

Shared Reading in Children's Heritage Language Development: Case Studies of Three Chinese-American Families

Dr. Ya-Ning Hsu

Institution: Bilingual/Bicultural Program
Teachers College, Columbia University
Macy 351, 525 West 120th Street
New York, New York 10027
U.S.A

Abstract

The current study explores at-home co-reading practices in three families where the children's heritage language is Mandarin Chinese. Existing research on reading time, with adults reading to children, mostly focuses on monolingual children or school settings. However, little is known about at-home reading practices in heritage languages among bilingual children. This longitudinal mixed-method study collected data from reports of reading time and routines in each family and observations of each learning environment. The study found that read-aloud time decreases as children grow up due to hegemonic forces from mainstream English education. In addition, bilingual children require more support in heritage language reading since heritage language acquisition is usually their weaker language. Finally, the study calls for creating space and providing additional support for bilingual children's heritage language maintenance.

Keywords: Reading Time, Family Shared Reading, Heritage Language Maintenance

Introduction

The current study examines the read-aloud practices of three bilingual children conversant in both Mandarin Chinese and English. The study focuses on reading time with parents in a home setting where the children use their heritage language, Mandarin Chinese, and have access to Chinese book collections in their home. Previous studies on reading time with parents have chiefly discussed monolingual children or focused on school settings. As a result, there is a lack of research on bilingual children learning to read in their heritage languages at home. This article begins with a literature review on read-aloud and literacy development, and read-aloud time in relation to children's age. Next, the history of heritage language maintenance in the U.S. context and its distinct challenges are discussed. The methodology section presents the data collection procedure, method, and analysis process. Findings are provided for each case family followed by the discussion. Finally, the researcher calls for preserving space for heritage language maintenance and providing support for bilingual children in their heritage language development.

Literature Review

Read-aloud practices and literacy development

Reading itself is praised by literacy experts for its many benefits: building background knowledge, developing vocabulary, familiarizing children with story structures, exposing them to rich language patterns, heightening their awareness of the reading process, and promoting reading as a pleasurable activity (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Hall & Moats, 1999; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Learning to read and comprehend reading materials are two of the most important achievements in children's academic careers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Bialystok (1997) stated that reading reflects children's first encounter with symbolic representation, and when children learn to read, they often have a moment of epiphany in which they realize that text represents meaning. Among the various ways of reading, read-aloud refers to adults reading to children and engaging children in discussion about the language and text (Holdaway, 1979).

Almost three decades ago, read-aloud became a central concern as a result of the 'Becoming a Nation of Readers' study (Anderson et al., 1985) in which read-aloud was named the single most important activity for success in reading. At that time, public interest in reading aloud to children sparked a new wave of research on the practice. Much of that research has shown that reading aloud to children has multiple benefits. Lane and Wright (2007) noted that a systematic approach to reading aloud can yield important academic benefits for children. Additionally, Saracho and Spodek (2010) found that storybook reading with a family member is effective for students' reading and literacy achievement and concluded that students not only are exposed to language usage through read-aloud practice, but also learn reading-related skills such as language fluency, textual interpretation, and development of comprehension skills.

Previous research has also examined multilingual read-aloud practices. For example, Roberts (2008) studied 33 bilingual preschool students whose home languages were either Hmong or Spanish. During two six-week sessions, students participated in both home and classroom storybook reading in their first and second languages. The study found a significant gain in the students' L2 vocabulary acquisition, especially when the vocabulary came from a caregiver or a parent who spoke English to the students. Roberts argued that storybook reading could be a means to enhance students' language development.

Read-aloud time and children's age

Although the benefits of shared reading have been substantiated in the field, there is typically a gradual decrease in adults' reading to children as children grow older. Jacobs, Morrison, and Swinyard (2000) studied the classroom reading practices of 1,874 elementary school teachers to survey the frequency with which they read to their students. The researchers found that although elementary teachers have been encouraged to share literature with their students by reading to them on a daily basis, reading books to students occurs mostly in the lower grades of elementary schools. Read-aloud practices wane as the students advance into the intermediate grades. Albright and Ariail (2005) conducted a descriptive statistical survey analysis of middle school teachers' read-aloud practices, defined by the researchers as practices wherein teachers read aloud texts other than textbooks. The survey discovered a gradual decrease in reading aloud from fifth to eighth grade among the middle school teachers. Albright and Ariail concluded that reading aloud continues to be viewed as a hallmark of elementary school education, and they advocated further research on the extent to which middle school teachers read aloud to their students and the types of texts teachers use for reading aloud.

Why is reading aloud important beyond the early grades? Ivey and Broaddus (2001) conducted interviews with 31 students in three reading/language arts classrooms across 23 diverse schools, and discovered that students value the teacher's reading out loud as part of the instruction because 'the teacher helped to make the text more comprehensible' (p. 367) through reading aloud. Similarly, Rief (2000) studied a struggling eighth-grade reader and discovered that reading aloud helped him gain access to texts that he would not otherwise have been able to comprehend. Rief argued that struggling middle school readers are not necessarily able to read on their own; thus, teachers must find time to read aloud to make texts comprehensible to them. Rief's study on struggling readers sheds light on heritage language acquisition. Given that heritage languages are usually underdeveloped compared to the dominant target language (Valdés, 2001), reading in heritage languages is likely to be challenging to many bilingual readers, making them struggling readers in their home language.

Reading aloud to children also increases children's print exposure, a critical element in literacy development. In analyses of the 1992 US National Assessment of Educational Progress student reading scores, McQuillan (1998) found a strong relationship between students' standardized test scores in each state and how much access to print materials a state made available in homes, communities, and schools. Other studies also show the importance of access to print materials when parents are involved in their children's learning (Dorrell & Carroll, 1981; Neuman, 1999; Rucker, 1982). Neuman (1999) found that by substantially increasing the number of available books in childcare centers with economically disadvantaged children, those children developed higher levels of early literacy skills (e.g., conceptualization of material, letter name knowledge, and narrative competence) than children without parental involvement, and those effects continued into kindergarten six months later. Dorrell and Carroll (1981) found that simply adding noncirculating comic books to the school library increased the circulation of non-comic books by an impressive 30%. When more texts in print are made available to students, they consume more printed materials. The studies by McQuillan (1998), Neuman (1999), Dorrell and Carroll (1981), and Rucker (1982) on the impact of print exposure on children's literacy development centered on monolingual children. Little is known about the impact of print exposure on bilingual children and their heritage language development.

The current study aimed to explore children's reading practices and literacy materials in their heritage language at home through documenting children's co-reading time with parents and field observations of the amount of exposure to Chinese books the children had at home. Ultimately, the researcher hopes that findings of this study contribute to the field of heritage language acquisition. 6

Theoretical Framework

Krashen (1998) defines a heritage language as 'one not spoken by the dominant culture, but is spoken in the family or associated with the heritage culture' (p. 3). Participation in a heritage language connotes membership in a culture that exists apart from the broader society. Prior to the 1980s, the main mission of heritage language researchers in the U.S. was to stabilize indigenous American languages and identify the different minority languages. Under the umbrella of heritage language research lie the categories of indigenous heritage language, colonial heritage language, and immigrant heritage language (Fishman, 1989). This study's participants fall under the category of immigrant heritage language because the children in the study are native to the U.S. while their parents are foreign-born immigrants. Children in this category are exposed to an immigrant heritage language at home with family members and attend monolingual English schools during their formal education. Heritage language maintenance has long faced great challenges in the U.S. McKay and Wong (1996) held that skeptics are critical of heritage language maintenance. Immigrants who attempt to maintain their ethnic languages may be seen as not being committed to learning English and thus not devoted to their new country. Some educators still view bilingualism as a deterrence for bilingual children in their academic career, although numerous studies have shown that ethnic language retention and strong English acquisition can exist side by side, if not aiding English language learning (Baker, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2003). There are also powerful forces compelling immigrants to assimilate into mainstream American society. This ideology of abandoning heritage languages to give way to English is most clearly seen in the 'English Only Movement', resulting in the reduction of the number of bilingual programs and the loss of heritage languages for children of immigrant families.

Bilingual children may have contact at an early age with their heritage language in their families or communities. However, the children are often limited in their literacy skills (Valdés, 2001). Carreira and Kagan (2011) surveyed heritage language learner college students across different heritage languages and geographic regions in the U.S. and found that 80% of the Mandarin and Cantonese heritage language learners described their reading and writing skills as ranging from low to intermediate, while an average of 70% rated their aural and oral heritage language skills in the intermediate level to advanced level. The reason for the disparity between their oral/aural and literacy skills could have been the result of limited exposure to their heritage languages caused by the hegemony of English in the educational system (Carreira, 2004). Valdés (2001) points out that heritage language are underdeveloped in the U.S. when compared to the dominant target language, English. Heritage language-speaking children may be able to carry out social interactions in their heritage languages but lack proficiency outside of the family domain. Compared to L1 learners, who have full support in their native language at school, home, and in their communities in learning formal registers, content areas, and social and academic language, heritage language learners usually are left with distinctive linguistic, content, and cultural gaps in their heritage language, even though they do have the advantage of early and abundant exposure to the heritage language in a natural linguistic setting (Montrul, 2010).

Heritage language acquisition is neither L1 nor L2 acquisition (Lynch, 2003). Both heritage language and L1 learning provide an early start to language learning through interaction with language in a natural setting. Heritage language differs from L1 in that L1 learning continues and flourishes as the child develops with the support of formal schooling and exposure to the language outside of family and ethnic communities. On the contrary, heritage language learning peaks before the child enters his or her formal education. A child's aural/oral abilities may be maintained or further developed, but for many children, literacy skills may hardly develop at all, except through purposeful instruction on both a regular and long-term basis. Heritage language learning is also different from L2 learning in that heritage language learners enjoy the advantage of language learning at an early age in a natural environment. L2 learners typically have a later start with the language in a controlled classroom environment with prescribed literacy materials and instruction. L2 learners may not converse as easily as heritage language learners do; however, through systematic learning, they may have better literacy skills than heritage language learners. On the continuum of bilingualism, heritage language learners may find themselves in the difficult position of having strong conversational skills but being illiterate in their heritage language.

The incompleteness of skills in the heritage language can represent a lack of balance between aural/oral and literacy outputs (Montrul, 2010). Therefore, Valdés (1995) urged the language education field to frame a new agenda for heritage language acquisition. Since heritage language learners are not exposed to academic language, formal registers, and content areas as much as they are to their target language (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Rothman, 2007), it is inevitable that the heritage language will become their weaker language and they will need support in order to maintain it. In addition, since most heritage language learners acquire the heritage language at home, literacy exposure in time, frequency and materials at home become even more important in bridging linguistic gaps. The current study investigates read-aloud practices by adults to children in their heritage language, arguing that children benefit from such literacy practices by acquiring heightened literary skills in their heritage language.

Methodology

This longitudinal study focused on three English/Mandarin Chinese bilingual families. A mixed-method approach is adopted to examine heritage language learning by considering reading time, frequency, and the availability of books in Chinese for each family, as well as the process and challenges they experienced. In all the participating families, the mother is the major caretaker and participant in the read-aloud routine. All the mothers in the study are college-educated, fluent and literate in both Chinese and English, believe in the benefits of reading to children, and are adamant about the maintenance of their children's Chinese language. All three families have two children. For Family I, the research started when the first child was two years old. At the time of the write-up, the first child is in fourth grade the second child is two years old. For Family II, at the time of the report, the two children are in the fourth grade and the seventh grade. The research started when the first child was one and half years old. For Family III, the researcher started the observations when the first child was two years old. Currently, the first child is in the sixth grade and the second child is in the fourth grade. Table 1 summarizes the age, gender information for the participants, and the length of the research period. The researcher employed field notes, digital recordings, and observations with each family every three months to document the reading practices and book collections. Member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation were utilized to ensure the rigor of data collection and analysis.

Table 1: Information on the children participants

	Family I	Family II	Family III
Number of children	2	2	2
Age of children at the beginning of research	Child 1: 1 year old Child 2: not yet born	Child 1: 1 year old Child 2: not yet born	Child 1: 6 months old Child 2: not yet born
Gender of the children	Child 1: female Child 2: male	Child 1: male Child 2: female	Child 1: male Child 2: female
Age of children at the time of reporting	Child 1: 4 th grade Child 2: 2 years old	Child 1: 7 th grade Child 2: 4 th grade	Child 1: 6 th grade Child 2: 4 th grade
Length of research	9.5 years	11 years	11 years

Findings

The findings for each family are described below. Family I Since the daughter was born, the mother of Family I started purchasing Chinese books for read-aloud practice. The books, rich and diverse in topics and formats, were 10 mostly acquired from local and overseas bookstore, and some were gifts from friends and relatives. In their apartment, books were in the living room, dining room, bedrooms, on the sofa, on the windowsills, and on the floors. The mother said, 'I heard that reading is good for children. So, I want to read to my child.'

The reading time for each session at this stage lasted about ten to fifteen minutes to accommodate the daughter's attention span and napping schedule. The reading sessions were scattered throughout the day; the mother reported she read to her daughter 'at any time I could find.' The daily read-aloud practice totaled about an hour and continued throughout the preschool years for the next four to five years. However, once the daughter began first grade, the reading practice started to change, though the change was subtle in the beginning. First, the daily reading became inconsistent. Instead of reading every day, the mother noticed occasional disruptions, especially on the weekdays when the daughter's school homework took over their spare time. Reading time started to decrease occasionally from an hour to approximately forty minutes. The decline continued into the second grade. The read-aloud frequency subsided to no more than three times a week; reading time was reduced to about twenty minutes a day. The declining pattern persisted and before reaching the third grade, reading practice was no more than once a week and the reading time lasted ten to fifteen minutes. In the third grade, the read-aloud routine barely took place, as the mother reported, 'maybe once on the weekend or even less for about 10 minutes.' The mother reported that in the first three years, the daughter had plenty of time to read with her. When the daughter started preschool, she still had free time since there was little homework from school. However, starting in the first grade, the demand from school rose significantly. At times, they had to skip the read aloud. The mother reported, 'We would read if we had time. Sometimes we did not have enough time. Then, we could not read Chinese books.' The homework from school continued to increase throughout the second grade and became the focus of the child's life. The reading of Chinese books declined continuously.

At present, the daughter is in fourth grade, and the co-reading of Chinese books has completely ceased in Family I. The mother expressed, 'Reading Chinese is only something for home. Schools do not give credits for it. When we have to make a decision, learning Chinese sometimes has to give way to schoolwork. After all, her school reports do not include learning Chinese.' While the reading of Chinese books has ceased for the first child, the mother was even more enthusiastic and adamant about the read-aloud practices with her toddler son because 'this will be the only time he can read with me.' For the Chinese book collection in the family, the majority of books were purchased in the daughter's early years, featuring board books, sensory books, with topics such as fairy tales and make-believe stories. In the first few years, the mother continued to expand the collection. However, with the decline of reading time, the mother interpreted the decline as a dwindling interest and stopped updating the book collection. At present, most of the books are developmental and intended for young children at the early childhood stage. 'She does not seem to be interested in reading Chinese books anymore. So there is no need to buy books,' the mother explained. Thus, there is a further reduction in investing in Chinese books. Family II has a boy and a girl that are two-and-a-half years apart. The observations started when the first child was one year old. In the first three years of the observations, Family II maintained a consistent routine of reading Chinese books. The mother in Family II enjoyed reading to her children and considered the routine as a bonding opportunity with her children. She said, 'I especially like to have them sit on my lap in the rocking chair. They listen to me reading the books. The three of us would look at the pictures, talk, and just enjoy the time together.'

Chinese children's storybooks on varying topics and genres were abundant. The mother sometimes differentiated the reading by the children's levels and interests. 'It can take an hour. By the time I finish reading to each of them, I can get really tired,' said the mother. 'But, it is worth it,' added the mother, with a smile. The mother expressed a firm belief in maintaining her children's Chinese learning through reading: 'Since everyone is reading English books in the U.S., I figure reading Chinese books will help them with their Chinese learning.' The mother reported a consistent daily reading routine of approximately an hour during this time until the first child finished kindergarten. When the first child started first grade, schoolwork gradually became the focus of his life. Reading Chinese books began to decline and quickly plummeted in the next twelve weeks. Different from Family I where the decline was gradual, the reading routine plunged drastically from an hour a day to less than ten minutes; the frequency also dropped considerably to no more than twice a week. 'We can only read once in a while, like once or twice a week,' the mother sighed. When the son entered the second grade, Chinese coreading practice completely diminished. The mother reported, 'I have to make sure he does well in the school first... He needs to do well in school.' While the reading routine for the first child ceased, the mother managed to maintain the read-aloud activity for the second child. However, by the time the younger child started kindergarten, a declining pattern identical to her brother followed. The mother witnessed another drop in co-reading of Chinese books. By the end of her daughter's kindergarten, the reading routine also diminished for the girl. Similar to Family I, Family II started with a nice collection of children's books in the preschool years, and the books were of diverse topics and genres reflecting the children's interests.

However, at this time, with the children in the fourth and seventh grades, there were no Chinese books at home. 'Well, we do not read Chinese books anymore. There is no need to keep them anymore,' said the mother. Family III also has two children, an older boy and a younger daughter, with a one and-a-half year's age difference. The read-aloud practice in Family III started right after the first child was born because, as the mother revealed, 'I was told that reading is beneficial for children's literacy development, even at this early stage and I really want to maintain my children's Chinese.' The mother read to her first born 'as much as possible.' The mother elaborated, 'Playtime is also reading time for us. I would give him books to play and try to read a page or two.' The mother placed a basket of board books underneath the highchair, 'so that I can read to him at meal or snack time.' The constant reading persisted through the first two years. After the second child was born, she joined her brother and mother in the read-aloud routine. The reading routine was broken into small sessions to accommodate young children's stamina and attention span. The daily reading time approximated more than an hour a day. The mother prided herself over her dedication of the reading routine despite her hectic schedule. The reading practice at this stage was described as 'something all of us look forward to everyday and my children think it is part of their life.'

However, when the first child entered first grade, a situation similar to Family I and II emerged. The son started to spend more time on schoolwork and had limited time for Chinese reading. However, the mother insisted on the practice because 'their school does not teach Chinese. If I don't do it, who else can help them?' The mother insisted on spending 30 to 40 minutes on reading Chinese books together. The mother sometimes read to the children together, at other times, separately, to accommodate their growing divergent interests. The reading practice, though it experienced some decline, was for the most part preserved for the first two years in the elementary grades. When the first child started third grade, however, a noticeable decline surfaced. As the demand from school increased, the reading time decreased to 20 minutes approximately five times a week. Not only did the mother find it increasingly challenging to find time to read to her children, the use of the books emerged as a new issue. Just like the first two families, Family III also provided Chinese books for children. 'I always ask my friends and families to ship books to me. I think it is important to have the right books available,' said the mother. Therefore, unlike Family I and II, Family III's mother continued to update the bookshelf to align with her children's changing interests and linguistic levels. However, in Family III, with the constantly upgraded books, the read-aloud practice still ceased in the end of fourth grade for the children. The mother reported 'smooth reading' in the earlier years because 'they seemed to understand everything I read to them.'

However, around the time the first child approached the third grade, 'there seem to be more and more terms and words he does not understand and I have to explain or translate into English for him more and more.' The explanations and translations took a toll on the reading and the interests for the mother and the child. 'It is becoming more tiring to read Chinese books,' said the mother. A similar situation also happened for the second child around the same grade. The lack of time and the increasing difficulty in comprehending the Chinese books led to the steady decline of the read-aloud routine to approximately 20 minutes, three times a week and the eventual decrease at around the start of the fifth grade for the first child. A similar path was observed in the second child. The age of participant child and the corresponding co-reading time in Chinese is represented in Table 2. Figures 1 to 6 exhibit the linear graph for each family.

Table 2: Age of the Child and Chinese Co-reading Time per Week

	Family I, Child 1	Family I, Child 2	Family II, Child 1	Family II, Child 2	Family III, Child 1	Family III, Child 2
Birth to preschool years	450 minutes	440 minutes	420 minutes	420 minutes	470 minutes	460 minutes
Kindergarten	420 minutes	n/a	420 minutes	420 minutes	420 minutes	420 minutes
1 st grade	240 minutes	n/a	20 minutes	0 minutes	420 minutes	420 minutes
2 nd grade	60 minutes	n/a	0 minutes	0 minutes	420 minutes	350 minutes
3 rd grade	12.5 minutes	n/a	0 minutes	0 minutes	100 minutes	85 minutes
4 th grade	10 minutes	n/a	0 minutes	0 minutes	60 minutes	50 minutes
5 th grade	n/a	n/a	0 minutes	n/a	0 minutes	n/a
6 th grade	n/a	n/a	0 minutes	n/a	0 minutes	n/a
7 th grade	n/a	n/a	0 minutes	n/a	n/a	n/a

Fig. 1

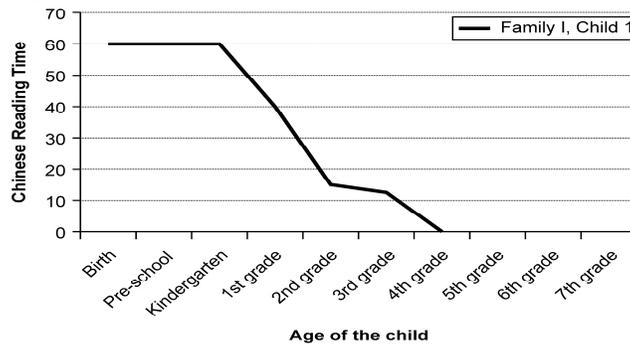


Figure 1: Chinese reading time and age of child I, Family I

Fig. 2

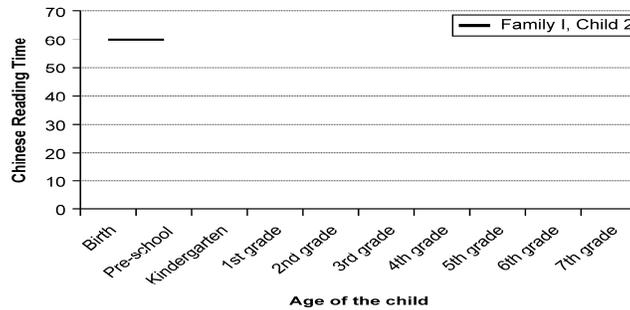


Figure 2: Chinese reading time and age of child II, Family I

Fig. 3

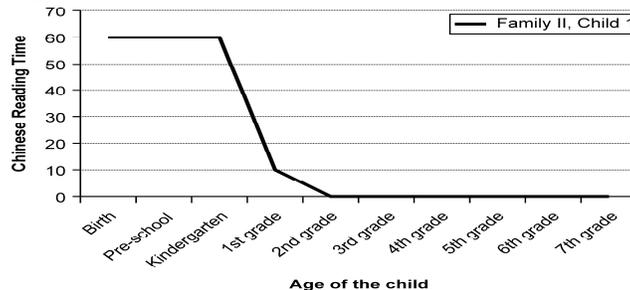


Figure 3: Chinese reading time and age of child I, Family II

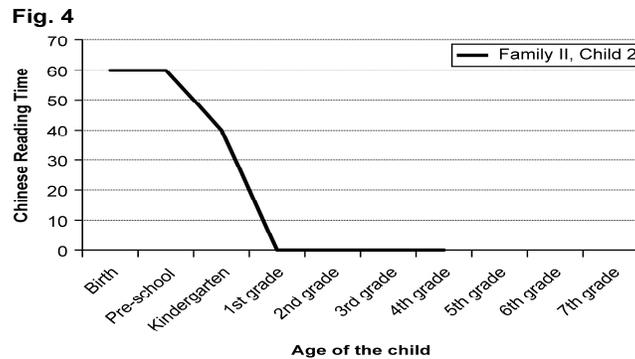


Figure 4: Chinese reading time and age of child II, Family II

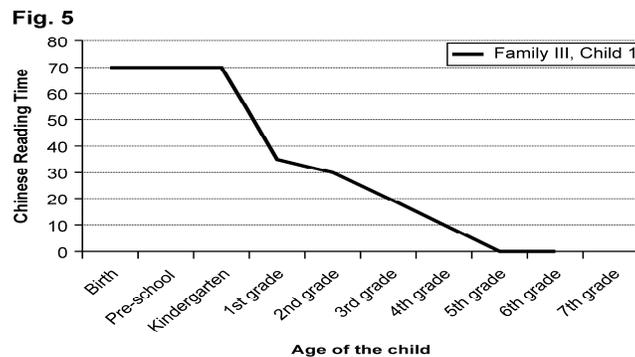


Figure 5: Chinese reading time and age of child I, Family III

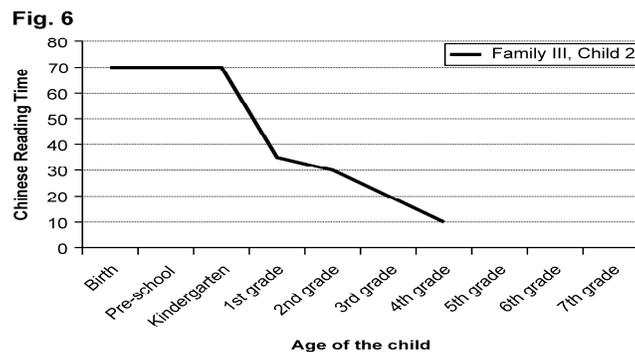


Figure 6: Chinese reading time and age of child II, Family III

Discussion

The current study examined the read-aloud practices of bilingual children at home in their heritage language. It was found that similar to monolingual children, the read-aloud practices declined as the children grew older. The reasons for the decline, however, are alarming. The three participating families are similar in that all the mothers started reading to their children at a very young age and maintained the routine throughout the early childhood stage. The decline in read-aloud practice commenced in all families at the onset of formal education, either kindergarten or first grade. For Family I, the duration of read-aloud continued decreasing and when the first child reached third grade, the reading practice was no more than once a week for 10 to 15 minutes. For Family II, the decline turned into a drastic drop to no more than twice a week for approximately 10 minutes within one year of the first child's entering formal education. Family III's reading practice persisted well into the first child entering fourth grade, but they still lost the battle eventually. All three families cited that the major reason for stopping the practice was the increasing demand of schoolwork. Since heritage language learning is not part of the official curriculum, with the limited time available, the reading practices in all three families diminished. For many bilingual families, maintaining their heritage language has been an uphill battle since English is the official language, and its power is reinforced via hegemony (Carreira, 2004; Fillmore, 1993, 2000; Garcia, 2000; Valdés, 2001). As Wiley (2000) explained, 'linguistic hegemony is achieved when dominant groups create a consensus by convincing others to accept their language norms and usage as standard or paradigmatic.

Hegemony is ensured when they can convince those who fail to meet those standards to view their failure as being the result of the inadequacy of their own language' (p. 113). The pull towards assimilation is strong, which contributes to language shift in many bilingual families (Fillmore, 1991; Veltman, 1988, 2000). The results of successful linguistic hegemony are often language shift from the minority language to the majority language and, ultimately, language loss (Suarez, 2000). Garcia (2000) noted the change in school policy in the U.S. in the 1960s, and the genesis of a renewed interest in bilingual education under the pressure for equal educational opportunity and emphasis on respecting and affirming students' languages. In the 1970s, however, the political climate shied away from pro-ethnic and linguistic diversity and instead reinforced English's status. In the 1980s, even though cultural and linguistic diversity increased, the language programs for bilingual students, such as ESL programs and Transitional Bilingual programs emphasized English language acquisition and the native language component was meant to be remedial and transitional in nature. Entering the early 1990s, the influence of two-way emergent programs, also known as dual language programs was limited. Garcia argued: 'As the country has increased in language diversity, the movement toward Standards has taken afoot, effectively denying language differences and expecting the same level of standard English language proficiency of all' (p. 246). As a result, the number of bilingual programs was reduced.

Fillmore (1991) contends that in linguistically and culturally diverse societies like the U.S., children from immigrant families must learn English, the de facto language of the society, so that they stand a chance to advance in their academic career and gain employment mobility. While this is true, learning English should not displace and replace the primary language in bilingual children. In other words, second language learning does not need to result in the loss of the primary language. However, language-minority children encounter powerful forces for assimilation upon entering the English-speaking world in the schools, and this disheartening phenomenon seems to be the norm in the U.S. Thus, becoming bilingual in the United States is a subtractive process in that acquisition of English takes place at the expense of the erosion or loss of the primary languages (Lambert, 1975, 1977, 1981). In her study of preschool bilingual children, Fillmore (1991) found evidence that as soon as the children entered the English schools, their heritage languages started deteriorating. She argued that the timing and the conditions under which the children come into contact with English profoundly affect the retention and continued use of their primary languages. Brecht and Ingold (2002) also argued that language dominance propels many bilingual families in the U.S. to shift toward English in predictable patterns such that children born in the U.S. to first-generation immigrant families often move quickly to English before or at the onset of schooling at the expense of first language attrition. In studying preschool bilinguals, Fillmore (1991) suggested that English learning should not start until bilingual children's native languages are stable enough to handle the encounter with English. The author of the study disagrees with such a proposal. Language learning is an evolving process that demands continuous input, practice, and sustained exposure and reinforcement (Montrul, 2010).

What stage can qualify as the stabilization point? In the view of the author, it is not possible to 'wait' until the 'stabilization' of the heritage language has occurred before learning English. Instead, systematic heritage language programs that include formal instruction in writing, reading, and content areas are necessary to maintain the heritage language at an academic and professional level (Brecht & Ingold, 2002). In addition to the hegemonic forces imposed on bilingual children, the lack of proper reading materials and adult support at home further exacerbates the situation. All three families invested in children's Chinese books when their children were young. Neither Family I nor Family II updated the books as the children grew into the elementary grades. At present, early childhood books still dominated the book collection for Family I. Reading Chinese books stopped when the first child was in kindergarten, and Family II simply gave away all their Chinese books. Only Family III's mother continued updating the Chinese books. The lack of developmentally appropriate books in Family I provided little motivation for the child to continue reading Chinese with her mother. Family II provided no resources for read-aloud practice even if the children wanted to read. For Family III, another challenge surfaced. The books all three families owned were all written for native Chinese-speaking children. In the early years, none of the family reported difficulty in the reading process. However, as the children grew up, a new challenge emerged. Family III, the only family that continued updating the books, reported that the children started showing difficulty in the comprehension. The mother reported needing to translate from English to facilitate reading in Chinese, a situation that did not happen in the earlier years. The fluidity, pace, and stamina of reading were affected significantly. Even with the mother's co-reading, both the mother and the children found the reading increasingly challenging. The mother reported, 'Sometimes, the explanations take so much time and reading becomes difficult. It is really hard.' The mother tried to choose easier books.

However, although the linguistic level might have been more appropriate, ‘they think the easy books are for babies and are not interested.’ Therefore, the read-aloud practice eventually ceased. Montrul (2010) maintained that for most heritage speakers, the home language is the weaker language, and heritage language learners’ incomplete linguistic knowledge presents a unique set of challenges. Lynch (2003) contended that heritage speakers are not entirely L1 speakers or L2 speakers of the language. Unlike monolingual children who reach full development of their native language through the systematic instruction received from formal schooling, heritage language speakers have distinct gaps in their linguistic knowledge. Limited exposure, infrequent use of the language, and lack of formal schooling in the heritage language are the main reasons behind the incomplete patterns of acquisition, even attrition. Heritage language learners usually acquire the heritage language in informal contexts, such as home, thus missing the chance to learn formal registers along with the vocabulary and complex structures that are typical of written language (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Rothman, 2007). However, as children grow up, the language development extends beyond the home. Yet, heritage language learners are still confined within the familial setting where social language prevails and, it is challenging for heritage language learners to advance beyond their home language and comprehend written texts as native speakers do.

Montrul (2010) pointed out that language learners need to expand their vocabulary and develop literacy skills in different genres, and the acquisition of vocabulary is context specific and depends largely on experience. This might explain the reasons why, even with the steady supply of quality books in Family III, the read-aloud practice still proved to be challenging. Since heritage language learners’ linguistic knowledge is incomplete, adults’ support is critical. In the literature review, it was mentioned that struggling readers especially appreciate read-aloud practice with teachers who are able to scaffold, explain, clarify, model, and motivate children’s literacy development (Rief, 2000). Heritage language learners are similar to children needing additional support. All the children in the case studies expressed needing their mothers to continue reading to them. Family I’s daughter said, ‘There are many words I do not know. If I read the book myself, it is like reading blank, blank, blank.’ Family III’s mother pointed out that she had to stop constantly to translate for her children especially in the middle elementary grade so that her children could keep up with the reading. She reflected: ‘I can see that this is not something they can do alone. There are many terms they have never heard of.’ This study found that maintaining read-aloud practice in the heritage language proved to be challenging. As children moved up the grades, their schoolwork became more demanding of their time and energy.

The time devoted to reading Chinese books simply had to yield to the demand. After a prolonged period of not reading Chinese books, the mothers either gave away all the books, as Family II did, or stopped updating the books, as found in Family I. Even with Family III’s resilient effort to continue purchasing books, the reading routine was still difficult. Since heritage language learners have incomplete linguistic knowledge in vocabulary, sentence structures, academic language, and content-area knowledge, reading Chinese books is challenging, even with adults’ support. The lack of age-appropriate books in Family I, the total non-existent Chinese book collection in Family II, and the misalignment of books in Family III all contributed to the low motivation for the routine of reading Chinese books. All three families stopped the read-aloud eventually at different points. The lack of reading Chinese books further fed to the deteriorating of the children’s Chinese language skills, making English the preferred choice of language for the children, thus further reinforcing its hegemonic status. Figure 7 illustrates the vicious cycle for the three families.

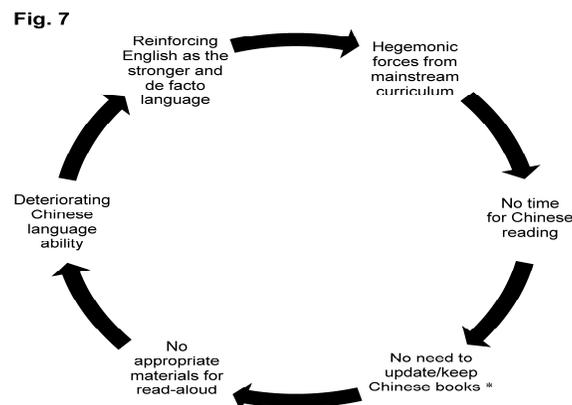


Figure 7: The Chinese Book Reading Practices and Cycles in Three Participating Families

Conclusion

This study investigated heritage language read-aloud practices in three Chinese/English bilingual families with Chinese as a heritage language. Studies on read-aloud practices mostly concentrate on classroom settings or monolingual children in English. Research has found that classroom read-aloud practices for monolingual children decrease as the children move into the middle school grades. The current study also found a similar pattern. However, not only do the read-aloud practices cease much earlier than the findings for monolingual children, but the reasons behind them are disconcerting. All the families had the same aspirations of incorporating reading in Chinese into their daily routine, hoping it would aid their children's heritage language acquisition. However, the hegemonic mainstream ideology was an obstacle to heritage language maintenance. Despite the fact that the U.S. is a linguistically pluralistic society, heritage language maintenance is not supported. The pull towards assimilation is strong, and many language minority families experience language shift (Fillmore 1991; Veltman, 1988, 2000).

All three families started the read-aloud routine when their children were very young. All the mothers put tremendous effort and time into reading and invested in purchasing books. The reading practice worked well for all the families until their children started formal education. Within a few years, all of the participants withdrew from the practice. Their journey illuminates the challenges bilingual families face in heritage language maintenance for the succeeding generation. The hegemony of mainstream education is an imposing external factor. The official education simply does not leave room for heritage language learning. Even when parents invest themselves at home to protect space for heritage language leaning, they face the misalignment between the reading materials and the children's linguistic skills because of the distinct gaps heritage language learners typically exhibit. For the majority of heritage language bilinguals in the U.S. context, acquisition of English continues fully beyond childhood while acquisition of the heritage language is significantly curtailed, or stagnates, toward the adolescent years (Lynch, 2003). For some, acquisition beyond the linguistic stages naturally realized in childhood never occurs, and for others language attrition begins to happen (Merino 1983). Bilingual families continue to struggle in the battle of maintaining heritage language for the children.

Implications

This study reveals the challenges of maintaining reading practices in the heritage language in three bilingual families. The field of heritage language studies remains under-researched and bilingual families facing the hegemonic environment are struggling to preserve their heritage languages. It is imperative that the space and the right for a formal and comprehensive heritage language curriculum be established for bilingual children.

Limitation and Future Research

The current research employed a multi-case study approach. Although case studies afford an in-depth understanding of the participants and issues, the findings are limited to the specific groups in question and should not be generalized to describe other populations. Future research directions can examine a larger scale of participants. Second, the current study focused on Chinese-English bilinguals. Future research should investigate other language pairs to further our understanding of heritage language maintenance in other linguistic groups. Finally, the participants' gender differences and birth orders were not explored in the study. Lambert and Taylor (1996) and Zentella (1997) suggested that in bilingual families, first-born children tend to develop higher levels of heritage language proficiency than do their younger siblings. Gender differences were investigated by Klee (1987) and Ellis (1994). Future research can examine how gender and children's birth orders affects heritage language reading practices in bilingual families.

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