

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Demographically China has 56 officially recognized ethnic groups comprising the ethnic majority Han that accounts for 92% of the country's total population and 55 ethnic minorities that make up the remaining (8%) of the population but are widely distributed over 60% of its vast territory in relatively underdeveloped and remote border areas (See the figures in Appendix A and Table 1 in Appendix B for distribution of the ethnic minorities and their populations in China and Yunnan). Sharply different in available resources, ethnicity and cultural diversity, among other things, EFL teaching in China has not yet been homogenized between the economically better-off Chinese towns and the rural areas with the majority of EFL learners of the country (Gao 2005:11), in particular between the Han and the minorities in the rural minority communities. Although the country already started to officially include English as a compulsory subject for high schools early in 1902 when the Qing imperial government promulgated *Authorized Regulations for High School Opening and Operation*, it was not until 1983 that New China, in response to the needs of the reform and opening up to the outside world, endeavored to generalize early English teaching to the town students from the third grade of primary school and to rural learners, four years later, at junior high school. At the rural minority junior high school, English is added as one of the three major subjects in addition to Chinese

and math after their six-year primary school Putonghua-monolingual or Putonghua-Minority bilingual education in the classroom setting.

Table 1 Ethnic Groups, Population and Distribution of China
(Excerpt only, see Appendix B for full details)

Alphabetic Sequence No.	Description	Population	Major Distribution
...
20	Han	1,040,000,000	All over the country
...
29	Lisu	570,000	Yunnan, Sichuan
...
53	Yi	6,570,000	Yunnan, Sichuan
...

However, judging from the very scarce availability of related articles, magazines or books at libraries, bookstores, Internet and other sources, to date the imbalance in EFL teaching between the town and rural schools, which ought to be seriously taken into consideration for the benefit of the whole nation's overall development in the era of globalization, is not at all a popular research topic among Chinese educators, researchers and administrators. Even where there is some limited research already, it tends to have been conducted so far by in-school postgraduates of Applied Linguistics with little teaching experience, and in-service high school and college teachers with limited knowledge of EFL teaching theories. The researchers tend to put their finger

only on some factors that may hinder the rural minority students' performances in their study of junior high school English, rather than conduct composite investigation into the problem with due consideration of the minority learners' ethnic identity and their culture.

For investigation into China's rural minority's EFL learning difficulties, Yunnan can be considered a representative and most appropriate location to choose from, as a multiethnic province inhabited by almost all the country's 55 identified minorities, of which 25 have a population of over 5,000, according to the fifth provincial census in 2003. The minority populations account for 33.4% of the total population of the province (42.88 million).

Lisu is an ethnic minority mostly inhabiting Yunnan Province with some in Sichuan Province for thousands of years. According to China's national census in 1 November 2000, the Lisu population of nearly 634,912 (an updated figure greater than Table 1, of the 1990s) ranks the 21st largest minority in China, the majority (570,000) of whom live dispersedly in the northwest, west, south and central rural of Yunnan Province taking up 4.48% of the provincial total population (See Table 1 in Appendix B). In addition, more than 300,000 in northeastern Burma, over 40,000 in northern Thailand, and about 1,200 in five villages in northeastern India are also native Lisu speakers outside China, and are believed to be kin to the Lisu communities in eastern Tibet and Yunnan (Bradley, 2010). My field trips and conversations with the Lisu villagers in the Myanmar-Thailand border area indicate that the Lisu people from different countries and regions are linguistically and culturally related with a high incidence of resemblance although their speech may not be as mutually intelligible as expected due to a long period of isolation from their ancestral communities in China.

Among so many ethnic minorities in Yunnan, Lisu is a large minority with several Lisu ethnic autonomous administrative divisions at the township, county and prefecture levels, mostly located in remote hilly areas. Each Lisu autonomous township has only one junior high school (secondary school) where, like all the other rural junior high schools across the country, English is first introduced as a compulsory subject, lagging far behind most of China's urban primary schools. This is no exception at a junior high school of HZX township in central northern Yunnan Province, China, one of the largest Lisu communities of the province, where the Lisu population comprises 70% and its oral language is widely spoken and understood as the primary community speech among all the groups in the community: Lisu (70%), Yi (20%), and Chinese-Han (10%). However, within the Lisu ethnic community, English teaching and learning is said to be more problematic than at any other junior high school with only a very small number of Lisu students able to pass the English tests administered by the local education administration. Although the reliability and validity of the county-wide tests may be still questionable, according to several local teachers of English (only one of the six teachers of English is a Lisu), most Lisu ethnic students demonstrate less satisfactory outcomes in their English study than their Han and Yi peers, with the greatest proportion of failure in English tests (scoring less than 60 points). Apparently, this is an issue of a group of Lisu rural minority students' marked learning difficulty in English, as a third (even fourth for some) foreign language in formal education. The Lisu students speak their minority language from birth, learn Chinese as a second language through the 6-year bilingual primary schooling to achieve near native proficiency in the community with full communication competence, and some even learn another minority language, Yi, predominantly spoken at the county town as the Yis used to be the ruler over other

groups before the founding of New China in 1949.

Why the rural minority EFL learners have these learning difficulties, what are the factors leading to their difficulties, and how can we investigate and identify possible solutions to them? Such questions prompt the researcher, a trilingual teacher in Lisu, Chinese and English, to ponder and take as a case study for investigation any possible factors and solutions to the rural minority EFL learners' allegedly EFL underachievement, using multidisciplinary perspectives i.e., linguistic, socio-cultural, psychological and anthropological.

1.2 Purpose of the study

First of all, this research is aimed at identification of any possible causal factors contributing to underachievement of the rural minority EFL learners at the junior high school level in the formal educational setting of China, taking the Lisu ethnic minority learners as a case in point. Secondly the research targets at the factors most likely to cause the problem, based on the hypothesis that the EFL minority learners' ethnic identity and culture may matter since there are three ethnic groups of students live and study in the same community high school. The third purpose is to carry out a case study, for any salient findings, theoretical and empirical, and thus to seek any pedagogical implications for the minority learners. Fourthly, the researcher, through a variety of possibly feasible instruments and scrupulous discussions, intends to inform the local educational authority, the junior high school leaders, EFL teachers and learners, and the parents of the factors contributing to the rural minority EFL learners' unsatisfactory outcomes as well as providing any practical insights and recommendations on successful EFL teaching and learning for minorities in the rural context. Finally the researcher's intention is to raise the teachers' awareness of

linguistic, socio-cultural, psychological concerns and ethnic identity and culture while teaching English to the rural minority learners, thus improving their teaching quality and contributing to the enhancement of education for the underdeveloped minority areas.

1.3 Significance of the study

This case study may showcase a miniature of the society from a variety of perspectives centering on a group of Chinese minority learners of the foreign language, through investigation into the rural minority EFL learners' difficulties within a typical multiethnic community in China. At almost all the rural high schools, English is offered as a compulsory foreign language learning subject as well as a subsequent language for the multilingual minorities, where their peers in towns and cities learn the language starting from grade 3 of primary education. As Chinese rural proportion takes up over 60% of the total and most minority people live in rural villages, the findings of this case study may be of broad representativeness in China's context, with ethnic particularity, regional practicality, and multidisciplinary implications. Moreover, the study has been conducted over a duration of three months and continued for the past four years in collaboration with the local educational authority, the school headmasters and other leaders, as well as the EFL teachers and the students, drawing their attention and affecting, to greater or lesser degrees, their conceptual attitude, confidence and capacity building, and decision making. It is also the author's hope that the conclusion of the study may be of some value for reference by other researchers on similar topics.

1.4 Definition of terms

Rural minority EFL learners: The students who study English as a foreign language in the classroom setting at an ethnic minority inhabited rural community junior high school in Yunnan Province of China, the venue for this case study.

Han, Yi and Lisu: Han is the majority ethnic group of China as well as the native speakers of the national language Chinese (the standard Putonghua or the numerous dialects), while Yi and Lisu are two minority groups in the country. The students from these three groups learn English as a foreign language together at a rural community junior high school.

English learning difficulties: the difficulties of China's rural minority students in learning English knowledge and skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing and Chinese-English translation in the cross-linguistic and intercultural classroom setting.

Underachievement of the learner: The Lisu minority students' repeated failure (less than the score of 60 points) of the tests given by their teachers of English for the mid-term exam and by local educational authorities for the final term exam.

Underperformance of the teacher: the EFL teacher's failure to meet the professional requirements for their own English proficiency, professional teaching, and occupational ethics.

Learner support: various supports to the rural minority EFL learners from their parents, community school teachers, and the administrators for a better foreign language learning environment.

Cross-linguistic and intercultural EFL classroom: an EFL learning setting in which multilingual learners learn the target language in the medium of L2 (also the national language) while experiencing linguistic transfer and cultural interaction following their L2-minoirty bilingual education.

Left-behind children: rural children who live with their grandparents or other care takers after their parents go to work in towns in order to earn more income for the family living expenses and the children's' schooling in China.

Putonghua: also known as 'Mandarin Chinese', is an officially adopted common Chinese speech from 1956 onwards in the People's Republic of China. After 2001, it was recognized legally as the universal spoken Chinese language, or in other words, the national lingua franca in China with the highest status.

Bilingual: in this case study, refers to the ethnic minority high school students who have learned Chinese (local Han dialect or the national lingua franca Putonghua) through the six-year primary minority-Putonghua bilingual education, or their Han peers proficient in both local Chinese dialect and the common Chinese speech Putonghua that they acquired from the classroom setting and the media as well as visitors from outside, respectively.

Trilingual education: for this case study, represents the ethnic minority EFL learners who are already bilingual in their mother tongue and the second language Chinese and now are expected to learn the third and foreign language, English, in the classroom setting.

Rote-learning: a popular way of learning strategies among Chinese students involving repetition, practice and memorizing of information, regardless of having a full understanding of the information.

1.5 Organization of this thesis

This thesis comprises five chapters, as is usual. Chapter One introduces the background, purpose and significance of the case study. The remaining chapters deal respectively with literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, and

conclusion and recommendations. Chapter Two reviews the findings of relevant research already conducted and theoretical and empirical bases for this case study. Chapter Three informs the readers of several instruments for the case study including field trips, interview, classroom observation, questionnaires, and experimental EFL teaching in the medium of learners' first language. Chapter Four sets out the data collected with the instruments, interprets the findings from the data, and discusses any salient issues emerging from the study. In the last chapter, a conclusion is drawn from the preview chapters, followed by some limitations of this case study and recommendations for future research.

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