



The Impact of Students' Personal Characteristics on Tibetan Language Attitude and Acquisition: A survey of the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, China

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ABSTRACT

The theory of language attitude offers different explanations for the differences observed in people's language learning ability. This paper makes an empirical analysis of individual differences in student language acquisition, from the perspective of language attitude. One-way ANOVA was used to analyze the influence of individual characteristics on language attitude and language learning. Finally, regression analysis was applied to language attitude and language acquisition data.

Key Words: Individual Characteristics, Language Attitude, Language Acquisition, Bilingual Education

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76

Introduction

Language attitude is characterized by the behavior, ideas and feelings of an individual speaker toward a language, and is closely related to the cultural background, social cognition and position of the language user. It is also the external manifestation of the use of a language in daily activities (Feng, 2013). Whether the language user identifies with the language and the choice of language are closely related to the language attitude, thus, an in-depth understanding of language attitude is essential to the study of language acquisition. Osam (2006), argued that a language is a primary means of communication, but the language use differs considerably between individuals. The differences can be related to the nature of the language, as well as to other variables, such as educational background, age, power relations, social status and individual characteristics.

Minority students usually have more profound emotions regarding their native language, and, whether it impacts the choice of teaching mode, or implies the development of specific teaching policies, language attitude should be an important consideration in developing successful language teaching strategies.

Language attitude has been extensively discussed in the literature. Jabbari and Golkar (2014) found that language learning strategies and learners' attitude are two widely acknowledged elements contributing to students' successful learning. Lochtman & Ceuleers (2010), and Oroujlou & Vahedi (2011) argued that learners should acknowledge the impact of language attitudes on learning a second language or a foreign language, and addressed the importance of both learning motivation and student characteristics in successfully acquiring

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a new language. Baker's model is known as the "input-output-context-process model of bilingual education model regards the "input" element as the students' language potential, sexual orientation, attitudes and motivations, whereas the "output" roughly includes language ability and the identity of cultures (Baker, 1993).

State of the literature

- Through the analysis of language attitude, we can understand the cognitive system of a group of people.
- The language attitude and acquisition differs considerably between individuals.
- Whether the language user identifies with the language and the choice of language are closely related to the language attitude, thus, an in-depth understanding of language attitude is essential to the study of language acquisition.

Contribution of this paper to the literature

- This paper reconsiders the relation among students' personal characteristics, Tibetan language attitude and acquisition.
- This paper explores the dimension and its constituent elements of Tibetan language attitude and acquisition.
- The analysis explores the theoretical assumptions for the students' personal characteristics, Tibetan language attitude and acquisition, considers later empirical data, and examines critiques of early research.

The attitude of language learners toward the language and its speakers greatly influences the language learning process and its outcomes. Previous research on attitudes to language learning show that attitude and motivation are strongly intertwined. For example, a positive attitude to the language and its speakers can increase motivation, which then results in better learning achievement and a positive attitude toward learning the language (Rockwell, 1995; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005; Tódor & Dégi, 2017). From the phenomenological point of view, language identity and language loyalty are important parts of language attitude. In linguistics, language identity has different interpretations and definitions. Some scholars believe that language identity is an attribute of ethnic identity, which is defined as the emotional recognition and attachment of ethnic minority groups to their own identity (Zhou, 2016; Feng,

2013). Language identification is an important part of national identity, and the study of language identity is part of exploring the development of national culture. Moreover, language identity is a result of the long-term development of a healthy and balanced minority culture. The language identity gives theoretical guidance and contributes to the construction of the socialist modernized countries (Khatib, & Rezaei, 2013; Rezaei, Khatib & Baleghizadeh, 2014). For example, China has an abundance of ethnic minority languages, and although the Chinese language system occupies an important position, the minority languages and Mandarin Chinese are compatible with each other, all contributing to the national identity of Chinese individuals. Furthermore, although ethnic speakers must recognize Mandarin Chinese as the official national language, this does not mean to dilute the role of their respective minority language.

Language loyalty is an example of language attitude, and it does not mean blind worship, but rather the love of language, especially with respect to ethnic minority languages. For example, some scholars believe that language loyalty refers to an ethnic minority nation attempting to protect its native language (Lao, 2005; Hidalgo, 1986). Therefore, language loyalty could be defined as a behavior or emotion that drives speakers to love and protect their minority language. Language loyalty may be closely related to national feelings and, in some cases, even linked to policy..

In currently available studies, the relationship between Tibetan language attitude and Tibetan language acquisition has not been adequately explored. Nevertheless, there are many academic circles discussing learners' attitude toward Tibetan language, from the perspective of linguistics. Factors closely related to Tibetan language attitude, such as latent emotions or national cultural psychology, affect the Tibetan language learning and use, and raise concerns about the implementation of Tibetan-Chinese bilingual education (Li, 2007; Yao, 2015; Ma & Renzeng, 2015; Yongbin, 2007). Most bilingual people have deep feelings for their native language, and a strong inclination to keep their own language. The factor of feeling plays an important part in the attitude of bilingual people toward their native language (Wan, 1997; Zhou, 2000). For example, Tibetans always have a strong desire to keep their own language, whereas bilingual people tend to have a more rational and

positive attitude toward learning Chinese (Wan & Wang, 1997). In an early study, Swift, Jonathan and Smith (1977), showed that the attitudes of the participants positively or negatively impacted their linguistic performance. Cairancuo and Dou (2014) explored the relationship between bilingual learning attitude and language psychological ability of Tibetan students, and suggested methods of improving the bilingual learning ability of Tibetan students. Tunik, Sude and Yuan (2016) indicated that language attitude has the function of regulating social behavior. Human language use is a social behavior, and language attitude is a social psychological factor which has an important influence on people's language behavior and language ability.

Therefore, we thought it necessary to examine the relationship between Tibetan language attitude and Tibetan language acquisition in middle school students from Yajiang County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. Individual characteristics of students, such as gender, age, Tibetan language learning years, living area, etc., were considered in this study. The Tibetan language attitude was defined by two major variables: Tibetan language identity and loyalty. Language acquisition was assessed based on language ability and use. The following hypotheses were developed based on research conducted in other nationalities in China:

Hypothesis 1: The individual characteristics of the students have a significant effect on Tibetan language attitude.

Hypothesis 2: The individual characteristics of the students have a significant effect on Tibetan language acquisition.

Hypothesis 3: The speed at which middle school students learn the Tibetan language increases with the degree of Tibetan language identity.

Hypothesis 4: The Tibetan language ability of middle school students increases with the degree of language loyalty.

Hypothesis 5: The frequency of use of Tibetan language increases with the degree of language identity of middle school students.

Hypothesis 6: The frequency of use of Tibetan language increases with the degree of language loyalty of middle school students.

Methods

Selection of samples

To investigate the impact of individual student characteristics on Tibetan language attitude and acquisition, we designed a questionnaire to select middle school students from Yajiang County, Ganzi Prefecture, China. A total of 1000 questionnaires were issued and 945 questionnaires were recovered (effective rate = 94.5%). In this study, the samples were selected by Stratified Random Sampling. The sampling took into account the distribution of factors such as gender, age, Tibetan language learning years and residential areas in Yajiang county. Unfortunately, due to restrictions including time, manpower and funds, the scope of the sampling was not further enlarged. Therefore, the regional variables were not considered in the empirical analysis.

Participants

A total of 945 students from Yajiang middle school in Ganzi prefecture completed the issued questionnaires. According to Table 1, the proportions of male and female students in this survey were 43.8% and 56.2%, respectively. More than 90 percent of students (93.3%) were Tibetan, while the Han and other ethnic groups accounted for 6.7%. Regarding the distribution of grades, the students in grade 2, in junior school, had the highest ratio (36.2%), whereas the percentages of the other grades ranged from 13.3% to 18.1%. Approximately 70.8% of

Table 1. Participants (N=945)

	Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)		Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	414	43.8	Learning Tibetan Time	6-8 years	669	70.8
	Female	531	56.2		9-10 years	243	25.7
Ethnicity	Tibetan	882	93.3		11-12 years	33	3.5
	Han	27	2.9	Grade	Junior 1	126	13.3
	Others	36	3.8		Junior 2	342	36.2
Living areas	Tibetan areas	882	93.3		Junior 3	162	17.1
	Han areas	27	2.9		Senior 1	144	15.2
	Others	36	3.8		Senior 2	171	18.1



students had been studying the Tibetan language for six to eight years, 25.7% for 9 to 10 years, and 3.5% for 11 to 12 years. Moreover, the survey revealed that 93.3% of students live in areas dominated by Tibetans, 2.9% of students live in areas dominated by the Han ethnicity, and 3.8% live in other areas.

Procedure

We received permission to conduct the study from the Yajiang County Education Bureau of Ganzi. Data were collected in January 2017. A pilot study was conducted in the winter of 2016 to confirm the study methodology. Six teachers were trained in how to use the survey before we began the main test we laid out the questionnaire. The teachers ensured that the students were able to understand correctly before they did the main test. The formal testing then started. The data collected from this test were mainly used for item analysis

Measures

Tibetan language attitude and acquisition were assessed using the questionnaire, which is based on the theoretical of bilingual attitude, bilingual ability and bilingual use proposed by Tunik Talev, Sude and Yuan Mei (2016). To analyze the influence of students' personal characteristics on language attitudes and language acquisition, we chose demographic variables, such as gender,

grade, Tibetan language learning, residential area and so on(see table1). At the same time, the Tibetan language attitude and Tibetan language acquisition were analyzed as dependent variables, respectively. Linguistic attitude was decomposed into two variables, namely, "Tibetan language identity" and "Tibetan language loyalty" (see table 2); language acquisition was also decomposed into two variables: "Tibetan language ability" and "Tibetan language use"(see table3). Each test adopted the Likert five-spot evaluation standards, 5 = totally agree, 4 = highly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = totally disagree.

Data Analysis

We quantified the contents of each students test questionnaire. The tester scored each student according to the criteria for each item. Then the data from the student's test results were entered into SPSS 21.0. The appropriate statistical analysis methods were selected on the basis of the results. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the means of Tibetan language attitude variables and Tibetan language acquisition, and regression analysis was conducted between language attitude variables and language acquisition variables. The analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY). The structure equation were applied to test the reliability and validity analysis of questionnaire using AMOS21.0

Table 2. The parameter estimation table of "Language attitude" measurement model

Latent variables and measurement index	Non-standardized factor loading	Value of T	Standardized factor loading	Project reliability	Construct reliability	α	AVE
Language identity							
1. I like the characters of the Tibetan language	1.000		.535	0.286	0.807	0.795	0.519
2. I love the pronunciation of Tibetan language	1.164	17.179	.794	0.630			
3. In my daily life, I prefer to communicate with people in Tibetan language	1.238	17.537	.860	0.740			
4. I prefer to send text messages, voice messages or e-mails in Tibetan	1.120	17.403	.648	0.420			
Language loyalty							
5. I learn Tibetan language, so that Tibetan culture does not disappear.	1.000		.780	0.608	0.810	0.746	0.518
6. Taking Tibetan language courses does not add to my schoolwork and stress.	.952	24.041	.787	0.619			
7. Tibetan language courses will not affect my grades in other subjects.	.681	19.156	.613	0.376			
8. Even if there is no "Tibetan certification examination and preferential entry", I will still take Tibetan language courses.	.776	21.410	.685	0.469			



Table 3. The parameter estimation table of "Language acquisition" measurement model

Latent variables and measurement Index	Non-standardized factor loading	Value of T	Standardized factor loading	Project reliability	Construct reliability	α	AVE
Language ability							
9. My Tibetan listening ability has improved after accepting Tibetan teaching.	1.000		.797	0.635	0.875	0.872	0.639
10. My Tibetan speaking ability has improved after accepting Tibetan teaching.	.991	31.587	.854	0.729			
11. My Tibetan reading ability has improved after accepting Tibetan teaching.	.900	28.329	.783	0.613			
12. My Tibetan writing ability has improved after accepting Tibetan teaching.	.838	26.934	.752	0.566			
Language use							
13. I increase the frequency of Tibetan usage with family, after accepting Tibetan teaching.	1.000		.773	0.598	0.858	0.858	0.602
14. I increase the frequency of Tibetan usage in school, after accepting Tibetan teaching.	1.019	25.813	.760	0.578			
15. I increase the frequency of Tibetan usage in my community, after accepting Tibetan teaching.	1.004	25.931	.763	0.582			
16. I increase the frequency of Tibetan usage in religious activity place, after accepting Tibetan teaching.	1.029	27.586	.807	0.651			

Reliability and Validity Analysis

We analyzed the existing data using the AMOS21.0 one by one test. The dimension of "Tibetan language attitude" consisted of two variables, which are language identity and language loyalty, measured by four indicators (see Table 2).

The "language acquisition" dimension consisted of two variables, which are language skills and language use, each measured by four indicators. The confirmatory factor analysis is shown in Table 3.

The evaluation of individual indices

As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, the majority of standardized load of each index reached a value higher than (or close to) 0.7. The 'Project reliability' was higher than 0.5, and the standardized coefficients of each index reached a high significant level, therefore, these measurements can be used for the assessment of the four indicators.

Factor reliability assessment

From the Table 2 and Table 3, the Cronbach's alpha value of each potential factor was between 0.746-0.875, all above the threshold value of 0.5, and the value of construct reliability was between 0.807-0.872, above the threshold value of 0.7. This

indicates that the measures of the latent variables showed internal consistency and the reliability indexes were acceptable.

Factor validity assessment

For the convergent validity, as shown in Table 2 and Table 3, the average variance of the latent variables extracted (AVE) was between 0.518-0.636, indicating that the latent variables of this study possess convergent validity.

Results

Students' individual characteristics and Tibetan language attitudes

One-way ANOVA was used to compare the differences in Tibetan language attitudes, according to participants' sex, grade, Tibetan language learning time and living area, and the obtained results are shown in Table 4. Except for language loyalty, the gender differences were not significant, whereas all other indexes showed significant differences. From the perspective of gender, the scores of Tibetan language loyalty were significant at the 0.05 level, and the mean of female students was higher than that of male students.

From the perspective of grade, the mean of language identity and Tibetan language loyalty in middle school students reached a significant



difference, indicating that there were significant differences in Tibetan language attitudes among the different grades. Subsequent multiple comparisons showed that in the language identity dimension and the language loyalty dimension, the average recorded for students of Junior 1 was lower than those of other grades, whereas Junior 3 had a significantly lower average than the senior grades. With the increase in grade, the scores of Tibetan language attitude showed an increasing trend. However, between some adjacent grades, there were no significant differences in some items. For example, the scores of language loyalty were not significantly different between the Junior 2 and Junior 3 grades.

It can be seen from Table 4 that there are significant differences in language loyalty and language identity among middle school students, depending on the number of Tibetan language learning years. As expected, Least—Significant Difference (LSD) results showed that as the students' number of language learning years increases, the acquisition level of Tibetan language also increases.

The score of Tibetan language identity and loyalty of students living in Tibetan-based

communities were significantly higher than those of students living in Han-based communities; however, for the Tibetan language identity, there were no significant differences between the Tibetan-based students and students from other communities. The Tibetan language identity of other ethnic minority students was higher than that of students from Han-based communities. Different from language identity, the Tibetan language loyalty of students from Tibetan-based communities was higher than that of students from other regions; there was no difference between students from Han-based communities and other areas.

Students' individual characteristics and Tibetan language acquisition

In Table 5, the descriptive statistics of students' individual characteristics and Tibetan language acquisition scores are summarized. The data were analyzed *via* one-way ANOVA, with results showing the significant differences between Tibetan language ability and usage, based on the participants' sex, grade, Tibetan language learning time and living area.

Table 4. Students' individual characteristics and Tibetan language attitudes

Index		Language identity					Language loyalty				
		Mean	standard deviation	F	P	LSD	Mean	standard deviation	F	P	LSD
Gender	Male	4.1304	.82901	.127	.722		4.0072	.74042	4.284	.039	1<2
	Female	4.1130	.67519				4.1051	.70547			
Grade	Junior 1	3.9896	.79274	12.915	.000	1<2, 1<4, 1<5, 2<4, 3<4	3.9026	.76277	9.193	.000	1<2, 1<3, 1<4, 1<5, 3<4
	Junior 2	4.2327	.66401				4.1660	.65342			
	Junior 3	4.0963	.87974				4.2593	.75997			
	Senior 1	4.4958	.29748				4.3583	.45187			
	Senior 2	4.2526	.71267				4.3298	.60414			
Learning Tibetan time	6-8 years	4.0278	.75423	18.382	.000	1<2, 1<3	3.9408	.75110	34.678	.000	1<2, 1<3
	9-10 years	4.3457	.66879				4.3556	.53164			
	11-12 years	4.3455	.74039				4.3636	.64702			
Living area	Tibetan areas	4.1361	.74107	6.851	.001	1>2, 2<3	4.0823	.71936	5.164	.006	1>2, 1>3
	Han areas	3.6000	.95111				3.7778	.74075			
	Others	4.1333	.55136				3.7833	.69508			

Table 5. Students' individual characteristics and Tibetan language acquisition

Index		Language ability					Language use				
		Mean	standard deviation	F	P	LSD	Mean	standard deviation	F	P	LSD
Gender	Male	3.8768	.99996	6.357	.012	1<2	3.8732	.97047	.621	.431	
	Female	4.0254	.81166				3.8249	.90735			
Grade	Junior 1	3.7982	.87814	8.883	.000	1<2, 1<4, 1<5, 2<4, 3<4	3.6726	.91332	9.729	.000	1<2, 1<4, 1<5, 2<4, 3<4
	Junior 2	4.0941	.88548				4.0023	.88732			
	Junior 3	3.9815	.96502				3.8194	1.12583			
	Senior1	4.3646	.57417				4.2865	.60360			
	Senior2	4.1535	1.08331				4.0175	1.11690			
The learning Tibetan time	6-8 years	3.8251	.89830	27.566	.000	1<2, 1<3	3.8460	.93533	17.120	.000	1<2, 1<3
	9-10 years	4.2716	.76756				3.7354	.90846			
	11-12 years	4.4091	1.16226				4.0926	.91851			
Living area	Tibetan areas	3.9881	.90887	6.645	.001	1>2, 1>3	3.8639	.93719	2.438	.088	



Table 6. Regression analysis of Tibetan language attitude and acquisition

	Language ability				Language use			
	β	SE	t	VIF	β	SE	t	VIF
Constant	.218	.155	1.401		.367	.170	2.152	
Language identity	.464	.034	13.838***	1.181	.492	.037	13.393***	1.181
Language loyalty	.451	.035	13.022***	1.181	.357	.038	9.419***	1.181
	R ² = 0.386 F = 296.445 DW = 1.283				R ² = 0.315 F = 216.577 DW = 1.633			

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Regression analysis

The regression statistics of Tibetan language attitude and Tibetan language acquisition are summarized in Table 6. The data were analyzed by multiple regression analysis, with result showing that language identity and loyalty have a significant impact on language ability ($\beta = 0.464$, $\beta = 0.451$) and a significant main effect of language use ($\beta = 0.492$, $\beta = 0.357$).

In other words, Tibetan language identity and loyalty had a positive impact on Tibetan language ability and usage.

Discussion

In this study, we used an empirical method to analyze the impact of students' personal characteristics on Tibetan language attitude and language acquisition, in Yajiang County of Ganzi Prefecture, and also researched the influence of language attitude on language acquisition. The obtained results show that the research hypotheses proposed in this study were basically supported by the survey data.

Among the individual characteristics of middle school students, all variables had a significant influence on Tibetan language identity and loyalty, except gender. Tunik, Sude, and Yuan (2016) pointed out that students' language ability and language use vary with students, genders, grades, and regions. This generally accords with our results. It is important to not only consider the policy satisfaction of middle school students in the study of ethnic minority languages, but also to pay attention to students' attitude to the minority language, and to consider different language learning approaches according to the characteristics of different students.

Our findings do generally corroborate previous reports and supported our hypotheses. The regression coefficient for the influence of Tibetan language identity on the language ability of the students was 0.464, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, the language identity of middle school students in Ganzi Prefecture had a significant positive effect on improving the Tibetan language ability.

Related to our study, Yong-Bin (2008) indicated that Tibets have got a high preference to the Tibetan language, it would affect Tibetan language deeply.

The path coefficient of Tibetan language loyalty was 0.451, $p < 0.001$, so the Tibetan language loyalty of middle school students has a significant effect on the students' Tibetan language ability. Wan and Wang (1997) indicated that Tibetans always have a strong desire to keep their own language, whereas bilingual people tend to have a more rational and positive attitude toward learning Chinese. Furthermore, Tunik, Sude, and Yuan (2016) noted that the higher the language loyalty of middle school students, the stronger the Tibetan language ability.

Regression analysis revealed that the regression coefficient of Tibetan language identity was 0.492, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, language identity had a significant positive effect on the frequency of Tibetan language use among middle school students in the Ganzi Prefecture. Feng (2013) point out what is the attitude of a language, what feelings often affect the language use of this language, including the attitude of the mother tongue. Tunik, Sude, and Yuan (2016)'s finding showed that language identity help forward not only language ability but also use.

According to the regression equation model, the influence of Tibetan language loyalty on the use of Tibetan language was 0.357, $p < 0.001$. Consequently, the Tibetan language loyalty had a significant positive effect on the students' use of Tibetan language. Based on the survey of Tibetan students, Wan and Wang's research (1997) showed that all people think that should be rescued and protected Tibetan language. Furthermore, Feng(2013) argued that the open language concept is conducive to the stable use of the language. The language loyalty is an important factor in determining whether the learner how to learn the language, the user is using and how to use the language.

Conclusions

The results of this study help to understand the Tibetan language attitude of minority students and the acquisition of Tibetan language. However, due to the limited manpower and funds, it is impossible to conduct a questionnaire survey on more students. In order to make the study more extensive, we should consider expanding the research sample and taking into account the number of students in different regions. Meanwhile, the sample of other ethnic minorities is small, and the future research should consider more Han and other ethnic students.

In order to explore behind the quantization digital meaning and the causes of differences, future research combined with qualitative research methods, questionnaire and interview or observe the use of language, to be an in-depth study on the deeper problems.

This study did not analyze the difference between the attitudes to language learning of urban *versus* rural students. This difference should be investigated in future studies, using different strategies and methods.

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