

〈Research Article〉

Family Language Policy: The importance of national and family context

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Abstract

Family Language Policy (FLP) is a recent area of study within language acquisition. An important aspect of FLP is language management, and this paper examines the approaches towards bilingualism within families, drawing on a qualitative study of language management in bilingual families. The study investigated the attitudes and practices of parents of Chinese / English mixed heritage children towards raising their children bilingually. The findings illustrated the significance of national context for language management within families. They also demonstrate how family members (the maternal grandparents) confer a strongly Mandarin-centred FLP, supporting maintenance of their grandchildren's bilingualism. A further significant finding was the link between language and culture in relation to FLP, and specifically the moral underpinnings of some families' FLPs. The study adds to existing literature through its emphasis on implicit and unconscious aspects of FLP, moral dimensions of the relationship between language and culture, and the potential for both positive and negative affective repercussions from the involvement of grandparents in family language management. The research also raises issues in relation to policy and practice regarding bilingual learners, suggesting that it is important for schools to encourage rather than discourage bilingualism in the home.

Key Words: Bilingualism, Family Language Policy, Language Management

Background Literature and Research

The recently emerging field of Family Language Policy (FLP) is receiving growing attention (Curdts-Christiansen and Lanza 2018; Schwartz 2010). Family language policy can be defined as “a deliberate attempt at practicing a particular language use pattern and particular literacy practices within home domains and among family members” (Curdts-Christiansen 2009: 351). A particularly important aspect of FLP is language management, “the language efforts and measures provided by caregivers as well as the manner in which family members encounter and address challenges related to language learning and use” (Curdts-Christiansen and Lanza 2018: 123). Language acquisition does

not just happen in a vacuum but rather is managed, learned and negotiated within families” (King et al 2008: 907). This growing literature captures not just the explicit rationalities of families in relation to children’s language acquisition but also the more implicit dispositions to language management that come through family histories and personal experiences. It also reveals tensions that are generated between family members but also in relation to wider contexts, and has started to uncover the affective aspects of language management in families, exposing the discomforts and anxieties as well as more positive emotions (Smith-Christmas 2018). As Tannenbaum (2012: 57) asserts, emotions are central to FLPs, including “their unconscious, defensive, and adaptive roles”.

Although there is a recognition that language acquisition is negotiated within families, the norm has been to focus on the parents and siblings (Schwartz and Verschik 2013). Li Wei’s (1994) book on 3 generations of Chinese families living in the same households in Northern England focused on the language use of the grandparents but only touched on their contribution to the language acquisition of their grandchildren. However, a small but growing body of research has begun to emphasise the role of extended family, in particular grandparents (Ishizawa 2004; Makehara 2005; Meek 2007, Ruby 2012; Smith-Christmas 2014). Grandparents are seen to enhance language acquisition, and the literature generally highlights the positive contribution they make. Gender of grandparent plays a significant role in FLP. Grandmothers, usually paternal ones, often act as primary agents of minority language use in their interactions with both their children and grandchildren, primarily due to their role as caregivers in an extended family (Ishizawa, 2004). Smith-Christmas’ 2014 study of a Gaelic speaking family in Skye, also found that in similar families, FLP was usually managed by the mother, together with the paternal grandmother. As well as passing down the linguistic elements of their heritage, grandparents in immigrant families also act as facilitators of cultural values to their grandchildren (Ishii-Kuntz, 1997).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through personal contact, and comprised four couples, consisting of an English husband and a Chinese wife as this is the most common configuration in English / Chinese marriages. All participants had one or more child aged between one and five years old, in order to examine the situation early on in their children’s bilingual development. So that some of the differences resulting from the couples’ country of residence could be examined, two couples residing in the UK were selected, along with two couples living in China. The two families participating in the UK, consisted of a professional husband who had spent a substantial amount of time in China, and

their wives, also from professional backgrounds, who have been living in the UK for a period of five years or more. Both of these couples had two children, one family residing in Kingston upon Hull in Yorkshire, and the other in London. Both of the couples in China consisted of professional expatriates who had lived in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, for a time period of over five years. They had both married Chinese women local to that area, and had recently become parents. To ensure the anonymity of participants, all names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Participating families

Family	Parents	Children
Couple A – Based in the UK	Jonah and Monique	Nick – 3 years old, Eric – 2 years old
Couple B – Based in the UK	David and Lisa	Simon – 5 years old Kim – 2 years old
Couple C – Based in China	Jack and Fiona	Chantal – 1 ½ years old
Couple D – Based in China	Jim and Millie	Alfie – 1 year old

All eight parents were educated to at least degree level and were currently in professional jobs so would all be considered middle class (Savage 2015).

Procedure

Parents responded to a semi-structured interview administered by the author during the period of October 2014 to February 2015. In addition to 10 demographic questions, eliciting educational level, job history and status, and family composition, participants were asked to respond to a list of 19 questions. First they were asked a number of open-ended questions in order to reflect on their attitudes to bilingualism: What are your views on bilingualism? Have they changed in any way since you got married / had a child? What is guiding your approach to bilingualism in raising your own child/children? Was there agreement with your spouse? What compromises if any did you have to reach? How does raising a child bilingually improve or hinder their academic ability?

Participants were then asked a series of questions designed to elicit the participants' bilingual practices. Some questions probed present speaking practices and in which situations English or Mandarin was used. Other questions probed change in or adaptation of practices, and the resources and strategies used to encourage children's language development. Participants were also asked to describe examples of when they spoke to their child in their mother tongue. A final set of questions

tried to enable a more sociological lens, focusing on cultural and social influences and experiences, including asking the participants to reflect on the impact of national context.

Interview transcripts were analysed both line by line, as well as in larger sections, in order to capture their meanings in context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Comparisons were made within individual cases, as well as between cases, in order to discover similarities and differences. For the data analysis a mixed analytic approach was chosen, working down from concepts already existing in the literature, while simultaneously working up from the data. Initially, the analysis concentrated on concepts from the Family Language Policy literature. Here themes such as the influence of extended family, the impact of the national context, and affective dimensions of language acquisition were deployed in the analysis of data. However, the research also adopted a grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2007, 2008) in order to ensure unexpected facets of the data were recognized and taken into account. Both the implicit and unconscious aspects of language management and the moral dimensions of FLP emerged as important themes through the grounded analysis of the data.

Findings

The logic of language practices

Totally unexpected were the many references parents made to having an instinctive sense of what to do rather than engaging in any conscious deliberation. There was a taken for granted, largely unarticulated understanding of the way to proceed that was far removed from anything that resembled strategic decision-making by the couples. All four couples stressed that they had had very little formal discussion or planning about raising their children bilingually. This concurs with some of the literature on FLP, which suggests that the majority of parents bringing up bilingual children do so without deciding upon a concrete strategy or plan of action (Caldas, 2012). Still it was surprising that all the parents said that they had not really discussed or come to any major decisions about an FLP. Couple B said that the choices they made about their children's bilingual development were primarily unplanned. Couple A similarly stated that there had been no "conscious discussion" about how to teach their children, while Couple C began the interview by stating that no actual planning had been involved in their language strategy. As Monique said "I don't think it was something we discussed and really made a decision on." Lisa pointed out that specific elements of language policy, such as vocabulary choices, and how to adapt the balance of languages if they moved to China, were also subconscious decisions:

It's not like you'd change it consciously. It just suits the environment, and whatever suits it best, and you just have to adapt.

Lisa went on to say:

I don't think I consciously chose these ways of doing things, they just developed naturally.

While her husband, David, commented:

We never did anything deliberately, it just came naturally. We've kind of gone with the flow.

His words are echoed by Jonah, the other England-based husband, who reflected:

We didn't really make a decision on it to be honest, it's just something that naturally happened.

We never really had a discussion or made a decision that we're going to do this, it's just what you're going to do, isn't it?

Jim, living in China, and whose son was being looked after by his Chinese in-laws while his wife worked full-time, commented:

In all honesty we'd be lying if we said we made a decision about it, it sort of fell into place and it's something we accepted, especially with Millie's parents looking after our son.

While, Jack, the other China-based husband said:

I haven't done any research, we've done what seems to come naturally.

For all 4 couples the language management of their children's bilingual development 'developed naturally', 'just came naturally' or in Jonah's words was 'just something that naturally happened'. As Curdt-Christiansen and La Morgia (2018: 2) argue 'language management highlights the importance of the conscious choice of the linguistic measures and literacy practices in shaping the unconscious process of linguistic and cultural transmission in transnational families'. For the parents in this study it appears to be more about the implicit and unconscious rather than the explicit and conscious (Curd-Christiansen 2012). We might also question whether things would come quite so naturally in families with less of the linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) these parents possess, between the 8 of them they are proficient in 18 different languages.

The link between language and culture, and the moral dimensions of FLP

The inextricable relationship between language and culture (Fishman, 1985) was evident in the way all four couples spoke about language acquisition. But, as Street (1993) has argued, parents conveyed not just the ways in which knowledge of traditions and festivals are imparted through the cultural aspects of language, but also the morals and value systems that underpin them. The two UK based couples and couple C in China all drew attention to their belief that learning the culture was part of the package of learning the language. Monique from couple A said that you could not have one, without the other:

Because learning culture is an important part of learning a language. You can never learn a language well without learning some of the culture.

Slightly different sentiments were articulated by Lisa from couple B, who believed language and culture were linked, but use of the language was not the only way to impart the culture of the other language:

The culture part doesn't just come from language. For example, a bedtime story. Of Chinese tonghua (fairy tale), or yuyan (fable), although I might not read it in Chinese, I am still translating the Chinese version of history. A culture can still be passed on in a different language. But it's just with the language it happens a lot faster, a lot more effectively and the kids will appreciate it more.

Both Jack and Fiona from couple C shared similar opinions on the importance of culture when learning a language. Jack began by sharing his view that:

Understanding culture is just as important as understanding the language.

Fiona elaborated on this point:

I think like language, if you can speak, you can just talk. But if you can understand the culture that means you've really grasped the skill of learning that language.

The couples in the UK both discussed the idea of becoming bicultural as well as bilingual, and how this helped an individual to have a greater appreciation of the different types of people around them.

Jonah from Couple A expressed this by saying:

I think it can help if you can see things from a different frame of mind. If you can speak another language and you can speak it well then you can understand people from another country, not just what they are saying. And if you are brought up in that environment where you are looking at two cultures and are getting two points of view I think that it broadens your horizons and it broadens your mind so you're more accepting of different opinions. Whereas if you've just got the one view all the time...

Lisa from couple B linked the acquisition of an additional language to a deeper understanding and tolerance of fellow humans:

I think it improves you, not just academically, but as a person. You can appreciate different varieties of people, of human races, and appreciate the diversity of human cultures much better.

Seeing culture and language as intertwined often leads to the view that learning a new language is also about the transmission of cultural values (Street, 1993). This perspective was held by both of the UK couples, couple A thought that Chinese culture contained certain values that seemed to be lacking in the UK. When asked about which elements of Chinese culture they thought learning Chinese would facilitate, Jonah replied:

I think honour your parents.

Monique built on this by adding:

I think what learning Chinese will teach them is to respect the elderly, as I think that side of

things is quite loose at the moment in England. Be responsible for your family, not just yourself. Ideals of “the good citizen” differ across nations, and the Chinese mothers, in particular, articulated a connection between the acquisition of a language and the embedding of values in societies. So Lisa stressed:

For me, I just want my kids to be able to understand, or at least appreciate to a certain degree, Chinese culture. The embedded respect, and the being humble, and all that.

She emphasises the differences in values between the two cultures by drawing on an anecdote about the book “Horrid Henry” in relation to the concept of bullying:

For example, one thing I’ve picked up culturally that is very different between English and Chinese is the book Horrid Henry. To me this is bad! You shouldn’t teach your kids about bullying. But then English culture takes a different way, we accept this is reality, we expose kids to it at the very beginning, and we take a satirical view of it, right? And take a different attitude. In Chinese culture, this is bad. We nip it in the bud, in a way, we play ostrich a little bit. We don’t accept it, we say no, no one should behave like this and then we pretend it doesn’t happen. The Chinese kids along the way, will by themselves pick up how to solve it.

Monique goes to draw a distinction between herself and Jonah which also implicates the English language:

Yes, because you are too competitive, you always have to draw a conclusion that one history is better than the other. Because in your dictionary, co-existence doesn’t work.

Jonah’s competitiveness is, according to Monique, in part, because English as a language does not lend itself to easy coexistence. Both women stressed the differing moralities of English and Chinese societies, and made links between moral dimensions of Chinese and English societies and their languages.

However, Lisa also articulated an advantage of how closely related language is to culture. She expressed the hope that learning Chinese would help her children foster a better understanding of China and Chinese culture, which she felt was often misrepresented and misunderstood:

There are still a lot of misconceptions about China. The issue is complicated, but there is a lot of different thinking. The more people understand the language the more they can be part of the culture and understand it, and it might just do its fair share of helping people surrounding us to understand it differently.

The four families in my study echoed the sentiments of the parents in Curdt-Christiansen’s (2009, p371) study on Chinese immigrant families in Quebec. She wrote: “The parents express their beliefs that language use frames and defines socio-cultural identity, and that language is a cultural tool for

their children to gain access to culturally significant aspects of knowledge and information.” Although Lisa in couple B expressed the view of language as key to understanding culture most powerfully, it also permeated couple A and couple C’s understandings of language. For these couples, learning a new language is much more than language acquisition, it is also fundamentally about cultural understanding and knowledge.

The importance of national context

The importance of environment and context in relation to its effect on language acquisition has been a longstanding issue in bilingual learning (Long, 1996), and it was a central feature in the narratives of all four couples interviewed. However, the most prominently mentioned aspect was the effect the family’s country of residence had on the child’s linguistic development (Auerbach, 1989). As David and Lisa agreed:

So because we’re in England, I guess English is going to be both of the kid’s first languages and the fact that they hear English in the house, so when we speak to each other we speak in English and therefore they learn that.

The other couple residing in the UK, Jonah and Monique, were also very aware of the influence of the environment of their country of residence on language use, not just their children’s, but also their own:

I think, in an English speaking country, we are more like 70% English, 30% Chinese, the same thing if we go China, we’d probably be 70% Chinese, 30% English.

The implication for both the UK-based couples was that language use in family changed, depending upon which country they were in. Speaking of their two year old daughter, Monique said:

Yep. But it’s not exact. For example, now we’re in England, Fiona is speaking more English.

What all the couples illustrated was a pragmatic adaptation to the wider context within their family language policies in which the language of the country of residence became the dominant language within the family home.

As Jim, one of the English husbands residing in China, acknowledged, his son’s first language was going to be different from his own:

I’ve come to accept that his first language will be Chinese, because he is immersed in that all day long.

However, for one of the couples, the urging of their child’s school that parents communicate only in English in the home further reinforced their acceptance that the language of their country of residence should also be the dominant family language. This resonates with Curdt-Christensen and La Morgia’s (2018) conclusion that the English educational system often makes demands on families to prioritise the promotion of English in the home to the exclusion of other heritage languages.

The distinctiveness of the family context and the contribution of grandparents

Just as the national context was key so was the specificity of each family context. A theme that regularly featured in the interviews was the effect of extended family on the linguistic environment (Baker, 1995). This was particularly evident in relation to the strong influence of the maternal Chinese grandparents who were involved in childcare. Unlike Ishizawa (2004), who found paternal grandparents were most involved, this study highlights strong involvement of maternal grandparents. All four couples had had the maternal grandparents come to stay with them after the birth of a child, for prolonged periods of time ranging from 6 months to two years. As couple A reported:

They've had their grandparents from China spend considerable time with them as small children. So, from being born through to 6, 7 months, and so they've got used to hearing both languages together.

The impact of grandparents' assistance on couple B's children's language development was largely positive:

Like, when my wife's mother came over from China for six months. That was like before my daughter had even really started speaking. But she could understand, she spent the majority of her time with my mother-in-law, so she could understand some Chinese.

The role of grandparents clearly had had a strong affirming impact, helping to create a minority language environment for the couples living in the UK. The emphasis was on their contribution to the creation of an active and stimulating Mandarin learning environment in which all four parents stressed the positive affective contribution grandparents made. However, the situation for the couples in China was more complicated. There were elements of discord and dissatisfaction among all four parents in relation to how grandparents were communicating with their grandchildren, underlining the potential for negative affective aspects of FLP (see also Smith-Christmas 2018). Both couples mentioned disquiet at the introduction of a regional dialect into the child's linguistic environment. As couple C mention:

They talk to her in Yangzhou dialect. I just hope she can understand.

The maternal grandparents of couple D also provided a lot of exposure to the local dialect, especially as Millie had returned to work, and they were at the family home during the day to look after Alfie. Millie said:

They are always, always talking in the local dialect.

For both couples residing in China, the conflict between their desire for their children to learn a globally accepted, high currency version of Mandarin and communicating with their grandparents remained an unresolved dilemma.

A further impact of the national context was the degree of influence that the parents' social circles

played a role in the children's language environment. The one area of language management where parents did talk about making conscious decisions was in relation to children's peer group socialising. So Lisa and David deliberately tried to engineer social interactions that created a Chinese language environment for their children. For this purpose they regularly met socially with a large number of Chinese and Chinese / English mixed marriage families, not just for the adults to interact, but also to enable their children to speak Mandarin. As David said:

We have a lot of friends that are Chinese families with kids or also mixed Chinese, so when we spend time with them they do get exposure to Chinese.

Lisa adds that:

I sometimes organise play dates with my Chinese friends. A lot of those kids are bilingual, or bilingual to all different degrees. But the kids, they talk to each other in English. But me and my Chinese friends catch up in Chinese, and when we speak Chinese, the kids understand perfectly.

So it's important to create that environment I guess, a Chinese environment.

In China, the role of the parents' friends in exposing the children to the minority language was drawn attention to by both of the couples. As Jack in Couple C explained:

Because when she's out and about everyone around her is speaking Chinese. But then generally, when we're with friends we speak in English, so she gets a mix really, both English and Chinese.

Couple D described a different feature of socializing with other mixed marriage English / Chinese couples in China. The children of these couples regarded couple D's son as Chinese, and so spoke to him in Mandarin:

With the families that we do go out with that also have mixed children, their children always speak to him in Mandarin.

This micromanagement of children's social networks, together with the complex dynamics of interaction with grandparents reveals some of the demands made on parents when trying to raise their children as bilingual learners.

Conclusion

The irony in relation to the Family Language Policy of the parents in this study is that there was actually very little planning and formulation of policies in relation to their children's language acquisition. Rather, all reported that there had been little formal discussion about whether or how to raise their children bilingually. Rather, it was just not something they had discussed or made a decision on. We are in the realm of Bourdieu's 'non-decisions' here where the right course of action appears so obvious it is automatic, instinctive, taken-for-granted (Bourdieu 1990). This raises issues around the class privilege of the couples in the study and the ease with which they were able to fit in

with the dominant doxa or status quo in relation to bilingualism. Less privileged parents may well not have access to implicit assumptions about ‘the right way to do things’.

There is a growing literature in relation to FLP that stresses the affective and emotions. We glimpse the emotional consequences of families’ language management in the China-based couples relationship with their children’s grandparents. Far less attention has been paid to the moral dimensions of FLP in the literature. However, the importance of cultural values was evident in the Chinese mothers’ emphasis on the different moralities embedded in the two cultures, and their belief that important moral learning accompanied their children’s acquisition of Chinese.

The effect of country of residence was a powerful influence on parental attitudes and practices. National context determined the balance of language use in families and perceived responsibility for maintaining the minority language. The country of residence also affected the influence of extended family on the FLP (Spolsky, 2012). National context, through public schooling, also has the potential to enhance or undermine FLP in relation to the minority language. The advice of one school that the parents communicate solely in English at home both confused and undermined their language management in the home. This points to the importance of wider education policy in the country of residence and the potential schooling has to undermine FLP (Curdts Christiansen and Lanza 2018), and is linked to the hegemony of English as a global language (Wright, 2003). Family Language Policies need to be supported by informed school language policies that both recognise the value of bilingual learning in the home, and support it in the classroom.

This study has uncovered some findings which would be interesting to examine in future research. The methodology could be approached from a different angle, involving parents of older children. This would provide the opportunity to interview both the parents and the children, eliciting the child’s perspective on Family Language Policy. Carrying out observations in conjunction with the interviews may also yield additional data. Finally, it would be informative to conduct a comparative study analysing the effects of a different context and culture on Family Language Policy.

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