

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Major findings from the case study

The case study yields several major findings as follows from in-depth discussion and analysis of the data collected for investigation into the Lisu rural minority students' EFL learning difficulties, as a case study, through using such instruments as field trips, interviews, questionnaires, classroom observation and experimental teaching in the medium of the learners' L2 and then L3 over an extended duration for the data collection following an extensive review of the literature on the FLLD issue in China and beyond.

5.1.1 The educational policy misinterpreted

Characteristic of a high-stakes test-driven accountability system as the only way of assessment for the rural minority community school teachers, the current educational policy is found to have negative backwash effects on several aspects. It gives the EFL teachers a wrong signal and the mistaken belief that their students' scores should be the priority for assessment of the teachers' performance rather than their professional instruction of essential knowledge and development of the students' overall skills toward their communicative competence. Then, with such misinterpretation in mind, the teachers may confine their EFL routine teaching activities to a goal that is narrowed down to the test relevant knowledge points and the

students are demanded to achieve a score requirements set by the teacher. The assessment system is also incorrect and unauthentic when applied to measure the students' achievements. So a collaborative and efficient teacher-student relationship may not be possible when the learners fail to achieve within certain score ranges set by the teachers, while the teachers for their part may not fully fulfill their roles. In the end, both sides may be reluctant to work together, blaming each other - or more seriously, students may totally give up, for instance, asking for sick leave, inattentive attendance or drop-out. As for the teachers, they may stop reflecting on their own faults and simply maintain the situation in a burnout attitude, thus 'producing' more FLLD students unintentionally.

5.1.2 'Soilless rooting' under the grammar-translation method

To meet the 'specifically quantified' goals, the students' scores earned in the end of the school year, the teachers may turn to a short cut – only teaching to tests or exams relevant knowledge. To achieve the goal, they may also pick up a long outdated linguistic 'relic' dropped by Western educators as of the 18th century and demand their students to study the foreign language by rote-learning or excessive repetition like a semi-programmed robot. As a result of the product-oriented approach for the sake of "quick-success", the process of the teaching and learning divert away from the national curriculum design we specified in 2.1 of this thesis. Aimed merely at word-for-word grammatical explanation and translation, the "time-honored" grammar-translation method focuses little on listening and speaking and neglects the great potential of the minority EFL learners' bilingualism and trilingualism prior to their learning of the foreign language, particular in the two skills. Moreover, the method appears to be convenient for the teachers, without the need to enlarge the

students' exposure to the target language as it pays little attention to listening and speaking skills and use of teaching-aid purposed devices and materials. Instead, the teachers speak more Chinese for word-for-word grammatical explanation and translation into Chinese, the instructional medium. As the study indicates, the teacher talk in English in the classroom is all the input of the target language, as well as almost the only resource and opportunity for most of the rural EFL learners. In addition, the less-than-half intake may not be fully digested due to the method's little attention to functional and appropriate use of the foreign language in various contexts, leaving it an incomprehensible input and making the teaching task incomplete.

5.1.3 Low motivation and minimum investment

Then, through several times of experience of failure of the tests or exams, the students' initial enthusiasm in learning a subsequent language is soon extinguished, right after their successful learning of the second language Chinese during the primary school bilingual education. In other words, the students do not enjoy the language learning experience but rather, experience it as a mechanical learning of a junior high school subject. The vicious cycle of the teaching method does not stop there but further demotivates the minority students, due to socio-psychological constraints such as undesirable teacher-student relationships under pressure, negative self-evaluation, loss of confidence, test-induced anxiety, and other non-linguistic factors that may more or less impede the students from investing time and diligence in learning the language. Consequently, actual language learning may not take place or with little effectiveness.

5.1.4 Inappropriate teacher roles

In the learner-centered and instructor-directed model, the EFL teachers may play a variety of roles in their classroom teaching, which not only demands their

proficiency in the target language, but also their sustained teaching profession preparation, their linking of SLA, TESOL and multilingualism specific theories with practice, and their task-based role-shift strategy. The teachers' knowledge and skills can be a resourceful fount of wisdom for the learners. Their professional performance capacity, however, relies on sustained teacher development and practice of language educational theories elsewhere plausible, locally adaptable, and applicable to meet both the curriculum requirements and the learners' need. In reality, upon instruction in the classroom setting, their role should not be a fixed or frozen one without any vitality but rather, shift as necessary among a wide range of roles including but not limited to the task-related (e.g. organizer, instructor, facilitator, resource, and evaluator), interpersonal (optimum atmosphere creator, socializing agent, motivator) and individual (learner, observer, action researcher). For attainment of all these, it is essential that there be implementation of all-rounded teacher development programs, professional, ethical or self-reflective, in varied forms for the rural minority community schools.

5.1.5 Insufficient social support

Social support, such as the educational administration, the community school, the teachers, the parents and other community members, can be seen as a metaphor for the soil for seedling cultivation and growth before they are 'transplanted' to a new farm field. In that case, the 'soil' (a variety of support) should be 'nutritious' (to the learners' needs) containing possibly sufficient 'elements' conducive to 'growth' (learning process) of the 'seedlings' (learners), at an 'eco-friendly temperature' (to the learners' interests) similar to the 'outdoor' (society) climatic conditions. Simply providing the learning environment is far from enough as supporters or care givers in this metaphor. Specifically, the students study should be timely facilitated by a

collaborative, consecutive, and contributory team of supporters, materially or psychologically.

Very low educated, only having received primary education themselves, the parents of the minority students financial support and concern is not enough, they should also give educational advice, though not necessarily being able to coach their children at school; the school leaders should not involve themselves too much in teaching but spend more time and energy on school management which does not mean to simply take orders from the supervisory institution, partly for securing their own positions, but to make available professional teachers for the students and arouse enthusiasm of the teachers for making a contribution to rural education. As for the teachers' support, in addition to their knowledge and skills teaching, they should try to understand the students' thought and behavior and timely render assistance to them.

5.1.6 Neglect of ethnic and intercultural awareness

Each ethnic group may have its own culture distinctive from others, which is no exception with the Lisu minority. In language instruction, it is no longer a puzzle to emphasize both the language and the culture embedded in it. However, the learners' language and culture also play their roles in a heterogeneous classroom, with positive or negative transfer, for which learning difficulty of the target language and culture may become greater when the learners feel it different and distant from theirs. This does not mean the teachers should always compare the cross-linguistic differences and similarities of the languages in classroom teaching as this would consequently diminish the input of the target language for the learners with already very limited exposure and meanwhile increase the complexity, unless the two languages are classified in the same language family or group with similar sounds and syntax, mutually borrowed words and shared cultures in the same continent or neighboring

regions; for instance, most European learners (e.g. the speakers of French, Dutch, German, and Danish) would feel it easier to learn English than Chinese as a foreign language. The teacher should also bear in mind that most of the minority students are multilinguals through years of bilingual education and their successful experience in learning the second and subsequent languages can be utilized for additive trilingualism.

It is found that cultural differences between the Han and the Lisu Minority also account significantly for the extremely high drop-out rate of the students, which is a social phenomenon of the local community mistakenly taken as the Lisu minority people's lack of study awareness and their less developed ability in language learning than their neighboring ethnic groups. Given Chinese EFL textbooks' exclusion of ethnic minority specific cultures and some Han teachers' inadequate awareness of the ethnic and cultural differences in their classroom teaching, it is not easy to retain the minority students' initial interest in learning the foreign language, which leads to their low motivation, minimum investment, and even excessive drop-out rates. As a result, the potential of their multilingualism in the mother tongue and local ethnic languages and dialects fails to be developed.

5.2 Limitations of this case study

First of all, the case study was conducted at a small rural minority community of three ethnic groups – Lisu, Yi and Han, sequenced by the populations contrary to the nationwide figures where Han is the dominant, Yi, one of the largest minorities, and Lisu among the minorities with only a population a little more than half a million. Only the EFL learning difficulties among the Lisu minority students were focuses of this investigation, so it might not represent the general picture of a larger rural

minority community elsewhere. Therefore, the findings from the case study may not be fully applicable to some other ethnic areas.

Second, there is a long interval, four years from my data collection to interpretation of the data for writing this thesis, during which things may have changed a lot. Some of the data was consequently updated but it would be very hard to recollect all the data once again in a very tight schedule. And even if time permits, follow-up investigation would be now impossible as all the students have graduated from that school, some of their teachers have transferred to teach at other community schools nearby, and some leaders were also re-appointed.

Third, major casual factors were found through possibly broad perspectives of investigation for this case study and over a considerably long period using several instruments; however, some minor factors have to be further investigated, for instance, the socio-political issues. The community consists of over 70% Lisu population, around 20% Yi and 10 % Chinese Hans, but it is not yet a Lisu autonomous township. Moreover, the township is not located at a majority Lisu village but at a majority Yi village where the Yi rulers for all the local ethnic groups in history resided. The Han people are a minority locally but their language is the national language, it is used as the only instructional medium for all the subjects. Although all the students can speak or fully understand Lisu, in most cases they communicate in local Chinese dialect at the school, as a 'public speech' among the different ethnic groups.

5.3 Recommendations for future study

Firstly, further study should be carried out for more findings, on more specific and practical issues such as the use of L2 learning experience from the bilingual

education, the teacher development model for the rural minority community school, the trilingual education in the medium of the community speech Lisu, adaptation of the EFL teaching and learning materials for the Lisu and Yi minority students, causes of the extremely high dropout incidence and solutions, among others.

Secondly, practical support should be given to the community school through provision of advice to local educational administrators and school leaders (e.g. cancellation of the existing system of 10 workdays and 4-day weekends), training of local EFL teachers, bringing in native English speakers as volunteer teachers, and informing domestic and international NGOs of local conditions for their joint contributions, which the researcher has tried over the past years with some effect but which was not mentioned in this case study.