Negotiating Contexts: A Case Study of a Tibetan Boarding Class in Inland China from a Tibetan learner’s Perspective

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As a particular form of Chinese minority education in practice, Tibetan boarding class in inland China is relatively less well-studied and is little known internationally (Wang & Zhou, 2003). Previous studies on boarding schools mainly used statistical comparisons of students’ scores in standardized examinations (Clothey, 2001), or focused on the historical development of boarding schools (Wang & Zhou, 2003), both of which overlooked the voice of Tibetan students themselves and their perceptions. In light of this current situation and the increasingly urgent need to conduct studies on minority and indigenous languages and their speakers in non-Western contexts (Becket & MacPherson, 2005), such as China which remains underrepresented in scholarly research (Postiglione, 1998), a case study is designed and conducted, intending to explore a Tibetan boarding class in inland China from a Tibetan learner’s perspective.

This study is underpinned by a theoretical framework of language ecology, which is defined as “the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 1972, p. 325). As its notion informs, language ecology highlights the interrelated relationship between language and context and the interactions among language, learners, and the learning environment. Meanwhile, language choice and learning is a major problem in minority education (Paulston & Heidemann, 2006), a decision which leads to further profound socio-cultural consequences. Specifically, the present study centers on a learner, considers the impacts of his referential contexts, and explores a particular Tibetan boarding class as an example of Chinese minority education in practice. Three key questions addressed
in this study are focused on three aspects. Namely, they are a particular Tibetan boarding class in inland China, the Tibetan student’s negotiation between his home environment and school environment, and the practice of Chinese minority education.

Data collected through interviews, observations, and document review reveal that language learners constantly negotiate with multiple identities and interact with their referential contexts. Meanwhile, the multilayered and multifaceted referential contexts play an influential role in learners’ experiences and learning outcomes. Tibetan Education, as exemplified by the Tibetan boarding class, facilitates and encourages minority learners to participate in the mainstream education and the majority cultural practice. However, Tibetan education also impedes the maintenance and preservation of their indigenous languages.

In conclusion, Chinese minority education endeavors to ensure that various ethnic and linguistic learners have educational opportunities and qualities to develop individuals’ ability; to strengthen their competence; to upgrade their social, educational, and economic situations; and to invest in what they define as worthwhile and valuable in a way that they view as effective. This study is informed by multicultural education, a notion grounded and well studied in North American discourse. Yet in view of the variations between North American discourse and Chinese context, the notion of multicultural education can not be entirely applied to Chinese minority education.

This case study proffers a better understanding of Chinese minority education in general through the lens of Tibetan education. To better report this case study, a traditional format of presentation is preferred, and PowerPoint will be used as an illustration.
References


