

Bringing up emergent bilingual children in Canada: The case study of two Asian families

Xiaoxiao Du and Rie Shirakawa, Ph.D. Candidates, Faculty of Education, The University of Western Ontario

Introduction: Canada is a multilingual and multicultural country with a large number of immigrants. Asian immigrants have contributed to “the growth and prosperity of Canada” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). According to Statistics Canada (2012) “more than 200 languages were reported in the 2011 Census of Population as a home language or mother tongue”, and Asian languages showed the strongest growth between 2006 and 2011. While there are many studies about bilingual or multilingual children (Baker, 2000; Cummins & Margaret, 2011), there are few studies specifically of Asian children (Kabuto, 2011; Kenner, 2004), and even fewer that examine Asian children’s bilingual learning at home in Canada (Liu, 2005; Noro, 2009). Therefore, this study examines Asian immigrant children’s bilingual learning (Asian heritage languages and English) at home in Canada.

Purpose of the study: The goal of this study is to understand and describe Asian (Chinese and Japanese) immigrant children’s bilingual learning at home, and provide empirical research findings so that researchers, educators and parents can further scaffold Asian children’s bilingual literacy learning at school and home. Research questions included: What are parents’ attitudes toward bilingual learning in Canada? What are Asian immigrant parents’ literacy practices to support their children’s bilingual learning at home? What are the concerns brought by parents regarding bilingual learning in Canada?

Theoretical perspectives: This study is situated in the socio-cultural perspectives of language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). First, language learning is not just about learning to read, write nor speak, but it is associated with cultural and social practices. Immigrant families bring their cultural and historical roots and practices into their language learning (Gee, 1992; Perez, 1993). Second, children are capable knowledge constructors in language learning and parents provide appropriate support for their children’s language learning by providing language resources and engage children in meaningful language and literacy activities. In summary, language learning is a social phenomenon; both parents and children play significant roles in language learning.

Methodology: A qualitative case study was conducted to have an in-depth understanding of Asian children’s bilingual learning at home (Yin, 2003). Participants were 3 Asian immigrant children (two Chinese boys and one Japanese girl) as well as their parents. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with participating parents about their perspectives and support of their children’s bilingual learning at home in Canada; participant observations with participating families in their homes; informal conversations with children about their ideas of bilingual learning in Canada; and participating children’s literacy work samples from home. Interview data, field notes and literacy work were analyzed thematically using a constant comparative approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Findings: The initial findings suggest that parents play a key role in their children’s bilingual learning at home. Participating parents provided a rich bilingual literacy environment at home for their children’s bilingual and bicultural learning through engaging their children in both Asian languages and English literacy activities (such as speaking, story reading and pretend play). Participating parents’ education and cultural backgrounds may influence their ways of engaging their children in bilingual learning at home. There was a concern regarding the lack of bilingual literacy resources and fewer opportunities to practice bilingual literacies outside home in Canada.

Significance: This study can contribute to the knowledge base of culturally and linguistically diverse children’s bilingual learning in Canada. The findings of the study can help researchers and educators to better understand Asian immigrant children’s bilingual learning at home. It also has useful implications for parents who want to support bilingual children at home in Canada.

Bibliography

- Baker, C. (2000). *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism* (2nd ed.). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2010). *Asian Heritage Month*. Retrieved October, 5, 2010, from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/asian/index.asp>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (5th Ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Cummins, J., & Margaret, E. (2011). *Identity Texts; the Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual schools*. Stoke-on-Trent, UK and Sterling, USA: Trentham Books.
- Gee, J. (1992). Socio-cultural approaches to literacy (literacies). In W. Grabe, R. B. Kaplan, C. Ferguson, G. R. Tucker, H. G. Widdowson, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* (Vol.12) (pp. 31-48). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kabuto, B. (2011). *Becoming biliterate: Identity, Ideology, and Learning to Read and Write in Two Languages*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kenner, C. (2004). *Becoming biliterate: Young children learning different writing systems*. England: Trentham Books.
- Liu, Yu. (2005). An investigation into home conditions favouring bilingual/biliterate development in a preschool-aged Chinese immigrant child. (unpublished Master's Thesis). The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.
- Noro, H. (2009). The role of Japanese as a heritage language in constructing ethnic identity among Hapa Japanese Canadian children. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30(1), 1-18.
- Perez, B. (1993). Bilingual practices and issues in secondary schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 69(1), 117-135.
- Statistics Canada. (2012). *2011 Census of Population: Linguistic Characteristics of Canadians*. Retrieved October, 25, 2012, from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/121024/dq121024a-eng.htm>.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Translated *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological process*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.