

Research on The Role of Mother Tongue in English Learning for Trilingual Learners

Maidina·Abudureyimu

Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract: This study investigates the role of the mother tongue in English learning among trilingual learners, focusing on minority regions in China. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research explores both the opportunities and constraints that arise from the use of the mother tongue in English learning. The findings reveal that while the mother tongue can facilitate English acquisition through positive transfer and support cultural identity, it can also hinder learning through negative transfer and instructional challenges. This study provides valuable insights for developing effective teaching strategies and policies that support trilingual learners, emphasizing the importance of a balanced approach to language education.

Keywords: trilingual learners, mother tongue, English learning, language transfer, cultural identity, teaching strategies, educational policies

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

In the globalized era, trilingualism is prevalent in many regions around the world, including minority areas in China. In these areas, learners are exposed to three distinct languages. Their mother tongue, a minority language, is the first language they acquire, deeply rooted in their local culture, family life, and early communication experiences. It serves as a carrier of their unique cultural traditions, dialects, and values passed down through generations. The national language, Mandarin Chinese, plays a vital role in national integration and educational access. It is the language of formal education, government, and mass media. Proficiency in Mandarin allows trilingual learners to participate in the broader Chinese educational system, take national exams, and communicate effectively with people across the country.

English, as a global language, is increasingly important in modern society. In education, it provides access to international academic resources and exchange programs. In communication, it serves as a common language in international business, technology, and cultural exchanges. Economically, English proficiency is highly valued in many international - oriented industries, opening up better job opportunities and career prospects.

However, trilingual learners face unique challenges in acquiring English. The co - existence of three languages in their linguistic systems can lead to complex interactions. Language transfer, either positive or negative, may occur. Cultural differences among the three languages also add to the difficulty, as learners need to navigate different cultural norms and connotations while using English. These challenges make the study of trilingual learners' English acquisition and the role of their mother tongue in this process a complex and significant area of research.

1.2 Research objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of the mother tongue in the English learning process of

trilingual learners. Specifically, the research aims to identify the opportunities and constraints associated with the use of the mother tongue in English learning. This study also explores the implications for English language teaching and policy-making in trilingual contexts, providing insights into how educators can better support trilingual learners.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical framework

The role of the mother tongue in second and third language acquisition has been widely discussed in the field of applied linguistics. Language transfer theory suggests that learners' prior linguistic knowledge can either facilitate (positive transfer) or interfere (negative transfer) with the acquisition of a new language^[1]. In trilingual contexts, the interaction between the mother tongue, the second language, and the third language is particularly complex. Research has shown that cognitive and sociocultural factors play a significant role in shaping language learning outcomes^[2].

2.2 Previous studies

Previous studies have explored the impact of the mother tongue on English learning in various contexts. For instance, Smith (2022) found that bilingual learners can leverage their mother tongue to enhance their understanding of English grammar and vocabulary^[3]. However, negative transfer from the mother tongue can also lead to pronunciation and grammatical errors in English^[4]. In the context of trilingual learners, Wang (2023) highlighted the importance of cultural identity in motivating English learning^[5]. These studies suggest that the mother tongue can both support and hinder English acquisition, depending on how it is used in the learning process.

3. Research methods

3.1 Research design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of the mother tongue in English learning. The research design allows for the collection of both numerical data and in-depth qualitative insights.

3.2 Participants

The participants included 150 trilingual learners from a minority region in China, aged between 12 and 15 years. The learners were proficient in their mother tongue (a minority language), Mandarin Chinese, and were studying English as a foreign language. Additionally, 10 English teachers from the same region were interviewed to provide their perspectives on the use of the mother tongue in English teaching.

3.3 Data collection

Quantitative data were collected through surveys designed to assess students' language proficiency, attitudes towards English learning, and the perceived role of the mother tongue. The survey included both Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions to gather detailed responses. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers. The interviews focused on their experiences and perceptions of using the mother tongue in English learning.

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the survey responses. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in the interview transcripts. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

4. Opportunities

The study unearthed multiple opportunities that the mother tongue brings to English learning among trilingual learners. Firstly, in the realm of language structure, positive transfer from the mother tongue acts as a powerful catalyst for understanding English grammar and vocabulary. Take, for example, a student from a minority ethnic group whose mother tongue has a particular verb - conjugation pattern. When learning English verb tenses, this student was able to draw

parallels between the two languages. The logical structure in the mother tongue regarding verb - form changes helped the student quickly grasp the concept of English verb tenses, such as simple present and past tenses. This transfer of knowledge made the learning process more efficient and less intimidating.

Secondly, the mother tongue plays an indispensable role in the development of cultural identity. For these trilingual learners, their mother tongue is a symbol of their ethnic roots and cultural heritage. When they realize that learning English can serve as a bridge to the global stage while still maintaining their unique cultural identity, it becomes a strong motivator. They are eager to learn English not only to gain access to international education, participate in global communication, but also to introduce their own culture to the world. This sense of cultural pride, deeply connected to their mother tongue, fuels their enthusiasm for English learning.

5. Constraints

However, the study also brought to light several constraints linked to the use of the mother tongue in English learning. One significant issue is negative transfer, especially in pronunciation and grammar. In terms of pronunciation, students often struggle to differentiate between the phonological features of their mother tongue and English. For instance, some minority languages have unique vowel sounds that do not exist in English. When these students try to pronounce English words, they involuntarily substitute English vowels with those from their mother tongue, leading to distinct pronunciation difficulties. This can impede effective communication, as native English speakers may have trouble understanding them.

Grammar is another area affected by negative transfer. The grammatical rules of the mother tongue can sometimes conflict with those of English. Students may apply the sentence - structure patterns of their mother tongue when constructing English sentences, resulting in incorrect grammar. Moreover, in the classroom, teachers face the daunting task of striking a balance between the use of the mother tongue and English. If students rely too heavily on their mother tongue, they may not get enough exposure to English, which is essential for developing proficiency. On the other hand, completely banning the mother tongue may make it difficult for students to understand complex English concepts, especially in the initial stages of learning.

6. Discussion

6.1 Implications for teaching

The findings suggest that the mother tongue can play a dual role in English learning for trilingual learners. While it can provide valuable support through positive transfer and cultural identity, it can also pose challenges through negative transfer and instructional difficulties. Teachers need to adopt a balanced approach, leveraging the mother tongue to enhance understanding while minimizing its negative impact. Strategies such as code-switching and scaffolding can be effective in supporting trilingual learners.

6.2 Policy recommendations

This study highlights the need for educational policies that support multilingualism in minority regions. Teacher training programs should include modules on how to effectively integrate the mother tongue into English teaching. Curriculum development should also consider the unique needs of trilingual learners, providing resources that support both language learning and cultural identity.

7. Conclusion

This study represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the complex relationship between the mother tongue and English learning among trilingual learners, especially in the context of minority regions in China. By employing a mixed - methods approach, it has comprehensively explored both the facilitating and inhibiting aspects of the mother tongue in the English - learning process.

The findings of this research have underscored the importance of a balanced approach in language education for trilingual learners. On one hand, the mother tongue can act as a powerful resource. Positive transfer from the mother tongue enables trilingual learners to better understand English grammar and vocabulary. It also plays a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening their cultural identity. This cultural connection serves as a strong motivational factor,

driving students to learn English as a means to access global opportunities, be it in education, international communication, or the job market.

On the other hand, the study has clearly identified the challenges associated with the mother tongue. Negative transfer often leads to pronunciation and grammatical errors in English. For example, the unique phonological features of the mother tongue can be misapplied to English, causing pronunciation difficulties that may impede effective communication. In the classroom, teachers face the challenge of managing the use of the mother tongue. Excessive reliance on it can hinder the development of English proficiency, while complete exclusion may deprive students of a valuable learning aid.

In terms of implications for teaching, teachers are urged to adopt strategies that capitalize on the advantages of the mother tongue while mitigating its negative impacts. Code - switching, for instance, can be used strategically to clarify difficult concepts, and scaffolding techniques can help students gradually transition from using their mother tongue to relying more on English. These methods can enhance students' understanding and engagement in the learning process.

Regarding policy - making, the study highlights the need for educational policies that actively support multilingualism in minority regions. Teacher training programs should be redesigned to include in - depth modules on integrating the mother tongue into English teaching effectively. Curriculum development also needs to be more attuned to the unique needs of trilingual learners. This includes providing a rich array of resources that not only promote language acquisition but also nurture and celebrate their cultural identity.

For future research, several directions emerge. First, longitudinal studies are needed to explore the long - term impact of mother tongue use on English proficiency. This could involve tracking the progress of trilingual learners over several years to understand how the role of the mother tongue evolves as their English skills develop. Second, there is a need to develop culturally responsive teaching materials. These materials should be designed to incorporate elements of the mother tongue and the local culture, while also adhering to the standards of English language education. Such research can further enrich our understanding of trilingualism and contribute to the development of more effective language teaching and learning practices.

In conclusion, this study enriches the growing body of research on trilingualism and language education. By providing practical recommendations for both teachers and policymakers, it aims to improve the language learning experience of trilingual learners and promote more inclusive and effective language education in diverse linguistic contexts.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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