ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE THIRD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION ON THE ENGLISH TEACHING FOR TIBETAN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Fang Liu

School of Foreign Language of Lanzhou University, Lanzhou Gansu

ABSTRACT: *English education in Tibetan areas has not achieved good results. This paper reviews the research on the third language acquisition at home and abroad, analyzes the factors affecting the English learning of Tibetan middle school students, and combined with research results, puts forward some ways to promote the teaching ability of teachers and the learning ability of Tibetan students so as to improve the quality of English teaching in Tibetan middle schools.*

KEY WORDS: Third language acquisition, Tibetan middle school, language teaching

INTRODUCTION

As early as July 2002, the State Council has proposed that "a curriculum system for minority language and Chinese teaching should be gradually formed in primary and secondary schools for ethnic minorities, and also a foreign language course should be set up in areas where conditions permit." As a result, English teaching is carried out in minority regions in China. Tibetans, living mainly in Tibet, have their own spoken and written language. Tibetan students who have been living in Tibetan environment since childhood have Tibetan as their mother tongue, Chinese as their second language and English as their third language.

The fact that three kinds of language knowledge structures and cognitive structures in the brain work at the same time and influence each other alternately makes it more difficult for Tibetan students to learn English than students of Han nationality since they have to deal with the relationship between the three languages to reduce cross-linguistic interference, and manage to take advantage of the existing knowledge about language to learn the target language. Therefore, teaching English in Tibetan areas has its particularity and complexity. Due to the late start of English Teaching in Tibet compared to Tibetan and Chinese teaching, it is still relatively backward. Therefore, it's necessary to combine the outstanding research results of third language acquisition at home and abroad with the practice of English teaching in Tibetan middle schools, which can not only effectively promote the teaching ability of teachers and the learning ability of Tibetan students but also contribute to the development of minority education so as to realize the common prosperity of all nationalities. This paper is going to put forward some strategies to improve English teaching in Tibetan areas based on the

relevant theories and research of third language acquisition.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE THIRD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Foreign Research on Third Language Acquisition

Third language acquisition means that learners are learning another language except for their mother tongue and the second language they have mastered. In the past 20 years, the research on third language acquisition has made a great progress, involving many aspects of this field, such as the influence of first language and second language on third language acquisition(Leung, 2005; Zobl, 1992); differences between second language acquisition and third language acquisition (cenoz, 2000); cross-linguistic influence and interaction in third language acquisition; and metalinguistic awareness (De Angelis, 2007) .

Cenoz (2000) emphasizes that third language acquisition is different from second language acquisition. It is a complex process influenced by different factors and conditions. Cenoz (2000) puts forward several main differences between third language acquisition and second language acquisition, including the order of language acquisition, sociolinguistic factors and psycholinguistic process of language acquisition. Bild & Swain (1989) discuss the role of acquired language in target language learning and believes that bilingual learners have more language cognitive advantages than monolingual learners; Zobl (1992) finds that multilingual learners have an open rather than conservative language learning process.

Language transfer is one of the most important research fields in third language acquisition. It refers to the influence of the acquired language on the target language due to the similarities and differences between languages (Odlin, 1989). For trilingual learners, if they have mastered two languages, these two languages will have influences on the third language learning. In terms of the effect of transfer, it can be divided into positive transfer and negative transfer. According to De Angelis' analysis, many factors can affect language transfer, such as language distance, the proficiency of target language and source language, recency of use, the order of acquisition. In addition, based on the study of language transfer, the researchers put forward several theoretical models and hypotheses to explain the language acquisition mechanism of multilinguals. Bardel and Falk (2011) confirm the influence of second language and put forward the L2 Status Factor Model. The model holds that in the early stage of third language acquisition, the second language structure is in the priority of transfer compared with the first language. This is because the first language is acquired implicitly and stored in procedural memory, while the second language is acquired explicitly and stored in declarative memory. The way of third language acquisition is the same as that of the

second language, and thus language transfer occurs between the second language and the third language which are both stored in the declarative memory. The important role of second language status has been confirmed in many studies (Falk & Bardel, 2012). Another assumption is the Cumulative Enhancement Model (CEM), which holds that language acquisition is a gradual and cumulative process. Any previously learned language will affect the language analysis, understanding and production of the third language learners. Flynn et al. (2004)'s results have proved it. Language Typological Primacy Model (TPM) proposes that learners compare three language structures, choose the language which is the most similar to the target language in structure, and transfer all syntactic features of the language to the third language. Some scholars have proved the hypothesis of the model.

Metalinguistic awareness has also received much attention from researchers of third language acquisition, which refers to the ability to apply the structure features of language, including the analysis of language knowledge and the control of language processing (Baker, 2001). Metalinguistic awareness is closely related to learners' language learning ability (De Angelis, 2007). Foreign researchers have explored the metalinguistic awareness of multilingual learners from various perspectives. The results show that rich language acquisition experience can promote the development of metalinguistic awareness of phonetics, vocabulary and syntax. Previous studies have shown that the more languages learners have mastered, the stronger their syntactic competence is, and their pragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence are superior to those of monolinguals (Jorda, 2005). These studies have shown that bilinguals may show cognitive advantage in learning the third language.

In recent years, foreign scholars began to study the use of learning strategies by third language learners, and found that learning strategies and language learners' learning motivation go hand in hand (Dmitrenko, 2017). In addition, the personal factors of the third language learners, such as education experience, early bilingual acquisition, second language proficiency, language learning environment, learning motivation, learning attitude, personality are found closely related to their language learning. Teachers should apply appropriate teaching methods for the third language teaching based on students' individual differences.

Domestic Research on Third Language Acquisition
In China, the research on third language acquisition started relatively late, of which 80% studied the English acquisition of minority students (Fan, 2018). Much attention has been paid to the field of language transfer. Ou and Liu (2009) analyze the transfer that takes place in Mongolian College Students' English pronunciation learning. The results show that transfer occurs more frequently between second language Chinese and English, which indicates that the influence of language distance of psychological

perception is greater than that of language type distance, and the similarity of language type is conducive to the occurrence of positive language transfer. Cai and Yang (2010) investigate the influence of Chinese on Uygur and Kazakh students' English learning. The results suggest the proficiency of Chinese has a significant impact on the acquisition of English syntax. Both studies have proved the L2 status factor model. He (2014) compares the vocabulary acquisition of Tibetan monolingual, Chinese monolingual and Tibetan-Chinese Bilingual students to find that Tibetan has more similarities with English in pronunciation and grammar, so transfer happens more frequently between Tibetan and English. To conclude, language transfer is complex and influenced by many factors.

In recent years, scholars have begun to study the development of metalinguistic awareness of minority students. They believe that learning a third language is conducive to the improvement of learners' metalinguistic awareness. Zeng (2011) finds that only balanced bilinguals have cognitive advantages in learning a third language, while monolinguals and unbalanced bilinguals have the same level of metalinguistic awareness, and age and close language distance can promote the development of metalinguistic awareness. Li (2013) compares the development of metalinguistic awareness of Tibetan monolinguals and bilinguals after learning English, and finds that learners' metalinguistic awareness will develop with the number of languages mastered and the language proficiency. He concludes that the more languages learners master, the easier it is to learn another language. In terms of learning strategies, studies have found that in English vocabulary learning, minority students use metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies more frequently than students of Han nationality (Xu, 2011). Concerning research on trilingual teaching, Wang and Kong (2013) discuss the learning obstacles that Chinese as the medium language may cause to Tibetan students, and point out that teaching English in Tibetan can not only help Tibetan students overcome learning anxiety, but also accelerate students' understanding of what they learn. Liu's research (2018) shows that the balanced input of Tibetan, Chinese and English has a significant effect on Tibetan students' English achievement. This conclusion is instructive to the trilingual teaching.

Factors Affecting the Effect of Teaching
Some research results mentioned above have shown that Tibetan students, as bilinguals, may have certain advantages in learning the third language. However, the fact is that the English college entrance examination scores of Tibetan students are far lower than those of students of Han nationality. Considering the teaching practice of Tibetan middle schools, there may be following reasons for this result.

Low Learning Motivation
Motivation is one of the key factors affecting language learning. Low English learning

motivation and poor learning initiative will have a negative impact on the development of language ability. Most of the Tibetan students grow up in the remote areas where there are few people to communicate with, and therefore they are introverted and feel difficult to express their ideas. At the beginning of studying English, these students are more likely to be afraid of reading aloud or participating in a variety of class activities. As a result, these students are in a backward state at the initial stage, easy to lose self-confidence in English learning. In addition, most Tibetan students learn English in order to cope with the exam, regard English learning as a burden and think it's useless. English Curriculum Standard clearly points out that positive emotions such as interest, motivation, self-confidence, will and cooperative spirit make a great difference to students' learning process and outcome. Thus, without high motivation for English learning, many students would not focus on or actively participate in classroom activities, which leads to poor learning effect. This phenomenon is also related to the policy of foreign language education in minority areas. If students choose to apply for universities for nationalities, they won't have to take the English test in the college entrance examination, so a few students give up learning English at the beginning. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) holds that not all language input is absorbed by learners, since emotions will filter the input. To be specific, active attitude and good mood will promote language acquisition, while passive learning attitude and anxious feelings will hinder language learning. Therefore, only in the best emotional conditions, that is, students have a strong learning motivation, full of confidence, without anxiety, can efficient learning happen. Therefore, due to the low motivation of Tibetan students in English learning, English learning doesn't achieve good results.

Complex Influences from Tibetan and Chinese

Language transfer refers to the influence caused by the similarities and differences between the target language and any other acquired or not fully acquired language. Odlin (2004) indicated that when learners have mastered two languages and been learning a third language, the former two languages will have an influence on the learning of the third language, including the transfer of pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary. This is one of the most reasons why most Tibetan students feel it hard to learn English well. In terms of grammar, the basic word order of Tibetan is subject first, followed by object and predicate comes last, whereas Chinese is subject first, followed by predicate and object comes last. Chinese and English are similar. In addition, Tibetan, English and Chinese have different ways of tense formation and expression, which makes it more difficult for Tibetan students to change and use the conjugation of verbs correctly (Kang, 2009). In terms of pronunciation, both Tibetan and English are alphabetic writing. Some Tibetan students will learn English pronunciation dependent on their mother tongue, like writing mother tongue beside English letters for phonetic notation. Affected by the negative transfer of mother tongue, it is difficult for students to acquire the correct pronunciation. At the same time, Chinese is a tonal language, with

four tones of "Ping", "Shang", "Qu" and "Da". Influenced by Chinese tones, most students ignore the stress and add Chinese tones to English pronunciation (Bian, 2016). From the examples mentioned above, we can find that the three languages interact with each other, and it is difficult to judge which language is working. It is found by a survey that the interference and transfer of the second language, that is, Chinese, is one of the main factors causing the minority students' difficulties in learning English (Jiang, Liu, & Li, 2006). Most Tibetan students believe that Tibetan is more similar to English structure than Chinese. However, Most English teachers in primary and secondary schools in minority areas are teachers of Han Nationality, and most of them never learn Tibetan. In English class, Chinese is the main medium language, which is the second language for Tibetan students. Some of them are not very proficient in it. Therefore, this will increase cognitive load. Overall, both Tibetan and Chinese have brought difficulties to Tibetan students in learning English.

Unsuitable Textbooks

At present, Tibetan middle schools all over the country use national unified textbooks, such as the textbooks of Hebei Education Press or People's Education Press, which are all Chinese-English translation textbooks. This determines that the medium language in class is mainly Chinese. Some students need to understand the medium language Chinese with the help of Tibetan, making the cognitive load to learn English increase a lot. In addition, English classes are offered since Grade three in primary schools of Han nationality, but in some Tibetan areas students don't have English classes until middle school. Tibetan students lack the basic knowledge of English but use the same textbooks in middle school, which ignores the sequential learning from letters to words and sentences, increasing the burden of learning English. More importantly, language and culture are closely related. Undoubtedly, to understand the cultural background of English is of great help for Tibetan students to cultivate their English thinking pattern in the process of language acquisition. However, the national unified English textbooks are Chinese-oriented in language form and content, which reflects more of the similarities and differences between Han culture and western culture, and seldom involves minority language and culture. Similarly, many of the topics or contents in the textbooks are not in line with the life of the Tibetan students. So Tibetan students often feel incompatible with the content, thinking mode, rhetorical structure and cultural connotation in the textbooks. As a result, teachers have difficulties in teaching and the students have problems in understanding, which greatly affects the quality of teaching.

Lack of Qualified Teachers

Most English classes in Tibetan middle schools are conducted in the form of bilingual or trilingual teaching, and thus the demands for teachers are bound to be higher and stricter. However, due to the geographical location and socio-economic development of minority areas, foreign language teachers are particularly scarce. Consequently, there

is a gap between the teaching ability of foreign language teachers and the requirements of the new curriculum standard. In addition, Tibetan students' foreign language learning involves cognitive processing and the information exchange of three languages. Hence, the ideal foreign language teachers in Tibetan middle schools should master three languages, Tibetan, Chinese and English so that the trilingual teaching can be implemented to help students understand what they learn. However, judging from the current English teaching in Tibetan areas, the foundation of trilingual teaching is quite weak, and there is a lack of teachers mastering three languages. At the same time, in the use of classroom language, most teachers cannot effectively carry out code switching in class or meet the needs of students with different proficiency in three languages. For example, some students who have a low proficiency in second language need teachers to organize teaching in Tibetan. The mechanism of trilingual teaching is far more complex than that of bilingual teaching, which puts forward higher requirements for teachers' code switching between three languages and foreign language knowledge literacy. As a result, the shortage and low quality of teachers are also the main factors restricting the development of foreign language education in Tibetan areas.

Implications on Improving the Teaching Effect

To Strengthen Learning Motivation
According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), positive attitude will promote learning. Therefore, teachers should strive to create a relaxing and pleasant classroom atmosphere to reduce students' anxiety and stimulate students' interest in learning and their desire for active learning so that learning efficiency can be promoted. This requires teachers to abandon the spoon feeding and carry out meaningful classroom activities, such as games, playing some English music or movies for students, or creating some situations in which what they learn can be used so as to arouse students' interest, keeping students active in the classroom, and increase students' sense of participation and achievement in completing tasks. In addition, teachers should actively guide students to realize the significance of learning English, whose purpose is not only to cope with exams. Teachers can give some proper examples to let students understand the practical significance of learning English. Also, through movies or music appreciation, students can know about British and American culture, which gradually changes students' motivation of learning English from external to internal motivation, and this can promote students' active learning. At the same time, teachers are suggested to communicate with students to understand the problems students encounter in the process of learning and lead students to overcome difficulties. Attention should be paid to backward students in particular, so that these students can keep up with the teaching pace and make progress.

To Promote Positive Transfer

Most studies on metalinguistic awareness have proved that learners' previous language learning experience can facilitate the learning of another foreign language. A survey shows that most Tibetan students believe that Tibetan is closer to English. Therefore, Tibetan students should not ignore the influence of Tibetan, studying English in the same way of students of Han nationality. They can take advantage of Tibetan and Chinese to learn English. On the one hand, when teaching, teachers can compare the similarities and differences between these three languages. For example, tense in English is similar to that in Tibetan, so teachers can use Tibetan to teach it, which can make positive transfer happen, reducing negative transfer and difficulties students may encounter in learning can be predicted so that students understand and digest knowledge. At the same time, teachers can help develop students' metalinguistic awareness by guiding students to consciously adopt language learning strategies, actively compare the similarities and differences between the three languages and reflect themselves on learning. In addition, there is a study showing that learners proficient in Chinese and Tibetan can use Chinese to access English meaning, while those not quite proficient in Chinese have to understand English through Tibetan (Chen, Zhang, Liu, & Cheng, 2018). Therefore, for students who are not proficient in Chinese, teachers can choose to teach difficult points in Tibetan. Liu's research (2018) also shows that the balanced input of Tibetan, Chinese and English has a significant effect on Tibetan students' English achievement. If teachers who master three languages can switch codes properly in class, it will boost students' understanding of what they have learned. In all, English Teaching in Tibetan middle schools is different from that of schools of Han nationality. Teachers should lead students to learn English with the help of two languages they have learnt before, and enhance positive transfer between languages through contrast analysis.

To Develop Local Textbooks

Currently, Tibetan middle schools use national unified English textbooks, which are not suitable for Tibetan students in terms of contents and the difficulty. The new curriculum standard has established the national, local and school three-level curriculum management mode, which encourages the local government and schools to develop local-based textbooks in order to improve the adaptability of the new curriculum to local students. Therefore, it is suggested that Tibetan areas can develop a set of English teaching materials more suitable for Tibetan middle school teachers and students. The textbook can be written in Tibetan and English, which is suitable for those students who are weak in Chinese. It can also be written in Tibetan, Chinese and English in combination with the similarities and differences among the three languages, which can make positive transfer happen. At the same time, the arrangement of the difficulty of contents should be gradual, from letters to words to sentences, which is in line with the characteristics of students' psychological development. In addition, the teaching content

should be closely combined with the cultural characteristics of Tibetan areas and students' daily life. It is because when students have certain background knowledge, they will be more willing to express their ideas, easier to accept knowledge, and this can also stimulate students' national identity as well as learning motivation and interest.

To Cultivate Professional Teachers

The particularity of English education in Tibetan areas puts forward high demand for English teachers, so it is of great significance to cultivate a group of teachers who are proficient in Tibetan, Chinese and English and have strong teaching ability. Scholars have suggested that ethnic normal universities should give full play to their own advantages to cultivate a team of ethnic minority teachers who not only know their mother tongue, but also know Chinese and English. English teachers in Tibetan areas are required not only to master three languages, but also to flexibly switch the medium of teaching according to the teaching content, so as to facilitate students' understanding of what they are learning. In addition, Tibetan middle school teachers should also have knowledge of linguistics and psychology, knowing how to activate students' metalinguistic awareness to learn and how to trigger positive transfer. In addition, they are expected to actively communicate with students to help them strengthen their learning motivation and ease psychological barriers. The Ministry of education should also pay attention to the training and professional development of trilingual teachers, providing a platform and opportunities for teachers to learn, exchange and research.

CONCLUSION

Trilingual Teaching is a special form under the background of minority education, which contributes to improving the cultural quality of the nation and promoting the common prosperity of the nation. However, English Teaching in minority areas has not achieved good results. Trilingual education puts forward high requirements for teachers. Teachers should take the initiative to learn the theory of third language acquisition, combined with educational practice, to achieve the good teaching effect. Teachers can inspire students' learning motivation and lead students to know how to take advantage of their mother tongue and second language to learn. Textbooks suitable for Tibetan students are expected to develop. Trilingual researchers should pay more attention to minority English education and provide scientific theoretical guidance for the development of teaching practice

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