

# MLA in Chinese EFL classroom perspectives from minority students

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**Abstract:** *This paper reports on an investigation into the minority students' perceptions and practices of using minority language and Chinese in English classroom in order to examine their multilingual language awareness (MLA) in an English teaching environment. This paper draws upon qualitative research with 6 minority students in Dehong Dai and Jingpo autonomous prefecture, Yunnan province, China. The students sample was aged from 12-14 years, and comprised 4 males and 2 females. The findings from the study suggest that minority students value their multilingual background, while languages with high crosslinguistic lexical similarity means more benefits are available if minority students have a high proficiency; they were glad to use their L1 with their teachers' permission but they will not use their L1 if their teacher does not value their multilingualism or does not allow them to use their L1; Chinese is the foundation for learning English, but some uses of Chinese in the English classroom may be not efficient; using Chinese extensively in English learning results in minority students admitting the usefulness of Chinese but expressing a demand for more English exposure at the same time. This paper argues that Minority students demonstrated a certain level of MLA but they should be more aware of their right to rely on multiple languages in English classroom despite their teachers' preference.*

**Keywords:** *MLA; multilinguals; minority students; minority language; English learning environment*

## 1. Introduction

Today, more of the world's population can speak two or more languages, so English language classrooms outside of English-speaking countries are becoming increasingly multilingual. Compared with monolinguals, multilinguals may be more aware of language. Given their sensitivity to language, the general view seems to be that multilinguals have an advantage in learning new languages but multilingualism does not automatically enhance further language learning if students are not literate in the instructional language or not aware of the benefits of being multilingual. If students themselves do not have multilingual language awareness (MLA) and use only their pre-existing linguistic and language knowledge, learning multiple language cannot be enhanced <sup>[1]</sup>. In addition, in a school setting, language teachers tend to establish and maintain the norms of classroom participation and interaction in the language classroom. In this way, student's perception and practice of MLA are generally based on that of their teachers. Although language teachers should be the key facilitators of students MLA, many of them may fail to encourage their students to utilize linguistic and cultural diversity to benefit language teaching <sup>[2]</sup>.

There is a fear in the traditional language teaching profession that one language can contaminate another if languages are not separated<sup>[3]</sup>. Conoz and Gorter<sup>[4]</sup>believed that FM (focus on multilingualism) can be used as a practical approach in the language classroom. In this way, boundaries between the languages in an individuals' mind can be softened and enhance language awareness and learning. Although bilinguals are more likely to perform well when learning some foreign languages, ethnic minority students in China are relatively uneducated in English. By examining minority students' MLA levels and to explore how they practice that in an English learning environment, a clear picture can be revealed and pedagogical suggestion provided. In considering this area, it is necessary to explore the role of ethnic students' L1 (minority language) and L2 (Chinese) in learning English, and then examine how language learners' MLA work in the language classroom.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical background

#### 2.1.1 Bilingualism, Multilingualism and multilingual language awareness (MLA)

A multilingual refers to a person who is capable of using three or more languages, either separately or mixing them to a degree, while a bilingual refers to a person who can speak two languages together, or separately with speakers who do not speak the other one. Both bi/multilinguals use different languages in different domains and their proficiency of these languages varies. Bilingualism or multilingualism affords the ability to talk to different people. Bilingual and multilingual speakers tend to have the ability to shuttle between languages and form their language repertoire as an integrated system. They are faster to learn another language and, more importantly, those who are literate in their languages appear to develop more benefits from their multilingualism<sup>[5]</sup>. It is noteworthy, however, that bilingualism will not automatically lead to an advantage in learning a foreign language and many factors need to be considered. Although speaking different languages can result in a larger vocabulary, bilinguals and multilingual know fewer words in each language, find it harder to recall words, experience “tip of the tongue” more often and experience difficult language processing<sup>[6]</sup>. Specifically, being bilingual or multilingual gives individuals practice in inhibiting one language when using another, so speakers can have better attention and task-switching capacities compared to monolinguals. Furthermore, metacognitive changes also bring positive consequences to bi/multilinguals. They are more likely to pay attention to grammatical forms that can increase their attainment, including communicative skills. Further, they understand objects have more than one name when they are young. Compared with monolinguals, bilinguals who share similar background characteristics normally have larger language systems that may be helpful in foreign language acquisition.

The learning and teaching of a second language often happens in contexts where other languages are present, so it is important to raise students’ awareness of multiple languages. According to Garcia and Helotmultilingual language awareness (MLA) is a sensitization model<sup>[7]</sup>, a useful tool for communication or education, of language teaching (LT). MLA means raising awareness of different languages used in classroom activities and society. It is considered an inclusive approach because it allows minority speakers to display their linguistic knowledge and legitimizes languages not allowed in schools. MLA can therefore complement other approaches to LT<sup>[8]</sup>. MLA is a model of language education that discovers a multiplicity of languages, fosters metalinguistic reflection and develops a “global competence”. Metalinguistic reflection refers to “the capacity to reflect upon and manipulate linguistic features, rules or data”<sup>[9]</sup>. No matter whether multi- or mono-lingual speakers and no matter whether “at the institutional level or at the individual level”, multilingualism can be supported as long as there is MLA. Another main aim of MLA is to develop different perceptions towards “minority languages speakers, linguistic and cultural diversity and language use in society”.

Invisible bilingualism, monolingual language policies and ideologies and misconceptions about bi/multilingualism are the main barriers to MLA<sup>[10]</sup>. This is generally because fewer dominant languages are excluded from the school curriculum and the pervasive monolingual ideology and its deficit discourse lead to dominant school language attitudes. In order to overcome these barriers, teachers should teach alongside bilingual teaching assistants, parents and siblings who act as interpreters or translators. Teachers should also use digital literacy, finding, evaluating and composing clear information through writing and other medium. An additional way to promote MLA within the language classroom is research it within the language teaching and learning context of schools, especially those with language teachers and students.

#### 2.1.2 MLA in the language classroom

There are often different languages presented in the language classroom, but multilingual students may speak another language at home. In addition, there are different classroom activities according to the language learners’ MLA, such as translanguaging and code-switching so it is of importance to review MLA in the language classroom.

##### 1) Role of L1 in L2 learning from second language acquisition (SLA) perspective

Although a great number of teachers use L1 in L2 learning, some scholars believe that L2 should be maximized in the classroom. The perception to use only the target language (TL) in the language classroom is common<sup>[11]</sup> and has probably influenced language education policy. Maximizing L2 use allows learners to view the target language as a real and useful means of communication, experiencing

the unpredictability of real language encounters, providing enjoyment and immediate success and developing their own in-built language system and coping strategies.

It is unnatural to be monolingual in a multilingual context, however, and some researchers advocate the inclusion of L1 in the L2 classroom. Non-native teachers inevitably make use of the L1 and most students feel that L1 is helpful in facilitating learning so more L1 is used in the beginner stage. The exclusion of L1 in the L2 classroom fails to enhance learners' cognitive understanding of TL. Increased proficiency in using TL by making connections with concepts already developed in the L1 and code-switching is a significant characteristic of multilingual contexts. Additionally, proficiency in L1 can affect L2 because literacy skills can be transferred easily from one language to another. On the other hand, in a classroom where learners do not share a common language, the use of L1 is less common. Perhaps, however, it does not matter whether a teacher uses L1 or L2, but rather how the teacher uses either language to connect with students and help them to "transfer their attitudes, depositions, skills and self-image".

## 2) Code-switching, code mixing and translanguaging

Code-switching refers to switching between two or more languages in a single discourse or conversation for communicative purposes. Code-switching has its own advantage to enhance students' understanding about the content of the class and offers them opportunities to discuss it, which means it can support student's communication<sup>[12]</sup>. Through regularly code-switching, teachers can make their students comprehensively understand when the national language is used in the language classroom, but minority students might not understand the class if they do not have a good command of the national language.

Even though some scholars use the terms "code-mixing" and "code-switching" interchangeably, code mixing is defined as "a process whereby words of one language are inserted into another or it involves interaction between two languages below clausal (sentential) level". This means that code mixing does not reflect the grammars of both languages simultaneously. In contrast, translanguaging, "the purposeful pedagogical alternation of languages in spoken and written, receptive and productive modes"<sup>[13]</sup> is a wider concept because it allows more than two languages to work together.

## 2.2. Empirical studies

There are often different languages presented in the language classroom and there are different classroom activities according to the students' MLA. Empirical research about how they perceive and practice MLA and what is the current situation for English education in Chinese ethnic region is therefore important to consider.

### 2.2.1 Role of the home language on learning a foreign language

Studies on the effect of speaking another language at home while learning English have shown conflicting results. Rutgers and Evans<sup>[14]</sup> questioned whether it is necessary for explicit knowledge of one language to reflect upon or manipulate language and how metalinguistic awareness is related with metalinguistic knowledge. Researchers examined Dutch students learning German as an additional language, after Dutch and English, to find out whether there is clear metalinguistic advantage for the bilingual pupil to learn a third language or not. The findings indicated that a metalinguistic advantage cannot be established, but the bilingual pupils' L3 processing changed their attitude towards language learning and they developed a more practical language awareness ("the functioning of the multilingual mental lexicon"). It is still unclear, however, to what extent this advantage applies to bilingual education. In addition, another study conducted in the Netherlands<sup>[15]</sup> indicated that there was no advantage for bilingual groups to learn a further foreign language.

Maluch, Kempert, Neumann and Stanat<sup>[16]</sup> found a contrasting result by examining 2835 German 6th-grade students, which presented a positive trend between bilingualism and English achievement. The researchers were concerned with the role that a majority language plays in the foreign language classroom, the effect of speaking the national language (L2) at school while speaking another one at home (L1) in learning foreign language (L3) and the difference between bilingual groups with different mother languages. Students with immigrant backgrounds tended to lag behind their monolingual peers in the dominant language of the community. When it came to learning a third language, however, it may be more difficult for students who speak another language at home. Low proficiency of the instructional language means that students have limited language resources to draw upon. The researchers found that an immigrant bilingual background has a significantly positive effect on learning foreign language. Once

a bilingual individual's cognitive and metalinguistic awareness develops, their English learning will be enhanced. On the other hand, this positive trend varies across different bilingual groups with different mother languages. Although several studies were conducted to reveal the effect of speaking another language at home on learning a foreign language at school, most of them were in a European context, with scarce research available in Asian contexts, possibly due to fewer similarities between English, the most dominant foreign language, and Asian languages.

### ***2.2.2 Students' perception of multilingualism in a multilingual language classroom***

Having observed students with multilingual backgrounds from an Indonesian university, Milambiling<sup>[17]</sup> find that multilingual students usually take their previous language knowledge for granted and do not make a good use of their multilingual background. The study suggests that teachers who teach multilingual students should make language awareness a part of group discussions, written assignments and tasks within the classroom. In contrast, the student part of Illman and Pietilä's study<sup>[18]</sup> shows that these immigrant students value their multilingualism, they find it easy to learn English and they utilize their multilingualism to benefit their English learning, especially when learning new words. Not much research takes students' perception about multilingualism into consideration. Although Illman and Pietilä's research was designed to hear both teachers' and students' "voices", they used quantitative data (questionnaire) to analyze students' behavior and understanding rather than qualitative research into examining teachers' and student's perceptions of multilingual practices in the L2 classroom.

### ***2.2.3 English learning in ethnic minority regions in China.***

Since 1980, bilingual education has been conducted in some ethnic regions where teachers must teach students with two set of textbooks in two languages, for one purpose: to help minority students to pass the college entrance examination, Gaokao. On one hand, bilingual education enables Chinese minority students to learn in a public school and improve their relationships with Han students. On the other hand, the implementation of bilingual education somehow imposes a greater burden on minority schools, which already suffer from a shortage of funding and qualified teachers as bilingual education means different curriculums, teacher educations and classroom managements. Moreover, ethnic students' minority language may be discriminated against in mainstream classrooms as monolinguals (Han students) do not bother to learn minority languages, while multilingual (ethnic) students must learn Mandarin. This situation fails to support multilingualism, which is one of aims of multilingual language awareness (MLA) for both multi- and mono-lingual learners.

Teaching English in a Chinese minority region may be different from that of European countries. English education in Chinese ethnic areas encounters many problems. Jian<sup>[19]</sup> undertook a classroom observation in Ebian Yi Autonomous County to discover specific problems and the reasons why minority students fail when competing with their Han classmates in learning English. He found that inappropriate teaching strategies, learning materials and language policy all posed potential threats to the foreign language acquisition of ethnic minority students. Additionally, a few minority students and their families may regard Chinese language policy as a cultural invasion that makes them reluctant to learn Chinese, let alone English. Huang concluded that setting suitable learning goals, conducting effective classroom tasks and making good use of feedback information could arouse minority students' interest in learning English. Study groups may also help promote English learning, and students' parents should also play a role, despite many of them not speaking English at all. In terms of communicative competence, the author encourages teachers to combine language and culture to provide authentic scenarios where minority students are more likely to express themselves actively. Lu<sup>[20]</sup> conducted another study in a Chinese university where 80% off the students were from ethnic minorities, to gain a better understanding of students' perspectives. The findings showed there is a significant difference between two questions in the survey, namely Han students prefer learning English with computers while minority students prefer communicating with foreigners through blogs and the internet. Furthermore, Han students were more concerned with English examination reform, which would be significantly related to their future employment, while minority students were generally unsatisfied with the teaching approach, teaching materials and educational expense of their previous English classroom, exhibiting at greater desire to learn English compared to students from urban areas. Both studies were conducted in ethnically homogeneous regions, but foreign language education of a multi-ethnic area becomes more complicated because those ethnic minority students have different mother languages.

In order to explore how ethnic minority students' view and practice MLA in an EFL classroom, this study employed a qualitative research design with an interview as the data-gathering instrument to answer the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are minority students' perceptions and practices towards the use of minority language in

learning English?

RQ2: What are minority students' perceptions and practices towards the use of Chinese in learning English?

### 3. Data and Method

The current study was conducted in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, which is located at border of China and Burma. In Dehong, the linguistic landscape of schools is quite diverse, though Han students still account for a large proportion of the population, along with Burmese (whose parents have temporary resident permit), Dai and Jingpo people and so on. Although there are five indigenous minorities living in this region, Dai people and Jingpo people were relatively dominant minorities and so a decision was taken to select Dai, Jingpo and Han to make up the research cohort, to allow examination of minority students' perceptions and practices of MLA in the EFL classroom. The Dai are Tai people who are also related to the Lao in Laos, the Shan in Myanmar, and the Thai in Thailand. Dai language belongs to an Austro-Tai language and has different dialects and writing systems. Dai people in Dehong speak Tai Nuea, which is a language that is closely related to the other Tai language. The Jingpo language, however, has its roots in the Tibeto-Burman language. In the 19th century, American Baptist missionaries helped the Jingpo people create their writing system, so the Jingpo alphabet is based on Latin script<sup>[21]</sup>. Moreover, Ola Hanson, one of the missionaries, wrote the first Kachin-English dictionary after he learned the Jingpo language in 1890 and as a result, some English words were introduced to the Jingpo people. Six minority students, who came from three different schools in this region, were involved in this study. By purpose sampling and snowballing, the participants were recruited as interviewees. As shown in Table 1, four students were male and two female and all of them were under eighteen years old. They all spoke the minority language as L1, Mandarin as L2, and English as L3.

*Table 1: Students' information*

Name	Age	Gender	Grades on last English text	Ethnicity	L1	L2	L3
Dao	14	Male	76%	Jingpo	Jingpo language	Mandarin	English
Pai	13	Male	50%	Jingpo	Jingpo language	Mandarin	English
Qi	13	Female	87%	Jingpo	Jingpo language	Mandarin	English
Gen	12	Male	94%	Dai	Dai language	Mandarin	English
Zhao	12	Female	21%	Dai	Dai language	Mandarin	English
Jin	14	Male	80%	Dai	Dai language	Mandarin	English

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study to collect data. By allowing interviewees to express in their own views and allow new ideas to be introduced into the interview, in-depth insight about MLA was more likely to be obtained. This meant that interviewees had the freedom to express in their own thoughts and the opportunity to confirm meanings with the interviewer, while interviewer could ask additional, unplanned questions based on what the interviewees said. In this way, the interviewer could enter the interviewees' true world, focus on the topic and address questions related to the research. In terms of the current research, several structured questions were prepared in advance, based on the research aims. According to the interview situation, the questions were tailored without adhering to a definite format as it was helpful to explore the interviewees' own perceptions and experiences if asked in suitable wording and sequencing.

After data collection, in order to familiarize myself with the data and gain control of it, the interviews were transcribed by me. Since transcription of the data was significant to the dependability of analysis and inconsistencies in the transcription could produce biases that may pose a threat to the analysis process, I double-checked the recordings to make sure of their accuracy. By adding comments like "hesitate" and "laugh", interviewees' changes in speech were signaled. Considering that the main purpose of the study was to investigate participants' perceptions and practices of using minority language and Chinese in the EFL classroom, the combination of non-verbal utterances and verbal narration were helpful in gaining a better understanding of the meaning of data. Afterwards, Braun and Clarke's six-step guide<sup>[22]</sup> was followed to analyse the data of this study thematically as the six phases of thematic analysis are flexible,

clear, and concise.

One of main concerns of this study was to protect the participants and conduct it in an ethical manner because they were under 18 years old. The information sheet for this study was provided to all potential participants, giving information about the research and its purpose, activities, risk and possible benefits. As for the students who were interested in this project, the researcher further contacted their parents to ask for permission and they signed the consent form for their children after reading the information sheet. All students and their parents confirmed that they understood their rights, such as they can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalties. Furthermore, Chinese versions of all the materials used in the study, including the information sheets and consent forms, were provided and participants had the freedom to choose to be interviewed in Mandarin or the local dialect, which ensured that the participants could fairly understand the study and feel comfortable. As for data protection, all personal information gathered during the study was held as strictly confidential. Pseudonyms were used for transcripts of the interviews and the data and its transcription were stored on a computer hard-drive whose password is known to the researcher only.

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1. *The use of minority students' L1 in learning English depend on the levels of language similarity.*

Minority students whose L1 is very different from English still valued their multilingual background, while those students whose L1 was similar to English can only stand to benefit if they have a high proficiency of their L1.

The levels of similarity between minority students' L1 and English are different, resulting in different effects on learning English. A lower level of similarity means a smaller overlapped area that language users can draw upon. Dai language is far different from English and so, Dai students can find hardly any language similarities and consequently did not believe that they were able to obtain a direct advantage from their L1. Those students who still viewed their multilingualism as an asset did so because they felt that learning a language is a same thing. A comment from a Dai student illustrates this point:

*The language itself (Dai) has little connections with English. But it's all about language, right? The more I speak, the better I will be. Even Dai language is more like Burmese instead of English, speaking another language makes me confident.*

-Jin, Dai student

Even minority students whose L1 is far different from English do not see their L1 as an obstacle. They still believed that speaking another language at home makes them more confident to learn a foreign language at school. There exists a notable gap between teachers and students' thinking, however.

By contrast, Jingpo students had a different view of the effect of their L1 on learning English because of the high similarity between English and their L1, suggesting that an L1 with a high-level similarity to English leads to more potential benefits:

*Jingpo language shares many similarities with English. This kind of knowledge can help me to learn English.*

-Qi, Jingpo student

This participant was aware of the similarity between her L1 and English, so she was likely to gain an advantage from her L1. This potential benefit can hardly be reaped if Jingpo students have a good command of their L1, as shown in a comment below:

*I know some words in Jingpo are similar to those in English, for example, music in Jingpo is 'musi'. I don't know how to spell it, but the pronunciation is like this. [...] I can't recall anything else right now. Maybe my Jingpo language is not good enough. [Laugh] I can't read or write. I can only deal with day-life communication.*

-Dao, Jingpo student

This participant can only cope with daily conversations in Jingpo. He cannot provide more examples because of his relatively low proficiency of L1 and consequently, he can benefit from his L1 when learning English but not very much. On the contrary, Jingpo students can gain more benefits if they have high proficiency of their L1. A comment from a Jingpo student demonstrates this point:

*Those who don't think it is helpful are not good enough in their mother tongue. [...] I can even give you more examples. [Laugh] Like, bang-bang; ball- baw; dip-dip; wound- wun; phone-phone; Christmas- Christmas; you- yu; accept- azep; warm- wawm; When I came across these words, I didn't have to remember them because I already knew them.*

*-Qi, Jingpo student*

It seems that this student has higher proficiency of Jingpo since she easily listed many similar words between Jingpo and English. These Jingpo words existed in her language repertoire before she began to learn English. Her high L1 proficiency is the main reason for the high-level contribution of L1 in learning English. It is fair to say Jingpo students' L1 proficiency determines how much their L1 helps them learn English.

#### **4.2. Minority students are glad to use their L1 with their teachers' permission; they will not use their L1 if their teacher does not value their multilingualism or does not allow them to use their L1.**

Minority students' practice of using their ethnic language relies heavily on their teacher's permission. Minority students reported that they used their L1 in English classroom if their teacher allowed them to do so. Two comments below illustrate this point:

*I use Jingpo language in English classroom because the teacher allowed us to.*

*-Pai, Jingpo student*

*The teacher won't stop us if she finds that we are communicating with each other about learning in Dai language.*

*-Gen, Dai student*

From the students' perspective, their practice of using L1 in a foreign language classroom is teacher oriented, although it could be suggested that they teacher may still be a dominant force in the classroom because they are junior high school students.

Additionally, minority students were willing to use their L1 because they feel it is more interesting and even efficient sometimes:

*The class became more interesting when I used Dai language. I'm happy to use it. That was amazing.*

*-Gen, Dai student*

*When the teacher talked about a topic that my desk mate [who is also Dai] could not understand, I explained to him in Dai language. It was more efficient because his Mandarin is not good enough.*

*-Jin, Dai student*

As the students commented, the use of L1 in the English classroom can arouse students' interest and make them feel comfortable and confident. Consequently, they are more likely to engage in classroom activities. Compared with using Chinese or English, using their L1 was more efficient sometimes when minority students communicated with classmates from the same ethnic group. The shared L1 in this case became a tool among minority students to provide each other with support in learning English.

Many minority students will not use their L1 in English classroom, however, if their teacher forbids them to use it:

*I didn't use it [Dai language] before because my teacher does not allow us to use in class. If she allows us to do so, I may feel that learning English is closer to me and I may be more willing to take her classes.*

*-Jin, Dai student*

It seems that the participant felt at a disadvantage when his teacher did not allow them to use their L1. Moreover, some students do not use their L1 because they their teacher does not value it.

*But my teacher didn't know I was able to speak Jingpo language and didn't pay much attention to it. She does not care because she is Han. So, I don't use it.*

*-Dao, Jingpo student*

Since this minority student felt that the teachers were not interested in their linguistic background, he

chose not to use his L1. In addition, it seems that his teacher did not take the initiative to examine whether her students could speak another language or not. Minority students' peripheral use of L1 in English classes are mainly influenced by their teacher's preference. According to teachers' practices discussed before, perhaps the teacher did not allow them to use their L1 when learning English because there are more Han students in this class.

#### **4.3. Chinese is the foundation to learn English, but some use of Chinese in English classroom may be not efficient.**

From minority students' viewpoints, Chinese proficiency may affect their English learning. They may be not capable of learning English well without a good command of Chinese because minority students in this study go to a school where Han students are dominant. This is reflected in comments from two Dai students:

*I grew up in a Dai village, and I did not learn Chinese until I was six years old. My parents can speak Chinese but not very well, so we use Dai language at home. Sometimes, I think my English teacher speak Chinese too fast and I can't follow her. But my desk mate thought it is ok because he is Han.*

-Zhao, Dai student

This excerpt shows that minority students who did not perform very well in English often had limited Chinese proficiency. For minority students, Chinese is both their L2 and the instructional language. Chinese was commonly used alongside English in the classroom as the majority of students were Han whose L1 is Chinese. As a result, they could not understand their teachers and Han classmates well if they had problem with their Chinese.

While another Dai student who got high grade on his last English exam state that:

*My parents are government officials and I grew up in the city, so my Chinese is perfect [Laugh]. I got 114 (94%) on my last English exam. I don't any troubles in understanding my teacher when she speaks Chinese.*

-Gen, Dai student

Thanks to this student's family background, the participant had confidence in his Chinese. This may be the reason that he can always understand when his English teacher speaks Chinese in the English classroom, and therefore performed well. This shows that minority learners' proficiency of Chinese affects their English learning.

Apart from frequency of Chinese usage, some minority students did not agree with how some teachers utilized Chinese in teaching English because these practices caused problems:

*I think it is very strange that when we dictate the words, the teacher asks us to write down the Chinese meaning first. Gradually, I only remember the spelling of English words, but I didn't know what they meant. I can't remember anything. I don't think that's good.*

-Jin, Dai student

This participant described his teachers' practice in the English classroom, which he could not understand. He found that he could not remember the words clearly when using the method introduced by his teacher because he was unable to examine whether he remembered the Chinese meaning of the word unless he writes it down in advance.

#### **4.4. Using Chinese extensively in English learning, minority students admit the usefulness of Chinese but express a demand for more English exposure at the same time.**

Minority students in the English classroom have relied heavily on Chinese because of their current English proficiency:

*I don't have enough vocabulary. Therefore, I have to use Chinese a lot in classroom.*

-Zhao, Dai student

This participant is in Grade 7, so she cannot adapt to an English-dominant environment with limited vocabulary and grammatical rules. Consequently, Chinese was widely used instead in the English classroom but minority students used code switching frequently when learning by themselves:

*For me, Chinese is still very important in English learning. I will translate difficult sentences, but not for something, I know the meaning at a glance, for example, welcome to China. The teacher did not ask me to do so, it was all my own decision. I will translate the whole article into Chinese because it helped me a lot.*

-Dao, Jingpo student

For minority students, Chinese also plays an important role in learning English outside the classroom. Minority students may employ code-switching activities when they learn by themselves and it is interesting that they seemed to use more Chinese than ethnic languages to help them learn English. Maybe their teachers' preferences toward Chinese in the practice exercises influenced the students' practice as well, so minority students get used to using Chinese to learn English in the classroom. As a result, they translate English sentences into Chinese (L2) instead their L1 after class.

Due to family background and the social environment, students want to have more exposure to English, at least in the higher grades.

*My parents can't speak English. None of my families can. I value the opportunity to speak English in the classroom. I try to speak English as much as possible,*

-Pai, Jingpo student

*But personally, I want to improve my spoken English. Maybe when I am in Grade 9, I will be able to use English more in the classroom.*

-Zhao, Dai student

Some minority students did not have the opportunity to learn English when they were young, so they attached importance to activities in the English classroom. From their point of view, they preferred using English in the classroom. In the light of their current English proficiency, however, they still needed to rely heavily on Chinese but also expressed a desire to gradually increase the frequency of using English.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Minority students of the present study demonstrated a certain level of MLA in terms of their perceptions of multilingualism. If comparing the results of the current research with that of Illman and Pietilä, all minority students valued their multilingual background like immigrant students in the previous study. Those minority students also agreed the importance of similarities between linguistic systems<sup>[23]</sup>. Jingpo students recognized the "crosslinguistic lexical similarity" between their minority language and English<sup>[24]</sup> and believed that it facilitates their English learning. Similarly, although Dai students were aware of the divergence between their minority language and English, they still believed that speaking another language at home gave them confidence to learn English. Moreover, the findings also demonstrated that students acknowledged the significance of the instrumental language (Chinese) and its proficiency in learning English, which resonates with Rutgers and Evans. They found that L3 learning changes language learners' attitudes towards language learning and developing more practical language awareness. Chinese (minority student's L2) could likely cause a problem if minority students do not have a high proficiency of it, which is in the line with the previous findings. To summarize, minority students showed their MLA by appreciation of their multilingual background and willingness to take advantage of all languages they know to study English. They had a fundamental understanding of a multiplicity of languages because they expressed their knowledge of the way languages work in and out the classroom. For minority students, this is a positive sign although their minority languages are usually taken for granted by the mainstream classroom.

Turning into ethnic students' practice of MLA in an English learning environment, our findings indicate that in most cases they were not given opportunities to take advantage of their minority language. Their MLA practices were highly dominated by their teachers' preferences, so they did not have the freedom to really make use of their multilingualism if their teacher does not encourage or allow them to do so. On the less frequent occasions they were allowed to practice MLA, minority students from both ethnic groups were glad to introduce their minority language into the foreign language classroom. Furthermore, Jingpo students who had a high proficiency of their minority language reactivated their prior language knowledge when learning English. Additionally, minority students tended to fall back on whatever language resources they possessed when they lacked sufficient English linguistic resources. Their teachers' preference of using Chinese in English classroom made them get used to using Chinese even when learning by themselves. For these students, the facilitative effect of Chinese is to code-switch

and aid communication in English. They analyzed Chinese and English they use Chinese transfer in communication when they had a desire to express messages.

As for pedagogical implications, English educators in multilingual contexts should pay attention to the local multilingual differences. Firstly, they should have the basic awareness that not all students are native speakers of the dominant language of the nation. Although it is impossible to require all teachers to have a knowledge of these minority languages, it is necessary for them to understand the social, political, economic struggles surrounding the use of these languages. In view of this, it is recommended that English teachers in ethnic regions should familiarize themselves with local minority languages and be aware of their students' linguistic background. At the very least, they should show their respect to ethnic students' minority languages since the finding of the current study shows that minority students can be motivated if their L1 is acknowledged in an English classroom. For teachers, being a qualified user of language is not enough; they should become a good observer of languages and withhold judgement of minority students' language use. Moreover, another finding reveals that minority students may encounter different problems with Han students when learning English and they found that some teachers' practices are not efficient. It is important that teachers should listen to minority students' voices about their pedagogical practice. With regard to the dominance of the classroom, teachers may want to give minority students more freedom to utilize all languages they have acquired to learn English, while teachers play the role of helper to scaffold these students. In this way, translanguaging is more likely to find a way into the foreign language classroom. By using translanguaging activities, teachers can help minority students make the best use of their language repertoire, which can further improve their MLA. For multilingual students, especially minority students in developing areas, they may need to invest more time and effort in learning English. The knowledge system of minority students is constructed through family education and ethnic culture, so they can self-create a "bridge" between different languages and cultures, which is another way to increase MLA. For example, when learning alone they can practice speaking English to introduce ethnic culture that they are familiar with. Additionally, a steady foundation of basic English is of importance, so minority students should set suitable short-term and long-term goals at the very beginning as students with successful experiences tend to be motivated to pursue further knowledge. Moreover, they should be aware of their right to rely on multiple languages in the English classroom despite their teachers' preferences. In this way, they are more likely to take advantage of their multilingualism and use their multiple linguistic repertoire to learn English better.

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