

Preface

Existing research on multilingual acquisition indicates that learners confront challenges not only in mastering unfamiliar linguistic forms but also in forming new identities, especially when the languages concerned are socially and linguistically distant from each other. This study shows that ethnic multilingual learners (EMLs) in China face more challenges at universities than the ethnic majority Han, when they choose to study English as their major subject. The textbook written for the majority Han and instructive methods for mainstream students are imposed upon them. The environment is unfamiliar to EMLs, and they are often regarded as “strangers” to the new language learning community. Their problems include the national examination system, the medium of instruction, learning difficulties, psychological issues, and cultural exclusion. In a sense, the current educational policies in China are designed to protect the educational rights of ethnic minorities, but ignore the role of education in promoting ethnic minority cultures. The current university curricula mainly focus on subject knowledge and patriotic education. As a result, the “cultural self-consciousness” or *wenhua zijue* in Chinese and “cultural capital” in English are less emphasized and encouraged. In this study, data are collected on two female ethnic multilingual minority students at Yunnan University of Nationalities (YUN) through ethnographic interviews, autobiography, oral narrative, online chatting, and field observation.

This study provides information at the micro-level on how the two students have successfully navigated the Chinese education system to the tertiary level. They have tried their best to excel in the curricula of YUN by constructing multiple identities. The findings suggest that the informants negotiate their multiple identities through their active engagements, on and off the university campus, as legitimate participants in various “communities of practice.” These identities are shaped partly by their own cultural heritage and partly by the present sociopolitical realities in China. Drawing mainly on poststructuralist and multicultural education theories, the study also examines the power relationships exercised in YUN and discusses the impact of these power relationships on the identity formation of the target informants. The national and local policies as well as the curriculum structures of YUN are analyzed

to identify the implicit power relationships that cause tensions in the education of EMLs. It is argued that multiculturalism, as a discourse of education, may help to ease the tension between being an ethnic minority and a Chinese national. Multiculturalism may also help reduce the danger of assimilation and marginalization. To achieve the goal of multilingual education based on the notion of multiculturalism, a “collaborative” power relationship, which facilitates the empowerment of EMLs, should be the goal of Chinese higher education. With such a goal, EMLs will be able to act as human resources for raising the productivity of the country, as agents for social transformation and as citizens of the cosmopolitan world.

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