

## A Case Study of Chinese Immigrant Children's Biliteracy Learning at Home

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### Abstract

Canada is a multicultural and multilingual country with a large number of immigrants. It is therefore not unusual to see a highly diverse student population in Canadian elementary schools. This study examined primary grade Chinese immigrant children's biliteracy learning at home using a qualitative case study approach. Data collection included home visits, interviews with parents, and conversations with children. Interpretational analysis was used when analyzing data (observational notes, interview transcriptions, and research journals) in order to identify emerging themes of biliteracy learning at home. The findings of my study indicate that several factors might affect children's biliteracy learning at home including parents' education background, attitudes, motivations, expectation level, degree of support toward biliteracy, as well as literacy resources and language environment. This study may help educators further understand Chinese children's literacy learning at home and could encourage parents to more actively support their children's biliteracy learning.

### Introduction

Increased migration has changed schools and schooling worldwide. Globalization's impact on education has been such that students in contemporary times are required to be equipped with advanced literacy skills to participate in "a globally interlinked economy" (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009, p. 62). Being literate, especially with print literacy skills, is in high demand in schools and places of work within a *knowledge economy* context. Language and literacy education, while influenced by globalization, also needs to be understood in the local context in order to get a holistic picture of the context-specific literacy learning situation.

Canada is a multicultural and multilingual country with a high influx of immigrants. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) (2015) 260,404 immigrants came to Canada in 2014 and 36.8% of those immigrants chose to settle in Ontario. The province of Ontario has been the top settlement choice for immigrants for over 10 years. Moreover, one in five people speaks a home language other than English in cosmopolitan centres like Toronto. The People's Republic of China has been among the top 3 immigration source countries to Canada, and Mandarin Chinese has been the most frequently reported mother tongue of immigrants to Canada since 1998 (CIC, 2015). However, North American educational research related to biliteracy has focused primarily on Spanish-English bilingual programs in the United States (Farver, Lonigan, & Epe, 2009; Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2008; Hammer, Jia, & Uchikoshi, 2011) and French-English immersion programs in Canada (Cummins, 2014; Cummins & Swain, 2014; Genesee, 2013; Hermanto, Moreno & Bialystok, 2012; Lyster, Quiroga, & Ballinger, 2013).

Little research has been devoted to Chinese-English bilingual and bicultural understanding in Canada (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Gregory, 2008; Kendrick, 2003; Li, 2000; Wang, 2013), with even less attention paid to the situation of Chinese immigrant children's bilingual learning experiences at home (Lao, 2004; Li, 2001, 2003, 2006b). While much research has pointed to the importance of first language maintenance and development at home (Stille & Cummins, 2013; Swain, Kirkpatrick, & Cummins, 2011), the Ontario curriculum emphasizes English print literacy at school. My study focuses on biliteracy learning at home, examining the home literacy learning environment of young Mandarin Chinese-speaking immigrant children. I explore three main research questions: In what ways do young Chinese immigrant children engage in biliteracy learning at their homes? What are the perceptions of the

participating children's parents about biliteracy learning in Canada? In what ways do parents support their children's biliteracy learning in Canada?

### Theoretical Perspectives

Defining the term biliteracy is complex, as it is located in the fields of bilingual education and literacy studies. This paper employs a view of biliteracy from a socio-cultural perspective, wherein literacy reflects "a more unified holistic view of reading, writing, thinking, and problem solving situated in social and intellectual contexts" (Preze, 1993, p. 118). In other words, literacy learning is understood to be more than learning to read and write, as it also involves people's thinking and meaning-making. The literacy learning process reflects people's social and cultural background, as Li (2006a) stated that "[l]iteracy is a socio-cultural discourse" (p. 18). Essentially, language and literacy learning is a socio-cultural phenomenon that varies from context to context (Gee, 1992; Harding-Esch, & Riley, 2003; Li, 2006a; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Perez, 2004; Scriber & Cole, 1981). In this study, I define biliteracy following the work of Preze and Torres-Guzman (1996), as "the acquisition and learning of the decoding and encoding of and around the print using two linguistic and cultural systems in order to convey messages in a variety of contexts" (p. 54) and add the sociocultural element to the biliteracy learning process. In other words, within this study, biliteracy refers to the communicative use of Mandarin Chinese and English in listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as *meaning-making*.

### Literature Review

The home literacy environment plays an important role in children's literacy learning. Anderson, Li, Ku, Shu, and Yue (2002) conducted questionnaires and reading tests to 574 Chinese children. They found that several main factors can influence children's literacy learning: parents' education, family status, parent's beliefs, and parent-child literacy related activities. Significantly, research highlighted how parents' education background can affect how they support their children's literacy learning (Leichter, 1984; Shi, 2013). After examining six young children's experiences of studying to write in Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, and English Kenner (2004) found that, in particular, each family had its own way to teach children to learn—and especially how to write—in their mother tongue, based on their own cultural understandings and past educational experiences.

Moreover, parental beliefs and attitudes toward dominant and home languages can also affect their children's biliteracy learning at home (Lao, 2004; Li, 2006b; Shi, 2013). Li's work on biliteracy in Chinese families (2006b) stated that the home literacy environment played a crucial role for children's success or failure in achieving biliteracy. There were several factors that appeared to affect children's achievement of biliteracy at home, such as parents' understandings of their immigrant status in the society, their beliefs about the majority and minority languages, their teaching methods, and their own proficiencies in the dominant language. Li further argued that positive and balanced parental attitudes toward Chinese and English and sufficient home literacy support contributed to children's biliteracy learning. Li found that the more parents valued Chinese and English, the more attention and efforts they provided in learning the two languages. This further led to higher levels of success among their children in biliteracy learning in an English-dominant environment.

Literacy resources at home also influence children's literacy development, and the inclusion of more resources provided at home appear to facilitate children's literacy learning. Taylor (1983) claimed that in a rich literacy home environment, children had many literacy materials available and they were actively engaged in literacy events with their parents. Feng, Gai, and Chen (2014) similarly demonstrated that bilingual children with less books at home had lower literacy test scores. These studies seem to indicate that several factors impact children's biliteracy learning. These factors include the addition of more print and non-print texts at home, the interaction of parents or other family members with children focusing on literacy related activities, parents with more years of education, and extra literacy support at home for young children.

### Methodology and Participants

I used a qualitative case study (Yin, 2005) to understand Chinese children's biliteracy learning at home. A case study approach can "portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation" and help to get to know participants' perceptions, sayings, and doings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 181). The macro geographic site was a medium-sized city in Ontario, Canada with a high percentage of Chinese immigrants, and the micro sites were the homes of five Chinese families. I obtained data over a four-month period through visiting children's homes, conducting semi-structured interviews with parents in Chinese, and having informal conversations with the participating children in Chinese and English. I used interpretational analysis to "find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 466). All forms of data (observational notes, interview transcriptions, and research journals) were coded, analyzed systematically, and triangulated to find emerging themes in biliteracy learning at home.

This paper presents three representative cases of children who were born in China and Canada with different family backgrounds. All of the families were from mainland China. All participating parents had a university education. The three participating children were approximately 6 years old: Xinxin (all names are pseudonyms) was born in China and started her preschool in Canada. Her father was doing postdoctoral research at a local university and her mother stayed at home. Star was born in Canada and his parents were pursuing graduate studies in science at a local university. Sky was also born in Canada. His mother worked in a research unit at the local university, and his father worked in an American company and commuted back home once a month. Sky's parents came to Canada in 1995, so this family had the most amount of years in Canada among the three families.

## Findings

### *Literacy Resources*

I visited the participating families over several weekends during the 2007-2008 academic school year. Xinxin's family lived in an apartment building owned by a local university. The first time I visited Xinxin's house, I took the stairs to the third floor, gently knocked on the door and waited, but not for long. Xinxin's mother opened the door for me and greeted me with a smile, saying in Chinese, "Come on in, Ms. Du." I went in and found Xinxin was watching TV. Her mother commented that, "When we first came to Canada, she learned many new words by just watching TV. She loved Treehouse TV, a Canadian English-language cable television channel broadcasting children's programming. Next to the TV was a bookshelf that contained science textbooks and magazines, children's story books, Chinese textbooks in math and Chinese, as well as English and Chinese dictionaries. From the barcode on the book, I could tell some books had been borrowed from libraries and others were owned by Xinxin's family. Xinxin's mother offered a glass of water to me and mentioned that she had noticed that I was looking at the bookshelf. She explained, "Her father is pursuing research in his postdoctoral fellowship so you see many research related books, articles and magazines." She also said that, "I like to take Xinxin to the nearby public library on a weekly basis to borrow children's books to read. When we go back to China, I like to buy Chinese textbooks and story books as there is not much to be found here."

Similarly, when I visited Star's family who lived in a single house near a local university, I also found Chinese newspapers, children's literature books in English and Chinese, research journal articles, books, and reference books. While regarding Sky's home literacy resources, during my visit to his home, I found more English books and magazines than Chinese books. This may be because they came to Canada earlier than the other two families, and they did not go back to China often due to the parents' busy work schedule. The kinds of resources that are available at home appear to reflect parental support and attitude toward their children's biliteracy learning.

### *Parents' Education Background and Family Context*

Sky's family came to Canada in 1995. His mother spoke to their early experiences:

At that time job opportunities were limited for Chinese people and English was not our first language. It was not easy for us to find jobs. We chose to upgrade our degrees first... Recently his father started to work in the U.S., I had to take care of the family alone... When we first arrived, his elder brother struggled at school. He did not know a lot of English. When Sky was born, we gave him an English name and hoped he

could do better. We did not want our children to experience the difficulties we had before. We hope they can learn good English and succeed at school...At home we tried to help Sky with his English learning.

Based on the interview information, Sky's parents hope Sky will not go through his brother's struggle at school nor his parents' challenges in searching for a job. They view English as the dominant and powerful language that guards the key to school and job success in Canada, so they support Sky's English learning at home. This is an example of how family context (e.g., job security) might affect parents' understanding of and support toward biliteracy learning at home.

Xinxin's parents received their education in China and their Chinese learning experiences has heavily influenced their ways to support Xinxin's biliteracy learning at school. When I visited Xinxin's family on a sunny afternoon, she was watching TV in the living room. Her father was not home. When I asked about Xinxin's literacy learning at home, she related the following:

Her father and I always speak Mandarin Chinese with her as we do not want her to forget Chinese. We also help her with English. She tries to do her English homework by herself. If she has questions, we will help. For new words that I do not know I look them up in the dictionary or sometimes I will search them on-line. I usually ask her to spell the word slowly, try to sound it out and guess the pronunciation. In this way, she can learn the sounds, spelling and then get to remember the meaning. Once she knows how to say and spell the word, I then ask her to write the word several times to remember it. We also keep a vocabulary book of all new words...At school she writes journals on Mondays. We practice writing journals at home on Sundays so that she can be ready...When we were in China, students had a lot of homework. I believe the more practice you get, the better you can do your school work. So I spend a lot of time at home on helping her with school work. I just hope she can do well at school.

During the interview I also discovered that Xinxin's parents asked her to print one Chinese character 10 times to facilitate her Chinese writing, and they also encouraged her to write journals in Chinese. The step-by-step guidance in learning new words, the idea of keeping a vocabulary journal, as well as parental efforts and expectation all point out that parents' education background can affect their ways to support their children's biliteracy learning at home.

#### *Parents' Attitudes and Support*

All the participating parents had positive attitudes toward learning English and Mandarin Chinese in Canada, but their expectation levels varied. For example, Sky's mother stated her perspective below:

We live in Canada and it is important to learn English well. English is everywhere and if you want to survive and live well here, you definitely need good English. We are Chinese and we need to keep our Chinese heritage. I send him to the community Chinese school to learn Chinese. I hope he can learn Chinese there, at least know how to speak Mandarin and not to forget it. I do not expect him to learn the entire Chinese language system. It is complicated to learn for a six year old. Perhaps just speaking a little bit Chinese for now. If he wants to learn it later, he can still learn it at the university level.

Sky's parents had lower expectations for his Mandarin learning. They just wanted him not to forget Mandarin and at least speak Mandarin. It is worth noting that Sky did not appear to try as hard as he could to learn Mandarin at the community Chinese school according to his Chinese teacher. Conversely, they thought that English was a "high prestige language" in Canadian society. Thus they preferred to spend more time and energy supporting Sky's English literacy learning at home instead (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003, p. 85). Because Sky's father worked in the U.S. and his mother was busy preparing for dinner after picking Sky up from school, Sky usually spent after-school time watching TV and doing a little bit of reading and writing at home. Sky's mother commented on their home literacy practices:

We did all the Home Reading Books. We tried to read them all and return them on time so that we can get more to read and he can improve his English. No matter how busy I was, I still found time to listen to his reading and tutoring his printing homework. On the weekends I took Sky to the library to borrow books...After receiving his report card from school, I decided to spend more time on improving his writing.

I asked him to write at least one sentence of what happened at school every day at home...I tried as much as I can to support his English learning so that he can do well at school.

Sky's parents shared their hope that Sky will be bilingual in Chinese and English. However, the particular family context and the perceived dominant status of English in Canada urge them to put more efforts to support Sky's English learning at home. Sky's Chinese learning is mostly supported by the community Chinese school. Parental expectation level and daily practices at home have affected Sky's perceptions toward English and Chinese and his efforts toward biliteracy learning.

Conversely, Star's parents seemed to have balanced attitudes towards biliteracy. They reflected on their ethnic pride and the necessity of learning the Chinese language and culture in the comments made by Star's mother:

We are Chinese and if we do not know or understand Chinese, it will be a great regret and shame. Learning the Chinese language (Mandarin) and culture would be a great treasure for him. When he grows up, he would not regret having missed learning his native language and culture. Plus China is growing fast and in the future he may even go to work in China.

My participants highlighted how another reason parents might want their children to learn Mandarin is the hope that their children can communicate with family relatives and friends when they go back to China for a visit. Star's family concurred with this in the next excerpt from an interview transcription:

If we visit Chinese relatives, Mandarin is the only effective language for communication. If children do not understand nor speak Mandarin, how can they communicate with them? Their grandparents would feel so sad and possibly shamed of the fact they cannot understand nor talk with their grandchildren. Children really need to learn Chinese for their own good.

Star's parents explained that they insisted upon speaking Mandarin Chinese at home to facilitate his first language maintenance. They also expect Star to learn to understand, speak, read, and write in Mandarin Chinese. His parents also stated the following about Star's English language learning:

He went to a public school in Canada and all the instructions were in English, so it is very important for him to learn English well. We finish all the work sent by his teachers like home reading books, spelling work, journal writing and some math. We also read with him not only the school books but also library books and the books we bought from China. He liked to make his own games like creating game cards and using empty boxes to make his own game world. We parents just supported his way of learning.

These findings suggest that Star's parents supported his English literacy learning by tutoring his English reading via reading with or to him and supporting his writing through encouraging him to write in a journal and to practice spelling. They also provided resources (e.g., crayons, paper, makers, and scissors) for Star to make cards and design his own board game.

Similarly, Xinxin's mother highly valued her Chinese heritage, "We are Chinese, we need to learn Chinese. Xinxin loves Mandarin. I send her to the community Chinese school to improve her Chinese listening, speaking, reading and writing." Regarding Xinxin's English literacy learning at home, her mother commented:

She does all the reading and writing homework. Her father and I help her with some new words in reading and some grammar in writing. Her father used the white board to teach her new words and sounds. For example, once they worked on the "oo" sound. Her father gave her some words like good, book, cool and let her find out what sound "oo" makes in different words. In addition, when Xinxin asked her father to spell a new word, he would usually pronounce the word first and let her guess the spelling and then teach her the correct spelling.

In a word, Xinxin's parents had a positive attitude toward both English and Chinese literacies. They scaffolded Xinxin's biliteracy learning at home based on their understanding of literacy and their Chinese education background.

In summary, these three Chinese immigrant children can be considered as emergent bilingual learners in English and Mandarin as they could understand, speak, read, and write different degrees of Chinese and English. It seems that Xinxin and Star had full support of biliteracy at home, but Sky did not get the same degree of support at home. This may be attributable to Sky's family history of difficulty adjusting to Canadian living and the search for jobs. The parent participants tended to focus on helping their children with reading and writing. When they were asked about this during the interviews, their answers all pointed to following what the teachers taught at school. Thus they had a particular view of school literacy as print literacy.

The overall findings of this study indicate that the home literacy environment could play a significant role in children's bilingual literacy learning. The findings of this study are therefore consistent with the literature in that positive or balanced parental attitudes toward English and Chinese cultivate balanced parental support of children's biliteracy learning at home (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003; Kenner, 2004; Leichter, 1984; Li, 2006a). Home visits and interviews with parents show that my parent participants tried to provide diverse literacy resources for their children to practice biliteracy. Parents provided different degrees of support in their children's English and Chinese learning according to their different expectation levels and attitudes toward the two languages. Individual family contexts, such as parents' own living experiences and busy working schedule, also appeared to affect their understanding of ways to support their children's biliteracy at home.

### Conclusion

Language and literacy learning practices at home reflect families' social and cultural backgrounds. Findings indicate that different parents had different perceptions of the Chinese language status in Canada. They provided different degrees of literacy support for their children's biliteracy learning, which appears to have greatly influenced their children's ways of thinking and actual efforts in learning Mandarin Chinese and English. Furthermore, their ways of support reflect their understandings of what literacy is and how literacy needs to be taught and learned based on their own education experience in China.

Based on these findings, I argue that parents play a pivotal role in their children's biliteracy learning. When parents encourage their children to become bilingual learners, it may allow the children to practice both Chinese and English at home. When parents value one language over another, it appears that a possible consequence might be the loss of children's first language. Parents' attitudes, behaviours, and practices at home and in public greatly affect children's perceptions and their formation of cultural values. In brief, what parents think, do, and say could influence their children's attitudes and efforts in their biliteracy learning. Therefore, it is important for Chinese immigrant parents to have a balanced view toward learning English and Chinese and to provide related scaffolding for bilingual and bicultural learning at home. Finally, based on findings from this case study, I suggest that educators and researchers might further support immigrant children's literacy learning at school by becoming aware of children's home literacy practices.

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