He Kupu
The Word
Volume 6, Number 3 - May 2020

"We only speak Chinese at home": A case study of an immigrant Chinese family's Family Language Policy in New Zealand

Sophia Li | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

With the increasing growth of immigrant Chinese families living in New Zealand, there is a rise in the number of young children who are learning two or more languages at the same time, namely their home language and the language of instruction in early childhood education settings, typically English. When the family serves the central role of supporting children's heritage language maintenance (Wong-Fillmore, 1991), it is pertinent to study the parents' perspectives on their child's dual language development and the language practices that are evident in home settings. As part of a larger Master's research with New Zealand Tertiary College that explores the support that four Chinese immigrant families provide for their children's dual language development, this article presents a case study of one Chinese mother and how she constructs and implements their Family Language Policy (FLP) to support her children's dual language development focusing on their heritage language maintenance.

Data was collected through two interviews, and the qualitative data was themed and key findings identified. These findings suggest that this immigrant family's FLP is focused on their heritage language maintenance, with consideration of the children's individual interests and learning needs. Moreover, it is suggested that both mother and the children learn from each other when helping to support the children's bilingual development. Also discussed as part of the findings is the mother's understanding on multiculturalism and multilingualism, which shows her reflections on being a global citizen with strong cultural dispositions.

Introduction

The concept of Family Language Policy (FLP) has only been recently defined (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King et al, 2008; Spolsky, 2004), but studies on language beliefs, language management and language practices in terms of how immigrant families transmit their heritage language to the next generation had already drawn interest from researchers worldwide (Schwartz, 2010). Spolsky (2012) argues that classic studies on language policy are almost entirely focused on the nation level, while each domain, especially the family should be further studied for a better understanding of the establishment and the sustainability of a speech community.

Family Language Policy are a set of practices relating to language use and literacy that is continuously implemented by all family members in home settings (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). It can be implicit or explicit (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). The immigrant parents' support of their child's dual language development in the host country does not naturally happen; rather it is the results of conscientious implementation of a FLP (King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008). In this paper, the participant was encouraged to reflect on the explicit and conscious support she gives to her children in their dual language development. For immigrant children who learn to speak more than one language, what language they use at home, and how their parents support their language use are important to studies of these young dual language learners' development.

There are significant numbers of children from immigrant parents enrolled in ECE services in New Zealand (Statistics NZ, 2019). One of the largest groups of immigrants comes from China (Statistics NZ, 2019). It has been found that immigrant Chinese families value their heritage language and seek to proactively support their heritage language maintenance in home settings (Chan, 2018; Guo, 2012). The family as a basic societal unit plays a critical role in early

language development (Spolsky, 2012), especially for Chinese immigrant families in New Zealand. Early Chinese immigrants went through the stage when their heritage language was not valued or respected; thus they withdrew from public spaces to smaller societal units such as community or families, trying to transmit their heritage language to the next generations (Roberts, 2005). Therefore the study of immigrant Chinese families' FLP provides important insight for both education practitioners and policy makers (Luykx, 2005) in supporting immigrant Chinese children's dual language development.

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017), the national early childhood curriculum of New Zealand, explicitly states that "children more readily become bi- or multilingual and bi- or multiliterate when language learning in the education setting builds on their home languages" (p. 12). Meanwhile, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) also acknowledges the different skills, attitudes and dispositions that all cultural groups place in their child-rearing practices. Therefore, how early childhood educators and policy makers can align their effort to support immigrant children's dual language development has become a key task. The study on immigrant families' language beliefs and language practices can effectively inform early childhood educators and reduce possible misunderstandings on the parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's dual language development.

A FLP is constructed based on a range of political and socio-economical factors (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). The family members' language beliefs, their language management (such as how to intervene in case of undesired language uses), and their language practices are the most important components that construct a FLP (Schwartz, 2010). Curdt-Christiansen (2009) further points out that immigrant's cultural orientations, their educational background and their immigration experiences all play an important role in the structure of their FLP.

Literature review

The research on FLP is mainly focused on the three components of a FLP: language beliefs, language management and language practices (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King & Logan-Terry, 2008; Schwartz, 2010). Language beliefs, or known as language attitudes (Hu, Torre & Whiteman, 2014) refer to how family members think of a language (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). Language management refers to the actions taken aiming at intervention, influence or modification of language use (Spolsky, 2004). Language practices refer to the actual language use in various contexts (Schwartz, 2010). See figure 1 below.

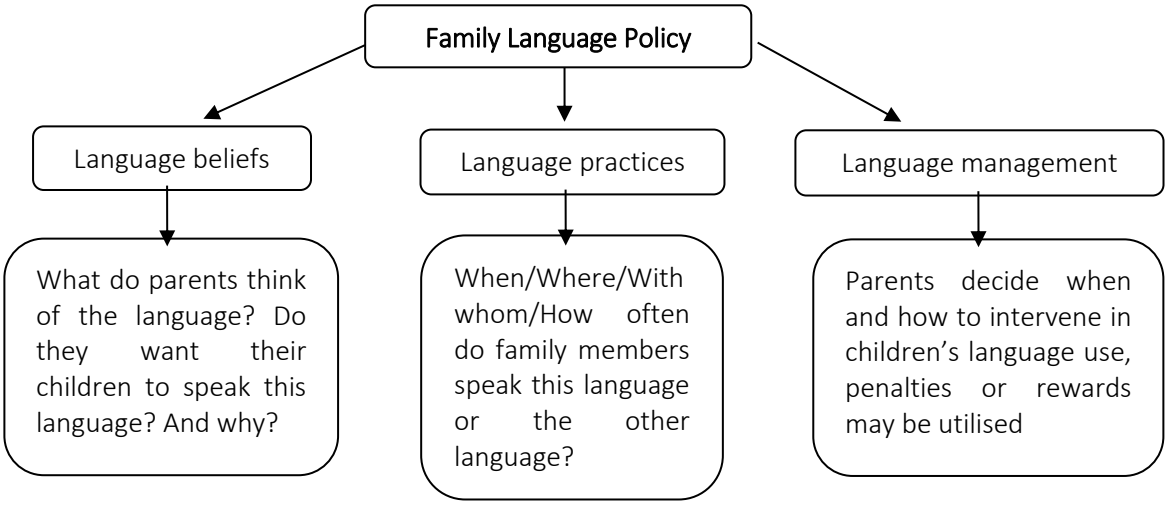

Figure 1: The components of a family language policy

Parents' language beliefs determine their choices of the language spoken at home. In an empirical research, Kim (2011) describes a Korean father living in the United States who insists that English should be the only language spoken at home, in order to support their daughter's acculturation into the mainstream society. In a case study on Chinese immigrant living in the United Kingdom, a Chinese family changed the language they speak at home from Korean (as one of the minority languages in Mainland China) into Mandarin due to the fact that Mandarin has higher status than Korean in the United Kingdom (Hua & Wei, 2016).

Language practices reflect the actual language used within the families in home settings. In the interviews conducted for her study on Chinese immigrants in New Zealand, Chan (2018) notices that it is common that Chinese parents adhere to Chinese language with their children, while the siblings prefer to communicate with each other in English. Even though these parents are concerned, alternative practices are not evident. Chan (2018) suggests that most Chinese families are flexible with children's language choices when the children are not able to find the Chinese words. The parents' choices of flexible approach make the actual language practices in their homes a more mixed language usage.

Language management happens when there are unexpected or undesired language practices in home settings, or when family members' intervention is necessary. In an investigation of Australian Chinese families' language beliefs and practices, Hu, Torre and Whitman (2014) find that most Chinese parents prefer direct intervention strategies to guide their children's language learning activities. Schwartz (2010) gives an example of a Canadian family's attempts to raise their children in a French-dominant home when they spend their school years in English-speaking Louisiana and summer holidays in French-speaking Québec. French is preferred at all times at home, no matter where they live, and children were enrolled in French immersion programmes in Louisiana. In this case, the parents are trying their best to manage their home language settings regardless of the language they experienced in social settings. They were determined to regulate and intervene the language practices in home settings despite the dominant language environment. Schwartz (2010) also mentioned there may be penalties or rewards for a specific language being used at home. Immigrant parents may also seek external support from a relevant socio-lingual environment (Schwartz, 2010).

All the three components in a FLP are closely related and deeply rooted in the specific sociocultural contexts in which the family is located (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Hua & Wei, 2016). There are many factors that influence language beliefs and attitudes, which further determine language practices and language management (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). Curdt-Christiansen (2009) claims that the parents' educational background, their immigration experiences and cultural dispositions will significantly influence their FLP. Hua and Wei (2016) calls researchers' attention that family language choices may derive from family members' diverse linguistic needs, which are influenced by the specific socio-linguistic contexts that each family member experiences. Schwartz (2010) further states that family structure, in particular sibling positions, plays a key role in family language practices and management. It is safe to claim that the structure and implementation of a FLP is a very complex and fluid process that require a close examination of the particular sociocultural contexts of each immigrant family.

Methodology

In this paper, a qualitative approach is adopted to explore my participant's meaning-making in specific sociocultural contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case study as the main methodology provides an in-depth inquiry of an intrinsically bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this article I focus on one immigrant Chinese family and their aspirations for their children's dual language development.

Participant: The participant Anna (pseudonym) is an immigrant Chinese mother with whom I developed a relationship after her elder son attended the early childhood education (ECE) centre that I used to work in in West Auckland. Knowing that Anna had since moved and her younger child is currently experiencing ECE in an Auckland-based setting, I invited her to participate in my study to which she happily agreed. Anna is a 38 year-old housewife. She comes from North China and has been living in New Zealand for 20 years. She holds a Bachelor's degree in China, and previously worked as a full-time makeup artist. Her two sons are 8 years old King and 3 years and 7 months old Jimmy. King goes to a primary school in West Auckland and Jimmy goes to a kindergarten in the same area. Anna's husband comes from South China, and he is self-employed. The four members of the family share a home in West Auckland.

Data collection: I collected data from the participant through two interviews. Interviews can best collect data that is descriptive of participants' attitude and opinions if the right questions are asked. A semi-structured interview that allows for follow-up questions, allowed me to probe their responses and learn what is on their mind (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The two interviews were arranged at Anna's convenience, each of which lasted for about 40 minutes, and there was approximately one month between the first and the second interview. Prior to the interviews, the questions were sent to Anna so she had the time to reflect on the topics and organise her thoughts and language. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and audio recorded then transcribed afterwards. The transcriptions were sent back to Anna to double check for possible misunderstandings.

The data I collected were rich in descriptive information and interpretations, thus the method I chose for data analysis was thematic analysis, which focuses on patterns of meaning-making and suits my research purposes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Because I have the same cultural orientations as the participant, there are certain advantages and limitations for my study. The benefits come from our shared language and social norms, which makes my participant comfortable in sharing her thoughts and experiences with me. Meanwhile, our previous relationship helped her to build trust in working with me again, which made her feel confident to share her life with me, thus bring about effective and authentic data. The limitations lie in the fact that my professional judgement may be influenced thus leads to biased views and opinions due to our shared beliefs and values (Shenton, 2004).

Findings

Findings are organised into three parts, which address Anna's language attitudes and beliefs in a multicultural society, her language management in learning alongside her children, and her language practices aiming at heritage language maintenance.

Multilingualism in language beliefs

The first finding is Anna's understanding of multilingualism relating to inclusiveness in the New Zealand context. Anna's family lives in Auckland, and her structuring of their FLP is related to the New Zealand context, which is highly multicultural thus multilingual. Even when their FLP requires the children to use only Chinese language at home, Anna was very happy to see Jimmy learn some Māori words and cultures.

> "The current kindergarten is really good. …It is multicultural, not just Chinese. They have Māori Week. It's not just the language, because Jimmy jumped out of the bed at night to do Haka for me!" "He said the teachers taught them Haka and he can speak Māori words that I have no clue. Look, this is an achievement." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 3)

> "When it's Chinese Week, a parent was invited to play Chinese music for the children. Her daughter went to a primary school nearby, so she invited her daughter's classmates, including

> Kiwi kids, to come to the kindergarten to perform Chinese-speaking. I met a little boy. He could count in Chinese, and knew how to say panda in Chinese. See, this is kind of helpful for my boy. They are very multicultural." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 4)
>
> "Actually it is good for European children, the children from mainstream society, to learn some Chinese." "They may find it useful later, and it is not hard for them as long as they are interested. They can do really well! Like on that day in Chinese Week, the Kiwi kids love to show me their Chinese. They wouldn't let me leave." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 6)

Anna's husband speaks a little Cantonese, but he is not using Cantonese as an additive language in their home settings. Anna expressed her disappointment:

> "My husband came to New Zealand when he was in primary school… he doesn't speak good Cantonese now." "Actually it's a shame that my boys cannot learn Cantonese naturally… " (Anna: Interview 2, p. 3)

Anna explained her understanding of multilingualism:

> "It is not about where you are from or what language you speak. It's just simply the fact that we speak two languages, so why don't we support our children to develop in two languages?!" "It's not about the concept of ethnicity or the boundary between countries." (Anna: Interview 2, p. 3)

Reciprocal learning experiences in language management

The second finding is that in their language practices, Anna took her children's learning as her own learning opportunities as well and they learnt from each other to improve their dual language proficiency together.

It is evident that the FLP is implemented in a positive and supportive way. When the children reverted to use English due to their limited Chinese proficiency, Anna helped her children to find the Chinese words instead of blaming the children for violating the family rules or correcting them in a structural way.

> "Jimmy told me about his day in the kindergarten in Chinese, and he used the English words for the insects, which I didn't understand. So we Googled the English words together and found out the Chinese equivalence. In this way I taught him the Chinese words, and I learnt the English words." (Anna: Interview1, p. 2)
>
> "(When King was in an ECE centre) He asked me why there was no "decoration" [English] on the Christmas tree. I didn't know what decoration meant. So I asked him if he could say decoration in Chinese. Of course he couldn't. He was only four years old. Then we looked it up together, learnt how to say decoration in Chinese, and I made sure that he learnt how to say decoration in Chinese." "I have got some good experiences in teaching King Chinese, and now I even know what decoration means, so when Jimmy starts to learn those words, I can just tell him how to say it in Chinese." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 1)

When their FLP is focused on supporting the children's Chinese language development, the children are keen to help Anna with her limited English proficiency at the same time. It seemed that as a Chinese mother, Anna shared her

power and authority at home with her children, and she did not seem to feel embarrassed or awkward when being helped by the two young children. She said:

> "King always corrects me like: Mum that's not how you say it. And now Jimmy is doing it too. King just keeps correcting my [English] pronunciation. I said: OK your way just sounds better. And he said: No, your way is just wrong. " (Anna: Interview 2, p. 2)

Individual learning needs in language practices

The final finding relates to Anna's strong motivation in her family's heritage maintenance and how she negotiates her language practices based on her observation on the two children's individual learning needs.

Anna explained that Mandarin Chinese is the only language spoken at home among all family members. She justified speaking Mandarin for communicative purposes to the children. She explained:

> "We only speak Chinese at home. I tell them: Mum's English is not good. If you want to communicate with Mum, you need to speak Chinese. So they have to speak Chinese to me." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 1)

Later in the interviews she admitted that she actually understood most of her children's English in their daily conversations. However, in the home setting she claimed that she intentionally lower her English proficiency than what she was capable of, just to minimise the children's chances of speaking English at home and adhere to their FLP. She said:

> "I'm not saying it is not good to speak English, but I just want them to learn both languages. Isn't it better (than just to learn one language)?" "There is not much Chinese language out of home, so I try my best to provide them with Chinese language." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 5)

Even though Anna is firm with the implementation of their FLP, she is being very cautious with these two boys' individual learning traits and needs. She is aware of the differences between the learning styles of her two young children, and she is trying to adopt appropriate language practices to support their dual language development. She compared the two boys in their language learning, for example:

> "Jimmy is not as smart as his elder brother, but he does better in learning to talk." "He is really fast in learning language. When his elder brother says something, he can immediately say it out loud." "King keeps everything to himself and does not talk much, but Jimmy does better in talking." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 2)

> "King is more out-going and active, so he can't sit still. He does not want to sit there doing writing so he finds excuses to go out and play. I had to sit with him and watch him learn to write, and it worked." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 3)

When being asked why her boys are doing well in their dual language learning, Anna reflected on her implementation of their FLP:

> "I think it really matters to take into account the child's disposition, like how quick he can learn, or how well he can understand stuff…also I really focus on my children's education, so I take it very seriously, and keep repeating our learning." (Anna: Interview 1, p. 5)

Discussion

The findings from the interviews to Anna illustrate the structuring, enacting and negotiating of the family's FLP (King & Logan-Terry, 2008). With the purpose of dual language development for her children, Anna structured their FLP based on her language beliefs that multilingualism is an advantage. She saw Chinese, English, Māori or Cantonese as having a similar status, therefore she believed that multilingual development was beneficial not just for her children, but also for the children from the host culture. This counters previous studies which suggest that immigrant parents see bilingualism as an obligation (Moin, Scwartz & Leikin, 2013). Anna's positive language beliefs in multilingualism make heritage language maintenance an achievable goal for her family.

The language management in Anna's family seemed to be very positive and supportive. Anna was aware that the children's usage of English at home was the result of their limited Chinese proficiency; she used the opportunity to support the children's use of digital tools such as Google, in order to improve their Chinese learning and their developing competence in utilising learning resources.

It is an important factor in the analysis of a FLP to observe their language intervention, such as how parents regulate the children's language behaviour (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). While some studies choose to discuss the authoritarian parenting style in Chinese families (for example: Lim & Lim, 2004; Wu at al., 2002), Anna's language management as part of their FLP made a different voice. It is necessary to note that besides their cultural orientations, immigrant parents may undertake various kinds of parenting practices based on their own education background, immigration experiences and family structure (Schwartz, 2010). Anna explained to her children about the importance of learning Chinese in terms of the communicative purposes within the family, which showed that her language management at home is less authoritarian, but more conscious and knowledgeable (Schwartz, 2010).

In addition, Anna's language practices addressed her children's individual learning needs and she tried to adopt appropriate strategies to support them respectively. Considering that Anna comes from Chinese orientations, which is categorized as highly collectivist with high power distance on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2020), her language practices showed some similarities with the mainstream education philosophies in New Zealand that emphasize individual learning needs (MoE, 2017). It is totally different from what Moin et al. (2013) found about how parents ignore their children's personal characteristics when they implement their FLP aiming at heritage language maintenance.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlighted the fundamental components of a FLP from a Chinese immigrant family living in New Zealand. By analysing how their FLP is structured and implemented within the family members and in home settings, this paper tries to present authentic information on the internal and external socio-linguistic contexts that this particular Chinese immigrant family is exposed to.

FLP plays a crucial role in the study of immigrants' heritage language maintenance (Schwartz, 2010), and is closely related to studies on home literacy, language acquisition and parenting in a wider context (Hu et al., 2014). For a multicultural country like New Zealand, it is necessary for education practitioners and policy makers to raise their awareness to language policy at the level of family, because family is an "extremely important domain for studying

language policy" (Schwartz, 2010, p. 172). Only when the FLP of immigrant families are effectively noticed and studied, these families and their children may get the support that they need, both for their heritage language maintenance and their children's overall dual language development.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological and biological* (pp. 57-71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Chan, A. (2018). Chinese immigrant families' aspirations for children's bilingual learning in New Zealand's social spaces. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2018.1458598

Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2009). Invisible and visible language planning: Ideological factors in the family language policy of Chinese immigrant families in Quebec. *Language policy*, *8*(4), 351-375.

Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2018). Family language policy. *The Oxford handbook of language policy and planning*, 420-441.

Fillmore, L. W. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early childhood research quarterly*, *6*(3), 323-346.

Guo, K. (2012). Chinese immigrants in New Zealand early childhood settings: Perspectives and experiences. *Early Childhood Folio*, *16*(1), 5-9.

Hofstede, G. (2020). *The 6-D model of national culture*. Retrieved from: https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/

Hu, J., Torr, J., & Whiteman, P. (2014). Australian Chinese parents' language attitudes and practices relating to their children's bilingual development prior to school. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *12*(2), 139-153.

Hua, Z., & Wei, L. (2016). Transnational experience, aspiration and family language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 37*(7), 655-666.

Kim, H. Y. (2011). Parents' Perceptions, Decisions, and Influences: Korean Immigrant Parents Look at Language Learning and Their Children's Identities. *Multicultural education*, *18*(2), 16-19.

King, K. A., & Logan-Terry, A. (2008). Additive bilingualism through family language policy: Strategies, identities and interactional outcomes. *Calidoscopio, 6 (1)*, 5-19.

King, K. A., Fogle, L., & Logan-Terry, A. (2008). Family language policy. *Language and linguistics compass*, *2*(5), 907-922.

Lim, S. L., & Lim, B. K. (2004). Parenting style and child outcomes in Chinese and immigrant Chinese families-current findings and cross-cultural considerations in conceptualization and research. *Marriage & Family Review*, *35*(3-4), 21-43.

Luykx, A. (2005). Children as socializing agents: Family language policy in situations of language shift. In *ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism* (pp. 1407-1414). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ministry of Education. (*2017*). *Te Whāriki*: He *whāriki* mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

Moin, V., Scwartz, L., & Leikin, M. (2013). Immigrant parents' lay theories of children's preschool bilingual development and family language ideologies. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, *7*(2), 99-118.

Roberts, M. (2005). Immigrants' attitudes to language maintenance in New Zealand. In A. Bell, R. Harlow & D. Starks (Eds.), *Languages of New Zealand* (pp. 248-270). Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

Schwartz, M. (2010). Family language policy: Core issues of an emerging field. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *1*(1), 171-192.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for information*, *22*(2), 63-75.

Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Spolsky, B. (2012). Family language policy – the critical domain. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *33*(1), 3-11.

Statistics NZ (2019). *2018 Census totals by topic – national highlights*. Retrieved from https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2018-census-totals-by-topic-national-highlights

Wu, P., Robinson, C. C., Yang, C., Hart, C. H., Olsen, S. F., Porter, C. L., ... & Wu, X. (2002). Similarities and differences in mothers' parenting of preschoolers in China and the United States. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *26*(6), 481-491.