The Influence of Language Policy and Planning on Intercultural Education in China

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Abstract

Intercultural education, as an important aspect of English learning, is set as one of the fundamental teaching principles in Chinese schools. This paper incorporates three sociolinguistic concepts "language policy and planning", "language ideology" and "cultural identity" into the discussion of intercultural education in China. Three practical suggestions are also proposed to facilitate intercultural education for English learners in China.

Key words: Language policy and planning; Intercultural education; Language ideology; Cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

It has been a global phenomenon that English is being widely used as an international language all over the world, and there is no exception in China. With the deepening of globalization and China's reform and opening up policy, China is engaging in more exchanges and cooperation with other countries in the fields of economy, politics, diplomacy, culture, etc.. Prompted by these factors, more and more Chinese people are attaching great importance to English learning and the use of English, which is also embodied in China's English language education policy and planning. Regarding the current educational system in China, four official documents for English teaching in different education stages are issued with different curriculum objectives and requirements (Wen, 2012). As one of the four official documents, *English Teaching Syllabus for Tertiary English Majors (the Syllabus for Short)* was published in 2000 as a guide to English major education. In *the Syllabus*, intercultural education is emphasized and cultivation of intercultural abilities is set as one of the teaching principles for English majors. The official document requires all English courses to be designed with consideration of increasing students' sensitivity and tolerance of cultural differences as well as improving their flexibility in dealing with cultural differences (Teaching Advisory Committee for Tertiary English Majors, 2000). However, this is often not the case in the practice of intercultural education in China.

In some Chinese schools, the course related to intercultural communication in English is offered to equip students with good intercultural communicative competence. However, when students go abroad for further study, the knowledge they have learned was not applicable in actual intercultural communication. It is common for them to come across different kinds of misunderstandings when communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds. Liu and Zhang (2014) conducted a questionnaire survey on the current situation of intercultural education of English learners in two universities in Hebei Province, China. More than half of the respondents stated that their knowledge of intercultural communication is limited to the content of the textbook. Over sixty percent of the respondents claimed that the

intercultural knowledge they gained from the courses is not practical when it comes to actual intercultural communication. They lack sufficient intercultural abilities to deal with cultural differences. It cannot be denied that intercultural teaching and learning for English learners have some problems and limitations.

1. STUDY OBJECTIVE

There are various reasons that could account for the impractical intercultural education in China. This paper will argue from the sociolinguistic perspective, and incorporate three concepts (i.e., language policy and planning, language ideology and cultural identity) into the discussion. With the purpose of showing the importance and usefulness of these sociolinguistic concepts to intercultural teaching and learning, this paper will also provide some practical suggestions for intercultural education in China.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Language Policy and Planning (LPP) on Intercultural Education

The two terms "language policy" and "language planning" have no unified definition. According to McGroarty's (1997, p.1, cited in Hornberger & McKay, 2010, p.145) definition, language policy refers to "the combination of official decisions and prevailing public practices related to language education and use". Language education policy (LEP), as one part of language policy and planning, is considered as the implementation of explicit language policies and plans in educational settings (e.g. schools and universities) in relation to national languages as well as foreign languages and second languages (Shohamy, 2006, p.76). The frequently quoted definition of language planning is given by Cooper (1989, p.45, cited in Hornberger & McKay, 2010, p.145) as "deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes". Language planning is universally classified into three types: status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. This paper only focuses on acquisition planning as it deals with the planning of language teaching and learning in the whole education domain from official educational agencies to local educational institutions.

English language education policy, as a major part of language education policy, has been paid much attention to in many non-English speaking countries. Over the past few decades, English language education has been given more and more emphasis in China as English is playing a key role in China's economic development and social modernization. Official documents for English education were drafted and revised by policymakers and academic researchers from the relevant government agencies and institutions. In 2002, the new edition of *English Teaching Syllabus for Tertiary English Majors* was published by Teaching Advisory Committee for Tertiary English Majors. This is the only specified document for the guidance of English teaching for English majors in China. In *the Syllabus*, intercultural education is put forward with great significance to English language education, which requires English learners to have a good command of both specialized cultural knowledge and intercultural communicative competence.

Under the instruction of *the Syllabus*, English acquisition planning highly values the importance of intercultural education for English learners. In most Chinese colleges and universities, relevant English courses such as *Intercultural Communication in English*, *Western Societies and Cultures, Intercultural Business Communication* are offered to English learners. *Intercultural Communication in English* as a core course is provided to senior English majors, and the textbook *Intercultural Communication in English* is designated as the unified course book by Teaching Advisory Committee for Tertiary English Majors because it conforms to the objectives and teaching requirements of *the Syllabus*. However, the practice of intercultural education is far from reaching its goals. As China adopts a top-down foreign language policy, only government agencies and specialist committees have the authority to formulate foreign language policy without taking account of stakeholders' opinions and demands in different communities of Chinese society (Lu, 2003). Likewise, the enactment of English language education policy is also a top-down process in view of China's highly centralized educational system. As the policymaking process and the policy documents are kept confidential before they are officially released to the public, whether these policies can be implemented applicably and successfully in all educational institutions is questionable (Hu, 2007).

Consequently, the top-down policymaking exerts an inevitable influence on curriculum design and implementation. In terms of intercultural education for English learners, there exists an imbalance between how and what should be taught in curriculum syllabus and how and what is actually taught in classroom practice. Han (2006) carried out a questionnaire survey on the status quo of intercultural education for English learners in 39 universities in China. The study shows that a large majority of teachers are not well prepared for intercultural teaching practices. In cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence, teachers mainly focus on intercultural knowledge and communicative abilities and pay less attention to students' awareness and attitudes towards cultural differences, which contradictes the teaching principles of *the Syllabus*. Another survey was conducted by Gao

(2006) to investigate English learners' intercultural communicative competence in a Chinese university. The self-report questionnaire indicates that although students' intercultural knowledge is broadened, they cannot discern or cope with cultural differences in an actual intercultural situation. The objectives of *the Syllabus* are not achieved in this point. It can be inferred that both teachers and students are facing a huge challenge in intercultural teaching and learning.

2.2 Language Ideology and LPP

One major reason for this problematic intercultural education is attributed to the influence of language ideologies on LPP in China. The term "language ideology" has different notions. From a social and cultural perspective, language ideology is defined as "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine, 1989, p.225, cited in Pan, 2015, p.38). It is noticeable that power relations are embodied in language ideology. That is to say, language ideology is regarded as a generally recognized and "invisible" way of thinking and behaving by language users as a normative practice under hegemonic and governing power (Pan, 2011, p.247). Therefore, when policymakers formulate intercultural education policy for English learners, they have to take full consideration of English language ideologies in China. To cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence was first raised in the newly revised *Syllabus*. In the previous English language education policy, the government was very sensitive and cautious about any potential cultural or linguistic threats to national integrity. Thus English was taught as a subject rather than a means of communication (Lam, 2005). In the past decades, with the widespread use of English as an international language and China's integration into global economy and trade, international affairs and activities as well as cultural exchange and communication, the government has shaped a language ideology that English is beneficial for China's modernization, globalization, economic and social development. The altered English language ideology is also reflected in intercultural education for English learners. *The Syllabus* explicitly indicates three objectives of teaching cultures, which are increasing sensitivity to cultural differences, enhancing tolerance of cultural differences and promoting flexibility in managing cultural differences. It can be seen that the formulation of intercultural education policy is fundamentally regulated by the nation's official language ideologies, but whether the implementation of intercultural education policy is successful or not is more related to students' construction of different cultural identities.

2.3 Cultural Identity and LPP

Cultural identity is a key concept in intercultural communication with different definitions. This paper conceptualizes cultural identity as a flexible and negotiable entity of an individual, which means an individual's cultural identity is not fixed but dynamic and variable in intragroup and intergroup communication. According to Wen's (2012) statement, three correlated types of cultures are supposed to be taught in intercultural education for English learners, which are target language cultures, cultures of other non-native speakers, and the learners' own culture or local culture. That is to say, intercultural teaching should place equal emphasis on target language culture, Chinese culture, and different cultures of other countries. Thus intercultural learning is perceived as a two-way cultural communication between China and other countries, and students need to construct and reconstruct their cultural identities in various intercultural interactions. However, some scholars claim it difficult to investigate the construction of cultural identities in the EFL context in China. Qu (2005) argues that the construction of English language learners' cultural identities should presuppose genuine situations of intercultural communication or strict second language environments with language proficiency. However, the premise is absent in China since English is regarded as a foreign language and mainly learned and used in educational settings. It seems that China's language policies restrict English learners' cultural identity. China adopts a dominant language ideology that Mandarin is the sole official language and other varieties of Chinese are treated as national languages. Although English as the most popular foreign language, is taught as a compulsory subject in primary school from year 3, it is seldom used outside the educational system (Lam, 2005). In a monocultural society, English learners hardly have any opportunities or intercultural contexts to construct their cultural identities. As a result, when coping with cultural differences, students are likely to feel incompetent and lack sensitivity and tolerance in intercultural communication.

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Reflecting on the intercultural education of English learners in China, the importance of sociolinguistics must be emphasized, due to the fact that the correlated concepts "language policy and planning", "language ideology" and "cultural identity" all have great impact on intercultural teaching and learning. In order to achieve the goals of intercultural education in *the Syllabus*, some practical suggestions are provided in association with the three concepts.

Firstly, in the policymaking process of intercultural education for English learners, policymakers and specialists should seek advice from a wide range of students and teachers in the case of the imposition and impracticality of the policy. Although China executes a

top-down policymaking approach considering its highly centralized educational system, it does not mean that students' needs and teachers' opinions are underestimated. Since the implementation of intercultural education policy is ultimately reflected in grassroots classroom practices, the policymaking should take full account of students' linguistic and cultural repertoire and cater to students' expectations and actual demands of intercultural communication.

Secondly, in the acquisition planning stage of intercultural teaching, the professional training of teachers' intercultural competence should be planned as a prioritized and normalized program. Yuan (2006) points out that to develop teachers' intercultural competence is a prerequisite for smooth implementation of intercultural education. As the leading instructors for students' intercultural learning, only when tertiary English teachers are trained to have sufficient intercultural competence can English learners then acquire intercultural communicative competence. However, regarding the official document for intercultural education, the Syllabus did not specify teachers' professional competence in intercultural teaching, which is a major obstacle to effective intercultural teaching.

Thirdly, in terms of the construction of cultural identities in intercultural teaching and learning, teachers should provide more opportunities for students to practice their intercultural communicative skills. In classroom teaching, role-playing and co-teaching can be involved in intercultural education. Role-playing provides students with an imagined community to construct a new cultural identity in intercultural learning. In the role-playing, students may be exposed to a specific context they have never encountered before, and they are supposed to negotiate and reconstruct a different kind of cultural identity and become aware of the cultural differences. Hiller (2010) comments that role-playing is a useful and promising tool for the development of students' intercultural communicative competence. To be more specific, role-playing not only helps students to gain more awareness, empathy and positive attitudes towards cultural differences, but also improves their flexibility in dealing with different cultures. Co-teaching is another good pedagogical model to facilitate intercultural teaching. Native and non-native English teachers can collaborate and co-teach in the courses relevant to intercultural communication. Non-native English teachers (i.e., Chinese teachers) have a native Chinese cultural identity and are more familiar with their local culture and the learners' own culture, while native English teachers (i.e., teachers from English-speaking countries) have different cultural identities and are more familiar with the target language culture and multi-cultures of other countries. Herbert and Wu (2009) claims that in co-teaching practices, native English teachers can create an intercultural environment where students are more inclined to discern cultural differences and easily construct various cultural identities, while non-native English teachers can better perceive students' expectations and difficulties in intercultural learning and help students to realize a two-way cultural exchange. It seems that both role-playing and co-teaching are helpful tools for teachers to reach the teaching goals in *the Syllabus*.

CONCLUSION

In a word, this paper incorporates three sociolinguistic concepts "language policy and planning", "language ideology" and "cultural identity" into the discussion. It demonstrates the importance of sociolinguistics in intercultural teaching and learning. In the end, three practical suggestions are proposed to facilitate intercultural teaching and learning for English learners in China.

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