

## Original Paper

# Bilingual or “Bye-Lingual”? An Analysis and Discussion of Bilingual Education Mode in China and the US

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### **Abstract**

*This article compares bilingual education mode in two countries: China and the US. For China, the bilingual education been analysed includes mandarin and ethnic minority languages, Chinese and English. Extant research on bilingual education tends to focus on one country whilst there is a paucity of papers comparing various kinds of bilingual education. In this paper, by using the systematic review method, the differences and similarities of bilingual education mode in these two countries are been discussed and the tensions, as well as opportunities of bilingual education behind these two countries is explored. This paper ends a call for non-English native speaking EFL/ESL teachers to see their first language as an asset for developing bilingual education worldwide.*

### **Keywords**

*bilingual education, biliteracy, bilingual education mode, tension of bilingual education*

## **1. Introduction**

Language is never merely a subject or a tool. It is connected with socialisation into the local and wider society, as well as a powerful semiotic heritage and identity. Ruiz (1984) proposed three perspectives about language: language as problem, language as right, and language as resource. These three dispositions, though having drawn controversies in scholarship for they are rooted in politics (Baker, 2016), provided fundamentals and orientation for bilingual education.

Bilingual education is a term that describes the practice of utilising two or more languages for teaching academic or subject-matter content (Valdes, Poza, & Brooks, 2017). Despite that bilingual education not only provides chances for more people with diverse language background to receive equal or high quality education, but also brings those who can speak more than one language greater economic opportunities (Bialystok et al., 2005), it still remains contentious. Some bilingual programs are

designed to develop full biliteracy—the ability to use two languages proficiently, while others use the native language to facilitate the acquisition of L2 only (Vance, 2019).

This article presents an examination and comparison of various bilingual education models across China and the US, as well as the discussion of tensions and opportunities that are presented in the bilingual education policies within these two countries. It concludes by putting forward implications for language teachers and practitioners.

Several factors contribute to the author's choice of examining China and the US for this article. For one thing, as a native Chinese, the author has personally undergone the English-Chinese bilingual education, which has brought him benefits and opportunities not only in career pathways but also in higher education. For another thing, when reading about the bilingualism and bilingual education, the author noticed a number of articles and researches on bilingual education in the US, claiming that it brought negative effects to society such as it gradually delineated native language and accelerating English language assimilation (Phillipson, 2005). In the author's point of view, both these two countries serve as typical examples for the discussion of tension and opportunity of bilingual education.

### *1.1 Brief Overview of Bilingual Education in China*

As a country with 56 ethnic groups (Lewis, 2009), China sheltered approximately 2,000 dialects (Li, 2006). The majority *Han*-ethnic group speaks Mandarin occupies 91.5% of the total population in China, while the other 55 ethnic minority groups, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Zhuang, speak over 290 languages (Lewis, 2009). Therefore, unifying a standard language for education in China is undoubtedly complicated. On the other hand, with the opening-up of China in 1978, English has been regarded as a critical language in enabling the country to access advanced technologies and capital, thus catering to the trend of globalisation (Wenfeng & Gao, 2008). Furthermore, in 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping has launched the initiative “One belt, one road”, also known as the “*Belt & Road Initiative*”, which is a long-term strategy of international trade (Liu & Dunford, 2016). “Belt” refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt, and aims to connect the domestic underdeveloped area to Europe through Central Asia. “Road” refers to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road that connecting between the Southeast Asian region and China's southern provinces through harbours and railways (Cai, 2017). This initiative was vital for improving ties and stimulating growth and development along the geographic periphery of China (Swaine, 2015), and English is the major communicative language for it. Consequently, this placed the importance of English at a higher level in China.

These three factors above produced two types of bilingual education in China: bilingual education programs for ethnic minority students and Chinese-English bilingual education (Gao & Ren, 2019). These two bilingual education modes would be unpacked in the “*Results*” section with more details.

### *1.2 Brief Overview of Bilingual Education in the US*

The development of bilingual education in the US is full of disputes and adversities, and has always been closely related to political, economic, and social concerns (Vance, 2019). Proponents of bilingual

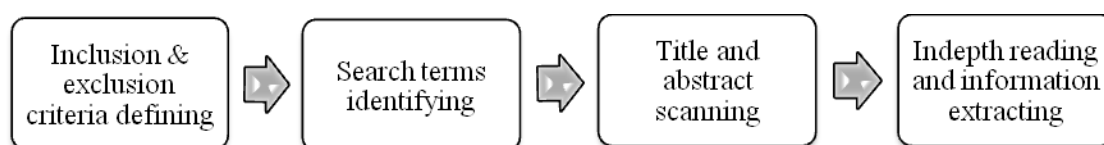
education hold the belief that it fulfils the demand of the population in the US not only at present but also in the future since the US is a nation of immigrants and was established by colonists from a wide range of language backgrounds (Krashen, 1997, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002). For instance, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1968 and Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nichols* all put forward the idea of utilising bilingual education so that everyone in the US can have an equal education.

However, in spite of the gains for advocates of bilingual education, opponents of bilingual education claimed that only by virtue of the English-only education mode can the unity of the country be preserved. This view was supported by the organizations such as English First and U.S. English in the 1980s and 1990s who claimed that English should be the only language of instruction (Vance, 2019). Furthermore, in 1998 a famous initiative passed with 61% of the vote known as California Proposition 227 shifted the federal government away from only supporting bilingual education to accepting English-only instruction (Wiese & Garcia, 1998).

To sum up, given the demographic features and conflicting political ideologies, the debate regarding bilingual education will continue in the foreseeable future (Vance, 2019). In the *Results* section, a detailed depiction of the bilingual education mode and history of language policy in the US is presented.

## 2. Methodology

In this article, the systematic literature review is employed with multiple lines of literature would be drawn. First, articles or book chapters regarding this assignment: bilingual education in China and bilingual education in the US would be searched. These arching results would be synthesised and analysed. The reviewing process follows the systematic review procedure and is summarized as follows:



The table below outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this literature review:

**Table 1. Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written language: English</li> <li>Peer reviewed</li> <li>Keywords: Language policy in China, language policy in the US, bilingual education mode in the US, bilingual education policy and mode in China</li> <li>Paper published from 1970 to 2019: the output of research regarding bilingual education is increasing during this period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proceeding book or conference</li> <li>Not written in English</li> <li>Unable to access full-text</li> <li>Review on a general topic e.g. bilingualism in the world</li> </ul>

It may be useful to say a few words here about what this paper is not intended to do. It is not intended to provide an exhaustive or comprehensive literature review on the history of bilingualism in the world, nor does it intend to compare monolingual and bilingual education from a holistic view. It is about discussing and comparing bilingual education between the two countries selected, as well as analysis regarding tension and opportunities.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Bilingual Education in China

##### 3.1.1 Bilingual Education for Ethnic Minorities

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, different development stages of bilingual education for ethnic minorities have been witnessed (Dai & Dong, 2001). The first constitution in 1952 accorded that all ethnic groups in China enjoy equal status, and stated that each ethnic groups have the authority and freedom to use their own language (Lam, 2005), which legitimise and protect the use of minority languages at school. Under such policy, a sheer volume of studies have been conducted to standardise and develop minority languages for education purposes from 1949 to 1957, teaching materials and textbooks were also edited or translated into minority languages as well. During this period, bilingual education for ethnic minorities was focusing on developing students' competence in minority languages.

However, things have changed greatly during the riotous period of the "*Great Leap Forward Movement*" (1958-1959) and the "*Cultural Revolution*" (1966-1976) (Zhou, 2012). Not only has the economic development stagnated, but also the minority education deteriorated during this time. In order to achieve "rapid linguistic convergence", minority languages were tagged as "useless" and "backwards" and were suppressed and abandoned. Consequently, bilingual education during this period was replaced by monolingual Mandarin education (Dai & Dong, 2001).

Moving on to 1978 when such a chaotic time and unrest ceased, bilingual education for ethnic minorities was revived. The status of minority languages was reaffirmed and re-legitimized in the 1982

*Constitution* and the rights for using them in education were stipulated and endorsed by *The 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities* and *the 1986 Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China*. Nevertheless, since Mandarin was regarded as the common language for economic and cultural purposes and communication speech among all ethnic groups in China, teaching minorities in either minority languages or Mandarin does not seem to be appropriate (Gao & Wang, 2017). Therefore, differing from 1949 to 1957, the bilingual education for ethnic minorities from 1978 emphasises the development of biliteracy--minority languages and Mandarin.

### 3.1.2 Chinese-English Bilingual Education

The Chinese-English bilingual education could be traced back to 1862 in the Qing Dynasty when *Jingshi Tongwen Guan* (known as Peking University at present) first designed courses in foreign languages (Tong & Shi, 2012). The modern Chinese-English bilingual education was initiated in a few elite schools for trial since the 1990s, and the bilingual programmes were designed for secondary-level and primary-level schools only. These programmes turned out to be a great success and raised the interest and the heat of Chinese-English bilingual education in China (Gao & Wang, 2017).

In 2001, the Ministry of Education (MOE) determined to promote Chinese-English bilingual education nationwide, and extend the trial of bilingual education. Under such policy, a huge surge of schools that adopted bilingual education could be witnessed within only 3 years, from less than 100 schools in 2001 to more than 400 in 2004 (Hu, 2007). Most of these schools are in coastal cities such as Shanghai, Qingdao etc. These bilingual programmes were all reported to be successful in that the students were not only outperformed in subjects like Maths and Sciences compared with their peers who did not receive bilingual teaching, but also achieved high competence in English writing and speaking (Wang, 2003).

Similar to the primary and secondary schools, bilingual education in universities was also originated in elite schools. As one of the top universities in China, Tsinghua University in 1990 adopted English as a medium of instruction in class and set up joint international MBA programs (Pan, 2006). These programmes served as an impetus for Tsinghua University to become a top world-class university and gained the acceptance of using English as a teaching medium in university classes in China. In 2001, the MOE justified that Chinese-English bilingual education is vital for catering to the trend of globalisation, cultivating international professions and talents, and improving the quality of higher education in China. With the support of the government, an increasing number of universities have set up bilingual courses and programmes, and the Chinese-English bilingual programme has gained nationwide recognition (Feng, 2005).

The Chinese-English bilingual education aims at developing learners' biliteracy in both Chinese and English. However, despite it proving to be conducive to students and was endorsed by MOE, it has never been legitimised. The Language Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that "schools and other institutions must use Mandarin and standardized Chinese characters as the basic spoken and written language in education and teaching" (He, 2011, p. 98). This means that using English for

instruction is not under legal protection and may be suspended if law stipulates. This has put the Chinese-English bilingual education in a paradoxical position. For one thing, under the current trend of globalisation and the economic growth in China, bilingual education has proved to be suitable for them and has gained support from MOE. Besides, studies and experiments have demonstrated its benefit for students. For another thing, using English for teaching in China did not have legal status. This paradox will undoubtedly add ambiguity to the future of the Chinese-English bilingual in China.

### 3.2 Bilingual Education in the US

#### 3.2.1 Language Policies in the US

The US has no official language policy except offering non-English speaking citizens a right to study the English language (Grandara & Hopkins, 2010). Nonetheless, it has been depicted as “a graveyard for languages” (Rumbaut *et al.*, 2006, p. 448). Crawford (2004) estimated that only 20 out of 175 American Indian languages spoken today would survive to the mid-century. What’s more, other languages among immigrants are losing at a rapid speed. One prominent example is Spanish. Spanish-speaking immigrants are mastering English at a more rapid rate compared with previous generations, and concurrently they are losing Spanish more quickly (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Under such a background, the language policy in the US was rather restrictive as it promotes English language while subduing other languages. Among the 50 states in America, two serve as the typical example of such restrictive language policy: California and Arizona.

Immigrant has never been welcomed in the US. As two states with the largest, increasing proportion of immigrants, the anti-immigrant emotion and event was nurtured and spiking in California and Arizona (Grandara & Hopkins, 2010). In 1994, California proposed *Proposition 187*, which banned all unregistered immigrants from public services, including education. Although this proposition was eventually abolished by the Supreme Court, in 1998 California passed another law: *Proposition 227*. This proposition prohibited the use of non-English speakers’ first language in English class to promote English-only instruction. During the same period, Arizona passed *Proposition 203* in 2000, which is similar to *California Proposition 227* with the purpose of anti-bilingual instruction, and in 2006, the implementation of English-only policy was stricter stipulated in Arizona. The law in these two states has made it more difficult and confused for teachers or TESOL/TEFL experts when conducting English teaching, as they were striving for the effective English teaching method in English classes while fearing for the penalties of these Propositions (Wright & Choi’s, 2006).

Due to political factors and immigrants, the history of bilingual education in the US has undergone from admitting to suppressing. It is commonly believed that bilingual education in the US is not teaching students in two languages but in English solely. The language policy in the US plays a determinant role in the modes of bilingual education in the US, which would be depicted in the next part.

### 3.2.2 Bilingual Education Mode in the US

Unlike in the other part of the world, bilingual education in the US aims at English learning rather than biliteracy development (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). The bilingual mode used in the majority of the US is Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), which utilises two languages to teach English Language Learners (ELLs). On the one hand, TBE mode teaches ELLs academic content such as Sciences and Maths in two languages so that they will not fall behind in these subjects while they are learning English. On the other hand, TBE mode includes the study of English as a Second Language (ESL) in their curriculum. Gradually, TBE shifts ELLs to learn school content in non-English to all in English, thus to the complete transition. TBE is divided into “Early-exit” and “late-exit”. The former aims to accomplish the transition in 1-3 years whereas the latter aims at 4-5 years (Crawford, 2004). Therefore, it can be concluded that the ultimate goal of TBE is English language acquisition.

Whilst the TBE mode is still widely used at present, there is an emerging bilingual mode in the US: Dual Language Education (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). Different from TBE, Dual Language Education aims at developing learners’ biliteracy (reading and writing in two languages) and bilingualism (speaking proficiently in two languages) (García, 2009; Genesee, 2004). It uses two languages for instruction over a constant period, normally at least five years (Howard et al. 2003). Furthermore, Dual language Education serves not only non-English speakers, but also native monolingual English speakers in the US, which would enhance learners’ linguistic competence and expand their language repertoire.

To sum up, among the two bilingual modes in the US, the TBE is labelled as “subtractive” while the Dual-Language-Education is tagged as “additive” (Baker, 2011). The debate and development of bilingual education remain continuous and further research is still in need.

## 4. Discussion

Comparing bilingual education in both China and the US, similarities could be found. For one thing, bilingual education for the ethnic minorities in China and bilingual education in the US have all undergone the stages of acceptance and repression, and have all shifted from developing mono literacy to biliteracy. The ethnic minority languages were accepted for schooling after the foundation of the PRC, and then suppressed to make room for Mandarin for a short period until the present that both minority languages and Mandarin can be used for teaching. Similarly, in the US, immigrants’ and non-English speakers’ mother tongue was allowed to be used in class, then moving to the restrictive language policies that it was enforced by law that only English could be used, turning the goal of bilingual education into the acquisition of English only, until present the Dual Language Education is brought up and aims to develop learners’ biliteracy. For another thing, the goal of Dual Language Education in the US is in line with the goal of Chinese-English bilingual education, which strives for developing students’ Chinese and English literacy. However, both two types of bilingual education in China at present are designed for developing learner’s biliteracy, whereas in the US, TBE still plays a

major role in bilingual education. Although in TBE both English and learner's L1 are allowed to be utilised, its ultimate goal is still the English acquisition. This, from the perspective of the author, is considered as a distinction between the bilingual modes in both countries.

In terms of the tension presented within bilingual education in these two countries, commonalities could be spotted as well. For one thing, although Chinese-English bilingual education is increasingly prominent in China, it does not receive any legal protection and is not legalised. This means that all Chinese-English bilingual programmes could be suspended with merely a piece of law. Similarly, in the US, the emerging Dual-Language Education has not yet received any legal status. In fact, currently the bilingual students are labelled as "*English learners*" in the US, and the federal government has stipulated in 2000 that the bilingual education programme is designed for teaching English rather than teaching two languages (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Besides, TBE still plays a dominant role in bilingual education in the US. These have undoubtedly escalated more difficulties in developing non-English learners' biliteracy in America. For another thing, since the immigrants or migrants in the US are non-English speakers, in a gesture to enjoy advanced education or pursue a job career in America, a proficient mastery of English is a necessity and prerequisite. This has placed more pressure on them in terms of language learning and thus they would work hard to learn English while losing their first language simultaneously. Although the Dual-Language-Education is initiated to develop biliteracy, the learners may still focus more on English. After all, most schooling and job positions are using English for communication, which invisibly lifts the status of English in the US. That is to say, if one wants to make a living in America, he or she must speak English. Consequently, an extinction of more indigenous languages in the US may be expected. In China, bilingual education for ethnic minority groups confronts a similar challenge. Notwithstanding that the current bilingual education aims at promoting biliteracy, and the law has regulated that every minority group should receive equal education, in reality, the equality may be diminished, and using minority dialects may be "restrained" in the current society of China. Firstly, in terms of the high-salary job such as teachers or lawyers, using Mandarin is compulsory. In order to acquire related job certificates or accreditation, passing Mandarin speaking test is required. This has made it more difficult for minorities who wants to work in those positions. Second, because of the unbalanced economic development in China, the minorities may choose to move to developed cities in the southeast part of China to seek more opportunities. In these developed cities, Mandarin is mainly used, and this may force minorities to learn and speak Mandarin as much as possible while limiting the use of their own languages. Lastly, when minority students are having classes in mainstream classrooms in China, their teachers may not understand their dialect which would hinder their learning progress, and other students may tease the minorities for they are speaking "weird languages". All these factors will invisibly place more restrictions on minorities to use their own languages. Henceforth, like the US, China may foresee an extinction of minority languages. To briefly sum up, bilingual education in both countries, although seems to be additive, are invisibly subtractive to some extent.



Nevertheless, although bilingual education in China and the US are facing various kinds of challenges, opportunities are presented as well. To begin with, both these two countries have placed more emphasis on developing biliteracy. This may lead to the rise of general literacy levels among the citizens of these two countries, and academic areas such as TESOL or TEFL might attract more scholarship. Also, it can be noticed that the practice of using two languages in a language class is gaining more tolerance and acceptance. It means that the current field of language teaching is open to and welcoming new teaching theories and practices. This is conducive not only to learners for that they can have more options and opportunities for schooling, but also to teachers or language practitioners for that they can try and test different teaching methods. Moreover, the wider acceptance of bilingual education may boost the confidence of foreign language teachers whose first language is not the target language they teach. In the past, they may underestimate themselves and regard themselves as “inferior” to those native-speaking teachers for the fear of lacking target language competence. Now that with more studies conducted and the benefits of using two languages are concluded, bilingual teachers can feel more confident and thus motivate them to perform better in teaching. Last but not least, for China and the US, with an increasing number of people who can speak more languages due to bilingual education, both these two countries are gradually following or even leading the trend of globalisation. This means more international trade opportunities, elite exchange and communication, which would boost and strengthen China and US’s domestic economy in the long term.

## 6. Conclusion

Although in both countries, teaching in two languages has not yet been legitimised, it is gaining increasing popularity and acceptance. Besides, under the current trend of globalisation, mastering two or more languages is important not only for one’s career path but also for personal development. Therefore, from my perspective, bilingual education is irreversible worldwide and will gain more acceptance and emphasis. As TESOL practitioners, it is our obligation and duty to promote the bilingual mode in English classes. For one thing, it is necessary to conquer our concern that non-English native speakers are deficient in teaching English, and realise that using the learner’s L1 is not a performance of incompetence, let alone a shame. Rather it is an advantage which those English monolingual teachers do not possess. For another thing, in practice, on the basis of following the rules of the mode of conduct for teaching stipulated by the authority and the school, we shall use different teaching methods in class to develop students’ biliteracy. For instance, using different amounts or proportions of L1 and English and finding which proportion would be the most suitable for the class.

In conclusion, promoting bilingual education in the world is never an easy task. Only by virtue of the steadfast diligence of all TESOL/TEFL or other foreign language teachers can let the world see the great and unique benefit that bilingual mode can have. Hopefully, in the foreseeable future, bilingual education in China, the US and other countries will receive its legal status, thus it will not be dubbed as “bye-lingual”—suppressing one language for the other any more.

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