

Chapter 20

Multilingualism, Identities and Language Hegemony: A Case Study of Five Ethnic Minority Students in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings from a case study of how five post-secondary ethnic multilingual students (three Bai and two Zhuang) at a local university in Southwestern China experience multilingualism and ethnic identities (de)construction and invest themselves in an active negotiation for legitimate membership in mainstream educational Discourses (Gee, 1990, 2012). The authors seek to understand how the perceived hegemony of Mandarin has impacted their social positioning and delegitimized their multilingual assets and ethnic identities in mainstream educational Discourses, and how they managed to negotiate their identities as ethnic multilinguals in different social Discourses. The authors argue that through the legitimate dominance of Mandarin, these students are not merely being positioned as members of a negatively stereotyped ethnic group but also concurrently participating in reconstructing the Mandarin language hegemony in those very Discourses, which runs the risk of further expanding the existing educational inequalities between Han and ethnic minority students..

INTRODUCTION

Previous research has indicated that multilingual learners confront constant challenges in acquiring new linguistic forms and forming new identities (e.g., Marshall, 2009; Wang, 2016; Wang, Tsung, & Ki, 2012). In this regard, ethnic multilingual students in China generally face more challenges than their Han peers in terms of language acquisition and identities construction due to the limited access to

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educational resources and marginalization they often experience in mainstream educational contexts. A considerable amount of earlier research has been conducted in sociolinguistics in the English-speaking world to understand the relationships among language learning, identity, and linguistic inclusion and exclusion of bi-/multilingual students (see for example, Ibrahim, 1999; Lee & Marshall, 2011; Marshall & Moore, 2013; Moore, 1999; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey 2001). Among these, there are studies that have illustrated the potential cognitive, linguistic and academic advantages of being bi/multilinguals (e.g., Ehlert & Moore, 2014; Gee, 2014; Moore, 2010). Despite the multitude of studies, however, a sociocultural perspective on ethnic bi-/multilingual students and ethnic identities in the higher education context in China has not received sufficient attention. Most studies of ethnic multilingual students in China so far have mostly focused on language learning strategies, attitudes, and motivations (see for example, Hu, 2007; Yuan, 2007). As Wang, Tsung, and Ki (2012) point, little is known about how ethnic minority students in Chinese context perceive and negotiate their identities and multilingualism within various sociocultural relationships. Informed by Gee's (1990, 2012) Discourse theory, the current seeks to address this research gap by exploring the ways five ethnic multilingual students perceive, experience, and negotiate their multilingualism and ethnic identities in the midst of a network of social relationships their local communities, mainstream educational Discourses, and the larger Han society weave. Specially, the authors address three related questions: a) How do five post-secondary ethnic multilingual students (the Bai and the Zhuang) at a local university in Southwestern China perceive their multilingualism and ethnic identities? b) How do they experience conflicting identities in different "Discourses" (Gee, 1990, 2012)? c) How do they invest themselves in an active negotiation for legitimate membership in mainstream educational contexts?

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

SWF University

Yunnan is a multi-ethnic province in Southwestern China. Of the 55 officially identified ethnic minority groups in China, 25 inhabit the region and "22 of them speak 28 languages" (Tsang, 2005). Located in the capital city (Kunming) of Yunnan Province, SWFU is a local university with more than 16,000 registered undergraduate and graduate students coming from 31 provinces of China. Approximately 30%¹ of the whole student population is composed of ethnic minorities from 27 minority groups. Within this group of 30%, more than half are identified as ethnic language speakers. These ethnic minority students have a complex pattern of language use. They speak an ethnic language at home and in the local communities, use both Mandarin and the ethnic language in schools, and study and practice English, a third language, at school and university. However, as Wang, Tsung and Ki's (2012) case study has shown, ethnic multilingual students at postsecondary level in Yunnan struggle in their academic performances and social inclusion because of the challenges caused by social and linguistic differences. Hu (2007) also reports that many ethnic minority students have a sense of inferiority which prevents them from building up strong confidence in academic study.

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