

## Research Note

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### Learning the Chinese Language in a Multicultural Milieu: Factors Affecting Chinese-Canadian Adolescents' Ethnic Language School Experience

#### *Introduction*

The multilingual nature of Canada is rapidly growing as a result of increased immigration from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Central and South America. According to the 1996 census, 4.7 million people (i.e, about 17% of the total population) reported a mother tongue other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 1997). Indeed language is both a part of culture and a vehicle for the transmission and preservation of culture. It provides a focus for the development of cultural identity. An ethnic group's language, which has often been considered one of the most socially significant ethnic patterns, provides efficient communication among group members, preserves the ethnic culture, and maintains collective ethnic identity and solidarity (Feuerverger, 1989; Fishman, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1981; Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Isajiw, 1981, 1990; Li, 1995; Lieberman, 1970; Reitz, 1985; Sengupta, 1987).

It is common practice for many immigrant children to attend an ethnic language school from an early age. This is especially the case in large metropolitan areas where heritage language classes have been incorporated into the public school curriculum<sup>1</sup> or offered by community organizations. In fact Pannu and Young's (1980) study of 76 ethnic language schools in Toronto, Edmonton, and Vancouver pointed to the tremendous potential of these schools for the development and inculcation of ethnic identity, training of future ethnic leaders, reproduction of ethnic elites at both the community and national levels, and drawing together of community members by galvanizing them through various symbolic activities. Moreover, the fact that minority students' literacy in their ethnic language can contribute to their academic achievement, which supports the view that advanced bilingualism promotes academic excellence, has been well documented (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Cummins, 1981; Cummins et al., 1984; Duran, 1983; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991).

Earlier surveys of Chinese-Canadians in ethnic language schools tended to focus exclusively on issues of the maintenance of ethnic identity (Lan, 1992), language use (Chow, 1983; Man, 1997; Xiao, 1998), and self-esteem (Lee, 2001). This article explores Chinese-Canadian students' degree of satisfaction with

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the various aspects of ethnic language schools and identifies the factors that affect students' ethnic school experiences, two important issues that have been largely ignored in earlier research.

### Methodology

Data for this research were gathered as part of a larger investigation into ethnic identity maintenance and ethnic language learning among Chinese-Canadian adolescents in Calgary.<sup>2</sup> A questionnaire was administered to a total of 510 Chinese-Canadians attending three Chinese language schools in Calgary during the academic years 1999-2000 and 2000-2001. The sample comprised 255 male (50%) and 255 female (50%) students with a mean age of 14.24 ( $SD=1.92$ ). Almost two thirds of these adolescents ( $N=323$ ; 63.7%) were born in Canada, and about one third ( $N=164$ ; 32.3%) were born in Hong Kong. The average length of residence in Canada was 11.96 years ( $SD=4.06$ ), and Canadian citizens comprised an overwhelming majority of the sample ( $N=470$ ; 93.8%).

### Data Analysis

Ethnic language school experience was measured by seven items on a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), with an alpha reliability value of .84. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Three aspects on which students expressed the highest degree of satisfaction included (a) opportunity to make friends with other Chinese students (mean=3.92,  $SD=1.01$ ); (b) being able to learn more about the Chinese culture (mean=3.33,  $SD=1.10$ ); and (c) teaching materials (mean=3.18,  $SD=1.15$ ). Conversely, students were least likely to state that they enjoyed doing the homework (mean=2.31,  $SD=1.15$ ).

A composite score based on these seven items was computed and used for ordinary least-squares regression analysis. A total of 11 predictor variables<sup>3</sup> were included in the model. As shown in Table 2, the overall regression model was significant ( $F=14.467$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and 22% of the variance in ethnic language school experience was accounted for. Two demographic variables, age ( $\beta=-.083$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and age at immigration ( $\beta=-.122$ ,  $p<.01$ ), were found to be negatively and significantly related to the dependent variable. More specifically,

Table 1  
Degree of Satisfaction with Ethnic Language School

	Mean	SD	N
1. I enjoy my Chinese classes very much	2.99	1.10	512
2. I learn a lot about my Chinese culture in Chinese school	3.33	1.10	511
3. I would encourage my Chinese friends to take Chinese language classes	3.03	1.14	510
4. I enjoy doing my Chinese school homework	2.31	1.15	511
5. I would highly recommend my friends to attend my Chinese language school	2.89	1.13	509
6. The study materials (e.g., textbooks) are useful	3.18	1.15	509
7. I am happy to have the chance to make friends with other Chinese students in the school	3.92	1.01	512

younger students and those who emigrated to Canada at a younger age exhibited a lower degree of satisfaction.

On the other hand, exposure to Chinese media ( $\beta=.222, p<.001$ ), attitudes toward multicultural policy ( $\beta=.140, p<.01$ ), ethnic pride ( $\beta=.126, p<.01$ ), practice of cultural customs ( $\beta=.107, p<.05$ ), and self-assessed Chinese-language proficiency ( $\beta=.094, p<.05$ ) were found to be significantly and positively related to school experience. In other words, those who had a higher frequency of exposure to Chinese media rated their proficiency in the Chinese language as higher, held a more positive attitude toward multicultural policy, involved in the practice of Chinese customs, and felt proud of being ethnic Chinese and of the Chinese community's accomplishments expressed a higher degree of satisfaction.

*Discussion and Conclusion*

This analysis identifies age and age at immigration as two demographic variables negatively associated with ethnic language school experience. In fact earlier research on immigrant children who arrived in Canada at older ages has ascertained that they maintain and/or continue to develop L1 (i.e., mother tongue) cognitive/academic skills to a greater extent than younger immigrant children (Chan, 1989; Cummins et al., 1984). Furthermore, this research corroborates findings from earlier studies (Heller, 1982; Koenig, 1980; Lambert, Giles, & Picard, 1975; Lan, 1992; Landry & Allard, 1991), which suggests that a positive attitude toward one's ethnic identity and the multicultural ideal, as

Table 2  
Unstandardized and Standardized Ordinary Least-Squares Regression Coefficients for Effects of Sociodemographic and Background Variables on Ethnic Language School Experience

	$\beta$	beta ( $\beta$ )
1. Gender	-.439	-.039
2. Age	-.245	-.083*
3. Age at immigration	-.187	-.122**
4. Self-rated socioeconomic status	-.554	-.064
5. Exposure to Chinese media	.305	.222***
6. Self-assessed Chinese language proficiency	.207	.094*
7. Academic performance in ethnic school	-.423	-.054
8. Parental assistance with homework	-.098	-.023
9. Attitudes toward multicultural policy	.794	.140**
10. Practice of cultural customs	.600	.107*
11. Ethnic pride	.759	.126**
(Constant)		13.926
F		14.467 ***
R-square		.24
Adjusted R-square		.22
N		515

\* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<.001$

well as a strong affinity to the ethnic culture, are significantly related to ethnic language retention.

It is imperative to note that Xiao's (1998) observation of the Chinese language schools in Winnipeg indicated that students were generally unable to achieve functional proficiency in Chinese, and Chow's (1983) study of the Chinese students in Toronto concluded that Chinese language schools were not very successful in transmitting writing and reading Chinese language skills. Perhaps the finding from the present study that students' apparent lack of interest in doing homework, coupled with factors such as limited hours of teaching per week and insufficient reinforcement for using languages outside the schools that have been noted in the two aforementioned studies, may contribute to the problem of language schools not being able to develop adequate reading and writing facilities in their students.<sup>4</sup>

On a more positive note, the language schools appear to have been successful in injecting a healthy amount of cultural awareness into the students and providing opportunities for students to establish a strong Chinese friendship network. Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of ethnic language programs and the pedagogical approaches and identify ways to enhance the students' learning experience.

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#### *Notes*

1. School Acts in various provinces were amended to allow instruction of nonofficial languages in the school system in the 1970s (e.g., Alberta in 1974, Ontario in 1977, Quebec in 1978, and Manitoba in 1979). In 1974 the Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism recommended federal funding for the teaching of languages other than French and English (Lan, 1992). As well, the federal government introduced the Cultural Enrichment Program in 1977, with the objectives of encouraging and supporting projects and activities to strengthen the cultural identity of different ethnic groups (Leung, 1984).
2. It should be pointed out that according to the 1996 census, the Chinese have become the largest visible minority group in Canada. Of the total 860,000 who identified themselves as Chinese, 44,670 resided in the Calgary census metropolitan area (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1997).
3. Age (mean=14.24; *SD*=1.92) and age at immigration (mean=2.26; *SD*=3.63) were measured in years. Self-rated socioeconomic status (mean=3.39; *SD*=.68) was measured on a Likert scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Exposure to Chinese media was a composite score based on frequency of reading Chinese magazines or newspapers, watching Chinese television programs or videos, listening to Chinese pop music, and listening to Chinese radio broadcasts (1=never to 5=very often/daily). Self-assessed Chinese language proficiency was a composite score based on self-evaluation of understanding, speaking, and reading the Chinese language (1=very unsatisfactory to 5=very satisfactory). Academic performance in ethnic language school (mean=1.38; *SD*=.71) was based on the grade that students expected to obtain (5=49 or below; 4=50 to 59; 3=60 to 69; 2=70 to 79; 1=80 to 100). Parental assistance with homework (mean=2.44; *SD*=1.29) had values ranging from 1 (frequently) to 5 (never). Attitudes toward multicultural policy and ethnic language retention (mean=3.92; *SD*=.98), participation in cultural practices (mean=4.03; *SD*=.99), and ethnic pride (mean=3.99; *SD*=.92) were measured as continuous variables (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

4. The problem that ethnic language programs were insufficient by themselves to promote functional reading and writing skills was also identified in studies involving non-Chinese students (Feuerverger, 1991).

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