

Study on National Common Language Acquisition of Preschool Children in Ethnic Areas: Taking Preschool Children in Shiqu County, Ganzi Prefecture as an Example

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Abstract: *Based on the general situation of ethnic preschool children learning the national common language in non-Chinese language environments, this paper investigates the current situation of preschool children's Mandarin listening and speaking abilities in Shiqu County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. It objectively analyzes the problems in fostering Mandarin listening and speaking abilities in preschool children in Shiqu County and identifies the main factors contributing to these problems. Targeted strategies and suggestions are proposed to address the problems.*

Keywords: *ethnic preschool children, pathway of national common language acquisition*

1. Introduction to Shiqu County

Sichuan Province is the second largest Tibetan region, the largest Yi people group settlement, and the only Qiang people group settlement in China, with a total of 14 ethnic groups. According to the seventh national census of Sichuan Province, the minority population in Sichuan Province is 5.688 million.[1] The ethnic areas in Sichuan Province are vast, covering an area of 302,100 square kilometers, which accounts for 60.14% of the total area of the province. Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture has a Yi population of 1.81 million, making it the largest Yi people group settlement in the country. It also has a Tibetan population of 1.22 million, ranking as the second largest Tibetan region in the country. The Qiang population is 300,000, making it the only Qiang people group settlement in the country. In addition, there are 18 cities in the province that are scattered minority residential areas. Due to the large number of minority populations, the language situation is extremely complex. The main languages used in the ethnic areas of Sichuan Province include Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, Miao, and Tujia. The linguistic phenomena in the region are very diverse and complex, almost each county has its own dialect. Language barriers restrict the cognitive levels, productivity, and local economic development of the impoverished population.[2] This article mainly focuses on Shiqu County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. It is located at the junction of Sichuan, Qinghai, and Tibet on the southeastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. It is one of the most remote and inaccessible counties in Sichuan Province. Shiqu County has jurisdiction over 7 towns, 15 townships, and 1 state-owned ranch. According to the data from the seventh census, as of November 1, 2020, the permanent resident population of Shiqu County was 103,633.[3] Shiqu County is remote and has a high and cold climate. It is one of the most remote and inaccessible counties in Sichuan Province. The educational development is relatively lagging behind, with a severe shortage of teachers, and the quality of education has been difficult to improve. Currently, there are 52 schools at all levels in Shiqu, including 2 junior high schools (with a complete middle school system in the county), 2 primary schools in the county seat, 23 central schools in townships (towns, ranches), 22 village schools, and 3 independent kindergartens (with 22 affiliated township central school kindergartens). There are currently 20,925 students enrolled in schools, including 3,194 students in preschool education. There are 796 full-time teachers in compulsory education, including 37 kindergarten teachers and 332 village-level bilingual tutors for preschool education.[4-5]

2. The basic situation of preschool children learning the national common language in Shiqu County

2.1 Local residents pay little attention to the national common language

The local residents in Shiqu County use the Tibetan language for daily communication. Some older residents, such as grandparents, may not even use the national common language (Mandarin and Chinese characters) for communication. Some elderly people have never left Shiqu County in their entire lives and believe that they can live their lives without knowing Chinese. Before attending kindergarten, preschool children live with their grandparents, who do not prioritize Mandarin, thus placing preschool children in an environment where they have no exposure to Mandarin. Shiqu County is located on the largest grassland in Sichuan Province, with a grassland area of 2.143 million hectares. It is the largest pastoral county in Sichuan Province, and residents mostly engage in animal husbandry. The county has a single economic structure, and the overall educational level of the residents is low. As a result, the residents do not recognize the importance of learning the national common language for ethnic minorities as a foundation for personal development, enhancing competitiveness, and fully participating in the modernization process [6]. Due to limited transportation, Shiqu County has only one road connecting to the outside world, and the isolated environment has led to a lack of awareness of the importance of Mandarin among local residents. According to domestic scholars such as Wang Hailan, research in language economics has shown that the impact of language abilities on labor income depends on the individual's proficiency in that language, as well as the usage and social status of that language in specific regions. Generally speaking, the higher the popularity and frequency of a language in a region, the greater the income increment that individuals can gain from mastering that language. In other words, the impact of language abilities on labor income requires the support of a certain "language environment" [7]. Clearly, Shiqu County lacks such "language environment" support.

2.2 Weak foundation in Chinese language among preschool children, due to long-term non-Chinese language environment

Shiqu County has the largest grassland in Sichuan Province, with abundant pastures. The main economic activity of the residents is livestock farming, and the young and middle-aged adults who can speak Mandarin and use Chinese characters are mostly engaged in this industry, working on the pastures throughout the year. As a result, young children in their families are mainly taken care of by elderly people who only speak Tibetan until they start school. In other words, these children have little exposure to Mandarin and Chinese characters before they enter school, and they grow up in a non-Mandarin speaking environment. Most of the preschool children in Shiqu County cannot understand Mandarin before they start school, and it is only when they attend kindergarten that they first come into contact with Mandarin.

Before starting school, preschool children in Shiqu County communicate with their family members at home in Tibetan, and it is only the teachers in school who use Mandarin for instruction. However, even after starting school, these children still use Tibetan to communicate with their peers. Apart from the Mandarin environment during classroom teaching, the preschool children in Shiqu County use Tibetan to communicate with their peers and family members during breaks and after returning home. Most of these children are exposed to the use of Mandarin for no more than six hours per day. For preschool children in Shiqu County, Mandarin is their second language, but it is not the primary reason for their weak Mandarin proficiency. According to conclusions from psychological experts, early childhood is a critical period for language acquisition, and if appropriate methods are used to stimulate children's linguistic potential, they can become proficient in more than two languages. Scholar Shen Mo believes that language transfer can improve the effectiveness of second-language learning. From the perspective of the perception of ethnic minority children, the acquisition of their mother tongue is very rapid. Based on observations by Teng Xing, many parents in ethnic minority regions pointed out that their children have already developed basic language skills in their mother tongue and can learn to read within a short period. Some scholars have even specifically pointed out that "ethnic minority people generally have higher language talents than Han people, and most ethnic minority compatriots have some level of Mandarin communication ability, while only Han people who have been in regular contact with ethnic minority compatriots possess language proficiency in minority languages.[8-9]"

2.3 The teachers involved in early childhood education have a low level of education and weak Mandarin proficiency

In Shiqu County, there are 3,194 students in pre-school education, with only 37 dedicated kindergarten teachers. After the implementation of the “one village, one kindergarten” plan, an additional 332 bilingual counselors were added. Bilingual counselors are generally non-contracted personnel engaged in pre-school education work in minority areas, recruited through open examinations conducted by city, state, and county-level governments. The general requirements for counselor recruitment are: individuals aged 18 to 45 with a high school or vocational school diploma or higher education, good health, and a willingness to work in pre-school education. The specific recruitment conditions may vary depending on the local situation. For example, for impoverished villages, the recruitment standards for counselors may be relaxed to allow graduates from junior high school to participate. After conducting phone interviews with the local education bureau, it was found that the education level of bilingual counselors in Shiqu County is generally low, most of them are local residents with little education and older age who are not specialized in pre-school education and have not passed the Mandarin proficiency test. Since bilingual counselors account for a large proportion of pre-school teachers in Shiqu County, and their Mandarin proficiency does not meet the requirements, the Mandarin used for communication between pre-school children and teachers in schools is not standard, and it does not create a correct Mandarin usage environment for pre-school children. Bilingual counselors in schools generally use Mandarin, but there are cases where their Mandarin is not standard. Some counselors do not differentiate between flat and retroflex pronunciations for certain Chinese characters, resulting in inaccurate pronunciation. Some teachers believe that Mandarin cannot express what they want to say, so they often use other languages when communicating outside of class, which occasionally leads to teachers not using Mandarin in their teaching. Children have a strong ability to imitate, so when teachers no longer use Mandarin, children will also imitate the teachers and either not use Mandarin or speak Mandarin inaccurately.

3. Factors restricting the learning of the national language by preschool children in Shiqu County

3.1 The influence of local ethnic languages and dialects on children’s language acquisition

In his “Some Issues of Comparative Methodology of Sino-Tibetan Typology”, the renowned scholar Dai Qingsha, who specializes in Sino-Tibetan languages, mentions that human languages can be categorized into either related or unrelated languages. The existence of a relationship reflects whether languages have a common origin. Chinese and Tibetan belong to the same language family and have a related relationship. Related languages have evolved from a common ancestral language, while unrelated languages do not share a common origin.[10-11] This indicates that Chinese and Tibetan have certain similarities and belong to the same language family. When preschool children learn Chinese, they already have a language system with Tibetan as their native language. The Tibetan language system can inhibit the learning process of Chinese, and various phonetic and intonation patterns can affect the learning of Chinese by preschool children.

3.2 Lack of an environment that supports children’s learning and use of the national language in their families

The language environment is the most important factor influencing second language acquisition. Whether children can be exposed to and use the national language in their daily lives, including at home, in kindergarten, and in the community, is crucial for their learning of the national language. [12-13] Due to the lack of a language environment that supports the use of the national language before attending preschool, preschool children in Shiqu County find it difficult to quickly grasp the national language after starting school. According to surveys, the local dialect in Shiqu County is Tibetan, and residents use Tibetan for daily communication. Only when students attend school can they be exposed to Mandarin. They have very little exposure to the standard national language in their daily lives. This leads to a lack of an environment for children in Shiqu County to use the national language, so even if they learn some basic expressions in school, they are unable to communicate with others in their daily lives.

3.3 Insufficient input and output of the national language in kindergarten life

Input and output of the national language are essential for preschool children to learn a second

language. In terms of input learning, basic vocabulary input through communication with others is important, and the study of literary works is also important. However, in the family and community life of young children, both of these inputs are severely lacking. Because parents or grandparents at home do not recognize Chinese characters or speak Mandarin, and the input of literary works at school is limited, there is a particularly lack of input of literary works for preschool children in Shiqu County. Having a certain amount of daily communication vocabulary is the basis for meaningful output, but preschool children in Shiqu County have very limited daily communication vocabulary. Due to the lack of vocabulary, children cannot or do not want to communicate with others, and this limitation becomes particularly evident in collective teaching activities. Learning without output is not effective in truly mastering the use of a second language. The learning of the national language for preschool children in Shiqu County is hindered in such an environment of insufficient input and lack of output.

3.4 The learning method primarily focused on memorization leads to insufficient understanding and usage of the national language for preschool children

Individual language abilities include conversational language abilities and academic language abilities, and the primary task during early childhood is to develop conversational language abilities. [14] Conversational language has characteristics of high-frequency vocabulary, simple grammar, and context dependency, while academic language has characteristics of low-frequency vocabulary, complex grammar, and context independence. Conversational language can be obtained through direct teaching by teachers during the teaching process, but much of it is naturally acquired through communication. However, children do not use Mandarin in their daily communication, so even if they learn conversational language at school, the lack of suitable opportunities for practice in their daily lives will result in the inability to improve their conversational language abilities. Academic language abilities need to be developed on the foundation of conversational language abilities. The lack of a foundation in conversational abilities will make it difficult for children to develop a sense and support for academic language.

4. Strategies to improve the learning of national common language and writing by preschool children in Shiqu County

4.1 The policy of preschool education in ethnic regions should shift from imbalance to standardization

In 2015, the innovative “one Village, one Kindergarten” plan was implemented in Liangshan Prefecture and received positive feedback. The state and government attach great importance to education in ethnic regions, and other prefectures in Sichuan Province have successively launched the “one Village, one Kindergarten” plan. As of now, there are three kindergartens in Shiqu County (including 22 affiliated township central school kindergartens), which to some extent ensures that preschool children in Shiqu County have a place to go to school. According to the “Implementation Plan for the Establishment of First-Class Education in Tibetan Areas in Ganzi Prefecture” (Ganwei Office [2013] No. 1), free preschool education services are provided to children enrolled in public kindergartens. Starting from the autumn semester of 2013, all public kindergartens no longer charge tuition fees. According to the “Ten-Year Action Plan for Education Development in Ethnic Regions of Sichuan Province (2011-2020)” (Chuanwei Office [2010] No. 38) and the “Implementation Plan for the Establishment of First-Class Education in Tibetan Areas in Ganzi Prefecture” (Ganwei Office [2013] No. 1), free lunch subsidies are provided to children enrolled in public kindergartens. All children enrolled in public kindergartens in Ganzi Prefecture can enjoy a daily lunch subsidy of 4.00 yuan per student, calculated based on 24 days per month and 10 months per year, for a total of 960 yuan per student per year. [15] The implementation of these policies has not only solved the economic challenges of children’s enrollment for the people in ethnic regions but also promoted the enrollment rate of local preschool children. These policies have ensured universal enrollment of preschool children in ethnic regions and equitable opportunities for preschool education. Currently, national policies should shift from equitable opportunities to equitable educational processes.

In the development of preschool education abroad, government policies have gradually shifted from uneven development to standardized development, including the effectiveness, quality, and training of teaching staff. In the next step, the government needs to move towards standardized development in preschool education in ethnic regions. This requires the implementation of relevant policies for standardized preschool education in ethnic regions. The Ministry of Education's “Tongyu Tongyin” program for preschool children in ethnic regions during the 14th Five-Year Plan is the government's

effort to shift from uneven development to standardized development in preschool education. Starting from the supply side reform, it aims to provide high-quality and standardized preschool education with integrated care and education for preschool children in ethnic regions, truly achieving fairness in educational opportunities and processes in ethnic regions. [16]

4.2 Improve the teacher training system to ensure the quality of teachers in the national common language

To enhance the proficiency of national language skills among preschool children in ethnic regions, the key lies in providing standardized and sufficient teachers. General Secretary pointed out that teachers are the primary resource for educational development and an important cornerstone for national prosperity, ethnic rejuvenation, and people's well-being. [17] Scholars have pointed out that teachers create language environments for students, and their verbal interactions with children during educational activities or daily life provide opportunities for preschool children to learn the national language. For example, research on the interest of Uighur preschool children in learning Chinese in Hotan region by Tang Yunfeng has shown that Chinese classes have become the only place for children to come into contact with the Chinese language, and teachers' teaching methods and attitudes are the primary factors affecting children's interest in learning Chinese. [18] However, many preschool teachers in Shiqu County are recruited from graduates with preschool teacher qualifications or those with adequate Chinese language proficiency from vocational schools, colleges, or even high schools. For a long time, preschool teachers in Shiqu County have lacked opportunities to participate in standardized training, have had insufficient learning materials, and lack auxiliary teaching equipment. The efforts and resources spent on improving the national language skills of teachers have yielded minimal results.

To address the bottleneck in national common language education for teachers, it is necessary to strengthen the training of existing teachers while focusing on teacher development, selection, and recruitment. In terms of selecting the trainees, a group of teachers with a certain language foundation and motivation should be chosen. The local central kindergartens should take responsibility for the training of teachers in village-level kindergartens, and establish a complete and standardized training system for preschool teachers. This includes regular training on national common language learning and educational teaching abilities, as well as timely supplementing relevant educational knowledge for teachers. Teachers participating in the training should be grouped according to their backgrounds, with separate groups for those without relevant professional knowledge and those with professional knowledge, and classified training should be conducted by one lead teacher and three groups. The training assessment mechanism should include practical classroom demonstrations to ensure that teachers' teaching abilities in national common language education are truly improved. In terms of training methods, simply gathering teachers for centralized training has proven ineffective. It is advisable to send teachers to county kindergartens for on-the-job training, allowing them to use the national common language as a medium for teaching. When recruiting teachers, it may be appropriate to improve the treatment and attract more professionally capable teachers from ethnic regions. Distinguished scholar Pei Shengyu mentioned in his research on adults learning the national language in ethnic regions that mobile and network tools can be used to assist teachers in learning the national common language. Support should be provided for the development of relevant tools and resources, and a combination of formal and informal learning, as well as offline and online learning, should be encouraged to enable teachers to learn the national common language in a broader range of time and space. [19]

4.3 Strengthen the importance education of the national common language in ethnic regions and provide a good family environment for children

In Shiqu County, the local residents do not use Mandarin, and many members of minority families communicate with children using their native language or dialect, which artificially hinders children's acquisition and use of the national common language. Therefore, parents should be encouraged to communicate with children in Mandarin in their daily interactions. It is especially important to enhance the awareness of the importance of Mandarin among adults in ethnic regions. Adults should also pay attention to not using inappropriate or non-standard language when communicating with children, and try to avoid negative influences. They should not mix languages in their daily lives either. Watching TV programs in Mandarin on a regular basis can help create a standard language environment for children.

Furthermore, efforts should be made to increase the motivation for Shiqu County residents to learn the national common language. Only when users fully understand the advantages of the national language will they truly recognize its importance and use it in their daily lives. Therefore, it is necessary to provide

more and better services to the population in ethnic regions, continuously improve their employment and living conditions, and encourage more residents to leave the mountains, set examples, and stimulate the enthusiasm of local residents to learn the national language. Language is often seen as a symbol of identity and helps construct “social identity” and establish “social relationships”. In general, the language one speaks should match the kind of life one desires. “Language expectations” are essentially a manifestation of “life expectations”. The lack of emphasis on Standard Mandarin by Shiqu County residents also indicates a lack of expectations for life outside the county. This is because they have not had exposure to life outside the county and do not know what life is like there. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage and create opportunities for residents of Shiqu County to venture outside and see the outside world.

4.4 Properly changing the way preschool children learn the national common language and characters

In teaching, teachers should pay attention to stimulating the initiative of preschool children in learning the national common language and characters. They should incorporate the teaching of the national common language and characters into various games that are suitable for the children’s physical and mental development, enhancing the individual motivation of children in learning the national common language and characters and increasing their proactive language output.

Furthermore, the language taught by teachers to preschool children must be based on their understanding, not just on their ability to read and recite without understanding its usage. Moreover, in the teaching process, teachers should integrate the role of fostering a sense of community consciousness among the Chinese nation, strengthen the children’s sense of identification and pride in the Chinese community, and make using the national common language and characters seen as something honorable, thereby stimulating their enthusiasm for learning the national common language and characters. Teachers can conduct game-based classes focusing on the national common language and characters, using games that children enjoy to enhance their understanding of the national common language and characters.

Additionally, activities such as Mandarin competitions, storytelling in Mandarin, mini-hosts, mini-announcers, and Mandarin singing competitions can be included in daily activities at kindergarten as extracurricular activities that use the national common language and script. This creates a favorable environment for learning Mandarin and motivates children to learn the national common language and characters. Children who participate in these activities can be recognized and honored, fostering their psychological recognition that using the national common language and characters is something prestigious.

Assigning homework related to the national common language and characters can also be done outside of class. For example, children can be asked to watch and listen to Mandarin programs at home, ensuring that they are exposed to Mandarin in their household. In this language environment, children can develop their language sense and effectively promote their listening and speaking skills in the national common language and characters.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the national common language and characters curriculum in kindergartens in ethnic areas should require oral communication skills, communication abilities, and habits from the aspects of polite communication. Teachers should improve their own ability to use the national common language and characters and recognize the importance of children’s understanding of the national common language and characters. In ethnic areas where Mandarin Chinese is not commonly spoken, it is particularly important to promote the importance of the national common language and characters, and provide a good social and family environment for preschool children in ethnic areas to learn the national common language and characters. When promoting the national common language and characters in kindergartens, attention should be paid to integrating teaching methods suitable for preschool children with their physical and mental development characteristics, in order to enhance their enthusiasm for learning the national common language and characters. Efforts from society, families, and schools are also needed to enhance the ability of preschool children in ethnic areas to learn the national common language and characters, and create a good language learning atmosphere for our children.

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