

Jinlong Yang* and Yanrong Zhu

Investigating foreign language anxiety of Chinese Dongxiang ethnic group: a language conflict perspective

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Abstract: The effect of being multilingual on learners' foreign language anxiety (FLA) is not always clear-cut. In view of related controversy on the issue and the negative impact of language conflict on learners' foreign language learning in multilingual areas, this study takes trilingual learners – the Chinese Dongxiang ethnic group – as the subject, and adopts a mixed methods approach to explore their FLA and how language conflict in learners' environment affects FLA. The study finds that FLA of Dongxiang undergraduates is much higher than that of Han undergraduates with the same English proficiency level. Besides, with the Dongxiang language, Chinese, English, and Arabic serving different functions in the participants' learning-lives, the potential conflicts between the Dongxiang language and Chinese, Arabic and English, Chinese and English are contributing factors in triggering participants' FLA. Based on the results, some pedagogical implications are discussed in light of language planning.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; language conflict; trilingual learners; Chinese Dongxiang ethnic groups; language planning

1 Introduction

Successful foreign language learning involves both cognitive and affective factors (Chen 2015). Among the affective factors, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has gained great attention by scholars from different contexts (e.g., Aydin and Ustuk 2020; Dewaele 2017; Horwitz et al. 1986; Rezazadeh and Zarrinabadi 2020; Teimouri et al. 2019; Zhang 2019). To date, documented literature on the influencing factors of FLA is not limited to learner-internal variables, but also to some language-related

***Corresponding author: Jinlong Yang**, School of English Studies, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China, E-mail: yangjinlong1011@126.com

Yanrong Zhu, School of English Studies, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China, E-mail: zhuyanrong0128@outlook.com

sociocultural factors such as learners' geographical background and language variables, types of setting in which learners are interacting, etc. (Dewaele 2017; Jiang and Dewaele 2020).

It is worth noting that the effect of learners' being multilingual on their FLA is not always clear-cut. Some studies reported that being multilingual was an advantage when learning new languages (e.g., Bensalem and Thompson 2021; Dewaele 2010; Thompson and Khawaja 2016), while other studies have shown that there was no significant correlation between learners' knowledge of more languages and FLA (Jiang and Dewaele 2020), or even indicated that being multilingual might aggravate learners' FLA level (Gong and Gao 2009). As a result, we assume in this study that language environment plays an important role in determining whether learners' FLA is aggravated or relieved by being multilingual.

The subject of the present study is trilingual learners – Chinese Dongxiang ethnic groups. The Dongxiang have a long history and unique culture. About 506,000 of them live in the city of Linxia, China, according to the 7th Chinese National Population Census in 2020.¹ Despite the dominance of more populous ethnic groups such as the Han and Hui, the Dongxiang have preserved and developed their unique language – the Dongxiang language, which belongs to the Mongolian branch of the Altaic language family and is transmitted orally with no written form (Jin 2013). The daily communicative language among Dongxiang is the Dongxiang language only. A survey shows that 11 % of the local Dongxiang ethnic group in Gansu province cannot speak Mandarin (Tsongkha et al. 2020). Typically, Dongxiang minorities begin to learn Chinese when entering primary school. Subsequently, students there begin to become trilingual learners since they are expected to start learning English by the third year of primary school.

Based on the documented FLA research and the trilingual learning status of Chinese Dongxiang ethnic group, this study aims to find out Dongxiang undergraduates' FLA levels, and how language environment affects multilingual learners' FLA from a language conflict perspective.

2 Literature review

2.1 Foreign language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety has been defined as “learners' distress at their inability to be themselves and to connect authentically with other people through the limitation of the new language” (Horwitz 2017, p. 41). As “the most widely studied emotion in

1 <https://www.hongheiku.com/shijirenkou/1525.html>.

second language acquisition in the past four decades” (MacIntyre 2017, p. 11), FLA and its contributing factors have been studied by scholars with various focuses. For instance, the correlation between FLA and learner-internal variables such as learners’ gender (Dewaele et al. 2016), personality (Horwitz 1986), language proficiency (Tao and He 2021), and other emotional aspects (Dewaele and Alfawzan 2018; Resnik and Dewaele 2020) have been investigated by scholars with the help of quantitative analysis.

Since the dynamic turn of FLA research around 2010 (Dewaele 2017), studies on the influencing factors of FLA have extended beyond learner-internal variables to language-related sociocultural factors. For instance, Dewaele et al. (2008) examined the communicative anxiety in the first language and FLA in the second, third, and fourth languages of 464 multilingual individuals, and found that participants suffered increasingly higher levels of FLA in languages acquired later in life. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that the knowledge of languages and its frequency of usage, the socialization in a language, and the network of interlocutors were linked to learners’ FLA level. Thompson and Lee (2014) took Korean EFL (English as a foreign language) learners as the participants and found that the experience abroad could help to improve participants’ language proficiency and hence reduce their FLA. Similarly, according to Dewaele et al.’s (2015) study, experiencing study abroad, even for a few weeks, could significantly reduce participants’ FLA level in the classroom. Additionally, with 190 Latin American immigrants living in Australia as the participants, Blakeley et al. (2017) found that participants’ foreign language anxiety varied significantly across social contexts, with speaking with friends, with strangers, at work, on the phone, and in public rated as progressively more anxiety provoking. Shirvan and Taherian’s (2021) study had 367 undergraduates in Iran as the participants and found that the interacting elements, such as teachers’ feedback, peers’ reactions, performance of classroom activities, etc., were factors that affect learners’ FLA.

It is worth noting that the effect of being multilingual on learners’ FLA is not always clear-cut. On the one hand, some scholars have proposed that being multilingual was an advantage when learning new languages (e.g., Bensalem and Thompson 2021; Cenoz 2003; Dewaele 2010). For instance, with 106 adult students in the UK as participants, Dewaele’s (2007) study indicated that learner’s knowledge of more languages was linked to lower levels of FLA in L2. With 953 French users as the participants, his research (Dewaele 2010) also found that multilingualism could enhance learners’ self-perceived communicative competence, and further led to less communicative anxiety in some challenging communicative situations. Thompson and Khawaja’s (2016) study used 156 EFL undergraduates in Turkey as the participants, and found that multilingual undergraduates got both higher levels of self-confidence and lower levels of FLA than the bilingual undergraduates. In a different context, with 354 students in Saudi universities as the participants, Bensalem and

Thompson's (2021) study also revealed that bilingual students experienced a higher level of FLA than their multilingual peers.

On the other hand, some studies have shown that there was no significant correlation between learners' knowledge of more languages and FLA, and other studies even indicated that being multilingual might aggravate learners' FLA levels. For instance, with 1,031 Chinese university students as the participants, Jiang and Dewaele (2020) investigated the correlation between sociobiographical variables (gender, ethnic group affiliation, geographical background and experience abroad) and participants' FLA, and concluded that there was no significant difference in FLA between Han² students and ethnic minorities across all the situations in the study (ethnic minorities in China are generally multilingual, learning English as their third language). Gong and Gao (2009) measured the FLA of 197 Tibetan students and 418 Han students and found that Tibetan students, as the typical trilingual learners in China, had higher levels of anxiety compared with Han, which was mainly reflected as communication apprehension in a foreign language classroom. Santos et al. (2017) investigated 532 adult participants in Spain and found that the communicative anxiety was higher in L3 (English) contexts for Spanish L1 speakers and Basque L1 speakers than in L2 (Basque or Spanish).

In sum, it appears that the influencing factors of FLA are not only limited to learner-internal variables, but also to some learners' language-related sociocultural factors, such as learners' geographical background and language variables, types of setting in which learners are interacting, etc. (Dewaele 2017; Jiang and Dewaele 2020). Meanwhile, the correlation between learners' being multilingual and their FLA varies depending on their geographical background, and learners' FLA levels are influenced by both outside and inside classroom factors (Jiang and Dewaele 2020). Accordingly, in this study, we assume that learners' language environment plays an important role in determining whether being multilingual can aggravate or relieve learners' FLA level, and attempt to interpret FLA of Chinese Dongxiang undergraduates from a language conflict perspective.

2.2 Language conflict

According to Dahrendorf (1959), conflicts, including some milder forms, are normal aspects of social life rather than dysfunctional occurrences, and social conflicts are

² The Han ethnic group is the most populous in China. According to the 7th Chinese National Population Census in 2020, approximately 91 % of the population in China is Han. Han people are mainly monolingual, speaking Chinese dialects or Mandarin Chinese, which is China's official language.

multifaceted rather than congeal around one single issue. Among them, language conflict is a state of confrontation between two or more language groups in a bilingual or multilingual environment (Nelde 1998). Swaan (2001) proposed that language conflict is a disagreement generated among groups within a people, nation, or other political entities. It can occur not only between different countries, but also within different ethnic groups in the same country, or even among different branches of the same nation. He and Zhou (2010) put forward that in a broad sense, language conflict includes not only the fierce fights or wars caused by language problems, but also the discordant phenomena such as language competition or disputes in speech. Drawing on the descriptions of language conflict provided above, the present study proposes that language conflict can refer more broadly to implicit language competition or disharmony among and within certain groups due to any irreconcilable goals.

The past decades have witnessed the development of language conflict research from theory to practice. Scholars have paid close attention to language conflict in different countries and regions, ranging from Europe (Darquennes 2010), America (Merritt 2011), Asia (Al-Haq 1985), to Africa (Hashim 2006). Most of the studies explored the issue of language conflict within a certain group by analyzing their history (Cecillon 2007), culture (Merritt 2011), religion (Hashim 2006), education and language policy (Arutyunova and Zamyatin 2020; Li 2015). For instance, taking autochthonous language minorities in the European Union as an example, Darquennes (2010) examined the close relation between language contact and language conflict, and proposed that a language very often develops into a manifest significant symbol of social conflict in minority settings, even when it may not be the direct cause of the conflict. Davies and Dubinsky's (2018) study presented detailed cases of language conflicts in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, and addressed the role language competitions, language ideologies and language shifts played in language conflicts. Arutyunova and Zamyatin's (2020) study investigated both the official and public discourses in Russia, and elicited a conflict between the state languages' mandatory instruction in schools and the daily language usage of Russia's titular nationalities.

In China, documented literature tends to study language conflict from perspectives of language education or language policy and regard language conflict as a medium for promoting multicultural development. For instance, Xue and Liu (1999) pointed out that when cross-cultural communication occurs, although language conflict plays a negative role in social inclusion, it is beneficial to the identification of national cultural history and the promotion of national cultural reconstruction. He and Zhou (2010) proposed that as a ubiquitous social phenomenon, language conflict has both negative and positive functions. For the latter, it includes increasing the cohesion of a specific language group and enhancing their language awareness,

maintaining or developing local linguistic and cultural diversity, reducing other types of conflicts and serving as a “social safety valve” (Li 2015). By comparing the phonetic, lexical and syntactic differences between the Jingpo language (a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family) and English, Yin (2014) proposed that with a multilingual and multicultural background, the foreign language would compete with the learners’ mother tongue and local culture. Accordingly, some suggestions on local vocational English education were provided in the study to alleviate the negative influences arising from language conflict.

To sum up, in view of the controversy over the effect of learners’ being multilingual on FLA (e.g., Cenoz 2003; Dewaele 2010; Jiang and Dewaele 2020), and the negative impact of language conflict on learners’ foreign language learning in multilingual areas (e.g., Gong and Gao 2009; Yin 2014) as presented above, this study assumes that the implicit language antagonism or competition in learners’ linguistic repertoires and their language environments play crucial roles in determining whether being multilingual can aggravate learners’ FLA or not. In addition, as many studies on FLA were quantitative, they tended to apply questionnaires or scales to measure the correlation between learners’ FLA and other variables. In this study, by highlighting the interaction between learners’ FLA and their language environment (such as language conflict in their language learning environment), we take trilingual learners – the Chinese Dongxiang ethnic group – as the subject, and adopt a mixed methods approach to explore how language environment affects learners’ FLA from a language conflict perspective.

3 Methods

Based on the documented FLA and language conflict research, this study attempts to explore the following three research questions (RQs):

- (1) Is there a significant difference between the FLA of Dongxiang undergraduates and that of Han undergraduates with the same English proficiency level?
- (2) What are the specificities of Dongxiang undergraduates’ language environment?
- (3) How do these specificities affect Dongxiang undergraduates’ FLA?

Guided by the research questions, a mixed methods (Akcem et al. 2019) approach that entails two phases was conducted that both included quantitative and qualitative methods to explore Dongxiang undergraduates’ FLA. In the quantitative section, we used Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure participants’ FLA to answer RQ (1), and this result could also help us to identify the most “informative participants” (Patton 1990) for Phase Two (case study).

The qualitative case study, which “holds the core assumption that reality is socially constructed and multiple” (Hesse-Biber 2010: 455), may shade insights into the contributing factors to participants’ FLA by exploring the specificities of their language environments, namely to answer RQ (2). Finally, we referred to language conflict theory to interpret the findings, namely to answer RQ (3).

3.1 Participants

Participants of this study were non-English-major Dongxiang undergraduates. By using a purposive sampling approach,³ we recruited participants in four universities with similar admission scores in Lanzhou, an educational and economic center of Gansu province where most of the Dongxiang ethnic group lives. Given that the four universities in Lanzhou only offer college English courses in the first and second years, a major selection criterion is that participants be in their first or second year of university study.

In addition, according to our pre-survey, all undergraduates at each university were assigned to different English classes based on their English scores in the College Entrance Examination. Since the admission scores of these four universities were comparable, undergraduates in the same level of class were considered to have the same level of English proficiency. Meanwhile, the majority of Dongxiang undergraduates at each university took the “third” or “C” level English classes with similar English scores on College Entrance Examination. As a result, in the quantitative section of this study, both Dongxiang undergraduates at the “third” or “C” level and Han undergraduates in identical English classes were selected for an independent-samples *t*-test to investigate whether there were significant differences in FLA between Dongxiang and Han undergraduates.

Finally, we selected 194 Dongxiang undergraduates and 239 Han undergraduates in total, with their age ranging from 17 to 21 (mean = 18.9) (see Table 1).

In the second phase, namely the qualitative section, we took participants’ year in college as the variable and selected a higher FLA group according to the *t*-test in Phase One (see Table 3). Then we chose students who scored in the top 10 % of the high FLA group, taking account of their family location, language learning experience, and willingness to cooperate. Finally, 3 of them were selected as the cases in the second phase. With the consent of the participants, pseudonyms “student J”, “student L” and “student M” were used in the study. More information is presented in Table 2.

³ Since the number of Dongxiang undergraduates in China is small, we purposely chose universities in Lanzhou city, Gansu Province with a high Dongxiang student population.

Table 1: Participants of the quantitative study.

	Male	Female	Mean age	Total
Dongxiang freshmen	37	64	18.4	101
Dongxiang sophomores	47	46	19.7	93
Han freshmen	53	68	18.1	121
Han sophomores	51	67	19.3	118
Total	188	245	18.9	433

Table 2: Participants’ brief background in the qualitative study.

Name	Gender	Age	University, major & year	Linguistic repertoires
Student J	Male	20	N University Politics Sophomore	L1: Dongxiang L2: Chinese L3: English
Student L	Male	19	M University History Sophomore	L1: Dongxiang L2: Chinese L3: English/Arabic
Student M	Female	21	L University Social Work Sophomore	L1: Dongxiang L2: Chinese L3: English

Table 3: Comparative analysis of FLA among different groups.

	Participants	Mean	Standard deviation	Sig.
Total number of Han	239	94.43	16.069	0.000
Total number of Dongxiang	194	111.11	19.057	
Dongxiang freshmen	101	107.12	18.385	0.002
Dongxiang sophomores	93	115.44	18.922	

3.2 Instruments

The classic Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) from Horwitz et al. (1986) was adopted to find out if there was a significant difference between the FLA of Dongxiang undergraduates and that of Han undergraduates with the same English proficiency level, namely to answer RQ (1). The FLCAS consists of 33 items of a five-point Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total scores of

FLCAS range from 33 to 165, with a higher score indicating a higher level of FLA. In the first phase of this study, we distributed the Chinese version of FLCAS (Wang 2003) to the participants. Internal consistency for this scale was measured and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 was obtained.

In the second phase, semi-structured interviews (face to face and online) and observations were adopted to explore the specificities of the Dongxiang undergraduates' language environment and how these specificities might affect their FLA (RQ 2 & RQ 3). For the semi-structured interviews, we mainly focused on understanding participants' educational background, language environment, challenges, and motivations in their English learning process. Guiding questions (the original version is Chinese) such as "what are the major challenges in your English learning", "do you have a feeling of burden or anxiety in English learning", "what activities do you usually take part in outside school", "what role do you think the Dongxiang language, Mandarin Chinese and English play in your life", etc. were raised to the interviewees. The Aicloud intelligent transliteration software was adopted to transfer interview recordings into the written form. For the observations, with the help of notes taking and a digital camera, we investigated participants' English classroom learning and the Linguistic Landscapes (Landry and Bourhis 1997; Shang and Zhao 2014) in their local communities.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

In the quantitative phase, a total of 456 questionnaires were collected, of which 433 were valid (194 from Dongxiang undergraduates and 239 from Han undergraduates). Twenty-three incomplete questionnaires were discarded. Descriptive data analysis and independent samples *t*-test were then carried out with the help of SPSS 27.

Data collection and analysis in the qualitative study follows the framework of "Learning lives," which originates from the Phenomenology theory (Husserl 1992). As Van Manen (2003) noted, "phenomenon" embodies a specific "situation" humans experience in education and life. Education phenomenon focuses on educational behaviors or ideas that intersubjective produce in such "situation." Therefore, education should be rooted in learners' life-world. Accordingly, by combining the researchers' voice, participants' voice, and local school English teachers' voice, we elicited Dongxiang students' physical spaces in their learning-lives and divided them into four aspects: the school field, the after-class activity field, the community field and the family field.

The school field is concerned with participants' classroom learning period, including their L1, L2 and L3 learning in the class; the after-class activity field is concerned with participants' activities after the class, such as self-study, recreation,

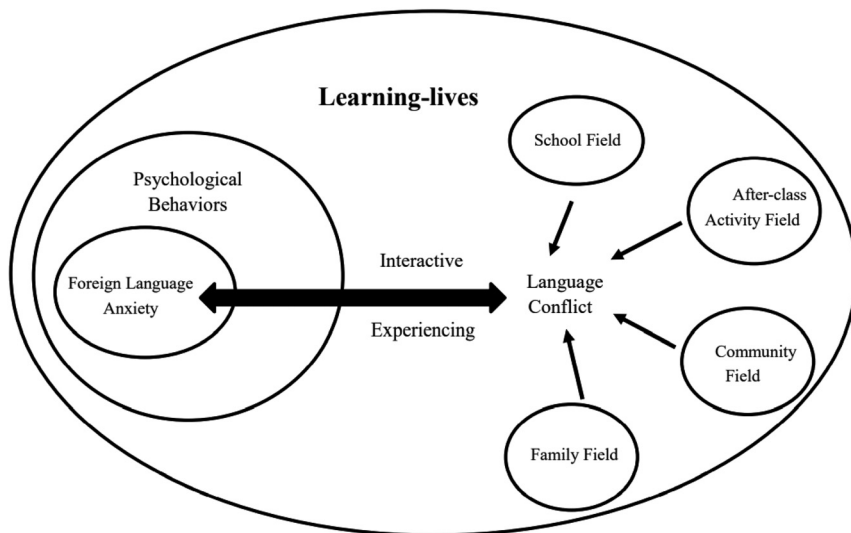


Figure 1: Analytical framework of Dongxiang undergraduates' learning-lives.

etc.; the community field addresses the language environment in participants' hometown Dongxiang and their language behaviours there; the family field focuses its attention on participants' language behaviours in family and their family members' attitudes toward L1, L2 and L3. Subsequently, the observation and interview data were coded and analysed from the four physical spaces to explore the contributing factors to Dongxiang undergraduates' FLA (see Figure 1).

On the one hand, we observed each case study participant three times in the school field (6 hours of classroom observation to get the participants' learning behaviors and strategies). Observations in the community and family fields mainly focused on the language behaviors of participants, their friends and family members, as well as the Linguistic Landscape in their communities.

On the other hand, the semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese face-to-face. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes and was audio recorded before being transcribed for analysis. Then, following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), and Corbin and Strauss (2015), the data were analyzed inductively and recursively. In this process, both the open coding and axial coding were performed. The former was performed to generate a cluster of codes, which were then converted into different categories; the latter was performed to compare and integrate the codes to elicit tensions or conflicts in participants' language environments. An inter-reliability test was conducted with two independent coders, yielding a Cohen's kappa of 0.83; all transcriptions were given to the

participants for member checking (Birt et al. 2016) to increase validity. Finally, with three to four rounds of interviews and the coding procedures above, we gradually enriched our data and finally formed case analysis based on the four fields in Figure 1.

4 Results

In this section, we first present the findings of Phase One, namely to find out if there is a significant difference between FLA of Dongxiang undergraduates and that of Han undergraduates with the same English proficiency level. Then in the second phase, participants' language environments in different fields (see Figure 1) are analyzed to elicit the contributing factors to Dongxiang undergraduates' FLA.

4.1 Phase One: the FLCAS

Phase One is designed to answer RQ (1). In this stage, 433 valid responses were collected, including 194 from Dongxiang undergraduates and 239 from Han undergraduates. As we can see from Table 3, the results of the FLCAS showed that the Han participants averaged 94.43 while the Dongxiang participants averaged 111.11. When all Dongxiang participants were compared to all Han participants, the FLA of the Dongxiang participants was significantly higher ($P = 0.000 < 0.05$).

In addition, we also took the year-of-study of the Dongxiang participants as a variable to conduct another *t*-test, with the aim of finding the most “informative participants” (Patton 1990) for Phase Two. Further analysis in Table 3 showed that the first-year Dongxiang undergraduates ($n = 101$) averaged 107.12 while the second-year Dongxiang undergraduates ($n = 93$) averaged 115.44 on the FLCAS, and the second-year Dongxiang undergraduates had significantly higher FLA than the first-year Dongxiang undergraduates ($P = 0.002 < 0.05$).

4.2 Phase Two: the case study

Phase Two is designed to analyze Dongxiang undergraduates' language environments in different fields (see Figure 1) and further to elicit the contributing factors to their FLA.

According to the quantitative analysis above, the FLA of sophomore Dongxiang was significantly higher than that of freshman Dongxiang. As a result, we used the former ($n = 93$) as a main study group and chose sophomore Dongxiang whose FLA score was in the top 10 % ($n = 9$). Furthermore, we also considered their family

locations, English learning experiences, and willingness to cooperate, thus student L, student J, and student M (pseudonyms) were selected as the cases in the qualitative part of this study (see Table 2).

4.2.1 School field

Based on our semi-structured interviews and observations, we found that in Dongxiang County, students lacked adequate Chinese input and output in their early stages. Most of them were exposed to Chinese till entering elementary schools through the Min-Chinese bilingual education,⁴ and once the students learned some basic Chinese, they began to learn English with the help of Chinese. As a result, Chinese is both the teaching objective of Min-Chinese bilingual education and the medium of English-Chinese bilingual education, and it serves as a major instrument in the two bilingual education models (see Figure 2).

However, in the bilingual education mode depicted in Figure 2, Chinese and English compete with each other for a certain period of time in most primary schools of Dongxiang County. For instance, in the first 3 years, the Dongxiang language is employed as a medium of instruction. Subsequently, students will use Chinese as the medium to learn other school subjects once they have reached a certain level of Chinese proficiency (usually in the third year). Meanwhile, to comply with the local education policy, each primary school begins to offer English courses in the third year. The transfer of classroom language occurs practically simultaneously with the introduction of English courses, making Dongxiang students resort to their inadequate Chinese to learn English (see Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1 *When I was in primary school, I learned both English and Chinese. ... Learning Chinese was OK, at least we used it sometimes in our daily lives. While learning English was challenging for me, we did not use it in everyday life. More importantly, we learned English through Chinese, despite our limited Chinese skills at the time.*
(Interview with Student L, 20/07/2022)

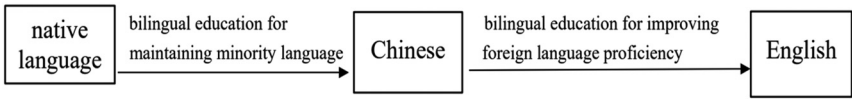


Figure 2: The role Chinese plays in two different bilingual educations.

4 An educational model in China that encourages the ethnic minorities to learn both Mandarin Chinese and their mother tongue at school.

Furthermore, one of our interviewees claimed that they had begun learning Chinese in primary school with Chinese pinyin. Chinese pinyin and English letters seem the same, but their pronunciation is different. In many cases, the interviewee found it hard to even distinguish Chinese Pinyin and English letters (see Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2 *After the third year, we began to have English courses. However, the Chinese Pinyin looked the same as English but sounded different. I was really confused, sometimes I couldn't tell the difference between Chinese Pinyin and English letters. ... I was under a lot of strain in English lessons, I was scared that if I mispronounced a word and my classmates would laugh at me.*

(Interview with student J, 04/07/2022)

4.2.2 After-class field

According to our observations and semi-structured interviews, the diverse language environment of Dongxiang makes their after-class learning strategic depending on diverse purposes. According to the participants, learning Chinese is for their daily communication, while learning English is mainly for testing purposes. As a result, the participants' English learning strategies after the class are test-oriented: they either try to memorize new words by mechanically copying them down again and again, or to finish mock tests in order to pass the final English test and College English Test Band 4 (CET-4).

Excerpt 3 *My classmates and friends are not limited to Dongxiang in College, there are many Han teachers and students. As a result, I usually speak Chinese for daily communication. ... For English, I can tell you that test is everything for me. I couldn't possibly be enrolled in college with an unsatisfactory English score, can I? And I won't be able to graduate or find a good job if I fail the CET-4 test.*

(Interview with Student M, 19/06/2022)

With the test-oriented learning motivation, the participants' English reading and writing abilities are emphasized in after-class learning, while their listening and speaking abilities are neglected, resulting in a lack of English communication skills (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4 *In order to prepare for the CET-4 test, I mostly did mocks after class and had little opportunities to practice my English listening and speaking skills. As a result, I was concerned a lot that the English teacher might ask me questions in the class, given my low oral skills.*

(Interview with Student J, 10/06/2022)

4.2.3 Community field

In the community field, we found that both the Dongxiang language and Arabic played crucial roles in the three participants' daily lives. On the one hand, the population in Dongxiang County is homogeneous. Located in a mountainous area, most people there are Dongxiang minorities and the Dongxiang language is the only language being used in their daily lives. As a result, children in Dongxiang are less likely to acquire other languages. According to our interviews, the structural disparities between the Dongxiang language and English, as well as the asymmetry of cultural information between the two languages, have caused a negative transfer of Dongxiang students to learn English (see Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5 *I didn't even know what the word 'coffee' was until many years later. The word 'coffee' does not exist in the Dongxiang language and we had never seen coffee before ... There was also a problem of word order. The word order of English is the same as Chinese, for example, 'I take meal', but in the Dongxiang language it is 'I meal take', At that time, I felt the more I learnt, the more confused I was.*

(Interview with student L, 06/09/2022)

On the other hand, Dongxiang people are Islam believers. Consequently, Arabic exerts a great impact upon Dongxiang communities. We observed that the most important activity in Dongxiang communities on weekends was to chant Qur'an and worship at the local mosque. In addition, commercial signs with Arabic elements were found everywhere in local economic and cultural centers of Dongxiang County and Linxia City (see Figure 3).

The Linguistic Landscape not only enables readers to know the composition or the characteristics of language usage within a certain community, but also can express power and solidarity through language choices in a multilingual area (Shang and Zhao 2014). Therefore, the semiotic signs in Figure 3 show that in Dongxiang ethnic community, although Chinese holds the most sway, Arabic also has a place there.

Excerpt 6 *In our hometown, Arabic is widely used in mosques and even shop signs on the street. These Arabic words might express our Islamic culture ... As for English, we hardly see it in our daily lives, with the exception of school textbooks.*

(Interview with Student M, 12/07/2022)



Figure 3: Advertising billboards written in Arabic and Chinese in Dongxiang County and Linxia City.

4.2.4 Family field

The instrumentation effect of Chinese and Arabic is clearly visible in Dongxiang families. Despite the fact that some Dongxiang residents are poorly educated, they can still recognize the capital attribute of language, believing that language learning is a crucial foundation for overcoming poverty and obtaining better job opportunities. Driven by this motivation, the enthusiasm for learning Chinese undoubtedly plays an essential role in Dongxiang families, despite the fact that the Dongxiang language is the major medium of family communication (Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 7 *Chinese is our official language. I may communicate in the Dongxiang language with my family and peers, but I need to speak and write Chinese in all other settings. As a result, if we plan to study, work, or reside somewhere other than Dongxiang County, we need to be fluent in Chinese.*

(Interview with Student J, 10/06/2022)

In terms of foreign language learning, family members of Dongxiang ethnic group are torn between English and Arabic, with the majority believing that Arabic is more valuable than English. For most of the Dongxiang people who live in mountainous areas with inconvenient transportation, English is merely a school subject. Meanwhile, Arabic occupies a key place in the minds of Dongxiang people because of its natural links with Dongxiang language and religious beliefs. As some studies show (Ma 1983; Xu et al. 2012), Arabic exerts a broad impact on Dongxiang vocabulary, including ethics, astronomy, ideology and so on. And the chanting and worship activities in local mosque also need some knowledge of Arabic. Therefore, for the majority of Dongxiang’s elderly population, learning Arabic is more practical than learning English (Excerpt 8).

Excerpt 8 *We Dongxiang people all believe in Islam and chant Qur'an. If some people are good at Arabic, they may become Imams, and Imams are honored in our hometown ... Learning Arabic can also help us to do business with Arab countries, so that we could make money... As to learning English, I think it's mainly for test..... My grandparents once said that if English was always dragging me down, it would be better to drop out and try to learn Arabic. Therefore, as I said before, actually I had more burden on English tests than on other subjects: once I didn't do well on English tests, my family would persuade me to learn Arabic and go to work instead of learning English at school.*

(Interview with Student L, 10/07/2022)

5 Discussion

The quantitative study in Phase One finds that the FLA of Dongxiang undergraduates is significantly higher than that of Han undergraduates with the same English proficiency level. Although earlier studies (Dewaele et al. 2008; Kemp 2007) suggested that learners who know more languages could become better at learning additional languages and give learners more confidence in their ability to avoid “linguistic icebergs”, the results in our study revealed that learners being multilingual was not always helpful in reducing their FLA. In China, most Han students are monolinguals whose mother tongue is Chinese only, and English serves as their foreign language. However, for the Dongxiang students who are typically trilingual, their mother tongue is the Dongxiang language, Chinese serves as the second language and English as the foreign language.⁵

Jiang and Dewaele (2020) reported that the correlation between learners' being multilingual and their FLA varied depending on their geographical background, and learners' FLA levels were influenced by both outside and inside classroom factors. In addition, Dewaele et al. (2008) claimed that participants with knowledge of more languages were found to have lower levels of FLA in *some situations* in the L1 and L2, and in *more situations* in the L3 and L4. The present study not only confirms the preceding two findings, but also delves deeper into this issue. Namely, learners' language environment or the *situation* outside of the classroom plays an important role in determining whether being multilingual aggravates or relieves their FLA.

5 Although Dongxiang people are exposed to some Arabic through religious activities, the great majority have not received formal education on Arabic.

Specifically, by exploring the four fields depicted in Figure 1, we discovered that Dongxiang undergraduates were mainly exposed to four languages in different fields: the Dongxiang language, Chinese, English, and Arabic. Although these four languages serve their respective functions in different fields, there exists a potential competition between three groups of languages from a more distant perspective, and it is the competition that may trigger participants' FLA.

To begin with, there is a potential competition between the Dongxiang language and Chinese in participants' family and school fields. The majority of Dongxiang people speak the Dongxiang language in their families, while Chinese is rarely spoken. At the same time, Dongxiang County implements bilingual education in the nine-year compulsory education. In the first three years of primary school, the Dongxiang language is used as a medium of instruction while Chinese is the target in language courses. Gradually, the Dongxiang language gives way to Chinese for instruction. Dongxiang County's bilingual education is comparable to the concept of "transitional bilingual education" proposed by Fishman (1978). When learners' mother tongue is a minority language, the purpose of implementing bilingual education is to help them get a good command of the second language so that they can integrate themselves into the society of the dominant language. As a result, Dongxiang students have to surmount the negative transfer of their mother language to Chinese in an attempt to improve their Chinese proficiency and achieve academic goals. Meanwhile, they must maintain their Dongxiang language proficiency for daily use. Thus, it can be seen that the Dongxiang language and Chinese are in competition with each other in their daily lives both inside and outside of school.

Furthermore, another competition occurs in participants' school and community field, namely Arabic and English. As previously stated, learning Arabic is more practical for most Dongxiang people than learning English. In addition, as Figure 3 shows, the Linguistic Landscape in Dongxiang communities can also reveal the culture and religious power of Arabic in those communities. In this case, the different attitudes of local community and family members toward the two foreign languages inevitably contribute to the competitive relation between English and Arabic. Once the Dongxiang students' English achievements are unsatisfactory, the language environment and cultural atmospheres surrounding them would likely convince them to give up learning English and devote themselves to learning Arabic, which may lead Dongxiang students to undergo greater test anxiety (Botes et al. 2022; Horwitz et al. 1986) than Han students in the process of learning English.

Finally, in the school field, Chinese and English compete for a set period of time. The majority of primary schools in Dongxiang County offer Dongxiang-Chinese bilingual education. The Dongxiang language is used as a medium of instruction for the first three years, and when students reach a certain level of Chinese proficiency (usually in the third year), they are required to study subjects in Chinese. Meanwhile,

in accordance with national policy, each primary school in Dongxiang County starts providing English classes in the third year. The language transition in classroom teaching occurs almost simultaneously with the introduction of the English course, posing additional language stress to the students. They have to cope with a large amount of Chinese input. More importantly, they have to resort to their inadequate Chinese to learn English. The diachronic analysis of the Dongxiang foreign language learners' schooling experiences shows that both Chinese and English have long played an important role in participants' school lives, with the two languages displaying an obvious competitive relation during the critical transition period of bilingual education mode (third or fourth year of elementary school), before gradually easing and eventually complementing each other.

The three groups of language competition illustrate that language environment plays a crucial role in determining whether being multilingual could aggravate or relieve learners' FLA: if there is dissonance or competition among these languages, then multilinguals' FLA would rise. As language conflict includes not only the fierce fights or wars caused by language problems, but also some implicit language antagonism or disharmony among and within certain groups (He and Zhou 2010), the three groups of language competition that Dongxiang students face are consistent with the broad concept of language conflict.

Given that language conflict is a ubiquitous social phenomenon with both negative and positive functions (Li 2015; Tajfel and Turner 1979), turning the negative function of language conflict into a positive one merits consideration in order to alleviate Dongxiang undergraduates' FLA. For instance, with the goal of harmonizing language group relations and authoritatively allocating language resources (Fishman 1994; Li 2015), language planning is one of the important mechanisms for regulating language conflicts, which mainly includes corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning (Ager 2005; Baldauf 2005). As earlier studies have shown that adequate acquisition planning (or language-in-education planning) played a positive role in alleviating language conflicts in certain areas (e.g., Arutyunova and Zamyatin 2020; Cecillon 2007; Merritt 2011; Yin 2014), exploiting Dongxiang communities' diverse language resources from the perspective of language-in-education planning could be a reasonable way to give full play to the positive function of language conflict.

Specifically, some studies have claimed (Ma 1983; Xu et al. 2012) that Arabic exerts a broad impact on Dongxiang vocabulary, including religion, ethics, astronomy, ideology and so on. Our study also indicates that some Dongxiang ethnic groups have high enthusiasm or motivation to learn Arabic. Therefore, the language competition between Arabic and English could be reversed into a diverse resource for Dongxiang students to become "Arabic + professional" or even "English + Arabic + professional" talents if colleges could provide courses on Arabic,

finance, foreign trade, etc. Additionally, the local primary schools in Dongxiang County could try to strengthen Chinese teaching in the first few years of students' enrollment so that Dongxiang learners could acquire sufficient Chinese skills, and try to postpone the English course appropriately at the same time. In this way, Dongxiang learners could resort to their adequate Chinese to assist their English learning. As a result, the competitive relationship between Chinese and English can be turned into a mutually beneficial partnership accordingly.

To sum up, taking advantage of language conflict's positive functions and providing more language learning options for Dongxiang learners are reasonable ways to stimulate Dongxiang students to become more qualified trilingual speakers, so as to meet their language learning motivation, cultivate their cross-cultural communication awareness, and finally alleviate their FLA.

6 Conclusions

With the Dongxiang ethnic group in China as the research subject, the present study finds that FLA of Dongxiang undergraduates is much higher than that of Han undergraduates with the same English proficiency level. Additionally, with the Dongxiang language, Chinese, English, and Arabic serving different functions in different fields of participants' learning-lives, the potential conflicts between the Dongxiang language and Chinese, Arabic and English, and Chinese and English are contributing factors triggering participants' FLA.

However, it should be noted that the findings of this study are limited to the Dongxiang undergraduates who pursue their undergraduate studies in Lanzhou, China. The sampling range of this research still needs to be further expanded to better understand the correlation between language environment and learners' FLA. Future research could be done to validate the results of this study with a larger sample or with different learning conditions.

Nonetheless, the findings of this study suggest that in multilingual areas, the languages that learners are exposed to not only serve their perspective functions, but also interact with each other, resulting in both positive or negative effects. For instance, in the context of the Dongxiang ethnic group of China, competition or conflict across languages may have negative impacts on learners' L2 or L3 learning. As a result, whether being multilingual can alleviate learners' FLA depends on whether the interaction between different languages is positive or negative in a given context. We hope that this study will pique the interest of more scholars in the issue of FLA with multilingual learners from different areas.

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Bionotes

Jinlong Yang

School of English Studies, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China
yangjinlong1011@126.com

Jinlong Yang, PhD in linguistics. Professor at Sichuan International Studies University, China. His research interests are educational linguistics, language planning.

Yanrong Zhu

School of English Studies, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China
zhuyanrong0128@outlook.com

Yanrong Zhu, Lecturer in Sichuan International Studies University. PhD candidate in Sichuan International Studies University. Her research interests are educational linguistics, language testing.