

## Family and Parent Involvement in Dual Language Development

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This ethnographic study with four Chinese and four Hispanic elementary school children and their parents revealed that both parents and children had a strong desire to learn English well and maintain their heritage languages, but were also concerned that they might lose their heritage languages due to the pressure to learn English well and the lack of support from the schools. Interviews with the parents and the children together, with participant observations of the children at play in their communities, suggested that most parents took a great effort to help their children improve their English, but the effort that they took to help these children to maintain the heritage languages were limited. Similarly, participants in this study took various strategies to improve their English skills but showed various degrees of reluctance to use their heritage languages at home. The diverse living environment of the participants and their younger siblings in their families might have helped these participants to maintain their heritage languages.

### Introduction

A recent report showing population growth among English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States revealed an increase from 5% in the years 1993-1994 to 7% in the years 1999-2000, with the larger populations appearing in the western and southern regions (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2004). The number of K-12 ELLs increased to 10 million in the United States and it took at least five years for ELLs to become academically

competent in English although they may be conversationally fluent in English within two years (Smith-Davis, 2004).

Due to historical, political, and cultural reasons, most immigrants in the United States lost their heritage language within two or three generations (Ovando, 2003; UCLA Steering Committee, 2000) although a great deal of research studies had shown numerous benefits (e.g., group membership, identity, cultural heritage, cognitive development, and academic achievement) of maintaining the heritage language for immigrants (Cavallaro, 2005). The loss of the heritage language for immigrants was largely due to the emphasis of rapid language shift to English in the U.S. educational system (Draper & Hicks, 2000).

In 1974, the Supreme Court's ruling in the case of *Lau v. Nichols* (414 U.S. 5637) stated that all ELLs must be provided instructional help and lesson modifications in support of their linguistic needs in order to effectively participate in the school's curriculum. The ruling did not define specific program designs to be used in these schools, although bilingual education and teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) were two suggestions (Wong-Fillmore, 2000). Since then both programs are being employed in many states with ELLs although bilingual education was found to be more favorable towards ELLs' acquisition of English as well as helping them to maintain their heritage languages (Garcia-Vazquez, Vazquez, & Lopez, 1997; Kirk-Senesac, 2002; Thomas & Collier, 2003).

When a child is acquiring two languages simultaneously, the two languages can interact with each other. Based upon such a belief, three potential outcomes of bilingual acquisition were proposed: acceleration, deceleration, and transfer (Paradis & Genesee, 1996).

Acceleration refers to the notion that bilingual children may master the grammatical properties of the languages earlier than monolingual children because of the facilitative influence of an analogous structure of the languages. Deceleration means that the double burden of acquiring two languages slows down the learning process of both languages. Transfer is a process where a linguistic structure from one language is used in another language during the development. Out of all these outcomes, only the first one (acceleration) was positive. Nevertheless, “there is no scientific evidence that infants’ language learning ability is limited to one language” (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004, p. 58). Research on infants suggested that all children have the innate capability to acquire two languages and bilingual infants were not delayed in language development (Bosch & Sebastian-Galles, 2001). With respect to cognitive development, earlier researchers posit that bilingualism was associated with emotional maladjustment and psychodynamic conflict (Diebold, 1968) as well as lower levels of verbal intelligence and/or general intelligence (Arsenian, 1945; Darcy, 1946; Macnamara, 1966). More recent researchers (e.g., Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; Peal & Lambert, 1962), however, noted that bilingual children had advantages over monolingual children in cognitive development.

While researchers debate about bilingual over monolingual development, parents and students are also concerned that learning two languages simultaneously could impede learning English. Out of the 19 Latino families surveyed by Sheffer (2003), 13 believed that it was good to teach the kids how to read and write in Spanish first and then apply the knowledge to English. On the other hand, eight parents said that English was the most important

language to learn and 10 parents expected their children to stop speaking Spanish during the elementary school period. In a larger study with 280 middle school Latino students in southern California, 59% felt that learning in Spanish could delay their development in English although 69% wished to develop both English and Spanish (Lee, 2006). A more in-depth ethnographic study with eight Latino families who had fifth-grade children in Los Angeles revealed that all parents expressed high priority in having their children become bilingual with the belief that speaking Spanish was tied to their sense of identity (Monzo, 2005). Similar findings were noted in Chinese families. Most of the 86 Chinese parents in a San Francisco preschool reported that developing literacy in primary language (Chinese) would help reading and writing in the secondary language (English), and believed that it was important for children to continue developing the native language (Lao, 2004). These parents encouraged their children to develop dual languages in order for their children to have better career opportunities in the future, to facilitate communication with Chinese speaking communities, and to develop positive self-image.

Although learning in the school context is important for students, family and parent involvement cannot be neglected, especially in helping these ELLs to maintain their heritage languages. “Children learn from their parents and teachers, and they have an innate capability to process and use several languages” (Montemayor, 2004, p. 1). According to language socialization theory (Ochs, 1999; Shieffelin, 1990), parental and community support in providing sociocultural knowledge and using the heritage language in daily interactions with the children is essential for the maintenance of the

heritage language. Nevertheless, most bilingual parents in the United States were less forthcoming and unassuming thinking that they should not interfere with the school about their children's education either because of their own limited English or low educational background (Crutchley, 1999; Montecel et al., 1993). Researchers are currently developing new models of teaching and learning that closely reflect students' home language backgrounds and view student diversity as an asset for building a more democratic society (McCarthey, 2000). Parent involvement in and encouragement of children's home reading is particularly important in fostering the children's literacy development (Jimenez, Filippini, & Gerber, 2006; Willis, 2002; Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1996).

Although many studies have been conducted to investigate this phenomenon, there are still not enough data to show how young children acquire two languages or the effect bilingualism has on emerging literacy (Hammer, Miccio, & Wagstaff, 2003). Therefore, this study focuses on the role that family and parents play in the assistance of elementary school ELLs' learning of English on one hand and maintaining their heritage languages on the other hand.

### Method

A six-month qualitative ethnographic study through family visits, interviews with the children and their parents (mostly mother), and participant observations of children at play was employed to answer the question as to how family and parents are doing to help elementary school ELLs learn English and maintain their heritage languages. This approach was adopted because participants respond more completely to interviews than to

questionnaires, and interviews help to build rapport and makes observations of non-verbal behaviors possible (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). These non-verbal behaviors may provide significant additional information, especially for children whose cognitive development is at preliminary stages.

### *Participants*

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Participants of this study include four Chinese-speaking students and four Spanish-speaking students in the fourth grade from two public elementary schools from two urban school districts in the United States. Two schools were chosen because the researcher wanted to make sure that the school environment was as comparable as possible with respect to the percentage of Chinese/Hispanic students in the ESL program. Four Chinese 4<sup>th</sup> – and 5<sup>th</sup> - grade students were selected from a school where Chinese students were the dominant group in the ESL classes and four Hispanic 4<sup>th</sup> – and 5<sup>th</sup> - grade students were selected from a school where Spanish-speaking students were the dominant group in the ESL classes. The ethnographic information of all participants is presented in Table 1.

### *Setting*

The home environment for all these participants was very similar. All Chinese participants were living in an apartment complex where the majority of minority residents were Chinese and all Hispanic participants were living in another apartment complex where the majority of minority residents were Hispanics. Both of these apartment complexes were close to

Table 1

*Ethnographic Information about the Participants*

Participants	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Grade-Level	Length of Stay in the United States	Number of Siblings in the Family
Maomao	Chinese	9	Male	4	3	0
Huzi	Chinese	10	Male	5	3	0
Qianqian	Chinese	9	Female	4	3	1
Duoduo	Chinese	10	Female	5	6	2
Pablo	Hispanic	9	Male	4	3	2
Jose	Hispanic	10	Male	5	10	2
Anna	Hispanic	9	Female	4	4	1
Rosa	Hispanic	10	Female	5	5	2

*Note.* Pseudonyms were used for all participants for the sake of confidentiality and the protection of the participants.

the largest university in each city, as a result, many residents were university/graduate students and were from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

*Data Sources*

Data were gathered from multiple sources during the visits to the participants' homes for the purpose of triangulation. Participants' homes were chosen as the research site, and the language used for the interviews were a mixture of Chinese and English for Chinese participants and a mixture of English and Spanish for Spanish participants. This was because the researcher is a fluent speaker of English and Chinese and could speak Spanish for communicative purposes, and the researcher tended to use the language with which the participants felt most comfortable. The similarities between the researcher and the participants in language and culture aided in developing rapport (Esterberg, 2002), and the use of the

participants' native language during interviews helped to maintain the meaning in its original language and to facilitate the functional equivalences of the researcher and the participants (Gonzalez y Gonzalez & Lincoln, 2006).

*Parent interviews.* Parents of the participants were interviewed once every month to collect information about parent and other family members' involvement with the participant's learning of English and their heritage languages. This includes activities and parental support such as reading books and watching TV programs in the two languages together.

*Participant observations.* Every participant was observed once each month during his/her play with other children and each observation lasted about one hour. The scenarios for the play included, but were not limited to, playing video games, computer games, card games, soccer, basketball, chess, as well as trading Pokemon and/or Digimon cards. The

researcher's role changed from an observer to a participant observer during the six months. Information about what language was spoken under what situations was recorded in the field notes. Questions about why the participants switched their languages were also noted.

*Children interviews.* Spontaneous follow-up interviews were conducted after each interview to help the researcher understand the participants' behaviors at play and why a particular language was used in a certain situation. Questions about the children's efforts to learn the English language as well as to maintain their heritage languages were also asked. These interviews also helped the researcher to solicit accurate information about the participants' attitudes towards English, the heritage languages, the English-speaking community, and the communities that spoke their heritage languages.

#### *Data Analytical Procedure*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a graduate research assistant who also coded the data independently with the researcher as a measure of peer debriefing to enhance trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Generic theorizing processes and general analytic procedures (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) were used to construct an interpretive description of the children's language learning processes associated with the family and parent involvement and their home community. The procedures to analyze the data involved scanning the data, creating categories, noting patterns, looking for counterevidence, and selecting important domains for further analysis. The researcher developed a codebook to record the detailed process of data coding, including the description of each code,

inclusion and exclusion criteria, and exemplars for each code. The codebook was refined when new data did not fit into existing themes and when the two coders expressed differences during the discussion after coding the data separately. Using codes to organize the data allowed us to identify the links, relationships, and patterns while reducing and making meaning out of the data. After the data were coded and categories identified, results were summarized to the participants and their parents for accuracy. The participants and their parents fully agreed that the interpretations were accurate and gave permission to publish the results.

#### Results and Discussion

Themes that emerged from the data analytical procedure were (1) parents' and children's attitudes toward the learning of English and their heritage languages; (2) parents and family involvement in the children's dual language development; (3) children's effort in learning English and their heritage language; and (4) the influence of the environment on children's learning. Each theme is discussed in detail with direct quotes from the participants and their parents in the following paragraphs.

#### *Attitude toward the Learning of English and the Heritage Language*

All parents expressed their hope that their children would be fully bilingual when they grew up because they would have more job opportunities and they could communicate well with their relatives in the United States or in their home countries. They were saddened to know that their children could lose their home language and culture if no support is provided at home and in the school. Huzi came to the United States when he was in the second grade and

could speak and write in Chinese very well at that time. His parents were so concerned about his English proficiency that they spent a lot of time helping him study English but ignored his Chinese. At the time of this study, he could no longer write more than 50 words in Chinese although he could still speak in Chinese.

Jose was born in Los Angeles and could speak very fluent Spanish before his family immigrated to North Carolina. His parents thought that his English had improved a lot but his Spanish had become much worse than before.

Although all parents were concerned with their children's learning of English and maintaining their heritage languages, differences were also noted between the Chinese and Hispanic families. Spanish was spoken more often in Spanish families than Chinese was used in Chinese families. In addition, Chinese children used mostly English whereas Hispanic children used mostly Spanish when children were at play in their own communities. Maomao and Huzi were both the only children in their families and had fewer opportunities to speak Chinese at home compared with other children in this study who had siblings to practice their heritage languages. Their parents could speak English and wanted to practice their own English speaking skills with the children because they thought that their children's English did not have the Chinese accent. Duoduo's mother was very regretful when she realized that Duoduo was reluctant to speak Chinese at home although she could speak Chinese. She said, "Duoduo could speak Chinese but she often talked to us (parents) in English. When my parents wanted to talk to her on the phone, she really had a hard time speaking Chinese. Gradually, they just seldom talk anymore." She continued to share her responsibility for this result,

I used to speak English to Duoduo to help me improve my English because she learned English from her teacher, American teacher, whereas I learned English from a Chinese teacher in China. I have strong accents in speaking English. Now, she is just used to speaking English to me even when I speak Chinese to her.

The participants' attitudes towards the English and the English-speaking community were both positive, and they all had strong motivation to learn the English language. Most Hispanic children have positive attitudes towards the Spanish language and the Spanish-speaking community whereas most Chinese students had negative attitudes towards the Chinese language. Although all the Chinese participants had exposure to the Chinese language in a Chinese school on Sundays, they all thought that the Chinese writing system was difficult to learn. They could not memorize the Chinese characters that they learned at the Chinese school. No information was obtained about the Chinese children's attitudes towards the Chinese community because the Chinese families participated in this study did not have close connections with their relatives and the children were seldom exposed to a true Chinese community. While most Hispanic families had many relatives in the same city, all of the relatives of the Chinese families in this study lived in China. Therefore, the Chinese children seldom had a chance to interact with their relatives who spoke Chinese only.

#### *Parents and Family Involvement in the Children's Dual Language Development*

All the parents of the participants cared about their children's education although they had limited involvement in

their children's education at school. This was found to be associated with the Chinese and Hispanic culture. These parents saw their role as being responsible for providing support in basic needs as well as educating their children to respect their teacher and to behave well at school. They respected the teacher and believed that teachers were knowledgeable and it was the teachers' responsibility to transfer knowledge to the children. They thought that they should not interfere with the teacher's job. All of the parents in this study also had the language barrier to communicate with their child's teachers. These findings echoed those reached by Crutchley (1999).

It was not surprising to find that most parents provided great support at home for their children to study English. Huzi's mother often took him to a public library during weekends and asked him to read for hours. Qianqian's mother checked her homework every day and used the English-Chinese dictionary to help her understand what the questions on Qianqian's homework were asking. When Qianqian came across a word she did not know, her mother again used the dictionary to find the meaning in Chinese and then explained to her what that word meant. Qianqian's mother also watched English TV programs with her to help her understand the content of the TV programs. Jose's father worked at the construction site and was very tired and normally went to sleep as soon as he got home after work. Since Jose's mother had very limited command of English and had two other younger children to take care of, she could not help Jose much on his studies. As a consequence, Jose did not receive much family support in his study of English. Like Jose, Pablo was the eldest child in his family and received fewer opportunities from his parents for help. On the contrary, Rosa received great family support in her study of English although her support was

all from her siblings. Rosa had a brother in high school and a sister in middle school. When she had difficulties in her homework, she often asked her sister or brother to help and they were quite helpful.

As for the parental and family support for the maintenance of the children's heritage languages, all Chinese families sent their children to a Chinese school on Sundays hoping that this could help their children develop interest in learning Chinese and improve their Chinese proficiency. Maomao's parents also bought the Chinese textbooks currently in use in China and asked Maomao to practice reading the textbook and writing the Chinese characters. Huzi's grandfather was a Chinese painter and taught him how to use the Chinese brush to write Chinese calligraphies during his visit to the United States. Huzi was interested in painting but Huzi's grandfather told him that he had to learn how to use the brush before learning how to paint. Huzi practiced a little at the beginning but soon gave up after his grandfather left. None of the Hispanic families sent their children to a Hispanic school, but their children actually had more opportunities to use the Spanish language because they had more relatives present in the home that spoke Spanish. Anna's family often went to a church in a Hispanic community where Spanish was the official language. Spanish was spoken more often in Hispanic families than Chinese was spoken in Chinese families in this study. This suggested that formal schooling, especially a couple of hours each week, might not be as effective as informal social gatherings where the children were exposed to real life situations involving the use of their heritage languages in order to maintain these languages.

*Children's Effort in Learning English and their Heritage Languages*

Most participants used a mixture of English and their heritage languages at home –speaking their heritage language with their parents and English with their elder siblings, which support previous findings (Chung, 2006; Hasson, 2006; Pierce, 2002). They all worked hard on studying English and spent quite a lot of time on reading. Maomao was a good chess player but learned to play chess by himself through listening to the English instructions on the web. Anna liked to read scary books. She could read in English for hours without taking a break. She also tutored her mother in English because she thought that her mother’s English was “terrible,” especially in pronunciation. This was actually very common among all families in this study. While helping their parents in learning English, these children’s motivation to study English was enhanced and their self-esteem increased. Rosa liked to learn English through listening to English pop music. She would look for the lyrics on the internet when she could not understand the songs and study them with the use of a dictionary. Pablo liked to play soccer and often played soccer with English speaking children in his neighborhood, which provided him a lot of opportunities to practice his English.

As for the maintenance of the heritage languages, no participants in this study indicated any effort out of their own initiative to improve or maintain their heritage language proficiency, another dangerous sign for the possible loss of heritage languages.

#### *The Influence of the Environment on Children’s Learning*

The literature suggested that bilingual children were more likely to be delayed in language acquisition and cognitive development in a subtractive environment but at an advantage in an

additive environment (Genesee et al., 2004). All families in this study provided an additive environment for the participants to learn English and the heritage languages, although the school environment was found to be subtractive for the heritage languages in both schools. The teachers’ letters to the parents were all in English which limited the communication between teachers and parents.

Though both additive, the environment that Hispanic families provided to their children to maintain the heritage language seemed to be more positive than that provided by the Chinese families. In particular, Hispanic families had a more frequent use of Spanish at home whereas Chinese was used less frequently in Chinese families. For example, all Hispanic parents in this study spoke in Spanish to their children but some Chinese parents in this study spoke English to their children for daily conversations. All Hispanic children in this study used Spanish when they talked to their parents, but only two of the four Chinese participants used a mixture of English in the same situation. One Chinese child (Duoduo) used English only when she spoke to her parents although her parents used Chinese in their conversations.

Another environmental factor that might have influenced the participants’ learning of English was the apartment complex there they were living. The residents were very diverse both linguistically and ethnographically. Therefore, most participants spoke English when playing outside with their peers because English was the only common language among them. Differences were also noted. Hispanic children used Spanish when playing with other Hispanic children but Chinese children used English even when playing with other Chinese children. When asked about the reason to use English, they all said that they learned how to play



the games in English at school but did not know how to say the words in Chinese.

Still another environmental factor that might have influenced the participants' learning of English and their heritage languages was the number of siblings in their families. Maomao and Huzi were both the only children in their families while all other children had at least one sibling. The participants tended to speak more English with their elder brothers or sisters but tended to speak more heritage languages with their younger brothers or sisters. This phenomenon could be interpreted as the dangerous signal that as children grow up, they gradually master the English language and prefer to speak English at the sacrifice of their heritage languages.

#### Limitations

Although a great effort was spent on trying to locate two groups of families from the Chinese community and the Hispanic community so that these two groups were as comparable as possible with respect to all aspects other than their native languages, the two groups had differences in certain ways. First, all Hispanic families had relatives in the city where they were living and therefore had frequent interactions with the Hispanic community, but all Chinese families had no relatives in the city where they were living and their only interactions with the Chinese community was limited to occasional get-togethers of some families of close relations. This difference could have influenced the use of the heritage language by the participants where Hispanic children had a lot more opportunities to use Spanish with their relatives who did not speak English well, but the Chinese children could use English to communicate with their friends or their parents' friends who could speak English. Second, the educational level of the Chinese parents was higher than that of the

Hispanic parents in this study. This could also have some impact on the parents' involvement with the children's learning of English and the maintenance of the heritage languages.

Although four children from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and four children from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade were purposefully chosen in order to see if differences existed between these groups, and four boys and four girls were selected in order to detect any gender differences, no differences were noticed. The study could be more meaningful in transferability if the participants were all of one gender and one grade so that the sample would be more homogenous. Finally, this study is descriptive in nature and readers should be cautious in generalizing the results to the population of Hispanic and Chinese families in the United States. However, vicarious experiences could be used.

#### Significance

Family and parental involvement plays an important role in the children's learning of English as well as maintaining their heritage languages. Maintaining the heritage language helps the bilingual children with their self-esteem and identity (Lao, 2004; Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Monzo, 2005), cognitive and emotional well being (Lee, 2006), facilitate communication with their own community (Lao, 2004; Worthy & Galindo, 2006), and enhance their future job opportunities (Lao, 2004; Worthy & Galindo, 2006). Furthermore, one of the most effective ways to enhance students' learning is through family and parent involvement (Henderson & Berla, 1994), and family participation in education was twice as predictive of academic achievement as family socioeconomic status (Walberg, 1984).

This study provided some insight on how Chinese families and Hispanic families were involved in their children's learning of English as well as maintaining their heritage

languages. The findings of this study could help educators/classroom teachers to have a deeper understanding of these children's needs. Teachers and school administrators could use the social capital from ELLs' families to facilitate the children's learning in academic studies in general and the learning of English in particular.

The school could also provide some opportunities for ELLs to use their heritage languages to provide a more positive environment for the children to see the value of their own language and culture. When students see their heritage languages as an asset, they would be more likely to develop stronger motivation to maintain these languages. This could also boost the students' self-esteem and eventually their academic achievement.

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