

Family Language Policy and Multilingual Development in Home Domain

--A Case Study of Chinese Immigrant Family in U.S.

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to better understand parental language ideology as evidenced in immigrant parenting socialization decisions with regard to children's heritage language maintenance in the United States. The research design entailed the case study of a Chinese immigrant family in the U.S. with three languages in use to illustrate family language policy through individual and often diverse responses to the research questions about parental beliefs and family languages in relation to children's heritage language maintenance and English development as their transition from home to school setting.

Keywords

Family Language Policy, Language Development, Immigrant Family, Child Development.

1. Introduction

The impacts of globalization have spread into various spheres of societies and have yielded diverse interpretations. The exchange of resources on a country-by-country basis has given rise to the rapid mobility of ideas and people. One feature of globalization that is manifested in population mobility is the increase in migration around the world. The U.S. is commonly referred to as a nation of immigrants and has long been a pluralistic setting with a single national language. Mass immigration brings richer and more diverse minority languages, which raises the bar for large-scale and unified minority language education in schools or other education programs. On the other hand, as non-English-speaking members of U.S. society, immigrants still undergo the social and political expectations that sustain English in its hegemonic position. [2]

Immigrants, who are driven by a desire for acceptance, are compelled to receive dominant language exposure by the powerful assimilative force, which is followed by assimilation and heritage language loss within generations in immigrant families.[3] People are gradually accepting the reality of heritage language loss under social-political pressure from the mainstream society. Therefore, the loss of heritage language signifies the phenomenon that one's home language (the subordinate language) is replaced by English (the dominant language), with the consequence of breaking down family ties and parental authority. [3][8][11]

2. Family Language Policy in Immigrant Families

2.1. Family Language Policy in Home Domain

A language policy is a set of regulations or guidelines established intentionally either to maintain or change the existing language practice in a speech community for certain reasons that involve the community's linguistic rights. [9] Spolsky extended the concept of language policy to the area of immigrant children's language socialization within the context of a linguistically and culturally diverse society. [10] The standard language ideology in the U.S.

continues to imply the default linguistic behavior of knowing and using only one language, i.e., English, in multilingual settings. [1][12]

The language policy that operates within the family domain is referred to as Family Language Policy. The concept of FLP highlights and interprets parental decisions as intentional efforts to maintain or make changes to the existing language practices in the home domain. Based on the premise that parents and extended family members have the familial authority to evaluate and decide the language environment and discourse they want to create for their children's language acquisition and socialization, parents and other caregivers occupy a significant position as experts in the process of language ideology formation, decision-making, implementation, and strategic modification.

2.2. Parental Language Ideology and Practice

Parental language ideology refers to core parental beliefs about the language development of parents' offspring and drives their behaviors to further influence children's language outcomes. Parental language ideology is driven by parental beliefs toward language practice and development, cultural identity, parenting, and family life. Views on the best strategies to employ for children's development and to what extent parents identify as 'good' parents play a part in continuing or changing parents' belief systems in diverse sociocultural contexts. [4][5][6] In this sense, the theoretical concept of cultural models of parenting helps in understanding the implicit rationale behind the language ideology, with an additional emphasis on economic and political factors.

In line with their language beliefs, immigrant parents must consider many concrete details when planning and implementing a language policy, such as which language should be used and when, how to arrange formal and informal language instruction at home, and which literacy activities can be adopted to facilitate language development.[7] Parents put effort into connecting with heritage language programs and the immigrant community as ways to maintain and further encourage their children's interest in heritage language learning and cultural knowledge.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Setting and Questions

Grounded on the conceptual framework of Family Language Policy, this study focused on parental efforts in maintaining Chinese young immigrant children's heritage language through a longitudinal case study of a Chinese immigrant family in a progressive school district in a southeastern state in the U.S.. In this area, the school district offers a Mandarin/English dual-language program and traditional ESL program, from pre-Kindergarten going up till 5th grade. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What are parental language ideology regarding children's language development in Chinese immigrant family?
2. How are these language ideologies reflected in parental efforts in maintaining children's language?

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1. Participant

The selection of the case study family is intentional, in order to address the research questions. This family has three languages in use, in other word, family members speak Mandarin, English and Cantonese (See Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1 Family Characteristics

Target Child	
Name (Pseudonym)	Tian Li
Family Members	
Nuclear	Father, Mother, Older Sister, Older Brother
Extended Family	Maternal Grandmother, Paternal Grandparents
Language Spoken in the Home	English, Mandarin, Cantonese
Parental Education	
Father	Master’s degree (U.S.)
Mother	Bachelor’s degree (China)
Living Condition	Suburban neighborhood

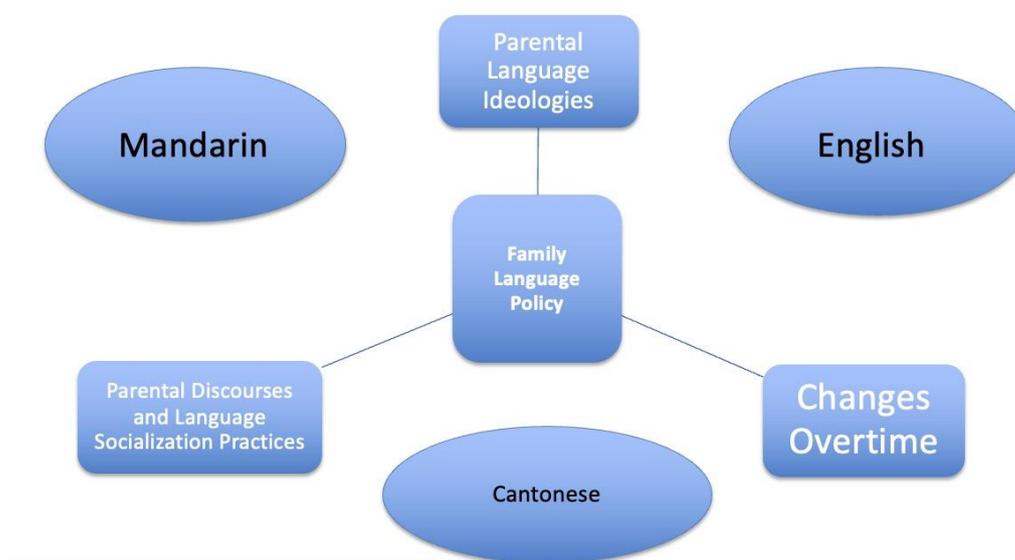


Figure 1: Family Language Policy of the Three Language in Use Family

3.2.2. Data Collection Strategies

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted at regular intervals, beginning from home to pre-K to kindergarten and 1st grade, focusing explicitly on heritage language maintenance. Questions included parental beliefs concerning the value of English, Mandarin, and other Cantonese; experiences of language practices among family members in home and their views on community-based language schools.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Parental Language Ideology Regarding Children’s Language Development

4.1.1. Meaning of Maintaining Mandarin and Cantonese

Tian’s parents frequently acknowledged the importance of having their children speak Mandarin. Even though they have lived in the U.S. for many years, they often shared the deeply held belief that their roots are in China and the cultural value has not changed.

Nobody knows maybe one day, we might go back to China. Even [though] people here are very friendly to us, it is difficult to get into the society. There are some changes, but the core value hasn't changed. (Tian's mother)

From the mother's perspective, being able to speak Mandarin is a remarkable symbol of Chinese identity. Therefore, continuing the use of Mandarin among the generation of her children is a way of staying in touch with the family's roots and not forgetting their identity even though Cantonese is their home language. Another reason that Mandarin is important and Cantonese is not enough results from the parents' work experience in China before they moved to the U.S. Given the high rate of economic growth and the increasing national power of China, the mother believes that the mastery of Mandarin provides more opportunities for the children's career in the future.

I worked in a foreign company co-run by China and U.S. I know Chinese (refers to Mandarin) is very important. The company required Mandarin and English. Cantonese is not enough. (Tian's mother)

4.1.2. Parent's Perceptions of Language Program and Schools

Among the characteristics of a school setting, the mother values the quality of the teacher the most. That is, from the mother's perspective, the quality of a school or program depends on the quality of the teacher. This evaluation criterion also applies to programs for Mandarin learning.

I think the teacher is an important factor in Mandarin learning, in any schools. Teachers' expectations and their teaching strategies are very important. (Tian's mother)

The two older children in this family went to the district's English/Mandarin dual-language program starting from kindergarten the oldest child, stayed in this program until 5th grade. The mother was satisfied with the teachers and the program during that time, whereupon the parents decided to send the second child, to this program for kindergarten. However, on the basis of that experience, their favorable impression of the dual-language program started to go downhill.

However, the mother speaks highly of the Chinese language afterschool program where all three children take classes every Saturday. She believes that the content taught in the afterschool program meets the needs and interests of the children. In that program, the teachers are not just teaching the language. To keep the children engaged and excited about Mandarin learning, the teachers employ various fun and innovative approaches to relate Chinese culture to class activities.

4.2. Parental Efforts Regarding Child's Language Development

4.2.1. Language Use Among Family Members

In terms of language competence, the mother notes that their English is the best, Cantonese is second, and Mandarin is the weakest. When the children are together, they speak only English. When Tian was in 1st grade, he began refusing to speak any language but English, especially after the maternal grandmother returned to China for a year, because he knew that everyone at home now could speak English. Although he is in the Mandarin/English dual-language program for 2nd grade, he rarely speaks any Mandarin or even Cantonese at home. Lack of practice in Mandarin and Cantonese makes it more difficult for Tian to communicate with his grandparents at home.

Now he gradually cannot recall how to express. For example, he tried to tell the paternal grandmother that don't cook rice tonight but he just could say it. I don't know which language he tried to say. He just doesn't know how to tell the grandmother "cook rice". (Tian's mother)

4.2.2. Language Activities in Home and Beyond

Given the fact that Cantonese and English are the most frequently used languages among the family members, the parents continue to try to generate more opportunities for Mandarin learning for their children. Mandarin book reading is the major activity that they have in the home domain. When Tian was very young, the mother read him stories in Mandarin every day. Even the maternal grandmother, who speaks not very standard Mandarin and has a strong Cantonese accent, made a good effort to read stories to her grandson and played a significant role in Tian's Mandarin learning before she returned to China.

*When he was back from China, my mother was help him with his Mandarin and he was able to keep up with that. Then my mother went back to China so I sent him to Chinese afterschool, he **lost passion in learning Mandarin and resisted to learn.** (Tian's mother)*

As Tian has learned more Chinese characters from the Chinese afterschool program and the dual-language program, the mother began to let him read two books on his own in Mandarin every day. When the father was at home, he would also read with Tian using the textbook from the Chinese language afterschool program. In addition, the parents started to speak more Mandarin at home and encouraged the children to respond in Mandarin to create a Mandarin speaking environment.

5. Conclusion

The story of the case study family reveals that the importance of maintaining family ties within generations is a motivation for heritage language learning. Parents believe that Mandarin, as well as Cantonese, opens a door for their children to better understand Chinese culture and construction of their children's identity. Guided by their language ideology, parents put more efforts in facilitating multilanguage use and communication in home and beyond to leave more opportunities for language practice.

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