

## English Education Based upon Bilingualism

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This paper explores the features of English education in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in China, a common phenomenon but intact field of research. The fundamental characteristics of English education in Yanbian is the third language learning based upon existing prior two languages: Korean and Mandarin Chinese. The author puts forward the “double positive transfer” learning model, intending that the prior two languages affect the third language learning in different facades. The preliminary experimental studies partially support the learning model. Until more experiments are conducted to investigate the English learning features of ethnic Korean bilinguals at all levels, there will be sufficient evidence to support the double positive transfer learning model.

### I. INTRODUCTION

We are living in an ever-shrunk global village in which change is the permanent law with worldwide migration that has never been experienced in history and increasing cultural contact and communication. We are exposed to new ideas, new technologies, and even new ideology in a daily basis. This inter-flow of information and people create a multilingual social structure with diversified ethnicities sharing social resources as well as guaranteeing their unalienable rights. This is what we call a multilingual society in its true sense.

Within the multilingual context, language education becomes a subtle and sometimes politically or culturally sensitive issue to tackle. However, this paper is not intended to explore the specific language policies a multilingual society should adopt, for linguistic studies in terms of multilingualism is still under the way to define its research subject and the following objectives and methodologies (Cenoz, Hufeisen, & Jessner, 2001). The true purpose of this study is to focus on the English education in the Korean-Chinese bilingual social environment. The Korean bilinguals being to our interest lies into several reasons:

firstly, the ethnic Korean students acquire both Korean and Chinese at very early stage of their childhood. Most of preschoolers can understand Chinese as well as Korean; some of them can become fluent bilinguals. Secondly, the ethnic Korean students have to take three language subjects simultaneously from primary school to the end of formal education whenever they stop. This leads us to theoretically attractive and practically useful issues: What does underline the three language learning process? If there is a language learning mechanism operating in the three language learning process to alleviate the heavy cognitive load of three linguistic codes, then how does it work out effectively and efficiently? Thirdly, the three languages ethnic Korean bilinguals have to learn is typologically different from each other, a rare case in the field of third language acquisition (TLA). It is to our interest how three languages interact each other in the linguistic learning process. Therefore, the paper is going to discuss the language learning mechanism and to construct a tentative learning model. The learning model intends to explain the inner mechanism of third language learning by means of two previous languages psycholinguistically and cognitively. To validate the effectiveness of the learning theory, two formerly-done experiments will be revisited and two current experiments will be summarized in support of the model.

## II. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Traditionally, bilingualism was considered as a blocking stone for the intelligent or cognitive development of children. Laurie (1890) argues that children's intelligence and personality development would be obliterated with bilingualism, which leads to the incomplete and mutable personality. Half a century later, most American scholars believed that the development of linguistic competence of children would be restrained by the bilingual living environment. They recommend that it is not worthy of giving children more than one-language classes. However, later studies show the contrary to the traditional conceptions of inferiority of bilinguals to monolinguals. The corner-stone research into the bilingualism is Peal and Lambert's study. After conducting a thorough investigation of their fluent bilingual children, they acquired the following results:

- a. bilingual education greatly enhances brain flexibility;
- b. bilingual education facilitates students' abstract thinking, especially in terms of conceptualization;
- c. a bilingual environment is instrumental to children's intelligence development;
- d. positive transfer is two-way, which is beneficial to the linguistic development.

Relevant research in bilingualism also yields results with regard to discrete thinking,

language consciousness, and communicative sensitivity and brain localization. These results tend to prove the superiority of bilinguals in the above-mentioned aspects to monolinguals.

In terms of a third language acquisition based upon bilingualism, there is few, if any, experiments or in kind being conducted to investigate the third language acquisition (TLA), which has been arbitrarily categorized within the domain of SLA. Recent academic interests in the TLA have been on the rise, splitting itself from the umbrella term of second language acquisition. Existing research results have shown that TLA is a much more complicated process than the process of SLA with the addition of new variables in the learning process. Those variables currently fall into two categories: learner-based and language-based. The learner-based variables include proficiency level of the two language acquired or learned, amount of target language use and exposure, language mode, linguistic awareness, age and educational background. The language-related factors are language typology, frequency, word class, morphological transfer. These factors interact with each other, sometimes overriding each other, sometimes converging to contribute to the TLA.

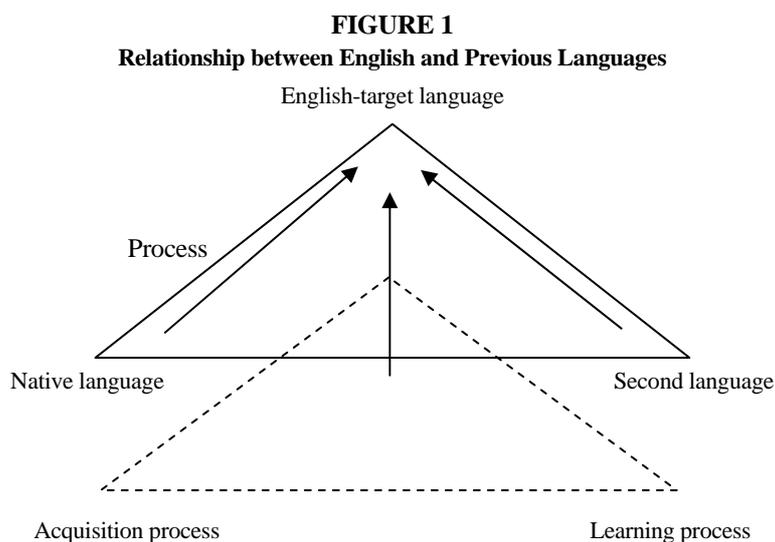
Advantageous as bilinguals are, the cognitive capability and linguistic potentiality have been the least tackled issue among Chinese scholars and local researchers. Ethnic Koreans are fluent bilinguals after receiving 12 years of primary and secondary education. The process of Korean-Chinese bilingual construction and cognitive strategies in language learning and production are still intact field which needs immediate elaboration and theorization, for the scholarly investigation not only unfold the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic facades of Korean-Chinese bilinguals but propose the concrete principles in maneuvering language teaching practices in English education upon bilingualism.

A systematic study on this issue was initiated from late 1990s with the financial aid of the Higher Education Committee of the Christian Board of the United States. We deem it very important to conduct a theoretical feasibility study for English education based upon bilingualism. Generally speaking, the more languages one can use, the easier for him or her to learn a new language (Lado, 1967). Ethnic Korean students have distinct advantages after learning Korean and Chinese. From the cognitive view of point, they have experienced two language-learning processes, which make them have more opportunities to develop their language potential in language learning than monolinguals. Therefore, they possess high cognitive abilities and profound cultural knowledge so that it is possible for them to learn a new language. Furthermore, ethnic Korean students have an outstanding ability in switching different linguistic codes and differentiating nonnative cultures and integrating them into its own.

A learning model, which I put forward in 2000, elaborates the mechanism of English learning based upon Korean-Chinese bilingualism. We believe that the previous linguistic knowledge for ethnic Korean students is a treasure in the process of third language learning.

Ethnic Korean students can use the learned languages at their disposal to compare and assimilate new linguistic features into their linguistic system in their brain. The more happenings of code switch in their daily life, the more flexibly and actively of the linguistic transfer in the learning of a new language. With appropriate elicitation and balanced doses of linguistic input, children can be directed to form a two-to-one transfer mechanism, namely, either from Korean to English or Chinese to English. By doing so, students' initiative in linguistic learning and mobilization of their general concept of language are activated to the level that makes learning develop in an efficient way.

Figure 1 is the illustration of the double transfer learning model. English learning is not singularly supported by one language like MOs or students in Korea, but is backed by two languages. The triangle with solid lines constitutes the linguistic relationship between the three languages. At the top point is the target English language, which is supported by Korean at the left bottom point and Chinese at the right bottom point. BIs can make use the linguistic resources, comprised of the two languages features they have accumulated through the previous language learning. Parallel with the linguistic triangle, there is an implicit cognitive triangle marked by the discontinuous lines. For sake of clarity, I separated the originally-overlapped triangles. By adding cognitive triangle, it is believed that BIs may mobilize their linguistic awareness, resistance of linguistic interference between two different languages, and sensitivity to communication, acquired quite naturally through two processes of language acquisition and learning, to the transfer process of the third language learning. How this triangle works in the process of English learning is our focus of current study.



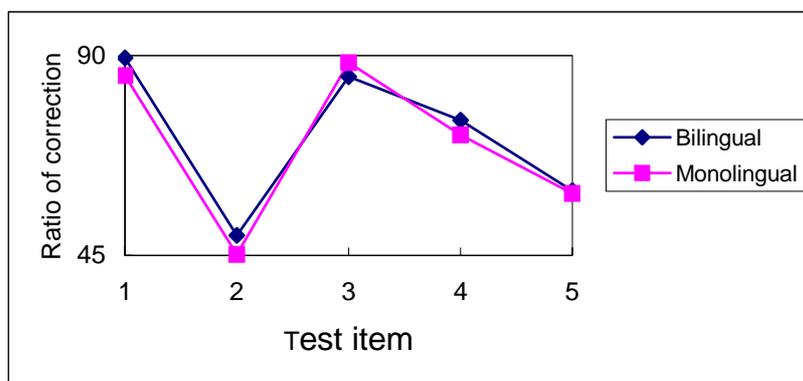
### III. PRELIMINARY EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

Though less dealt with in the previous study, some research is oriented to disclose the linguistic competence of ethnic Korean bilinguals and MOs.

In 2000, we analyzed the results of the first session of Weilaibe English contest in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture from primary level to senior high school level. We compared the item-based performance of ethnic Korean bilinguals with that of MO. In all items except the grammar item, the test performance of ethnic Korean bilinguals is significantly superior to that of MO. In the item of grammar, ethnic Koreans' score has no significant difference compared with that of MO counterparts. (See Figure 2)

Comparison is also conducted on the education-level basis. The scores of ethnic Korean bilinguals in the test items of phonetic perception, reading comprehension and cloze test are consistently and significantly higher than MO counterparts from primary school level to the second grade of senior high school. The grammar test shows an inconsistent curve, indicating that before the first grade of senior high school, ethnic Korean's performance in grammar is significantly inferior to that of MO counterparts; however, the performance of ethnic Korean bilinguals in 1-grade senior high schools exceptionally surpasses their counterparts at the same level. (See Figure 3)

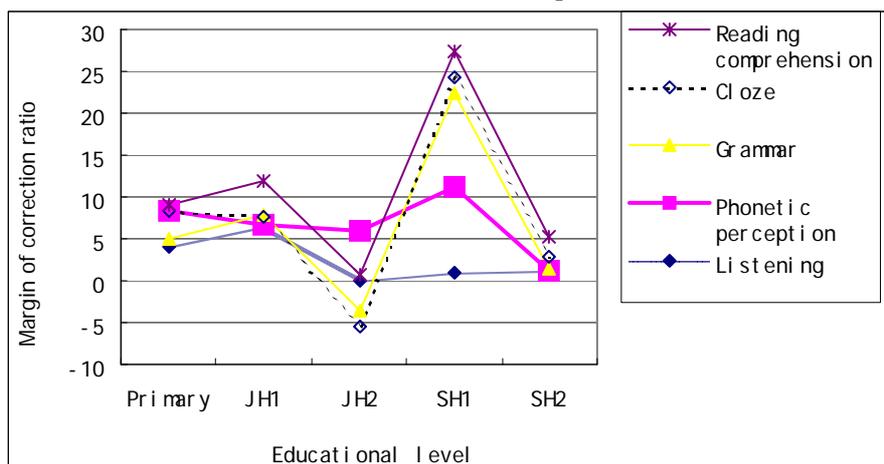
**FIGURE 2**  
Test Performances of BIs and MOs



The research shows that at least in the phonetic perception, reading comprehension and cloze test, ethnic Korean primary students perform better than their MO counterparts. This result proves that in the very early stage of English learning, ethnic Korean students begin to have a strong capability to distinguish the features of new languages and meaning-focus inclination with compounding lower performance in grammar. And this tendency goes through from primary school level to the first year in senior high school, and after that,

ethnic Korean students merge with their MO counterparts in English study but still show slight but insistent advantage on all aspects except grammar.

**FIGURE 3**  
Educational-level Basis Comparisons

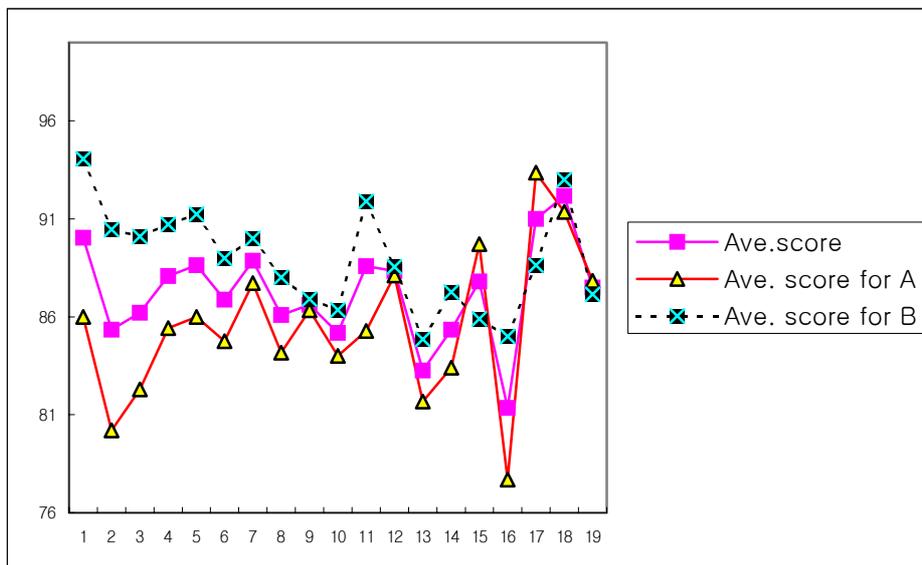


To further validate our learning model and the test analysis, we conducted a longitudinal study on the initial English learning experiment. The subjects came from a Chinese primary school and fell into two experiment groups: monolinguals who could only speak Chinese and bilinguals who could speak Korean and Chinese. The subjects were averagely the grade three primary school students who had never learnt English before and were selected by consulting the file of academic records and interview. The students were of average intelligence degree with good reaction capability and can all express their native language well. At the same time, we took into consideration of questions such as ratio of age and sex when we selected the subjects. All subjects were divided into two experimental classes with 12 students each. The detailed description is listed in table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
Description of the Group Setting

Group	Type	Nationality	Teaching Language	Content of Teaching
A	Chinese monolinguals	Chinese	Chinese	The same
B	Korean-Chinese bilinguals	Ethnic Korean	Chinese and Korean	

**FIGURE 4**  
**Test Results of 19 Consecutive Exams**



During the experiment, the teaching contents were the same though methods were different. Class A reach English education on a monolingual basis (Chinese language), while Class B learnt English on a bilingual foundation (Chinese and Korean language). The test result turned out to be the obvious superiority of Class B over Class A.

Many similarities were shown by Chinese language and English language in terms of their structure characteristics. So, students with Chinese as native language possess excellent natural gift in learning English. In fact, the studying outcome of the English learners with Chinese as native language has always been good. The Americans who got some understanding towards the eastern world usually held the belief that the Chinese are the best English learner in Asia. In the experiment, the excellent performance of Class A, who represented English education on basis of Chinese language, may serve as an illustration to this point of view. Be that as it may, a new promising group occurred Class B (Chinese and Korean language) that presented to be supreme in the whole experiment.

Up to now, the study has been focused on the generality of the relationship between English and the previous languages. It means how the *trainItgle* in figure-1 works in the process of English learning, and try to prove the learning model: two- to-one (double transfer) mechanism is activated in an efficient way. Next, there are two current experiments in support of the model.

An ongoing experiment is Korean bilinguals code-switching patterns in English-to-Korean and Korean-to-English translation. The study indicates that the English learners of

Korean bilinguals activate both Korean and Chinese language mode in translation task. In both English-Korean and Korean-English translation tasks, ethnic Korean bilinguals tend to activate Chinese language mode with the increasing difficulty of the English language. (Jin, Minhao, 2004)

Jin's findings strengthen the results of the previous studies in that it straightforwardly identifies the L1 and L2 transfer in the L3 learning, with differential weighting effect of L1 and L2 when the translation tasks become increasing difficult. In that case, L2, or Chinese, which is more typologically close to English in syntax, will override the L1 effect, which is typologically distant from the target language. The findings echo what we have accumulated in the course of four-language major English education. Students at intermediate level of English competence would like to accept the facilitative effects from Chinese in learning the third language whereas the L1, namely Korean, would recede to the second place.

In field of English phonetics, it is found that Korean bilinguals will be readily to transfer Korean articulatory patterns to the third language without any recency effect from Chinese. In terms of segmental English vowel production, Korean bilinguals intend to make full use of the vowel inventory in their native tongue, especially in the case of front vowels (Lee Yinghao, 2004).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The current field studies all support the existence of the double positive transfer learning model. With resourceful language knowledge, Korean bilinguals, intend to be linguistically sensitive to the difference and similarity between different languages. They opt to pick up the appropriate linguistic resource to be ready for the positive transfer in the English language learning. In terms of language mode, experimental results intend to show that with the increase of English language competence, Korean bilinguals will likely to activate Chinese language resources in handling difficult linguistic tasks due to the typological analogy between the two languages. On the contrary, Korean bilinguals are prone to transfer articulatory patterns in producing the English front vowels in that Korean front vowel system is more typologically close to English front vowels, thus overriding the transfer from Chinese front vowels.

Until more experiments are conducted to investigate the English learning features of ethnic Korean bilinguals at all levels, there will be sufficient evidence to support the double positive transfer learning model.

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Applicable levels: primary & secondary school level

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