

Exploratory Model on Advising Bilingual Parenting
among Chinese Immigrants

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Bilingual education has always been a hotly debated topic among politicians and educators in the United States, a nation in which the hegemony of English seemed self-evident through much of history (Crawford, 2000). Despite such an argument, the enrollment of Chinese language students in both the heritage sector and the formal education sector has been steadily rising. According to Scott McGinnis (2005) at the Defense Language Institute, the enrollment of Chinese language students reached 140,000 in heritage language schools and 59,000 in K-12 and higher education in 2002. The seemingly controversial nature of bilingual education and the increasing popularity of Chinese language education presents a growing need for a model in the advising of bilingual parenting among Chinese immigrants.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to shed light on Chinese immigrants' perspectives on their children's heritage language maintenance and development; second, to bridge the information gap between current research and immigrant parents by suggesting an exploratory model in disseminating crucial information on raising bilingual children.

According to sociolinguists, language maintenance depends in large part on the communities where the languages are spoken (Fishman, 1991). What role can leaders of today's diverse learning community play in assisting minority parents to raise bilingual children that can withstand the pull of English (Tse, 2001), and continue to maintain and develop their home language ability after enrolling in mainstream American public schools?

A Case Study on Chinese Parental Attitudes

A case study on Chinese parental attitudes toward their children's heritage language maintenance and development was conducted at Ybarra Elementary School of Rowland Unified School District. The district serves more than 18,000 students from Rowland Heights, Walnut, West Covina and La Puente. Ybarra's students are mainly from Rowland Heights, an immigrant

city with a population that is over 50% Asian. Chinese students constitute the largest single ethnic body at Ybarra.

Methodology and Findings

Focus groups, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews were used to collect data among the first generation Chinese parents on factors that affect attitudes towards their children's heritage language maintenance and development. The findings of the research suggest that Chinese parental attitudes about their children's heritage language maintenance and development are affected by their own educational, cultural and immigrant experiences.

Results suggested that irrespective of the educational background of first generation Chinese parents, most of them desired their children to be completely bilingual and biliterate. However, responses to certain statements in assessing the perceived importance of Chinese learning were significantly different between those with a higher educational attainment and those with a lower educational attainment. When asked to choose from the choices of "strongly agree", "agree", "not sure", "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statement, "there is no need for my child to learn Chinese in the US", the percentage of those that responded "strongly disagree" are 69%, 60%, 50%, 24% and 0% among graduate degree holders, bachelor degree holders, less-than-4 year's college degree holders, senior high school diploma holders and junior high certificate holders respectively.

In agreement with the research of Harding, Edith and Riley (1986), the study shows that Chinese immigrant parents who come from a multicultural society have a stronger desire to raise their children to be bilingual and biliterate. The experience of living in a multilingual society has given Chinese parents a better understanding of the importance and benefits of speaking more

than one language. In contrast, parents that come from a monoculture have a higher tendency of doubting the likelihood of having their children become bilingual or multilingual.

Length of stay in the US, which is a multicultural society, also plays a key role in parents' perception of the necessity of having their children learn Chinese. Among the categories of those that have stayed in the U.S. for "less than 2 years", "2-3 years", "4-6 years", "7-9 years" and "more than 9 years", there was a sharp contrast between the two ends of the categories. Fifty percent of the "less than 2 years" agreed with the statement "There is no need for my child to learn Chinese". In contrast, 48.6 % of the "more than 9 years" category strongly disagreed with the statement.

The findings of the research suggest that Chinese immigrant parents with low educational attainment, limited multilingual experience or shorter length of stay in the US are at a higher risk of neglecting the development of their children's heritage language. In helping this group of parents make a more informative decision on their children's heritage language education, an exploratory model that aims to bridge the information gap between current research and immigrant parents is proposed.

A Model for Advising Immigrant Parents

This model consists of two major components: the "what" and "how". What do these new immigrant parents need to know, and how do we bring the needed information to them? Ultimately, parents decide whether their children will gain opportunities to maintain and develop their heritage language. However, it is also the responsibility of the educators of minority students to help parents become aware of the importance of bilingualism. Our model focuses on getting our parents to realize that, "beyond utilitarian and unemotional instrumentality, the heart of bilingualism is belonging" (Edwards 2004, 30). In a remarkable bilingual handbook, John

Edwards, a psychology professor commented, “speaking a particular language means belonging to a particular speech community” (2004, 23). Consequently, not speaking the language of a particular speech community would very likely inhibit a person from forming a firm sense of belonging in that particular community.

In targeting our intended audience, we first need to find out their channel of information receiving. In addition to gaining information from socializing, this group of parents usually obtain information from local Chinese newspapers, such as *Chinese Daily News*, local Chinese radio broadcasts, such as AM 1300/AM 1600, and local Chinese news on television. These Chinese media can bring updated research to parents. Furthermore, to promote children’s welfare, educators can also partner with school-related organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association to arrange bilingual workshops on bilingual parenting at local public school facilities.

This study showed that first generation Chinese immigrant parents are at a higher risk of neglecting their children’s heritage language development. We suggest that Chinese media and school-related organizations assist parents to achieve maximum benefits from current research on bilingual parenting.

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