

***Family Language Policy and Immigrant Chinese Children's Bilingual Development in
New Zealand Context***

Long (Sophia) Li, Manukau Institute of Technology, New Zealand

The European Conference of Language Learning 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The concept of Family Language Policy (FLP) and the studies on language beliefs, language management and language practice in terms of how immigrant families transmit their heritage language to the next generation have already drawn interest from researchers worldwide. Immigrant parents' language ideology, their bilingual learning and bicultural experiences, together with the language attitudes from the host culture determine the immigrant families' language policy at home. Data was collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews, and the qualitative data was themed and key findings identified and discussed. The findings suggested that Chinese immigrant family's FLP is focused on their heritage language maintenance based on strong practice in domain separation. The linguistic environment in their home settings were unveiled, which included their language ideology and beliefs towards both languages, the language input and exposure in home settings, the verbal interaction patterns between the parents and the children functioning as language management, as well as the parents' effort in cultivating the children's developing bicultural identity by providing culture-related life objects. Parents' perspectives on children's bilingual development in educational settings are also explored and discussed. The study of Chinese immigrant children's FLP shed light on the understanding of inclusive teaching for learners from any bilingual backgrounds. Māori learners and Pasifika learners, as well as the many bilingual immigrant learners from various cultural backgrounds, can benefit from this deepened understanding of bilingual learners' genuine learning needs.

Keywords: Family Language Policy, Bilingualism, Immigrant Children

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Introduction

In New Zealand, English as the dominant language is used in nearly all areas of the social life, including education (Statistics NZ, 2019). However, with the growing number of immigrants, New Zealand is becoming highly diverse in the range of the language spoken (Office of Ethnic Communities, 2018), which makes New Zealand a country of highly multilingual environment. Young immigrant children bring their heritage language and culture with them into their daily learning and development in the early childhood education (ECE) settings, which are mostly English-medium in New Zealand. How to support these young bilingual learners to achieve bilingual and bicultural competence in ECE settings has been an emerging interest of local researchers (Podmore, Hedges, Keegan & Harvey, 2015). However, not enough research is conducted on the immigrant families' effort in supporting their children's bilingual development in home settings due to the language and cultural barriers. As part of my Master's research on the parental expectations in immigrant Chinese families, this study aims to explore the language environment in Chinese immigrant families in New Zealand, which is reflected through the structuring and implementation of their FLPs. Therefore, the research questions are:

- What FLP do some immigrant Chinese children experience in the home settings?
- How is the children's bilingual and bicultural development supported by their FLP?

Family Language Policy

Family Language Policy is identified as a set of practices that all family members continuously implement relating to language use and literacy in home settings (Curdts-Christiansen, 2009; King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008; Spolsky, 2004). The three components of a FLP are language belief, language management and language practice (Curdts-Christiansen, 2009; King & Logan-Terry, 2008; Schwartz, 2010), which can reflect the complex language environment in the home settings.

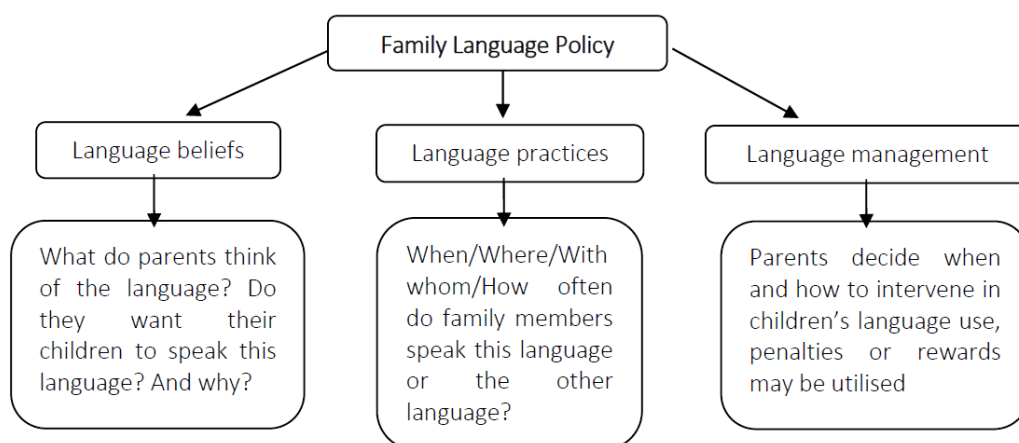


Figure 1: The Components of FLP (Li, 2020)

There are various factors that determine the structuring of the FLP in immigrants' families. Curdt-Christiansen (2009) suggests that the parents' personal experiences including their educational backgrounds, their immigration experiences and cultural dispositions will influence the shaping of their language belief. Based on their empirical studies, Hua and Wei (2016) claim that family language choices derive from family members' diverse linguistic needs in both home culture and the host culture, which are influenced by the specific socio-

linguistic contexts that each family member experiences. Schwartz (2010) further explains that family structure, especially the sibling positions may influence the implementation of language practice and management.

Bilingual Development in New Zealand

In New Zealand, children experience a plurilingual environment in all social settings, including home settings and ECE settings (Guo, 2014; Podmore et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2018). The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) advocates that children should “grow up strong in identity, language and culture” (p. 7), therefore multilingualism and multiculturalism are supported and nurtured in ECE settings. However, researchers suggest that domain separation is evident for immigrant children’s language use, which means that they choose different languages for different social settings (Chan, 2018; Ho, Cheung & Didham, 2017).

Based on the Principle of Family and Community in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), ECE teachers are encouraged to proactively engage the families to participate in the teaching and learning. The first step of effective engagement will be a good understanding in the families’ beliefs, knowledge and aspirations. In order to explore the immigrant Chinese families’ beliefs, knowledge and aspirations relating to the children’s language development, my research uses the theoretical framework of FLP to analyse language environment in the children’s home settings.

Methodology

In my research, I adopted qualitative approach to investigate the participants’ meaning-making in their specific socio-cultural context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to provide an in-depth inquiry of an intrinsically bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), case study was used as the main methodology.

To recruit the participating mothers, I put on a notice on WeChat (a popular social media app from Mainland China), and four mothers eventually took part in the study. They were from various backgrounds in education, immigration, family structure and overseas experiences, as shown below:

	Ana	Piper	Eve	Irene
Age	38	36	42	34
Years in NZ	20	2	15	9
Immigration	Family	Skilled (in progress)	Skilled	Skilled
Qualifications	Bachelor's	Master's	High school	Bachelor's
Overseas experiences	None	7 years in Canada	3 years in Japan	None
Child	Jimmy	Dora	Katie	Erik
Age	3 years 7 months	2 years 11 months	2 years 7 months	4 years 8 months
Siblings	One elder brother King	none	One elder brother Jake	none

Figure 2: Background Information of the Participants

There were two rounds of semi-structured interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and translated into English. The interviews were held in locations and times that the participants chose to their convenience, and the second interviews held after the participants read the transcript of the first interviews, so that they had the time to reflect on their answers and clarify any misunderstandings (Shenton, 2004).

The data collected consisted largely of the participants' interpretations and perceptions. When data collection and data analysis are spontaneously integrated together in the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), the process of data analysis started from the very beginning of data collection. I use thematic analysis for the qualitative data collected to generate collective and shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The themes revealed in the findings present well-structured and implemented FLP in the immigrant Chinese families.

Findings and Discussions

Language Belief

The participating mothers saw Chinese and English of equal status in their lives and strive to support their children to achieve higher proficiency in both languages with similar pace. They all expressed that the learning of Chinese for their children aimed at effective communication, for their future academic studies, travelling, job market and overall development. This finding is supported by the previous research on Chinese immigrant parents (e.g. Chan, 2018; Guo, 2014; Hu, Torr & Whiteman, 2014). They acknowledged the status quo that English is the dominant language in New Zealand, and aware that there is not enough language input in Chinese language in social settings, thus they focus their FLP in home settings on the maintenance of Chinese language and culture. "There is very little Chinese language environment here [in New Zealand], so I have to do my best to support my children at home

for their Chinese learning” (Ana, Interview 1, p. 5). The FLP reflected the parental expectations on the immigrant children’s heritage language proficiency aiming at gaining “membership in the ethnic culture” (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2010, p. 19). The commitment to the heritage language development is evident.

Language Practice

The language practice is observed among the interactions between family members (King & Logan-Terry, 2008). The participants shared their language choices, interaction patterns and opportunities for language use in home settings. It is evident that Chinese is the dominant language used at home for communicative purposes as well as the tool for supporting the children’s holistic development.

The finding of the study confirms the domain separation in immigrant Chinese children’s language learning: heritage language at home, and host language in other social settings (Chan, 2018; Ho, Cheung & Didham, 2017). The Chinese parents tried their best to create a language environment that is rich in their host language and culture in home settings, including using Chinese for communicative purposes, providing bilingual learning resources, using Chinese story-telling app and everyday life objects. The heritage language is used as one of the most important cultural tools for the transmission of heritage culture between generations in home settings (Baker, 2014). The immigrant Chinese children are significantly exposed in Chinese language and culture in home settings, which resonates with linguists’ emphasis on language exposure (e.g. Fillmore, 2000; Genesee and Nicoladis, 2005). For example:

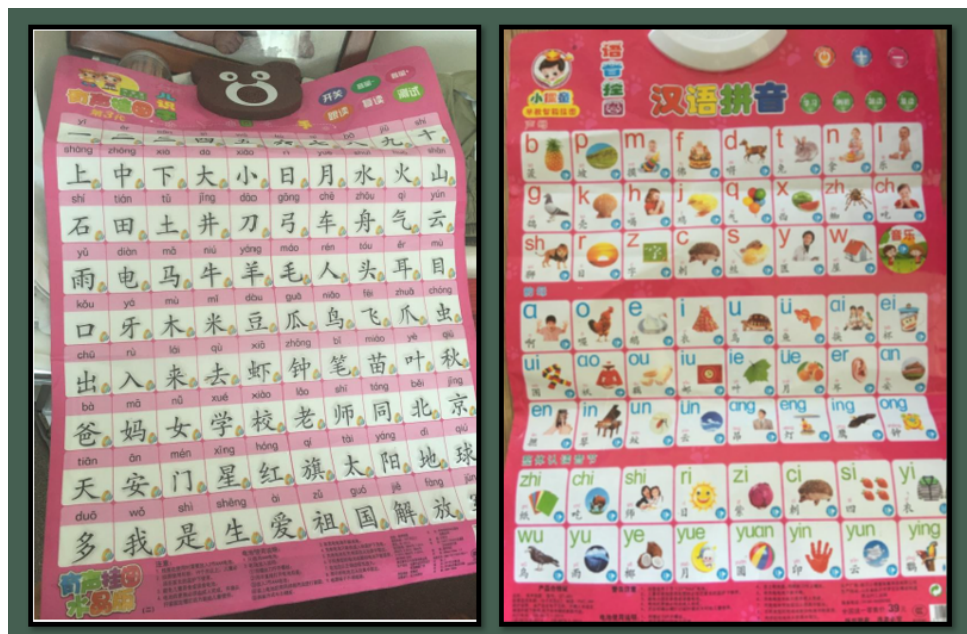


Figure 3: The Pinyin Charts Displayed on the Wall

Pinyin charts demonstrate the Romanisation of Chinese pronunciation, which support the children’s early development of Chinese language. The charts are interactive; therefore, the children are encouraged to explore them freely, without much parents’ interventions. The language practice shown from the parents’ perspective respects the children’s choices of learning experience and benefits their developing autonomy.



Figure 4: The Story-Telling App on Mothers' Cell-Phone

All participating Chinese mothers use teaching and learning app in Chinese to support their home education for the children's language development. What's more, cultural and moral education is spontaneously incorporated into the learning of their heritage language.



Figure 5: Bilingual Books that Cover All Areas of Child Development Including Moral Education

The children's cultural identity was discussed by the participants as well. The participants expect to support an integrated cultural identity for their children (Chen, Benet-Martinez & Harris Bond, 2008), and claim that the immigrant children's developing cultural identity should be transformative and complex (Bernstein, 2016), which reflects their immigration experiences,

cultural orientations and dispositions. One of the participants, Piper, designed a bilingual family logo to print on the T-shirts for all the family members, which emphasised the origin of the family and a brief history of the city. By providing this T-shirt to Dora, the mother signalled to the immigrant child that “This is our city. This is where we come from and where we belong” (Piper, interview 2, p. 4).



Figure 6: Piper Designed a Bilingual Family Logo for All the Family Members

When the participants felt that they need extra support in their children’s learning in Chinese language and culture, they sought help from the language community, and arrange playdates or activities to maximise the opportunities for their children to use Chinese in authentic context. Irene joined a drama play group initiated by another Chinese mother. “We teach them to recognise their names [in Chinese], their Pinyin, a little self-introduction for warm-up. Then for the drama, the children need to know their own words.” (Irene, interview 1, p.4) Such activity in Chinese can be very challenging for immigrant children who speak English in education settings. In the introduction of the group, the mother who initiated the activity wrote: “The sole purpose of the activity is about learning Chinese, Chinese, Chinese! We present the learning in the form of drama play, and help the children with lots of abilities during their performance”, as shown below:



Figure 7: Chat History of the Chinese Drama Play Group in Organising Activities

English is not excluded in home education. Apart from the bilingual learning resources provided by the parents, they also support their children's English learning at home by teaching them English such as English songs to help the children fit in ECE settings. "We have English Time and Chinese Time at home" (Irene, interview 1, p. 1). However, the children are still guided to use as much Chinese as possible. "If they get the habit to always speak English at home, that'll be a trouble" (Eve, interview 1, p. 2). Even though the parents aspire and support the bilingual development of the children, the focus of their FLP is on heritage language maintenance.

Language Management

Based on the language belief in their FLP, all participants focus on the communicative purposes of using Chinese at home. Therefore, when the children start to use English in home settings, the parents would remind the children that English does not lead to understanding and communication at home among family members. For example, Irene and Piper would remind their children that their fathers did not speak good English. If they wanted to talk to their fathers, the children had to speak Chinese. Ana and Eve would tell the children explicitly that they did not speak good English and Chinese is the only acceptable language at home. The communication between the children and the grandparents was emphasised as well. "Dora has to learn how to speak Chongqing Hua; otherwise she can't understand what the grandparents are talking about. She speaks Mandarin when I speak Mandarin with her, and she speaks Chongqing Hua with her grandma" (Piper, Interview 1, p. 4).

The participants showed good understanding of the children who preferred to speak English due to their bilingual development. Instead of scolding the children for speaking English, Ana, Eve and Irene used the translation app on their phones to help their children to find the right Chinese words when they started to speak English. Their language management at home

showed respect for the children and less power imbalance between family members. “When he doesn’t know how to speak a word in Chinese, we will look it up together. We Google it. And I teach him how to say it in Chinese, then he will learn it” (Ana, interview 1, p. 1). The children had shown their developing autonomy in their language choices, and the parents would guide their language choice to fit the FLP. “When he really wants to sing English songs, I will say OK five more minute in English, then we sing Chinese songs. I don’t force him. But if he is upset, I’ll just let him” (Irene, interview 1, p. 2). Apparently, the strategies were supportive, constructive and reciprocal.

It is common for immigrant families where the parents have limited proficiency of the host language, which gives the children the spaces to make their own decisions in language choices (Fillmore, 1991). In my study, the parents supported the children’s developing autonomy but also provide effective guidance to support them to adhere to the FLP.

Supporting English Development

When the focus of home education is on the heritage language and culture, the participants also shared their expectations on the children’s language learning in ECE settings. The domain separation confirmed in Schwartz (2010) is evident in that the immigrant parents find themselves confident in support the children’s Chinese learning, and prefer the children to learn only English in education settings. They clarified that they did not expect the ECE settings to support the children in their heritage language, with the main reason that they expected the children to learn how to be a Kiwi (New Zealander) who knows how to function in dominant language and social settings. This is supported by previous research on Chinese immigrant families in their expectations on children’s learning in ECE settings (Chan, 2018; Guo, 2012; Guo & Dalli, 2012). The immigrant Chinese parents see ECE settings as the environment for the immigrant Chinese children to learn about the host language and culture, and they prefer the educators in main-stream English-media education settings to leave the job of heritage culture learning to the parents themselves, which is also evident in other Asian families’ child-rearing perspectives (Ho, Cheung & Didham, 2017).

The parents showed trust for the ECE educators in helping their children in their English development. “As long as we find the right school [childcare centre] for the children, their English is not a problem” (Ana, interview 1, p. 5). They chose to step back and respect the teachers’ work, so that they could focus on the children’s Chinese learning. “I can’t help them with their English. ...for Chinese learning, what we can offer at home and in the Chinese community is pretty enough” (Eve, interview 1, p. 4). “Her English learning in childcare and future school will be enough for her, and the only obstacle for her English learning will be us, especially her father, who does not speak much English” (Piper, interview 1, p. 3). If there is any Chinese spoken in ECE settings, it will be for the social-emotional wellbeing of the transitioning children. “...so he doesn’t get so frustrated when no one can respond to his needs.” (Ivy, interview 1, p. 4). This perspective is supported by Guo and Dalli (2012) that heritage language spoken in host culture is to facilitate better participation. With the focus on learning how to function in host cultures as the learning outcomes in ECE settings, the immigrant parents do not even expect the Chinese ECE teachers to speak Chinese with their children in ECE settings (Ho, Cheung & Didham, 2017).

Conclusion

The study has presented an overall picture of the linguistic environment in immigrant Chinese children's home settings, and provided insight in answering the two research questions.

The FLP that immigrant Chinese children experience at home is focused on the maintenance of their heritage language and culture. Generally speaking, the language beliefs that parents hold show a balanced perspective towards the status of the heritage language and the host language. The parents believe that it is vital for the children to develop both languages effectively in the early age, which significantly benefit their developing multicultural identity and gaining membership in both cultures (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2010). However, when the parents feel that there are not enough resources to support the children's heritage language development in the societal domain, they focus their home education in promoting their heritage language, which gives the heritage language and culture a dominant position in their home environment. The language practice differs between families. Depending on parental expectations for children's bilingual development, the Chinese parents may create an exclusive Chinese language environment at home, or a Chinese-dominant bilingual environment. No matter in which case, the heritage language is encouraged to be used for communicative purposes as well as functioning as the cultural tool for home education. The language management tends to be more co-constructive, supportive and respectful than a stereotyped Chinese family which is focused on filial piety (Xiao) (Wu et al., 2002; Yan, 2017). The children's interest, autonomy and learning needs are respected among family members.

The FLP discovered in my study supports the immigrant Chinese children's bilingual development positively. In home settings, they have the opportunity to learn their heritage language intensively in naturalistic settings rich in language input (Ellis, 2018). The parents and grandparents transfer their heritage culture through the use of their heritage language, which enhances the children's development in their cultural identity (Debski, 2018; Baker, 2014). On the other hand, their FLP leads to the parents' choices of leaving English development totally to the ECE settings. The parents show support by choosing the right ECE services for the children and support the curriculum and participation in ECE settings (Guo, 2012, 2015). The parents' choices leave the educators the sole responsibility of supporting the children's development in only one language.

The study on immigrant Chinese families' FLP shed light on the immigrants' home education relating to their heritage language and culture. It helps educators, researchers and policy makers to gain more understanding in the immigrant young bilingual learners' learning needs and the parental expectations, not only limited to Chinese immigrants. In New Zealand context, the study can also help educators better collaborate with the families in supporting bilingual children's language development, including immigrant children as well as Māori and Pasifika children who speak their heritage languages in home settings.

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