Multicultural Communication Competence and Education in Ethnic Minority Areas of Yunnan

Hao Li

Dongfang College, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics, Haining, Zhejiang, China

Abstract—Cultural diversity is evident throughout schools in border provinces of China, especially in Yunnan, which has the largest number of ethnic minorities. To what extent do teachers in Yunnan prepare their teaching to cater for the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students? Findings revealed that cultural and communicative barriers exist in Yunnan's schools, resulting in the academic underachievement of minority students. This paper integrates some external issues, such as the insufficient family education and a lack of support and understanding from schools, with internal problems, such as students' and teachers' scant knowledge in multicultural communication and the stress from psychological and behavioural adjustment during the acculturation process, into a summary as multicultural communicative and educational problems. To solve these problems, theories and practice of multicultural communication competence are introduced to meet the varied needs of students in the multicultural environment, and integrate teachers with theoretical approaches for multicultural communication education. School courses need to be updated to address the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds, and this paper also provides practical ways to begin with.

Index Terms—multicultural communication competence, ethnic minorities, multicultural education, teaching practice

I. BACKGROUND

Yunnan is a multinational border province in China, and it has the largest number of ethnic minorities in China. Many students are ethnic minorities from mountain tribes, such as Yi, Dai and Mosuo tribes. According to the data distribution in the sixth national census in 2010, the country has 56 ethnic groups while Yunnan has 52, accounting for 33.37% of the total population. Ethnic distribution was inhabited by characteristics of large and small settlements. Different nationalities with geographical differences and ethnic characteristics enjoy rich and varied ethnic cultures and life styles. China has always been a country of cultural and linguistic diversity. From the earliest of times when the ancestors of Chinese first expanded its territory to the shores, China has incorporated people from various ethnic backgrounds. The Chinese government support for the view of multiculturalism has encouraged changes to the school curriculum which promotes greater respect for, and understanding of cultural diversity.

Ethnic culture embraces the beliefs, values, ideals, customs, languages, discourses, artistic products and symbols of a group with particular reference to ethnic minority groups in a China-as-a-whole context. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008, p.3), culture is "a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behaviour and each member's interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour". The cultural expression of a minority group can be found in their customs, group memories, important tools and artefacts which can create a sense of group and community identity. The expression of people's culture can also be found in the dynamic aspects of their society, such as their language, the way in which they interact in formal and informal settings, and their lifestyles. It should be recognised that all cultures contain diversity and conflict. It should also be recognised that culture is largely socially constructed and subject to change.

Communication roots in culture, and is also the carrier of culture. Gudykunst (2000, pp. 285-286) states: "Understanding communication in any culture … requires culture-general information (i.e. where the culture falls on the various dimensions of cultural variability) and culture-specific information (i.e. the specific cultural constructs associated with the dimension of cultural variability)". From this analytic perspective, there is little doubt about the significance of language in communication, whether as a medium or methodological tool for understanding other cultures. As Lee (1991) argues, language is a condition of culture because it is through language that one's culture is learnt and maintained. Language learning is an important issue in national education policy in China, including minority areas. China has the policy of protecting the rights and interests of ethnic minority groups to use their own dialects and writing systems, and considering interaction among different ethnic groups to be fundamental to the development of the whole area. Therefore, a multilingual education policy is being carried out by insisting on teaching students both in mandarin and in their native languages from early childhood. Normally, when minority students entered into primary schools, English learning will also be employed. However, multicultural communication is not just about language

learning, and it is better for multicultural communication be carried out according to the patterns described by Trompenaars:

...regard culture as referring to the shared assumptions, beliefs, values and norms, actions as well as artifacts and language patterns. It is an acquired body of knowledge about how to behave and shared meanings and symbols which facilitate everyone's interpretation and understanding of how to act within an organization. Culture is the unique whole, the heart and soul, that determines how a group of people will behave. (Trompenaars, 2011, p. 9)

With the problems of urbanization and people struggling to fill up the employment needs of the country, big cities in China see the movement of people inwards and people coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds and cultures. The consciousness of multiculturalism and its position in education is becoming more important in places with ethnic minorities. A conscious and persistent effort has to be made to promote understanding and respect for cultural differences, including ethnic minorities which make up an important part of population in Yunnan. This imperative was officially declared even as early as the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy (1984), which emphasized the necessity to teach all students how to respect ethnic and cultural differences and to accept them as part of the cultural diversity in China's modern society. Some selected core learning outcomes in schools reflect a commitment to cultural respect and diversity: students share points of view about their own and other's cultural experiences and legends; students cooperate to find and systematically record information about the contributions of people in a variety of situations; students share their sense of belonging to a community to analyse cultural aspects that constitute their ethnic identities; students enact a collaborative performance to identify their own and others' strengths and weaknesses.

The education of multicultural communication within the Chinese landscape is only part of the story. The importance of understanding diversity worldwide is now readily accepted in many countries. Cross-cultural understanding is now a major goal of social education (Banks, 2015). In the education of multicultural communication, Ting-Toomey (1989, pp. 175-176)) stresses that "… by understanding the fundamental value differences between members of all cultures, the learning styles of students from all societies, and the negotiation styles of participants in different speech communities, [that] we can better understand how members from different cultures synchronize their worldviews and modify their communication patterns to adapt and adjust to one another on both the interpersonal level and the intergroup-intercultural communication level". As qualified teachers in an environment with large number of ethnic minorities, they need to have knowledge of different cultural backgrounds, and should be interested in multicultural communication.

The objective of this study is to present issues and implications in the education of ethnic minority students in Yunnan, in order to establish a certain level of foundation for education in multicultural communication competence. We were interested in the role of educational context and how students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, attending the same school and living in the same area, perceived their education and multicultural communication in different conditions. This article will make recommendations for how to improve multicultural competency in communication, as well as in teaching, and look forward to contribute to the establishment of an educational model in ethnic minority regions in China.

II. ISSUES IN MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION EDUCATION IN ETHNIC MINORITY AREAS OF YUNNAN

The achievement gap in schools between ethnic minority and majority Han students has been discussed in many articles and has become a serious challenge for the national educational system. According to Berry et al.(2006), during the process of acculturation, students from ethnic minority backgrounds often experience educational underachievement. In the description of cross-cultural psychology, acculturation means individual or ethno-cultural group changes in behaviour and attitudes in the situation of multicultural communication, and it has been described as a stressful process. Schools have been considered to be the crucial context for acculturation of students from ethnic minority backgrounds. The development of multicultural communication competence of these students is thus embedded in the acculturation process, which involves their communication with others, psychological and behavioural adjustment in a multicultural environment.

Sometimes, ethnic minority students experience a lack of support and understanding by majority Han students and teachers. Minority and majority Han students in school seemed segregated and they don't mingle and play together a lot. Extra-curriculum activities intended to transfer multicultural knowledge, and boost multicultural understanding are not sufficient. According to our observation and interviews with some minority students, most of them are not enthusiastic in taking part in multicultural activities because they believe that they are treated differently in those activities. In part of Yunnan province, it is certainly true that there is an obvious pattern of ethnic segregation, including the preferences of parents to send their children to schools that cater to their language of choice and ethnic background. It of course has a detrimental effect for national integration as it does not contribute to a conducive and equal environment for people to communicate and interact with others from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

When learning a foreign language, bilinguals are more pragmatic, functional and productive than monolinguals (Jordà, 2005). But in reality, ethnic minority students in Yunnan often fail in competing with Han students in English learning. Some of the reasons are as follows: different educational environments and linguistic backgrounds bring a lot of obstacles to multicultural communication. Minority students tend to accept English education as a third language

while they ignore the cultural aspects of English language. Many western cultures and customs are too alienated to be understood and not acceptable by a lot of ethnic minority families. In the classroom, students always show scant understanding and interest to many western cultural introduction. According to some interviews with minority families, I suggest that many of the parents may have a misunderstanding of the reasons for learning English. Their families believe that good English may help their children find a better job in the future, but western acculturation will have a negative influence on their career development in Chinese societies. Many minority students' ideological system were constructed by their family education in a relatively conservative way.

The development of students' language and communicative skills is imperative for academic achievement (Hakuta, 2011; Paez, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014). If a minority student comes to understand that their language and culture are not respected, they may begin to disassociate from school (Hakuta, 2011; Valdes, 2001; Zhou, 1997). This not only influences their own academic performance but also affects the study ambience of the whole school. Thus, it is critical to understand how students learn a third language and think about their academic success in contexts within and outside of those schools and their perceptions of which of these contexts are most conducive to them. The low English proficiency of many minority students is influenced by their low English exposure and less focus of English learning in schools of minority areas. The more exposed the learners in another language, the higher is their communicative competence. In fact, the low English proficiency is in accordance with the mindset that English is considered as a foreign language and not as a necessary universal language. Such mindset impedes the development of English proficiency of minority students in those areas.

III. Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Multicultural Communication Competence

Recent studies regards multiculturalism as an exponent, examining specific policies in the fields of education, religious practice, media, dual citizenship, minority cultural activities, bilingual education, and affirmative action (Reynolds, 2014), or evaluating cultural aspects for religious rights, cultural rights, attitudes and identities, and political representation (Colombo, 2015). Gollnick and Chinn (1990) suggest five objectives for multicultural education. These objectives also stress aspects beyond the boundaries of ethnic or racial issues. They include: i) the promotion of strength and value of cultural diversity, ii) an emphasis on human rights and respect for those who are different from oneself, iii) the acceptance of alternative life choices for people, iv) the promotion of social justice and equality for all people, and v) an emphasis on equal distribution of power and income among groups. In Fraser's (2014) words: "We should see ourselves as presented with a new intellectual and practical task: that of developing a critical theory of recognition, one that identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality".

According to Oyewo (2000, p.157), communication is "the process of transmitting, receiving, and acting upon message/information, thoughts, ideas, attitudes and feelings through mutually agreed understandable/determined codes/symbols". This process is usually used to "inform, entertain, instruct and persuade in a given communicative encounter". The concept of communicative competence was put forward by Dell Hyme in 1972. According to Dell Hyme (1972, p.34), in language teaching, communicative competence is the capability to "use the language system appropriately in any circumstances, with regard to the functions and the varieties of language". Communicative competence requires the capability not only to know grammatical rules of a language be applied to make syntactically correct sentences, but also to know appropriate timing and occasion to use the sentences.

According to Jian (2013), in their illustration of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) discuss four separate elements influencing and interacting each other as elements of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Their sociolinguistic competence as mentioned by Orillos (1998) is now divided into two separate pragmatic categories: functional aspects of language (illocutionary competence, or, pertaining to sending and receiving intended meanings) and sociolinguistic aspects (which deal with such considerations as politeness, formality, metaphor, register, and culturally-related aspects of language. Communicative competence refers to both language knowledge and skill when interacting with others in real situations. Grammatical competence is concerned with mastery of the language code itself. Discourse competence, the complement of grammatical competence in many ways, concerns mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different types. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of the cultural rules of language and discourse. Strategic competence, a construct that is exceedingly complex, refers to the strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication. According to Díaz-Rico and Weed (2010, p.58), communicative competence is characterized of a language user's language and cultural knowledge and skills that allows the user to know "when, where, and how to use language appropriately". A competent speaker of a language knows the way to make appropriate choices of words and structures to fit the occasion in which communication occurs.

For students from different linguistic backgrounds, their interpersonal communication and relationships are strongly influenced by the language they speak. They learn to adapt their language use according to the specific situation, environment, and interpersonal dynamics with others. When interacting with friends who speak the same kind of language, minority students may prefer their native language for comfort and because they see language as a type of "code" that they share with their peers (Banks, 2015; Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2010). For many ethnic minority students,

using their home language may help them feel connected to their cultures and identities (Berry, 2006; Manning & Lee, 2017; Nieto, 2002; Zhou, 1997).

School is an essential context that has significant bearing on students' development of multicultural communication competence. It is an environment that has the potential to embrace the multiple communicative skills and multicultural resources that minority students need. Therefore, it is important to teach and improve minority students' multicultural communication competence to make successful cross-cultural communication and to change their situation of underachievement in schools.

IV. SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

To deal with the existing or potential difficulties that arise from teaching ethnic minority students in Yunnan, I suggest that measures should be taken to put more emphasis on multicultural communication competence, the teaching process, and the curriculum. As school did not succeed in creating a caring educational environment for all students, minority students were confronted with underachievement. Those students need to be helped to develop a positive attitude, a sense of belonging and a feeling of equality and acceptance in campus through education of multicultural communication competence.

According to Li et al. (2017), contrary to their aims and intentions, intercultural activities in school had limited effect and seemed to support the privilege of cultural majority Han students and teachers. This can be seen as a teaching practice giving advantages to ethnic majority over minority students. Therefore, multicultural activities should be designed to show no dominant or subordinate position of any specific culture, and it is better to display all the cultural elements equally. A closer appreciation of the perspectives of various cultures can enable students to develop understanding and respect for the values of others and a concern for their welfare and dignity. The main goal of multicultural language activities should be to help students develop the capability to make decisions with critical thinking so that they can solve personal and group problems and, through communicative action, influence the learning environment. Sound decisions cannot be made in a vacuum; they must be based on knowledge of multicultural communication and critical thinking. The key components of these activities should enable students to explore their own cultural identity and those of the various groups that exist in Chinese societies.

One major challenge could be in getting minority families involved in lesson planning or giving input and feedback on teaching in order to be culturally fair and inclusive (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). In many cases, teachers need to use information about minority families to adapt the curriculum and teaching procedure. However, normally not many minority parents are willing or able to take time to do so in an effective way. It is stated in China's national policy that all minority languages should and respected and maintained. This means that students will not be punished when they use their minority languages in their families and daily communication, but it is usually the case that they would feel ashamed when having to use their minority language in schools. To better understand the cultural backgrounds of students, it is important that schools take the responsibility to collaborate and communicate with their families in order to obtain as much information as possible about their cultural backgrounds and concerns. Students' parents or other relatives should be invited to schools and share or tell stories using their minority languages to the other students or families. All students have the opportunities to listen to, learn to use some of other minority languages in a supportive environment with the assistance from some teaching resources, materials. In these contexts, multilingual and multicultural resources and staffs should be available to provide relevant experiences to students in their minority languages. By gathering information from families about their cultural backgrounds and concerns, teachers can gain a better appreciation of students' experiences with their minority languages and cultures.

Although many multicultural studies do not explicitly mention language in their list of multicultural contents or as an organizing rationale, the interrelationship between language and culture has been discussed abundantly since the beginning of the 20th century. To achieve multicultural communication competence is also one of the purposes of the second language learning. Minority students will be able to surmount the cultural barriers to obtain more satisfactory results if they could express themselves in a more natural and supporting language environment (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). English learning could be carried out in a more effective way combining knowledge of language and culture. Thus, English classroom should be set multiculturally to cater to students' knowledge system. In a multicultural classroom, English can even serve as a medium of instruction to help gradually transfer from their ethnic cultures into multicultural understanding.

Celebrating "multiple intelligences" and invoking different styles of learning helps in culture-related language learning. Students will start to understand that achievements come in many different forms, and that diverse cultures should be respected and appreciated. In daily study, and in expressing their study, students may work with words, with discourses, with sounds and rhythms, with dramatic performances, with visual arts, with physical activities and sports from multicultural backgrounds. To complement oversimplified approaches, where children are directed in the "right" way to say or do in specific situations and conditions, these activities encourage students to value diversity, and provide opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to achieve, and for those achievements to be appreciated (Gay, 2010). The first prerequisites for education of cultural values are affirmation of individuals, and acceptance of their right to hold opinions and express them without being scoffed at for what believe at this point in time (Hill, 1994). In those multicultural activities, students are encouraged to explore and inquire about the cultural differences they

notice, and their questions are answered honestly and considerately in a way appropriate to their levels of understanding. During multicultural activities, teachers should avoid the arrogance which assumes that the majority Han culture, into which they have been initiated, is the only valid way of viewing the world for educational purpose. If varied outcomes are expected from multicultural communication, a broad basis of evaluation must be used as well. Effective evaluation depends on the teacher's ability to select the appropriate means of appraising learner progress in accordance with multicultural communication objectives.

Critical thinking skills are also an important component of the multicultural communication curriculum. It is equally important to evaluate whether or not students have developed such skills and how well they are able to use them. According to Clegg (2008), critical thinking skills are not the exclusive domain of social studies. They are essential if students are to understand appropriate cultural and social facts, concepts, and generalization. To the extent that there may be some overlap with the curriculum areas such as language arts, reading, or science, teachers should reinforce critical thinking skills that is often overlooked in many other classrooms. Students need to think about issues in classes of multicultural communication. Critical thinking does not occur in a vacuum, and it is more fruitful if the cultural issue is important to students. Important cultural issues, to which students have strong attachments and commitments, should be used frequently in classes of multicultural communication to give students opportunities to practice and reinforce their critical thinking skills. Critical thinking serves its most important purpose when it enables students to make better decisions and to take action that helps solve real problems and improve their living condition.

In addition, cooperative learning opportunities should be provided in multicultural communication activities so that students can share their common problems, objectives, tasks and joy of fulfillment with other group members. In cooperative learning, group members are interdependent. The cooperative relationship will lead to a better academic performance of each student, because in cooperative learning the mutual help will ensure that every student has grasped all the information and that the interaction among the members will become more frequent, so that learning can produce positive influence on all learners in the same group (Johnson, 1994). Students will benefit from such cooperative learning opportunities and develop some communicative competencies including respect, empathy and perspective-taking.

For structural integration of multicultural communication in schools, the practice should go beyond curricular activities towards the critical addressing of the cultural consideration of communication. Schools and teachers need to strive to create an equal and inclusive educational environment for students. This requires building class cohesion and bridging mutual understanding between minority and majority Han students, raising cultural awareness and the practice against cultural prejudices and biases. Furthermore, teachers need to take cultural diversity into account, in order to increase students' understanding of the impact of culture in communication and teaching. The objectives are to adapt teaching to students' learning needs, to provide curriculum in cultural contexts, and establish trusting and caring relationships with ethic minority students.

V. CONCLUSION

It can be found that cultural and communicative barriers exist in education of minority areas in Yunnan province, resulting in the academic underachievement of minority students. From the analysis above, this paper integrates some external issues, such as the insufficient family education and a lack of support and understanding from schools, with internal problems, such as students' and teachers' scant knowledge in multicultural communication and the stress from psychological and behavioural adjustment during the acculturation process, into a summary as multicultural communicative and educational problems. To solve these problems, theories and practice of multicultural communication competence are introduced to meet the varied needs of students in the multicultural environment, and facilitate teaching with theories and approaches for multicultural communication education. Based on multicultural communication competence, this paper also brings forward teaching principles and strategies for both teachers and minority students.

In multicultural communication education, the goal is to cater to the needs of diverse student populations and encourage teachers to intentionally incorporate cultural consideration into their pedagogy and courses. Teachers need to change their teaching approaches to benefit a diverse range of students, and adjust to sensitive and multicultural classroom environments. The development of multicultural communication competence provides an opportunity for students to improve their academic performance and learn about a wide range of cultures and gain valuable insights into the world society. Conceptualizing multicultural communication broadly also enables teachers to select content about different cultures so that students, by comparing and contrasting them, can develop higher level concepts and generalization about different cultural aspects in China's society today.

Some solutions to the problems on developing multicultural communication competence are largely theoretical and empirical, and require teachers to make great efforts to improve their awareness in multicultural communication. Therefore, further studies on these issues should be concentrated on putting those theories into practice to check their availability and efficacy.

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Hao Li was born in Kunming, China in 1978. He graduated from Yunnan University, China. He received his doctoral degree in Education in 2014.

He is currently teaching in Foreign Language Department, Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics Dongfang College, Haining, China. His research interests include applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.