic Han dialects and ethnic minorities languages coexist under national protection (Li and Lee, 2008); notwithstanding, despite the overwhelming generalization of Putonghua for formal education, legal, and administrative purposes (P. Chen 1999: 50, 53-4), the society still features both diglossia and bilingualism, in particular for rural minority students, that is, the dialect-Putonghua bilingualism for the Chinese Hans and the minority-Putonghua bilingualism for the minorities, the former sharing a great deal of linguistic similarity and the same culture. As a matter of fact, however, it is noteworthy that bilingual education in China means only the minorities' learning Chinese in addition to their mother tongue; the Hans, on the other hand, are under no obligation to learn a minority language (Blachford, 1997). Scholars agree that mother tongue teaching may be the best means for disseminating minority education for minority schools and it is unwise to uphold the Chinese-only policy in selection of the instructional medium (Li & Lee, 2004).

2.1.3 Ethnic and social identity of language minorities

Locally, China's minorities are of course not minorities in their own ethnic autonomous community, being the largest speakers of their own language, and they are treated legally and politically without discrimination and safeguarded as part of the China's population. However, their ethnic and social identities remain unchanged, e.g. in the public attitude and attention toward minority issues (Trenz, 2005), and they may not enjoy the same prestige and social status in reality. By respective social functions, more than 120 ethnic minority languages of the country are classified into three levels. Level 1 minority languages have their own traditional writing systems and are used through out the whole ethnic minority regions for all areas of life; Level 2 minority languages are used for limited areas of life; and none of Level 3 minority languages have writing systems or, if there are, they are seldom used in formal settings (Huang, 2003). Many ethnic minority languages of the three levels are on the verge of extinction due to decreased users of the younger generation or use of excessively borrowed words from Chinese, and gradual encroachment of the dominant standard Chinese, in order to further their study and secure more opportunities in the society (ibid.).

2.2 Constraints on learning a post-primary language

Specifically when it comes to the problems for EFL learning and teaching to the minority students in the disadvantaged rural areas, after their proficiency in Chinese and mother tongue through the primary bilingual education, many Chinese researchers have identified numerous problems which may account for the rural students' low scores in their EFL tests, such as lack of qualified teachers of English and insufficient teacher development (Liao Donghong & Liu Min, 2005), teacher's

'burnout' performance (Li Yucai, 2007), marginalized English learning environment (Yang Ling & Shen Haiying, 2008), the need for cross-cultural awareness raising and development of cultural communicative competence (Su Lanke, 2004), controversy around the issue of bilingual education (Jin Ruo, 2006), proper use of L1 in L2 teaching (Du Ping, 2003), and motivation of the minority EFL learners (Cai Chen, 2009), as well as the dilemma created between economic globalization and cultural localization (Zhu Li, 2008).

For Chinese rural minority students, there are a handful of domestic researchers who have researched the EFL learning difficulty, especially at the level of junior high school when the rural minority students learn the foreign language as an additional, compulsory subject after their primary schooling. From his investigation into a group of Zhuang ethnic minority EFL learners at junior high school, Tan (2009) finds that most such schools in China now have been equipped with multimedia teaching facilities like computers, color TV sets, and tape-recorders, which are readily available as an alternative or supplement to the traditional simplistic teaching aids by textbooks and a blackboard to the minority students. In that case, the problems may lie in other factors, for instance, the teachers' habitual methods of using grammar-translation teaching without use of the multimedia teaching aids, students' test-driven English learning, and their much reduced exposure to English compared to the minority language Zhuang, local Chinese dialect, and the medium of Putonghua.

Some scholars focus on socio-psychological relevance. They believe that the outcome of L2 acquisition may be affected by the socio-psychological factor, in a given socio-cultural learning context (Butler & Hakuta, 2004). In the model of Lambert (1974), learners' attitudes, motivations, and aptitude impacted the degree of

language attainment. From his diary study of the EFL learning difficulties and constraints within the test-driven context of China using an ethnographic approach, and based on his studies and actual teaching practice in mainland China, Huang Jing (2005) accounts for the students' EFL learning difficulties with such non-linguistic constraints as undesirable teacher-learner role relationships, negative self-evaluation, examination anxiety, deficient study skills, and obstacles to independent learning. Anxiety may be a key affective cause to hinder the foreign language learning, specifically language learning anxiety, with a potentially negative and detrimental effect on communication in the target language preventing students from achievement of the intended performance goals. In the multilingual and multicultural classroom setting, the anxiety may originate, according to Tanveer's (2007) case study, from learners' own sense of 'self', their self-related cognitions, language learning difficulties, differences in learners' and target language cultures, differences in social status of the speakers and interlocutors, and from the fear of losing self-identity.

Some other researchers have done action research aimed at the difficulties of the rural learners. Luo (2006), a proponent of the humanistic 'person-centered' approach to psychology (Carl 1961), from which the notion of 'student-centered' stems, also maintains that the students' emotions should be taken into account. As the rural students never have the chance to actually meet a native English speaker except for some impressions of foreigners in TV programs or movies, he argues that they may be mostly unlikely to be motivated instrumentally, but merely try to pass the language tests in order to be enrolled in higher schools, and as a result, they tend to take less interest in the foreign language and the culture and their EFL learning success may be less easily achieved and retained in the longer run (Luo, 2006). In line with the extroversive and introversive classification by Brown (1994), the researcher

holds that the rural EFL learners may, due to their introversive orientation, demonstrate this kind of learning strategy: thinking and making in-depth analysis of the language input for comprehension of the meaning between the lines, yet not good at communication with others in the language learned, poor in speaking skill. The students' attitudes, active or passive, may also result in different outcomes and degrees of success (Ellis, 1994), and excessive EFL learning anxiety or mental burden appears to often lead to frustration and consequently weakened motivation (Spolsky, 1989).

2.3 Defining success and failure in language learning

Though there may be many criteria, success in language learning can be fully reflected, with respect to bilingualism or trilingualism, in the extent to which the bilinguals and trilinguals have acquired or learned a subsequent language(s) and can use appropriately the languages in addition to their mother tongue. There are a number of conditions contributing to successful learning. In contrast, failure in learning a language can be an obvious indicator that the learner has some learning difficulties to which there are likely to be many causal factors.

2.3.1 L2 learning success and conditions

According to Spolsky (1989:14), achievement of possible linguistic outcomes in second language learning depends on meeting a number of conditions, for successfully learning the language. In accordance with his theory he proposes a list of 74 conditions. Based on Carroll's (1962) instructional model, he also condenses these conditions into a mathematical formula: $K_f = K_p + A + M + O$, in which 'K_f' stands for L2 knowledge and skills in the future and at the moment, while 'K_p' for that of L1

or any other languages in the past; 'A' represents language aptitude components including physiological, biological, intellectual, and cognitive skills; 'M' includes various mental (affective) factors such as personality, attitudes, motivation, and anxiety; and 'O', opportunity for learning the languages, formal or informal. To sum up, a successful L2 language learner must have rich previous language learning experience, ability to learn a language, positive affective elements and a magnitude of exposure to the target languages.

The successful L2 learners, bilingual individuals, may refer to those with native-like fluency of the two languages strict speaking, (Bloomfields, 1933: 56) or those fluent in L1 but also able to produce complete meaningful utterances in L2 in a broader notion (Haugen, 1953:7). Cummins (1976, 1979) hypothesizes that academic proficiency in L1 and L2 are interdependent, thus enabling the bilingual individuals to transfer academic skills from one language to another, and at the same time, the bilinguals may enjoy cognitive advantages if they attain "native-speaker competence" in both languages, or less so, in a state of "semi-bilingualism" with unbalanced or limited proficiency in L2. Cummins (1991) goes on to argue that, through contact with the two languages, a "common underlying proficiency" can be developed by bilinguals as a sort of linguistic reservoir (Jessner, 1999), from which arises the assumption that bilinguals are better language learners than monolinguals (ibid). For bilingual learners, who have experienced SLL and have raised metalinguistic awareness, they may also learn the third and subsequent languages in a more positive and effective way in the course of their multilingual education (ibid).

In their book *ESL/EFL Teaching: Principles for Success*, Y. S. Freeman & D.E. Freeman (1998) discuss in one whole chapter the notion that "Lessons Should Support Students' First Languages and Cultures", and plead for providing bilingual

support by showing respect for diverse cultures and by helping students take pride in themselves and realize their potential, since students acquire concepts most readily in their first language and then understand them in their second language; in other words, what we learn in one language may be positively transferred into the target subsequent language. Previous effective bilingual programs may offer students a number of cognitive (Cummins, 1991) and affective advantages with the ‘native-speaker competence’ in their learning of L3, and would help students to become better language learners (Jessner, 1999) among the EFL learners already bilingual in their first and second languages.

In the principle of “equality for all ethnic languages, spoken or written”, China adopts mainly appropriate teaching methods based on the local conditions and readily availability of teaching professionals, bilingual materials and researchers, it also has developed successful bilingual education in its ethnic minority regions over the past 50 years (Zhu, 2009). The bilingual education thus refers to the rural minority pupils’ schooling in the context of bilingualism in the two languages using the combined instructional media of the learners’ mother tongue and the national language Chinese through their six-year primary schooling in most rural minority regions of China. Then, when they start to learn English, as a subsequent and foreign language, they experience trilingual education, unlike the Han population dominant towns in Chinese-EFL bilingual education.

2.3.2 FL learning difficulty and causal factors

Learning difficulty, originally termed as “learning disability” (LD) in Kirk (1963), refers to a special group of ‘learning disabled’ children who “have learning difficulties to read, to spell, to write, or to calculate” but are not deaf, blind or

mentally retarded. The learning ‘difficulty’ or ‘problem’ is interchangeably termed for any significant discrepancy between their estimated intellectual potential and actual level of performance in the learning processes (Bateman, 1965). In Ma (2009), for China’s rural minority areas, it refers specifically to the difficulties and problems of the students at school in their study as well as their failure to meet the teacher’s or the school’s requirements. This group of students is often stigmatized as “slower students”, “low achievers”, “the less advanced learners”, or “late bloomers” (ibid pp.14), and are characterized by such criteria as (1) significant discrepancy between academic achievement and potential due to psychological barriers; (2) failure to reach the average scores as per the class, school, local or national requirements; and (3) inability to achieve the standard requirements of the teaching syllabus though normal physical growth (Qian, 1995). Apparently the learning difficulty means academic underachievement, rather than mental retardation as is defined for the learning disability. For this case study, there may be several other causal factors (relevance or relativity in other literature) to FL learning difficulties, such as cross-linguistic differences and distance, resources and opportunities, over use of the grammar-translation method and ineffective teacher development, test-driven assessment, low motivation, unwilling ‘investment’, and unawareness of learner ethnicity and culture.

2.3.3 Causal factors in EFL difficulties

Cross-linguistic difference and distance

Although the world has around 6,000 different spoken languages, in general, it is an unquestioned truism of linguistics that all human languages are ‘equally complex’ similar and constant in their complexity, descriptive or generative

(Bloomfield, 1933; Joos, 1957; Chomsky, 1980), that all ‘meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers’ (Crystal, 2003), and that no language is inferior or superior to any other language (Phillipson, 2003). However, after the turn of the millennium, quite a few linguists (Sampson et al 2009) started to challenge the long-held assumption on invariance of language complexity and posited that languages vary and evolve in the levels of complexity as part of a society’s cultural heritage. The varied language complexity, epistemic, ontological or functional (Rescher, 1998, cited and adapted in Miestamo et al., 2008) may cause learning difficulties in the language in all aspects from phonology to grammar, lexicon, and beyond (Kusters, 2003).

As applied to language learning, the difficulty may result from (1) the degree to which their native language differs from English, by a contrastive analysis approach, that is, the ease and difficulty predictable through comparison of the native and the second or foreign language of the learner (Lado, 1957): the more similar, the easier; (2) the ‘L1 interference’ to impede EFL learners’ learning progress due to L1 derivational errors of the target language in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar (Dechert, 1983, Ellis 1997, & Bhela, 1999).

Falling into two different groups of language families, English, Chinese and Lisu have significant differences (Refer to Table 3 in Appendix B for details). This makes learning English a serious challenge for Chinese EFL learners, in particular the ethnic minorities in the country. At least, according to Odlin (1989), due to the negative L1 transfer, the language distance influences the rate of L2 acquisition, in other words, it would take longer to learn a language quite different from the learners’ own native language.

However, from the comparative table, there is no evidence of any closer

distance between English and Chinese, and it would be groundless to say it is more problematic for Lisu than Han EFL learners. On the contrary, Lisu is more similar to English, both adopting the Romanized writing system. Phonetically, the Lisu ethnic language has six more consonants than English and two more tones than Chinese; lexically, Lisu has only a little more than 1,000 words and may be inadequate for expressing the complexity of the modern world, yet it may not be a must for the Lisu learners' to learn the target language depending on a second language, Chinese, that is, they can directly learn English in the instructional medium of their own native language Lisu instead of the second they have just learned; in grammar, there would be many examples of the Lisu's word order less different from English than Chinese, for instance, when you ask some "Where are you going?", in Lisu it reads, "Where you go?", but in the Chinese word order, "it would be you go where?"

Resources and opportunities

Resources, as defined for this case study, refer to availability of the learners' support in their learning, material or moral. Students, their parents, the teachers, and administrators all are sources of potential support for their EFL learning in the context of formal education. For the learners, a supportive environment, such as that created by the administrators, the teachers and staff and the parents may form an external factor to the learners' success as it is important to note that such support is necessary to significantly facilitate their learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Opportunities mean various settings to which the learners exposure themselves, in spoken or written form, in formal or informal ways of communications and in either an active or a passive role. Chiswick & Miller (1998) defined exposure as the features of formal learning and "learning by doing" that impact the acquisition of

fluency in the target language. The dimensions of exposure may also include the different external cues like print, media, and audiovisual materials. Previous studies have shown that exposure to the second language may serve as one of the environmental factors that enhance language proficiency (de Carvalho, Magno, Lajom, Bunagan, & Regodon, 2006, Jia, 2003; Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Kim & Margolis, 2000). Reber (1985) explains that through exposure, an individual becomes involved in a socialization process, thus acquiring the knowledge, values, and social skills required in learning a second language. Social interaction with a speaker or other learners of the language may result in the learner's opportunity to master a new array of social norms, attitudes, and mannerisms which thus enable the learner to become an effective speaker of the second language (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chen, 1993; Levine, Baxter, & McNulty, 1987). As interactionalists, Bachman (1990) and Chappelle (1998) emphasize contextual use of language where both knowledge or competence and the capacity are socially and culturally-mediated. Bachman (1990) emphasizes that context is important to the extent it allows the expression of language and thus develops language abilities. Kim and Margolis (2000) reported that students exposed to a greater amount of English material or who learn English from native English speakers might also be highly motivated. More recently, Jia (2003) finds that learners' proficiency in the second language increases as they experience richer language environments.

Instructional pedagogy

Pedagogy is the art or profession of teaching. As far as language pedagogy is concerned, the term is, by and large, correlated to several factors (Shu, 2005), such as a country's policy of language teaching, the objective to train the learners, individual

differences (in motivation, knowledge level, aptitude, age, gender, and way of learning etc.), the teacher (attitude, language proficiency, experience, adaptability, age, gender etc.), curriculum (instructional, situational, functional, communicative), course books (task-based, skills-targeted), teaching technology (lab, slide, computer etc.), and assessment (objective or subjective, discrete or comprehensive, summative or formative). In practice, based on SLA theories and TESOL proved efficient methodologies, EFL teachers should make their students aware of the differences and similarities among the languages and make full use of their L1 knowledge and skills, as well as utilizing L2 learning experience for facilitating their L3 learning whenever and wherever necessary and possible (Boey, 1969; Nation, 2003).

Theoretical and empirical findings from SLA or SLL research inform EFL teachers in many ways and may guide their practices of classroom teaching, including Krashen's Input Hypothesis, in the form of the "Natural Approach" to language pedagogy (Krashen & Terrell, 1983 cited in Mitchell & Myles, 1998), Pienemann's Teachability Hypothesis to suggest effective teaching of new L2 items in sequences. Although, with the varied nature of the classroom as a learning community, there can be no 'one best method' that applies at all times and in all situations to every type of learners, the resourceful concepts and descriptive accounts SLA research offers can be helpful for the teacher to understand better and interpret more correctly their own classroom experience, broaden the range of pedagogic choices open to them, and have recourse to the practical theories available (Mitchell & Myles, 1998:195).

In reality, however, some teachers may, for reasons of their own convenience, simply stick to some outdated, inappropriate or inefficient instructional methods, such as the grammar-translation still popularly used in Asian countries and beyond nowadays, in particular, among the EFL teachers of the rural minority students. This

'time-honored' approach was historically used for teaching Greek and Latin in the 16th century and for instruction in teaching modern languages in the 18th century in Europe (Mora, 2002). By this method, a typical class would be given in the instructional medium of the students' mother tongue, with excessive focus on translation and grammatical explanations. The disadvantages of the method include:

1. overemphasis on translation to make the learners dependent on their first language;
2. too much focus on reading and writing without due attention to listening and speaking skills, consequently making the learners unable to communicate appropriately in the target language;
3. unpractical content mostly taken from literary works;
4. memorizing grammar rules and bilingual word lists thus demotivating students to actively communicate in the target language.

On the other hand, unfortunately, in the EFL classroom instruction for Chinese rural minority areas, the teachers may be unaware of the above and seemingly too conservative to accept new theories and methodologies to guide their teaching, and use Chinese exclusively in their classroom, ignoring that fact that the teacher's talk is the only input of the foreign language to the learners (Mei, 2004; Chen, 2004).

According to Chen's investigation into rural schools across the province, the teacher's excessive concern about test giving rather than any attention to the students' affective response and low motivation also led to the 'affective filter' (Krashen, 1982) effect on his or her instruction. In addition, lack of a socio-cultural environment for the rural minority learners' EFL is also discussed with a conclusion that they affect learning efficiency as well.

Motivation and investment

The motivation theory in the field of L2 learning was established by Gardner

and his colleagues in Canada, concentrating on the attitudinal and motivational aspects on which learning a L2 depends and how the two are linked (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). Instrumentally rather than integratively oriented in the foreign language learning, mainly to pass the English tests for enrollment into higher schools for this case study, the learners' motivation can not easily be retained. In this study few foresaw any possible use of the target language in their future study, work and socializing and lost confidence in learning the language after experiencing repeated failure in English tests. There may be also cases of demotivation due to students' failure to meet the teacher's expectations; among the demotivating factors identified by Dornyei are the following:(2001: 150-151): (1) The teacher (personality, commitment, competence, teaching method); (2) Inadequate school facilities (group is too big or not the right level, frequent change of teachers); (3) Reduced self-confidence (experience of failure or lack of success); (4) Negative attitude towards the L2, the L2 community and the speakers of L2; (5) Compulsory nature of L2 study; (6) Interference with another foreign language being studied; (7) Coursebook.

In Norton Peirce's (1995:9) view, the "investment" construct signals more accurately the social and historical relationship of the learners to the target language and their ambivalent desire to learn and practice the language, rather than "motivation", a socio-psychological notion which attempts to quantify a learner's commitment to the target language, instrumentally or integratively oriented. Both are aimed at pragmatic purposes, unlike the term of 'instrumental motivation', as a "fixed personality trait", (ibid.) the learner's investment of 'cultural capital', a term coined from Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), attempts to capture the learners' relationship to the changing social world in which the learners not only exchange information with

the target language speakers but organize and recognize in them a sense of who they are and how they are related to the social world.

The language learner identity is contemporarily theorized as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change (Norton, 2000). In the diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts in which L2 or FL language learning takes place, learners, who may be valued in one site or marginalized in another, tend to negotiate or resist the diverse contextual positions they are confronted with (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997; Norton, 2000). Norton argues that a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community. Therefore, while motivation is seen as a primarily psychological construct (Dornyei, 2001), investment can be framed within a sociological framework in search of a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to the language learning process as well as their complex identity.

Assessment models

One way for the teacher to learn about a student's overall progress over time in a variety of contexts is to carry out an assessment, formative or summative, based on a collection of information about what the student learns and can do. At school, assessment is often associated with testing, which is a formal, standardized but single-occasion timed exercise to collect learner information, as part of the assessment (Chen, 2006). Whether such testing can reflect the learners' authentic performance depends on what assessment model we select.

In a joint case studies of three elementary schools of the US, Valli and her coauthors (2008) also seriously question the test-driven high-stakes accountability

policy, which, they believe, may create a test-driven culture that narrows the curriculum, weakens student-teacher relationships, and undermines professional standards for teaching and learning” (p.3). The policy turns classroom teachers into ‘test managers’ rather than instructional professionals (p.71) and teacher development into a ‘narrow skill training’ (p.155). One way to ‘weather the storm’ (p.166) could be build up a strong ‘organizational capacity’ (the human and material resources a school has at its disposal and the productive use of those resources) and ‘relational capacity’ (formal and informal relationships among the teachers that develop not just shared understandings but collective commitments and high levels of motivation for achieving organizational goals) (p.13), with low student mobility rate and less teacher turnover. Suen and Lan (2006) reviewed the negative part of the large-scale, high-stakes testing origin of China, the Keju (civil service) examination system surviving as long as 1,300 years of history (606-1905) and seemingly still continuing to influence the Chinese educational system, more or less. In the end, they concluded that it was an example of construct irrelevance and underrepresentation leaving several problems such as teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum to target test-specific contents, rating effects, master test-taking skills, and increased anxiety. Moreover, it also promotes rote-memorizing and reproducing model performance focusing on test-only skills and even cheating.

Finch (2002) finds that rather than a norm-referred assessment model, a criteria-referred one, such as the self- or peer-evaluation, has advantages in several ways: reliability, validity, authenticity, promotion of a non-threatening learning environment, and involvement of the learners, among others. In Caine (2005), due to a test-driven “hidden syllable”, a mismatch occurs between Japan’s communicative-competence-oriented curriculum planning for high schools and the

actual grammar-overemphasized classroom implementation, arising from the negative ‘backwash effect’ of the assessment. So, only a systematic test suitable both to the curriculum and the EFL teachers can achieve a positive ‘backwash effect’ with reliability and validity fostering a consistent and effective teaching.

To give the learners communicative competence is to check whether they can form correct sentences and also use the language appropriately, both receptively and productively, in real situations (Dell Hymens, 1970). Thus communicative language tests are intended to measure how the test-takers are able to use language in real life situations, and are often very context-specific, so if possible, should be based on a description of the language that the take-takers need to use (The Kitaos, 1996). Also, a communicative test task for students, subjective or objective in nature, should be covered in the course materials so that the learners can prepare for the test allowing the teacher or examiner to evaluate the learners' performances of the knowledge and skills, productive or receptive, integratively with certain band scales. The beneficial backwash from the tests will be a positive effect which encourages them to study for more communicative tasks.

Teacher development

Researchers such as Schrier (1994) and Butler (2004) among others point out that EFL teachers need to be proficient in the target language and its culture, well qualified in pedagogy, curriculum design and implementation, and excellent in using modern technologies. Cheng et al. (2003), in their discussion of EFL teacher education programs in China, emphasize that EFL non-native teachers need more training in language proficiency than in other areas (i.e. linguistics, pedagogy, culture and literature), which coincides with the Chinese saying “a teacher should have a

barrel of water in order to share a bowl of it with his students.” However, it is also widely believed that to teach the learner how to fish is more practical than to give the learner fish directly, as another Chinese saying goes, and the teacher’s role may shift from ‘Sage on the Stage’ to ‘Guide on the Side’, among others (Mckenzie, 1998).

To such ends, teacher training or development is very essential for effective teaching. However, it seems that training for the teacher’s professional EFL proficiency and know-how is not enough, as transfer of training may not take place, i.e. most of them will not take the risk of practicing the new theories and skills they learn from the teacher development programs or workshops. If the teachers are now allowed to try out the new advanced theory- based approaches while given feedback and coached (Joyce & Showers, 1987), that is, theory presentation, demonstrations at the programs or workshops should be followed up with teaching practice, corrective feedback, and job-embedded coaching, so that the teacher trainees will apply them to their classroom routine instruction. While teaching, the teachers are expected to reflect on their pedagogical learning and teaching practices, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the relationship between theory and empirical skills, thus developing their professional competence. Reflective teaching (Richards, 1990) can be conducted as a way to teacher development in addition to TESOL training through teaching journal keeping, classroom observation, mutual comment-giving, watching classroom instruction recording, informal discussion, etc.

In the context of China’s rural minority community schools, limited by time availability, inaccessibility by transport, teacher underperformance in dealing with the communicative, task-based textbooks, teaching task pressure and insufficient allowance for training, some more practical ways of training should be also provided, such as a participatory approach, rural minority area EFL teaching problems

specific study and discussion, progressive theory-to-practice transmission, selective training sites, and community school based training on certain themes (Liu, 2006). Teacher development programs remain a pressing need but should be seen as a long-run and gradual process to meet the rural teachers' needs and actually improve their competence (Liao, 2006).

Learner ethnicity, culture and religion

Ethnicity refers here to a practice of categorizing a group of people by their cultural or behavioral characteristics learned and shared among the people and distinguished from other groups in terms of their cultural traits such as language, religion, clothing or cuisine (Eller, 2009). Also defined in cultural anthropology, as a way of life of a certain community group in Stern et al (1992:207), culture is believed to have an intertwined relation with language (e.g. Pulverness, 2003). It is increasingly recognized that culture instruction is necessary in language teaching (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Hinkel, 1999; Jiang, 2000), if not a separate course of priority significance. Many researchers and teachers have also seen the importance of the culture imbedded in the target language.

When Gardner identified four variables (Gardner & Lambert, 1959) as relevant to individual differences in language learning, intelligence, language aptitude, motivation and situational anxiety, they also admitted that the four variables each depend on the briefs of the community of second language learning – the culture. More explicitly, Schumann's (1986) gives nine factors: affective, social, personality, cognitive, biological, aptitude, personal, input, and instructional, with the first two referred to as acculturation, 'the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group' (Spolsky, 1989:143). McKay (2003) contends that

culture influences language teaching in two ways, linguistic and pedagogical. In the arena of linguistics, culture impacts the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language, while pedagogically it affects selection of the language materials with certain cultural contents. Pulverness (2003) emphasizes that L2 learning would be inaccurate and incomplete without the study of the target language culture, and the learners would encounter “significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers” without exposure to cultural elements of the people and the society of the country (Bata, 2000). Many list the benefits from culture teaching for L2 learning (Cooke, 1970; Stainer, 1971; Chastain, 1971; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Kramersch, 2001, cited in Kitao, 2000), including (1) giving students a reason to study the target language; (2) helping learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places; (3) motivating the learners through access to culturally based background information such as the geography and history of the countries related to the target language and participation in such culturally relevant L2 learning activities.

In reality, however, culture teaching does not just involve the target language, particularly in a heterogeneous L2 classroom, and language teaching is necessarily complex, since in the learners a process of ethnic or cultural identity may form (Erikson, 1994). Most people espouse ethnocentric views due to being culture bound, which may lead to their rejection or ignorance of the new culture (Kramersch, 2001). This pushes researchers and linguists (Dinges, 1989; Kim, 1991; Wiseman & Koester, 1993) to add intercultural competence to the long established communicative competence lists – grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic, whose ultimate purpose is to learn a foreign language (Canale & Swain, 1980). Therefore, under such circumstances, according to Hinkel (1999:198), one would expect (1) the EFL teaching and learning textbooks to reflect the cultural contexts and to encompass

intercultural elements, (2) the materials to raise the learners' awareness of the intercultural issues for the sake of their communicative competence, (3) the ELT curriculum design and evaluation to take into account culture and intercultural communication. But some or all of these may not take place, and the textbooks may be based on the source, the target or international cultures, for different purposes: to help students become aware of their own cultural identity, to focus on the target culture, or to offer cultural-thread-free, interesting cultural mirrors, respectively.

On the other hand, researchers also argue that culture classes are vital in enabling the learner individuals to see themselves from different points of view rather than to limit themselves within the angle of ethnocentricity (Pulverness, 2004; Genc & Bata, 2005). In some multicultural classes, some countries may simply import EFL textbooks, some adapt part of the contents, and others may provide the students with English books almost totally in the source context, to help the learners retain awareness of their own ethnic identity. Also, the most important feature in the EFL classroom lies in awareness of cultural diversity, of equal social status without discrimination to their own language and ethnic culture, and appropriate inclusion of cultural specific content instruction while avoiding some taboos and controversial issues (Ferrira, 2007). It is also possible to take it as an acculturation process to achieve additive bilingualism while keeping the learners' unique ethnolinguistic and cultural identity intact (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). Moreover, an well-trained language instructor must be careful not to see differences and diversity as brain-washing designated to eliminate or replace the learners' native identity, but rather to add a new set of conventions to their already existing ones (Yorio, 1980 :441).

As part of the culture, people need some kind of belief system to explain various unreasonable things that occur throughout their lives, which gives them tools to understand a problem each time they face it (Obara, 2002). Thus whether students are consciously searching for answers or not, religions and worldviews can be a helpful introduction to stimulate profound reflection. Obara and Kirkpatrick (2002) even argue that “Denial of their religious heritage and ignorance of major world beliefs often hinders students' understanding of global events...teachers should never force a topic or a belief on their students, yet we can be aware that students may subconsciously be looking for guidance in these very personal areas as well as in strictly academic fields.”

Moreover, it is a widely known that Confucianism and Buddhism are quite influential in the daily life of many Asian countries, as is the case with Christianity in the West. The Lisu ethnic people also have their own centuries-old traditional religion Animism and foreign missionaries introduced Christianity, even if it is on the wane for the younger generation, ‘acculturated and assimilated’ (Damen, 1987) by the Chinese culture. The two kinds of religions coexist harmoniously in the Lisu people’s socio-cultural life. Affected by their religious beliefs and other cultural elements, the Lisu people in China or the immigrants to Myanmar, Thailand and India, and elsewhere, are identically considered members of a long-suffering ethnic minority whose origin can be inferred only from tales coming from the elders’ mouths to kids, the imaginative antiphonal folk song at weddings, and the epic of “soul routes back to the ancestor’s home” at funerals; they were inhabitants of remote hilly areas in a primitive society until the 1950s without any kingdom or records of ruling over any other ethnic groups in history, living on hunting, gathering and farming under harsh living conditions; a perseverant people experiencing large-scale and frequent

migration due to poverty and religious persecution; a minority with a variable writing system but none of which became widespread within and outside the community; friendly and hospitable neighbors for all other ethnic peoples nearby; bilinguals and trilinguals among several other minorities for social communication (Si 1999; Zhang, 2006). The minority EFL learners' social status, living conditions, their values and world outlook, and their ethnic culture may affect their learning of the foreign language.

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