

# The English Education in Primary Schools in Minor Ethnic Areas in Western China — Taking Leshan City as an Example

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## Abstract

As we all know, China is a country with many ethnic minorities mainly living in the northeastern and southwestern China. The English education in the primary schools in these areas is an important issue. The article analyzes the status quo of English education in primary schools in minor ethnic areas, taking the Leshan city, a western one as an example, and then proposes some suggestions of enhancing English education in primary schools in minor ethnic areas.

**Keyword:** the English education, minor ethnic area, primary schools, western China

## 1. Introduction

The city of Leshan is located in Sichuan province in the southwest of China, 120 kilometers away from its capital –Chengdu. It is famous for its world natural heritage—the Leshan Grand Buddha. All its population is not more than one million with the ethnic minorities living in the west mountainous areas of the city. They are mainly the Yi people with the lower living standard, let alone the English education. The minor ethnic education plays an important role in advancing the development of the society and constructing the “Harmonious Society”. The English education in primary school has become the center of the English Teaching Reform in China because it is an important stage for Chinese pupils to lay a great foundations for the learning in the future, whether in high school or in the college.

## 2. The Status Quo of English Education in Primary Schools in Minor Ethnic Areas in Leshan

Just as mentioned above, the Yi people live in the western area of Leshan, such as E’bian County and Ma Bian County. These areas are hard to approach except the bus commuting between these rural areas and the center district. After a period of investigation, the status quo of English education is as follows.

### 2.1 Low Investment from the Government

In the minor ethnic areas most primary schools pay special attention to the Chinese and mathematics education because most of them believe if you can learn both well, you can do anything in china, so they are unwilling to invest in the English education given the financially-poor ability of the local government. Most of the local educational departments don’t offer the English course for the students, which violates the regulation by the Educational Ministry of China that the English course must be offered from the third grade in the primary schools. Consequently, due to the low investment from the local government, many schools are not equipped with the facilities necessary for the English teaching which play a very important role in the English listening, or pronunciation, etc. such as the multimedia computer, the Internet connections, and the laboratory.

### 2.2 Lack of Qualified English Teachers

Although the Chinese government has taken a variety of measures to recruit teachers from urban areas to improve the English teaching in minor ethnic areas, the qualified teachers are still in short in these areas. Taking the college graduates from Leshan Normal University as an example, they are encouraged to work in the minor ethnic areas through increasing the salary, being promoted first, etc. But the survey shows that only 10% of the graduates are willing to do that in view of the poor living conditions and the boring lifestyle. These graduates who are willing to go there either are born in these areas or have families or relatives living there. Their choice may be just because of bonds of affections. More than half of the English teachers in these primary schools

either are not the English majors in college or have to teach many other subjects at the same time. Most of the English teachers are not professionally trained. Instead they learn English just by themselves, taking advantage of their spare time when they are young. So the following problems arise from it. Firstly, many English teachers in primary schools in these areas are so poor in the basic knowledge and listening ability that they can't organize the class through using English and instruct the students to do some oral and listening training. Secondly, many of them haven't received the training in the education science and psychology science, so they can't tailor the body of their teaching according to the pupil's physical and mental conditions as well as the learning psychology, which leads to the student's hatred for the English learning. Thirdly, many English teachers don't command the advanced teaching methods. That's partly due to where the schools lie. It's hard for the schools to provide the teachers with the latest development in the English teaching, its theory and workable practice given the unavailability of the Internet. Another reason is that the teachers themselves don't make any refinement about their teaching after class.

### *2.3 Influences from the Minor Ethnic Language*

In the minor ethnic areas, there are several languages existing together. Taking Leshan for example, Chinese mandarin, Sichuan dialect and the language of the Yi people coexist in Ma Bian and E'Bian –the minor ethnic areas. Many children from the ethnic minorities can't speak Chinese. They communicate with each other through their native language in the daily life. Sometimes even in the English class, the English teacher is a native himself, whose English pronunciation is not standard, so he has to interact with the students in their native language, which obviously prevents the students from learning English well. In the long run it will make the students feel discouraged, although they have made great effort. Thus when they go to the high school and college, they can't keep up with other students from the Han people.

### *2.4 The Unreasonable Evaluation System*

In the past, the schools and the English teachers, even the families attach much importance to the scores. They believe that the score can measure a student and his study. High score or low score will determine a student's promising future or hopeless future. This is obviously presented in the Gaokao every year. Nowadays the Chinese government is taking effective measures to eliminate the irrational phenomenon. But it is still prevalent in the rural areas, especially in the minor ethnic areas. The teacher in the class has to spend their time compiling the testing papers while the students spend their precious time memorizing the words and the language points, doing the exercises day after day. It is useless for developing students' thinking ability, communicative skills, and the comprehensive ability. It doesn't conform to the objective law for language teaching. Furthermore it keeps from enhancing students' interest and confidence in English learning.

## **3. The Effective Measures to Improve the English Education in Primary Schools in Minor Ethnic Areas**

From the above mentioned we can see that many reasons either in the local government, the primary school itself or in the teaching methods lead to the poor English education in the primary schools. So we should find some solutions to the problem in these fields.

### *3.1 To Attach Great Importance to the English Education in Primary Schools*

The government at all levels should increase their investment in the English education and provide or upgrade the English-teaching equipment in the primary schools, such as the libraries, the laboratories, and other useful facilities to provide the pupils with the opportunity to keep in touch with English; furthermore, the government should make more rewarding policies to encourage more college graduates and more volunteers to teach in the minority areas and improve the living and working conditions so as to make more people willing to go there for teaching. For those who have stayed in the area for a long time, the government ought to increase their salaries.

### *3.2 To Improve the Teacher's Teaching Level*

The English teaching level in the primary schools is closely connected with the teacher's personal quality because the pupils are just English beginners. They need the teacher's professional guidance. Sometimes they even imitate the teacher unaware. So the teacher's command of English produces a vital impact on the pupil's learning. So the teacher's teaching level must be improved. On one hand, the school can invite some native teachers to hold lectures so that the teachers can learn from them. Whether the standard English pronunciation or the colorful and effective teaching methods or some teaching philosophy are all the examples set for them. On the other hand, the teachers can go to the universities to further their study through some programs that are initiated by the government. They leave the school and stay at the university for a period of time, taking the courses such as English Phonetics, English Listening, English Vocabulary and English Methodology, etc. which

are given by the professionally excellent college teachers. In order to relieve their mind, the teacher can still get their salaries while they are studying in the universities, so they focus on it. Obviously, this is an effective way.

### 3.3 To Explore the New English Textbooks with the Minor Ethnic Characteristics

As we all know, the widely-used primary English curriculum is compiled by the central government which only applies to the most urban primary schools, not taking into consideration the actual situation in the minor ethnic regions. So the teacher should tailor the content of their teaching, for example to add, delete the teaching content required by the government or to take advantage of other teaching materials, etc. to meet the local situation and cater to the students. What's more, the school-based curriculum should and must be explored. The English teaching belongs to the agricultural activities, so when compiling the school-based curriculum, the minor ethnic culture should be taken into account. It aims to promote the pupil's individuality and create their personalities. For instance, considering that nearly all the pupils are good at singing and dancing, the teacher can apply English songs and dances to the teaching. They can organize this kind of activities in or after class. Only in this way can the teaching activities be beneficial and effective with more advantages.

### 3.4 To Adopt the Teaching Modes Catering to the Minor Ethnic Pupils

Just as mentioned above, the English learning for the minor ethnic pupils will be influenced by their native language. This is not the case for the Chinese mandarin because in the primary schools all the subjects are taught by the Chinese mandarin, with the native language occasionally used after class or in their daily lives, which creates the learning environment and gives the pupils opportunities to practise the Chinese mandarin. While in the English learning, the third language acquisition for them, they get little chance to practise it. So the English teacher should adopt the proper teaching mode or teaching methods to provide the pupils with the opportunity to listen to or speak the English. Here I suggest one method—Immersion Foreign Language Teaching Mode. It is a kind of teaching in which the non-native language is used as the teaching language which is called the target language. By applying Immersion Foreign Language Teaching Mode in other subjects they can learn the lesson, at the same time, mastering the target language, for example, we can use English at other kind of recreational classes, such as P.E class or fine art class. Through this way can the pupils get the chance to use English to communicate with each other and their initiative can be enhanced. Therefore they will acquire the knowledge along with the language unaware.

## 4. Conclusion

Nowadays the English education in primary schools in minor ethnic areas in western China is not as good as what is expected. Meanwhile it exerts a great impact on the pupil's education because the English language is an influential one as a result of the development of the global communication. Thus it is high time that we called on the efforts from all sides to deal with this problem properly. For one thing, the government should make appropriate policies to cope with the matter. For another, the primary schools in the minor ethnic areas should take full advantage of every chance to improve its interior conditions and encourage the English teachers to be better. Finally, the teachers themselves should also play a leading role in improving the teaching modes and methods to meet the pupil's needs, taking into account all the negative influences from their native surroundings. Only in this way can the problem be settled once and for all.

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### **Appendix**

#### The Choices of Graduates in Leshan Normal University

Location	number	percentage
Big cities (not hometown)	42	21%
Small cities (not hometown)	31	15.6%
Hometown	107	53.4%
Minor ethnic areas	20	10%

Note: The data is concluded through the survey about 200 graduates.

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