SOMMAIRE

THE PLURILINGUAL EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF YOUNG CHINESE CHILDREN IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

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Globalization, shifts in politics (such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of the European Union), the advancement of media technologies, and transnational migration all affect the use of language (Fishman, 2000; Milroy & Gordon, 2003) and people's construction and negotiation of identity (Hall, 1990; Rampton, 1995). While linguists have constructed various etic, western theoretical frameworks to explain children's language acquisition and practices, they have neglected the emic (culture-specific insiders') perspective of children's use of language and identity construction (Cummins, 2000). Most of the models that try to measure bi- or multilingual literacy are situationally and culturally specific, and do not elucidate how children communicate in their daily interactions or the kinds of communicative practices they have developed over time (Martinez, Moore, & Spaëth, 2008; Myers-Scotton, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to address these through the lens of four Chinese families whose children are enrolled in French immersion programs in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

This paper will begin with a brief overview of immigration trends, followed by French immersion programs, and will then utilize sociolinguists' views on multilingualism (e.g., Grosjean, 1982) to help address three research questions: 1) "how do Chinese parents foster multilingualism?", 2)"to what extent does the socio-cultural context influence the family's and the child's language practices?", and 3) "which language is most important to the parents' and the child's everyday life – Chinese, English, or French?".

The Immigration Trends

Canada has become increasingly multiethnic and multicultural over the last few decades. At the national level, of the 1.8 million immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1991 and 2001, 58% came from Asia, the chief country of emigration being China. For example, 860,100 Chinese residents were recorded in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2003), with the figure rising to 1,216,600 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008). The Chinese have become one of the largest visible minorities in Canada, accounting for 24.0% of the visible minority population and 3.9% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2008).

At the provincial level, Canadians of Chinese heritage account for a large share of the population in BC, followed by South Asians and Filipinos (BCStats, 2008a). For example, the

overall Chinese population residing in Vancouver was 175,200 in 1991 compared to 407,225 in 2006, which represented 18% of the total population in Vancouver (BCStats, 2008a).

Regarding changes in the Canadian language landscape, both English and French held onto first and second place in the 2001 Census, respectively. At the national level, 7.5 million informants reported English as their mother tongue, and 6.8 million reported French. A noticeable increase in the non-official language category was Chinese: 736,000 informants reported speaking either Cantonese or Mandarin as their mother tongue in 1996, with the total number increasing to 872, 400 in 2001, an 18.5 percent increase (Chui, Tran, & Flanders, 2005).

At the provincial level, 71% of 2.87 million informants reported English as their mother tongue in BC, and only 1.4% reported French in 2006 (BCStats, 2008b). Regarding non-official languages, 342,920 informants reported Chinese as their mother tongue, an 8.5% increase from 8.0% recorded in 2001 (BCStats, 2008b).

The Emergent of French Immersion Programs

Political effort. Since Confederation, Québécois have always felt that their distinct French heritage and language are under threat from the overwhelming anglophone environment in both Canada and North America at large. In an effort to promote and protect the interests of Québécois, Québec governments passed various language bills, which became known as the Quiet Revolution during the late 1960s (Gibbins, 1994; Genesee & Jared, 2008). As a result, the issue of bilingualism was publicized and hotly debated in the 1960s and 1970s.

In order to ease the political tensions between anglophone and francophone Canadians on the issues of bilingualism and, more importantly, national unity, former Prime Minister Trudeau adopted the bilingualism and multiculturalism policies suggested by the Royal Commission in 1971 (Driedger, 2001). Although the use of English and French is entrenched in the Canadian constitution, the Québécois nonetheless perceive bilingualism as nothing more than a means to linguistically assimilate them within the dominant anglophone environment (McRoberts, 2004).

Parental efforts. In order to promote and protect the French language and culture (in addition to the Quebec government's political effort as noted above), a group of St. Lambert parents, who lived in a bilingual community outside of Montreal, recognized the growing inadequacy of French language instruction. French was taught by native English-speakers whose French language competence ranged from excellent to poor, and students only learned French for 20 to 30 minutes a day since kindergarten. The parents were afraid of their children being socially and economically isolated from the mainstream of Quebec when they graduated from high school. The St. Lambert parents pushed the French immersion initiative forward in 1965, and it was eventually adopted by the other nine provinces in Canada (Genesee & Jared, 2008).

French immersion programs are now more than 40 years old. Canadian students are exposed to both English and French languages as part of their schooling. A recent survey of Canadian parents' attitudes toward language learning conducted by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) showed that immersion programs of diverse ethnic languages are offered in many Canadian schools, French being the most common. There are three categories of French immersion programs. Early French immersion consists of kindergarten to Grade 2, and is taught by native French speakers who provide a 100% French learning and speaking environment. Middle French immersion consists of Grade 3 to 5, with all courses taught by native French speakers, except for English and language arts. Late French immersion is from

Grade 6 onwards, with many courses still being taught in French by native French speakers, but with students having the option to choose certain courses that are taught in English.

In BC, French immersion programs are housed in English schools where French is the medium of instruction except for English class and language arts. According to Allen (2004), 55% of the students are enrolled in French immersion programs before Grade 4 in BC. Regarding the overall enrolment in French immersion programs, 38,500 students were enrolled in BC and 300,000 students in Canada (Carr, 2007). More girls enrolled in French immersion programs than boys in BC: 61% versus 49%, respectively (Allen, 2004). French immersion students have higher socio-economic status backgrounds and performed significantly better than non-immersion students in English tests of reading (Allen, 2004).

Sociolinguists' Views of Bilingualism

The idea of equal proficiency in two or more languages can be found in earlier definitions of bilingualism. For example, Bloomfield (1933) defined bilingualism as "the native-like control of two languages" (p. 56). This elusive belief of equal proficiency and competence in two languages influenced early laymen's, educators', school policy-makers', and researchers' views on bilingualism and language development. They believed that individuals have the potential to acquire two or more languages and be equally proficient in them. Saunders (1988) noted that "[s]uch bilingualism represents an ideal which is very rarely attained and which is perhaps best referred to by the less emotive term *equilingual* [original author's emphasis]" (p. 7). There are theoretical and methodological limitations concerning the equilingual viewpoint (e.g., "How do we operationalize native-like competence?", "How do we measure competence?", etc.) (Hamers & Blanc, 2000).

To conceptualize multilingualism, the author has adopted Grosjean's (1982) theoretical framework, which emphasizes that while many people speak two or more languages, it is difficult to achieve equal fluency in the acquired languages as in the native one. There are degrees of fluency in people's ability to understand, read, write, and speak, and how proficient people are in them depends upon the context and with whom they carry out the conversation. The author agrees with Grosjean that linguists' assumptions regarding bilingual individuals are based on monolingual assumptions, which not only neglect the social contexts of language development, but also limit researchers' ways of theorizing multilingualism. As Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck (2005) noted, "[m]ultilingualism should not be understood as 'full competence in different languages', despite dominant ideologies which emphasise complete facility" (p. 199). The acquisition of language is asymmetric, which is in stark contrast to the equilingual viewpoint.

Rationale for Conducting the Research

While there is some research concerning Chinese children and families (which can be found in "PsychINFO" and "Sociological Abstracts" databases), limited research is available that examines multilingualism in the context of young Chinese children enrolled in French immersion programs. For example, to what extent do multilingual contexts shape young Chinese children's and parents' language practices and identities? Given the increased enrolment in French immersion programs (Carr, 2007), there is need for more research if we want to better understand young children's multilingual experiences in BC and Canada.

Another reason to undertake this research is because while linguists have constructed various etic, western theoretical frameworks to explain children's language acquisition and practices, they have neglected the emic (culture-specific insiders') perspective of children's

use of language (Cummins, 2000; Martinez *et al.*, 2008). In an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, it is the goal of this study to give young Chinese children and parents room to tell their stories so that the author can search for themes and dimensions that accurately capture the nuances and dynamics of their language acquisition and practices. This research will help inform parents, educators, school policy-makers, and researchers about Chinese children's and their families' on-going interpretation of identity through language.

Methods

Participants

Upon receiving research approval from the Richmond school district and principals, Chinese families whose children enrolled in French immersion programs were invited to participate in a larger study entitled "Multilingual Development of Children in Early French Immersion Programs". Four families and children with ethno-cultural linguistic backgrounds were invited to participate in in-depth interviews.

Three families immigrated from China and one from Taiwan. All families had resided in the Greater Vancouver area for two to thirty years. Of the four families, three children were born in Canada, and one emigrated from China. The children were between 6 and 8 years old. Regarding which language was spoken most often at home, one family spoke English, one spoke Cantonese and English, one spoke Mandarin and English, and one spoke Taiwanese and Mandarin. All parents had obtained a post-secondary degree in their country of origin.

Design and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and August 2007. The informants' participation was voluntary. The aims of these interviews were to explore children's language acquisition and practices, and to see what effect living contexts had on their language use and identity. Semi-structured interviews were employed, because informants' responses cannot be reduced to just one quantitative variable (such as language fluency). This type of reductionism would not inform us about informants' actual language acquisition and practices or their perceptions of themselves in multiple contexts (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2000; Pavlenko, & Blackledge, 2003).

The semi-structured interviews were grounded in a narrative approach in order to document informants' language acquisition and identity construction, and how they give meaning to events happening across contexts (Hoffmann & Ytsma, 2004; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003). The use of narrative in this research was appropriate, because every situation invokes different thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and it is the informants' perceptions that give rise to their interpretation of that situation.

Results and Discussion

This section will document the plurilingual educational context of informants involving four Chinese children's and families' identity construction and use of languages. In order to preserve anonymity, the respondents' real names were not used. Further, Chinese transcriptions are provided (only when parents chose to conduct interviews in Chinese), followed by the English translations.

Plurilingual Educational Context of Informants

Language development. The four families offered a variety of reasons for choosing French immersion programs, ranging from giving their children an opportunity to learn more languages to being helpful for their children's future job prospects. For example, one parent said in Chinese, "主要係，學多一種語言好過只係會講單一種語言。我唔知道我女兒的future 係什麼， 但係我覺得學多一種語言沒壞" (Mainly, it is better to learn more languages than to only speak one language. I do not know what my daughter's future will look like, but I think it does her no harm to learn one more language) (048, Mother's Interview). This parent highlighted both the importance of language and the symbolic value that Bourdieu (1977) theorized. Since Canada is a bilingual country, it may be advantageous to learn both English and French in addition to learning one's heritage language. It is worth mentioning that when Chinese parents choose to enroll their children in French immersion programs in order to give them an advantage in their future lives, it is not due to survival reasons noted in the literature. Minorities' languages are valued by the dominant culture, thus minorities must learn the official language(s) in order to survive in their new country (Cunningham, Ingram, & Sumbuk, 2006).

Another parent chose to enrol her child in the French immersion program because:

I heard that in public kindergarten programs, they just play…reading-wise, he was more advanced than the other kids. And, I was thinking, if he goes to school and he's way beyond (in) the reading level, what if he gets bored? And he becomes a problem child. That was one of the factors. And also, my sister and my brother...talked about it and suggested I put him in French immersion" (096, Mother's Interview).

This parent reinforced some of the earlier findings on immigrant parents' concerns about kindergarten, which strongly emphasizes social development and lacks academic challenges in students' literacy development (Beardsley, 1991). Other research (e.g., Dagenais, 2003; Mitchell, 2001) has noted that by sending children to French immersion programs, parents believe that their children can be more challenged, which in turn will enrich their academic literacy and language practices. The educational literature also suggests that immigrant parents do not want their children to be seen as "ESL". Perhaps, by enrolling children in French immersion programs, they could bypass an ESL placement which is generally perceived as a roadblock for academic achievement and advancement (August & Calderón, 2006; Li, 2003; Yeung, 2005).

Chinese schools. In addition to learning French in regular schooling, all children learned English either from family members or from a private tutor, as well as attending Chinese school. All parents mentioned that children should know something about their culture and should be able to speak Chinese at least at the functional level (e.g., able to read a Chinese menu). One parent said, "There's a lot of kids I know (who) don't speak Mandarin and understand Mandarin, so they will have trouble communicat[ing] (with) grandma (or) grandpa. I don't [want] like that (to) happen so we always ask her to at least speak Mandarin" (093, Mother Interview).

Parents also pointed out that Chinese school teachers ask students to read or recite passages in class and sometime answer unassigned questions in addition to diction, quizzes, tests, or examinations. Children are aware that they have to review textbooks and complete assignments (e.g., vocabulary development, grammar, composition, etc.) on a regular basis if they want to avoid negative consequences (e.g., writing extra essays, doing extra Chinese worksheets, or lose their free time for failing to complete reading tasks or assignments). Parents indicated that when their children ask for help or seek clarification regarding passage themes or concepts, they will use this as an opportunity to explain Chinese culture or tell stories in order to help them effectively learn Chinese.

Overall, parents had positive views towards Chinese school and noted that their children could apply what they learn in school to their daily lives. One parent noted that "Like last week when he had the (Chinese) testing done, he picked up a few simple characters (during shopping in Richmond). So if we expose him to it (Chinese) more, he might be able to read more of it" (096, Mother Interview).

Language preference and practice. When the focal children were asked which language was most important to their everyday life, they unanimously chose English. A number of mothers noted that when their children were young, they spoke more Chinese. When they were older, they spoke more English and generally played with friends who spoke English. One mother said:

He told me who his best friends [are,] and they are all Asian. And I'm like, Oh! That is interesting. Because I don't think they talk about what they like in terms of their Asian culture. Because at school it is basically they play soccer outside...and all the boys play together. I don't know if it's the personality or background, but yah.... They speak English. (096, Mother Interview)

Peers exert a significant influence on children's language development (Fishman, 2000).

Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus* is useful in understanding children's language choice. Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions, practices, and representations primarily learned at home. When parents were asked which language was most important to their everyday life, three parents reported English and one parent said Chinese. Of the three parents who chose English, they said that they would still communicate with their relatives, friends, and/or co-workers in Chinese, especially if they did not understand English well. The children may learn that their parents speak English most of the time in and outside of the home, and they speak Chinese to people who do not understand English well. The children may internalize these communicative practices as to how they should interact with parents, relatives, and friends (Fishman, 2000).

Another way to interpret the children's preference for English is that it may be difficult for the children to express their thoughts and ideas completely in Chinese, since they have not been fully immersed in learning Chinese other than spending a couple of hours in Chinese schools and doing reading and assignments. Therefore, the children may feel more comfortable expressing ideas in English as opposed to Chinese in their daily lives. The author also observed that the children do not choose French as the language most important to their everyday life, even though they learned French in school. The author would hypothesize that even once they gain facility in French, they may still prefer English to Chinese or French, because English is still the lingua franca.

Overall, the parents indicated that they were satisfied with their children's language progress in French, English, and Cantonese/Mandarin. They hoped their children could maintain the Chinese language in addition to English and French as they grow up. As previously mentioned, the parents emphasized that their children's ability to communicate with grandparents and relatives in Chinese was important. As Grosjean (1982) pointed out, "language attitude is always one of the major factors in accounting for which languages are learned, which are used, and which are preferred by bilinguals" (p. 127). Indeed, one's heritage language is an effective communication tool to help maintain connections with the extended family and communities as well as to access information and help when they are in need (Danesi, McLeod, & Morris, 1993).

Literacy development and practices. All four families provided a rich multilingual learning environment to help nurture their children's multilingual acquisition and practices. For example, all families brought their children to visit a local library at least once a week. To help nurture literacy development, all parents asked their children to borrow French story and/or chapter books in addition to English and Chinese ones. To help sustain children's

reading interest, one parent who knew some basic French reported that "I would love to expose him (her son) to more French material…Because he loves to read, whenever I buy him books, he'll read by himself, so I said let's do it together" (096, Mother's Interview).

Besides reading print material, all children had access to French, English, and Chinese television programs at home. While children preferred watching English cartoons, parents instructed them to watch French cartoons during part of their TV time. However, parents did not explicitly instruct them to watch Chinese programs, because they think that it may still be too difficult for their children to understand Chinese completely. All children also had access to French, English, and Chinese radio channels, usually when their parents drove.

Informants' Identity Formation

It is important to hear what young Chinese children think of their own identity. One way to examine how children construct and negotiate identity is by way of their language preference in and outside of the home. Like other children in this study, a 7-year-old Chinese boy revealed the linguistic tension at home with his parents: "[I] usually speak English to my uncle and aunt. That's the lucky time. 'Cause at home, my mommy and my dad usually *make* me speak Mandarin, except I don't. I like speaking English" (093, Child Interview). As Cummins (2000) and Dagenais and Day (1999) noted, language is a salient dimension of ethnic identity. Although all the children preferred speaking English, they were unable to describe their identity.

One parent talked about the tension when her child proclaimed her ethnic identity. The following excerpt illustrated this tension (049, Mother Interview):

P: *妳覺得佢是加拿大人、中國人、還是加拿大華僑？*

        (How do you describe your daughter - Canadian, Chinese, or Chinese-Canadian?)

M: *佢覺得佢系加拿大人。我想是因為她生活在加拿大，對加拿大瞭解很多，*
        而對中國瞭解不多。我提醒她是中國人。

(She said, "She is Canadian." I think it is because she lives in Canada, she knows more about Canada than China. I remind her that she is Chinese.)

Indeed, parents play a pivotal role in shaping their children's identity construction in a positive light. The same parent believes that it is important to maintain Chinese culture and said   in   Chinese,   "我地都會想佢學多些中文，中國人的習俗，例如會告訴她一些中國人的習俗 過年、尊重長輩、禮貌等" (We want her to learn more about Chinese and Chinese customs. For example, I will tell her about Chinese customs, Chinese New Year, to respect elders, Chinese manners, etc.). In this study, parents' hope that their children maintain the use of their heritage language can be viewed as the parents' perception that the Chinese language is an ethnic marker (Curdt-Christiansen, 2006, Myers-Scotton, 2006).

To help children understand who they are as they grow up, parents can use language to help them encode, process, and interpret their ethnic identity (Grosjean, 1982). As children interact with diverse people, they can become more aware of how both linguistic and cultural rules and norms are subject to their own interpretation and reinterpretation. As illustrated in this study, children continue to construct their identity through dialogue and interaction with others. The author acknowledges that while children's language preference may be a crude indicator of their current internalization of the norms and values of the dominant culture, it may be of use to follow up on these children to document how they describe themselves over time.

Implications

Parents

It is important for parents to maintain their heritage language at home, because it has a psychological and social impact upon children (Curdt-Christiansen, 2006). Parents' attitudes towards the home language also translate directly to children's proficiency in the language they speak (De Houwer, 1995), to their literacy activities (Myers-Scotton, 2006), and to their identities as effective learners (Dagenais, 2003).

The immigration literature suggests that immigrants generally have a difficult time finding their place both in and outside of the home, because of the kinds of collective programming and cultural understanding and privileges which are often internalized by local inhabitants early on, and can therefore be difficult for immigrants to understand (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Some of the immigrant parents also have a difficult time communicating with their children at home, because as their children gain more English proficiency, the distance between them becomes larger (Hong & Ham, 1992; Lee, 1991). However, parents' difficulties in positioning themselves at home and in Canada, as well as difficulties communicating with their children, were not evident in this study. The present study suggests that it requires a coordinated effort on the parents' part to cultivate in their children a sense of appreciation of and maintenance of their Chinese language, culture, and heritage.

Teachers

Language is "an instrument of power" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 648). While research has shown that older children are struggling between speaking their mother tongue and the dominant language in schools (Goldstein, 2003), it is not evident in the children in the present study. The author believes that learning a culture is a process involving both existing Canadians and immigrants. Through exposure to cultural change and the self-interpretation and evaluation process, children are capable of acknowledging and overcoming their culturally-ingrained biases towards others over time. As Fay (1996) pointed out, "rule-followers thus do not simply "conform" to rules, but instead elaborate and transform them in the process of following them" (p. 56). Even though culture affects the way social life is constituted and maintained, children are also shaping culture at the same time (Ouane, 2003). In order to embrace cultural differences, teachers can spark an on-going dialogue among children (Dagenais & Lamarre, 2005; Toohey, 2000).

School Policy-makers

While early school policy-makers adopted the linguists' viewpoint that it may be detrimental for children to learn multiple languages because it may strain their language-learning capacity (Cook, 2002), Grosjean (1982) argued that it is not proficiency in language learning that is important, it is when and how children use their languages to meet their communicative needs. As the Royal Commission on Education noted, "We look to schools to preserve diverse cultural heritages through language instruction and other studies..." (as cited in Sullivan, 1988, p. 11). Instilling knowledge and skills based on intercultural relations and communication can aid students' on-going interpretation of their own identity and their self-development, as well as their ability to relate to others (Beynon, & Toohey, 1991; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). This present research can further clarify researchers', scholars', and school policy-makers' previous misunderstandings about students' language development and allow them to reflect upon the current and changing cultural landscape in the area of education.

Research

There is scant research utilizing an in-depth, systematic approach to examine the potential effects of family language practices on young Chinese students. Through the interviews, we, as researchers, can hear their "voices", which will enable us to gain an emic (culture-specific insiders') perspective of the parents' reasons for putting their children in French immersion programs, and both parents' and children's insights into their negotiation of language use and identity across contexts. In order to examine how Bourdieu's (1977) constructs of habitus, field, language capital, and linguistic markets (which explain how people interact within social spaces and the role of language within people's interaction) apply to Chinese immigrant families, future researchers can employ an ethnographic approach to document how Chinese children's and parents' language development and identity construction unfold across situations and time. This will deepen both researchers' and theorists' understanding of Chinese people's views of the relationship between language and identity formation.

Limitations

With respect to the limitations of semi-structured interviews, the data collection relied on parents' self-reporting, which could be a problem, as parents may try to present the positive image of bringing up their children in relation to language acquisition and practices, and the children may be too young to provide 'thick', meaningful responses. Another weakness in the data collection is that it lacks a structure to transcribe and code respondents' interview data. Furthermore, the samples were too small, and the method for choosing samples was not random in this research project, thus making it difficult to generalize the findings to the general population.

Despite the limitations, semi-structured interviews, along with Grosjean's (1982) theoretical framework, are useful in this research because they allow for discovery as opposed to merely verifying theories. As well, when eliciting responses in person, the author was able to ask for clarification, thus possible miscommunication was minimized. It was the author's endeavor in this study to use semi-structured interviews to understand both parents' and children's language practices, which gave a deeper understanding of some of the contextual factors that influenced their language development in and outside of the home. The interviews provided details and meaning at a deep personal level for which the quantitative approach is not designed. Hence, semi-structured interviews were appropriate to the present cultural study.

Future Research

The present findings suggested that young Chinese children's identity construction can only be understood through close observation of the linguistic resources family members utilize in their interactions with one another across contexts. In order to enhance the validity of the current findings, the author plans to conduct home visits with the participating families. This will give the author first-hand experience of their actual language practices and interaction processes, including communicative resources, strategies, and challenges, which in turn will provide insights into their identity construction and negotiation at home and in local spaces (Courcy, 2002).

Home visits, along with semi-structured interviews, will contribute significantly towards a better understanding of the processes involved in young Chinese children's identities, as well as expose any existing gaps in services and resources that are needed to help Chinese children

in French immersion programs. It will also help parents nurture their children's cultural heritage. Both home and school are of major importance in strengthening children's development and helping them to become productive citizens (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003). Through respondents' stories, the author hopes that parents, teachers, school policy-makers, and researchers can gain an emic, insider's perspective on some of the contextual factors that may affect children's development, language practices, and identity construction in the ever-changing multicultural society in Canada.

Notes

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