

Article

Decision Making of Chinese Immigrant Parents on Young Children's English-Mandarin Dual Language Program Enrollment

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Abstract:

Given the growing presence of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. specifically and the increase in immigrant population more generally, some U.S. school districts are now offering dual-language programs in Chinese and English. Yet little is known about immigrant parents' beliefs about the importance of heritage language, their perceptions of dual-language programs, language use in the home and community, and immigrant family life in relation to heritage language in the period of early childhood. This longitudinal case study investigated parents' ambivalence about dual-language programs, decision-makings regarding school choice between Mandarin/English Dual language program and traditional English program, and changes overtime in a Chinese immigrant family, in which the home languages involve varying levels of proficiency in Mandarin and English and a Chinese dialect. The case study shows that the availability and quality of dual-language program and the heritage language program in their community, and whether the program meet the expectations and needs of maintaining children's heritage language are essential factors in this dynamic parental decision-making process.

Keywords: School Choice, Chinese Immigrant Family, School Readiness, Dual Language Program



Introduction

Within a society such as the U.S., some argue that language diversity contributes to positive dissimilarity attitudes and is essential for sustaining diverse cultures and promoting bicultural identities in modern multicultural society (Lauring & Selmer, 2012). As the integration of ideas, behaviors, and ways of life continues at the global level, changes are also taking place within the nested contexts at the state, local, and familial levels. These changes have raised new

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questions about the convergence of multilingual and multicultural situations. Children of immigrant families are one population at the intersection of this convergence.

Given the move of diverse immigrants to new social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, the very concept of non-English native language maintenance is especially complex. On the one hand, mass immigration brings richer and more diverse minority languages, which raises the bar for large-scale and unified minority language education in schools or other education programs. On the other hand, as non-English-speaking members of U.S. society, immigrants still undergo the social and political expectations that sustain English in its hegemonic position (Alba et al., 2002; Fillmore, 2000). Immigrants thus experience the collision and integration of different cultures simultaneously, a situation that is especially challenging for families with young children. The research problem addressed in this paper focuses on parental decision-making on children's school choice regarding heritage language maintenance and English language development in young children of immigrant families living in the U.S.

The hegemonic position of English in western mainstream society and the growth of ESL education have contributed to not only the loss of heritage language in language minority groups, but also the obfuscation of cultural identity, breakdown of family ties, and the simplification of languages and cultures in diversified societies (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Fillmore, 2000; Hill, 1994a; Lee, 2013; Leeman, 2015; Spolsky, 2009). As such, heritage language is an important mechanism that represents the roots and reasons for passing down long-held traditions of cultural groups. The potential loss of heritage language is especially problematic for young children from immigrant families and other language minority groups as they transition from home to community and educational settings, often as early as age two for child care. Yet little is known about how immigrant parents support and interpret this transition experience, especially as it pertains to the potential increase in speaking English and the loss of their heritage language.

With regard to school choice, plenty of previous studies have placed emphasis on what factors which would have effects on parental decision-making process, and the rationale and strategies behind their decision making as children's transition to schools, such as parents' socioeconomic status, public or private school, student's academic achievements and quality and equity of the school in diverse context, and the like (Goldhaber, 1999; Hanushek et al., 2007; Ellison & Aloe, 2019). In some contemporary early childhood settings in the U.S., immigrant parents are given opportunities to make choices between monolingual and dual language programs for their children. A small but significant body of research describes the key role that parents play in this decision-making process as well as home language practices with respect to children's ESL and heritage language development

(Spolsky, 2004; Verdon et al., 2014; Li, 2002; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). Beyond this important insight, little is known about parents' perceptions and beliefs that might inform their decision-making and home language practices. Specifically, little is known about how parents of young children make sense of new challenges and opportunities to support their children's success in American schools and their thoughts about maintaining their cultural traditions and heritage language in the English-dominant society. Therefore, this study highlights one of the significant factors, especially in this multilingual and multicultural society, that the role of the language development and competence of children from immigrant families in parental decision making with school choice, which enhance the understanding of parents' choice of early childhood education programs and services by augments the cases of language minority families. This study is motivated by the curiosity and desire to gain deeper insights into immigrant parents' efforts to make good decisions about their children's language development with regard to the assimilative force of English and the goals of heritage language maintenance in young children.

Methodology

This study took place in a progressive district in a southeastern state in the U.S., in which the school district offers the choice of a Mandarin/English dual-language program and traditional ESL program. To investigate the parental decision-making process and the rationale behind, this study conducted a series of interviews at regular intervals, in most cases at the beginning of the school year, mid-year, and at the end of the school year. Interview questions focused on parental beliefs and goal for children's early learning, their perceptions regarding children's early school transition, as well as heritage language maintenance and English development in this Chinese immigrant family.

Results and Discussions

Case Study Family Basic Information

This is a family of five that lives in a single-family home in an upper middle-class neighborhood: father (Lin Li), mother (Yi Zhu), older sister (Xin Li), older brother (Wen Li), and the target child (Tian Li), all names are pseudonym. This family uses three languages (Cantonese, Mandarin and English) within their household. To this family, the maintenance of heritage language is more complex than the other Chinese immigrant families in which only two languages were used.

Parent's Perceptions of Dual-Language Program and Chinese Afterschool Program

This discussion about this particular family is rich and important, much more so than for the other family. One reason which is so significant for this family is the parents' reliance on their older children's experiences when making decisions for the target child. Among the characteristics of a school setting, the mother values the quality of the teacher the most. That is, from the mother's perspective, the quality of a school or program depends on the quality of the teacher. This evaluation criterion also applies to the programs for Mandarin learning.

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

The two older children in this family went to the district's English/Mandarin dual-language program starting from kindergarten, and Xin, the oldest child, stayed in this program until 5th grade. The mother was satisfied with the teachers and the program during that time, whereupon the parents decided to send the second child, to this program for kindergarten. However, on the basis of that experience, their favorable impression of the dual-language program started to go downhill. First, the teachers were not as good as before. According to the mother's description, his school report showed that Wen was not making process in his Mandarin in this program. In addition, the parents were aware of frequent rumors about possible changes and reforms to the program. In the mother's opinion, the confidence of the parents, teachers, and even the students in this program languished due to its uncertainty and instability.

It is the fifth time they are thinking of shutting down the dual-language program since my daughter was there. It might lead to the insecurities in both children and teachers. Parents also feel insecure. (mother)

In addition, given the experience of the two older children who studied in the dual-language program, the mother was not happy that certain subjects, such as math, were taught in Mandarin. For example, when her daughter was in the program, social studies were taught in Mandarin. Also, not only the language but also Chinese pedagogy was used to teach math. When older sister went to middle school where all the subjects were taught in English, it took her a long time to understand and connect the concepts and theories to what she learned before in Mandarin. Now Tian is in this program and the teachers are teaching math in Mandarin. That is, all the concepts and formulas in

math are taught in Mandarin but the homework and tests are in English. To help him understand the concepts, the parents must do extra work at home when they help with his math homework.

The concepts are different in Mandarin and English. You have to know the meaning of the term to work the math problems. Now he is learning math in Mandarin at school but the homework is in English. We have to explain to him again. (mother)

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

As the increasing awareness of maintaining heritage language, many immigrant parents expect that the school district would provide the service of heritage language learning for their children. Therefore, for parents and children from linguistic minority families, the availability and quality of dual-language program in the school district, as well as the heritage language program or service in their cultural community greatly contributes to their choices in terms of children's language development. The case of Tian's family showed that the Mandarin-English Dual language program and the local Mandarin learning school provided this family, as well as other parents and children in this Chinese community options of learning Mandarin beyond home domain. In order to maintaining children's heritage language, parents choose the school with dual language program other than traditional English school. However, parents' perception of the program and service also plays an important role in their decision making, including their satisfaction of the teaching ideology and pedagogy, children's performance, which are the indicators of the quality of the program.

Changes in Decision Making Over Time—In and Out of the Dual-Language Program

Taking a panoramic view of the three children's school experiences over the past years, the changes in the language policy of this family are evidenced mainly in the parental decisions about choosing between the Mandarin/English dual-language program and going to an English-only traditional school in this school district. The decisions for Tian are based on their evaluation of the older children's experience and Tian's current learning progress.

School Choice of Three Children in This Family

The older sister stayed in the dual-language program continuously from kindergarten through 5th grade. When she was in 4th grade, she did not want to learn Mandarin so the mother planned to send her to a middle school with no Mandarin program. However, the father insisted on her continuing Mandarin. Therefore, the parents picked another school where students could take a one-hour Mandarin class every week. Satisfied with the dual-language program, the parents continued this program for Wen (the second child), from kindergarten through 4th grade. During Wen's participation in the program, the program changed considerably and the quality of the teachers declined. Hence, the parents started to consider the possibility of transferring him to the traditional school. Details are provided in Table 1

Table 1 *Parent Quotes: Examples Regarding Decisions on Tian's School Choice Over Time*

School Level/Date	Decision on School Choice
Preschool/ (10/2016)	I am not sending him to the Dual language program next year (k).
Preschool/ (03/2017)	He is going to the dual-language program .
Transition to K (07/2017)	I don't want him to go to the dual-language program . Wen was pulled out from the dual language program by the end of the 4th grade year and sent to traditional school with Tian.
Transition to 2nd (06/2019)	The main reason that I transferred him back to the dual language program is because he is not speaking Mandarin now.

According to the mother's narratives with regard to their decision-making, the reasons for the changes can be generated from several aspects. The reason the parents decided to stop the dual-language program the first time was that they were not satisfied with Wen's school experience there, especially as he was not making much progress in Mandarin. A few months later, they still thought that dual-language program might be a good choice for Tian's Mandarin learning and wanted to give it another try. However, Tian's English had fallen behind after he came back from China. Moreover, they could not bear the math teaching in this program. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages, the parents made their 'final' decision to enroll Tian in a traditional U.S. school.

This was the first time the parents had one of their children enrolled in a school for kindergarten and elementary study other than the Mandarin/English dual-language program. However, after two years in the traditional school, the parents found that this school was not as good as they expected, especially compared with their previous

experience with the dual-language program. Based on two years of observation and experience, the mother thinks that the administration and management of this school is not professional. She is worried about the potential consequences of the loss of good teachers and the overall quality of the remaining team.

They have a new principle but he is not paying attention to students' study. And the teachers, I heard that many good teachers were continually leaving. They just quit. Just quit the job or retire all of a sudden in half of the semester. (mother)

After two years of study in English-only classrooms, Tian's English continued to lag far behind and he stopped speaking Mandarin. When he transferred back to the dual-language program, the teachers noticed that he had trouble spelling and writing in English. (mother)

During the past two years, I didn't see him memorize or write any English words at home. I think what he has learned (English) in this school is less than what he is learning at the dual language. (mother)

The target child has made some progress in Mandarin, perhaps because of the schedule in which he must speak Mandarin half the day in the dual-language program. The mother states that Tian is having a good time in the dual-language program and making some progress in both English and Mandarin. Overall, the quality of the school and teachers and the children's learning outcomes are the two major considerations in making decisions regarding the choice of their children's school. Along with the changes in the parents' decisions, some modifications to their language plan ensued. For instance, to prepare Tian for kindergarten in the dual-language program, the mother decided to send him to China for Mandarin learning. When they finally sent Tian back to the dual-language program, Tian stopped going to the Chinese language afterschool program because the parents believed that learning Mandarin in the program was sufficient.

As discussed above, the quality of language program is an essential factor that parents would take into account when they choose schools for their children. The special feature of this case study family is that there are three children in the house and they all have experienced "in and out" of this dual language program. In another words, the elder ones' learning experience and performance in the dual language program and the heritage language program have great impacts on the parents' decisions for the younger ones. Parents take the elder children as a reference and the decision making is not a one-time action, which changes along as parents' evaluation of the quality of the language program. Hence, in the dynamic decision-making process regarding school choice in linguistic minority families, whether the program meet

the expectations of the parents and the needs of maintaining children's heritage language determines whether they would allow their children stay in the program or not.

Conclusion

The most observable change was the parents' decision-making in Tian's family regarding school choice between the Mandarin/English dual-language program and traditional school in this school district. The parents changed their minds several times before they made an initial decision to withdraw Tian from the dual-language program and enroll him in the traditional school. Based on comprehensive consideration of the child's current learning process, a comparison of the two schools and quality of the teachers, and the experiences of their two older children in the dual-language program, the parents later decided to transfer Tian back to the dual-language program after two years in the traditional school. One feature that makes this family stand out is that the parents use the older children's experience as reference for their decision-making with respect to the school experience of the youngest child.

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