

Language maintenance and language loss in first language

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Abstract: Due to the mania of studying abroad in a foreign country, many students start to go overseas in their teen years. As a result, many educators concern about these young learners' language proficiency in their first language after they have settled down in a new environment. The eagerness of assimilating into the new social group is assumed to be an important factor that accelerates the loss of their mother tongue. In order to further investigate the issue of the language loss and maintenance, there are several literature reviews that have been carried out by linguists. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the factors that lead to the heritage language loss, the effects of this loss, the obstacles to the first language learning, the ways to overcome these obstacles and preserve the ethnic language, the author's personal experiences as a second language learner, and the values of native language maintenance. In the end, several suggestions will be made in an attempt to preserve the first language and culture.

Key words: language maintenance; language loss; language proficiency; first language; mother tongue; heritage language; native language; second language learner

1. Introduction and background

There is a widespread phenomenon in the American society that there is a large group of immigrant children in the danger of losing their heritage language competence after they are enrolled in the American schools and learn the target language. The assumption here would be the higher exposure to the dominant group, the greater social pressure to learn the new language once these immigrants decide to settle in the United States. In consequence, English starts to replace their first language, and finally becomes their daily language as they are assimilated into the American language and culture.

2. Literature review

According to Oxford (1982, p. 160), "language loss" means the loss or deterioration of competence in one's first language or second language. This paper will focus on the loss of the heritage language skills, which is Chinese. Many educators start to concern about the loss of the ethnic language proficiency in the immigrant children and the negative consequences of such loss. There are several factors that are viewed as the causes of the language loss. The first one that needs to be taken into account is the family reason. According to Fillmore (2000, p. 203), the proficiency in the heritage language starts to fade away "between the second and the third generations" since the immigrant parents would have less opportunities to use the ethnic language and impart it to their offspring. As a result, in many cases, the third generation starts to lose their ability in the first language despite the fact that their grandparents and/or their parents are fluent speakers of the native language. The second

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factor that leads to the loss of the heritage language is a child's own aspiration to assimilate into the American society, and thus refuses to learn the first language as asserted by Krashen (2000, p. 6), "some language minority group members go through a stage in which the desire to integrate into the target culture is so strong that there is apathy toward or even rejection of the heritage culture". According to Fillmore (2000, p. 208), there are both internal and external factors that lead to the loss of the native language. The internal force for this choice is the preference for social acceptance and conformity to the dominant group, and the necessity to communicate with those members. On the other hand, the external pressure comes from the sociopolitical reason in that the society opposes against differences, divergence, and aliens (Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). As a result, many immigrant children try to be transformed, and they only want to use the target language instead of the heritage language, because they do not want to be isolated from the mainstream culture but to be part of the dominant group. This has been stated by an immigrant in bilingual education, the acquisition of English, and the retention and loss of Spanish, "I certainly didn't want to be thought of as Japanese-American. I was American, pure and simple. I was proud that I didn't know Japanese and English was my sole tongue" (Tse, 1998, p. 21). The third source of language loss is considered to be the negative feedback from other native language speakers as claimed by Krashen (2000, p. 7), "Some imperfect HL speakers (often a younger sibling) report that their efforts to speak the heritage language are met with correction and even ridiculed by more competent HL speakers, a reaction that discourages the use of the HL, and thus results in less input, and even less competent". These instances clearly show how important the affective factors are in determining a person's choice of the language.

In consequence, once the loss of the heritage language competence persists, it will turn out to bring negative impacts in many perspectives. According to Kai-Fong's case as mentioned by Fillmore, the loss of the first language would increase alienation of the children from their family members. For instance, Kai-Fong refuses to use his home language, Cantonese, once he has learned a little English. "When grandmother spoke to him, he either ignored her or would mutter a response in English that she did not understand. When pushed, he would simply stop speaking....The more the adults scolded, the more sullen and angry Kai-Fong became" (Fillmore, 2000, p. 205). This reaction is referred to as "ethnic ambivalence or ethnic evasion", meaning the unwillingness to learn the ethnic language, but choose to assimilate into the dominant culture (Krashen, 2000, p. 6). It could happen even when the child still has difficulties with the English skills as in Kai-Fong's situation. Besides Kai-Fong, there are other language minority children having such conflicting feelings, one of them expresses this emotion by claiming: "If I had friends over, I purposefully spoke English to my parents. Normally, we only spoke Chinese at home. Because of the presence of a non-Chinese, I used to purposefully speak English" (Tse, 1998, p. 21). As a result, the rejection of using heritage language creates communication problems between the grown-ups and the youngsters, and finally in family relations as mentioned by Fillmore (2000, p. 205), "The adults do not understand the children, and the children do not understand the adults. Father, mother, and grandmother do not feel they know the children, and they do not know what is happening in their lives". This family separation in language most likely leads to an even greater problem since the family is considered to be very essential in offering children the basic needs that the school would not be able to provide (Fillmore, 2000, p. 206). For example, the awareness of the children's own ethnic identities and their own origins; a sense of belonging; a recognition of the relationship between the important others/events and themselves; the skills to solve problems; and understanding of their own duties to the society, the family, and themselves should all be inculcated by the parents (Fillmore, 2000, p. 206). Since these responsibilities lie heavily on the family, the parents would have a hard time to communicate with their children without a common language (Fillmore, 2000, p. 206). The loss of

the ethnic language thus creates a greater generation gap and breaks the intimacy between the parents and the children (Fillmore, 2000, p. 207). The potential risk here is the deterioration of trust and understanding to one another within the family and the loss of parental authority (Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). Other than the family relations, another great concern here is regarding to the maintenance of the children's own sense of worth and their own cultural identities while they attempt to assimilate into the American society (Fillmore, 2000, p. 207).

3. Methodology

In order to further investigate the issue of the language loss and maintenance, there are several literature reviews that have been carried out. There is a case study conducted by Fillmore in one of the journals that has been used in this paper. The subjects are the children in the CHEN's family, who came from Canton, China (Fillmore, 2000, p. 204). The family settled in the United States in 1989 (Fillmore, 2000, p. 204). The family members include mother, father, uncle, grandmother, and the children (Fillmore, 2000, p. 204). The older brother, Kai-Fong, arrived in the United States at the age of 5 while his sister, Chu-Mei was 4 years old at that time (Fillmore, 2000, p. 204). This study examines the process of language loss that takes place in this family, and how it influences the family members and the children themselves. Furthermore, there is a survey completed by Lee in another journal article. The author attempts to find out the importance of language and cultural orientation on scholastic performance since he considers that there should be a correlation between the students' willingness to accept and value their own heritage culture and their success in school (Lee, 2002, p. 213). Therefore, there are questionnaires, observations, and interviews carried out by Lee (2002, p. 217). The subjects include 57 Chinese and 48 Korean, for a total of 105 male and female students, who attend in two high schools in Orange Country, California (Lee, 2002, p. 216). Their ages range from 15 to 17, and they were all born in the United States (Lee, 2002, p. 216). The topic of the survey is related to the background, involvement, awareness, and perspectives of these Chinese-American and Korean-American students on their own cultural identities (Lee, 2002, p. 217). The set of questions written by Steven K. Lee that have been asked in the survey is attached in the appendix on the last page. In addition, the author's personal experience as a second language learner will be discussed in the following section as well.

4. Findings and analysis

Although many educators strive to find ways to prevent the loss of the ethnic language, in fact, there are many obstacles to the development of the heritage language. The first obstacle is the access to the appropriate course materials written in students' first language after they move to a foreign country (Krashen, 1998, p. 9). In order to solve this problem, the teachers are suggested to get the parental involvement to support the native language teaching (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). Due to the fact that the teachers would have difficulties finding those materials written in students' ethnic language, the parents become the best resources that a teacher should approach to get some assistance (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). As asserted by Fillmore:

"Parents should be encouraged to find time to talk with their children, read to them (if this is a practice in the culture of the home), and teach them things that interest educated members of their group. Families that come from cultures with a rich oral tradition will have many stories and histories to share with the children. Teachers should encourage them to use these materials and to regard them as equal to written materials that other families might use with their children at home"

(Fillmore, 2000, p. 209).

In addition, there are Chinese books available in the Chinese bookstores and the libraries for someone who needs them. Reading is especially suggested for those who have “language shyness” to learn the language by providing the input (Krashen, 2000, p. 7). Furthermore, Krashen recommends that the students should be placed into a relaxing environment while promoting voluntary reading to keep the affective filter down (Krashen, 1998, p. 10). The second barrier to heritage language maintenance is the influence of the mass media. The progression of the high technology, such as the satellite television, is a powerful tool in influencing the language and the cultural value of a person (Crawford, 1996, p. 3). If someone chooses to adapt to the American society, she/he would then prefer to watch the American programs rather than the indigenous programs. At last, she/he would lose the ability in the first language. Undoubtedly, engaging the children to watch some Chinese programs will improve their Chinese proficiency. Thus, choosing the Chinese TV shows that are interesting and meaningful should be beneficial to make the ethnic language more comprehensible. The third obstacle is the impact of the American role models, such as TV stars, movie stars, and singers (Crawford, 1996, p. 3). Especially the teenagers like to imitate the way how those people they admire speak with others (Crawford, 1996, p. 3). Therefore, it is parents’ responsibility to tell the children that there are also many good Chinese role models that they can learn from. In order to attract the teenager’s attention, the author would use the example like Bruce Lee since he is depicted as a typical Chinese hero in the movies. By using this topic, hopefully that will help to initiate the children’s interest in learning Chinese. Expectably, many of these barriers are related to the children’s own attitudes and motivation. Therefore, the teachers and the parents should be attentive to the vulnerable feelings that the children might have as they move to a new environment (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). The teachers and the parents also need to be aware of the emotional problems of the children and to treat these problems considerately instead of leading the children to alienate themselves further from the school and the family (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). Another step that needs to be taken by the collaboration of the teachers and the parents is to look for institutional support from both of the dominant country and their own heritage community (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). As mentioned by Fillmore, “the only way ethnic languages and cultures can survive in societies like the United States is through community action” (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). She further states that since some immigrant communities have actively participated in promoting the native language and cultural programs, being one of the members should also join the force (Fillmore, 2000, p. 209). Additionally, there are several more methods considered to be useful in preserving the heritage language. For instance, the frequent traveling to the hometown would be able to increase the knowledge of the ethnic language and the culture according to Krashen (2000, p. 6). Furthermore, the parents should insist on the use of the heritage language at home. This is considered to be necessary but not sufficient to maintain the first language as claimed by Krashen (2000, p. 6). There are two assumptions in this situation. The first assumption is that if the children reply the parents in English while the parents talk to them in the heritage language, then the effectiveness of the first language retention is minimal (class discussion). The second assumption is that even the children respond the parents in the home language, they might acquire “conversational language” only, but that does not guarantee the overall proficiency in the heritage language (Cummins, 1994, p. 6). As a compensation for this limitation, Demo (1988) suggests that if the parents choose to live close to other heritage language speakers, in this case, surrounded by other Chinese neighbors, then that would help the children to preserve the ethnic language longer. Moreover, the participation of the school clubs and the summer camps that support Chinese language and culture would be advantageous too. In addition, if the schools and the teachers support the idea of celebrating the cultural events, such as Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival and Dragon Boat Festival, etc., then the students would have more opportunities to recognize their own traditions better. Next,

the teachers can ask the students to decorate the classroom by themselves whenever these events are coming, so it would end up by creating a Chinese-style atmosphere. The ultimate goal here is to enhance the students' awareness of the language and the culture in a meaningful and interesting way.

5. Personal experiences as a second language learner

The story of the children in the CHEN's family reminds the author of her own experiences as a second language learner when the author was in Canada. The author believes that many Chinese students in an English-speaking environment might go through the same stage of having some kind of ambivalent feelings toward the use of the language. Sometimes, the author would wonder whether she should speak the first language or the second language to communicate with other Chinese under certain circumstances. Despite the fact that the author keeps using her heritage language at home, her ended up with using English with those Canadian born Chinese at school. As mentioned by Fillmore (2000, p. 208), "To be different is to be unacceptable. Thus children do what they believe they must rid themselves of what makes them unacceptable. Language is an obvious difference, so it is the first to go". As a consequence, the transformation of names, costumes, and hairstyles is the natural next step that some immigrant children would take, like the children in the CHEN's family, "Chu-Mei becomes Sondra, Kai-Fong becomes Ken.... They are still different from their schoolmates, but not quite as different as before. They are no longer outsiders: They are Americans, not foreigners like their parents" (Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). This scenario, once again, recalls the author's memory of the high school life. During that time, the author's westernized English name was used instead of the Chinese name in Romanized alphabets. All the author's school records were written in English name only. The Chinese name just disappeared completely in every school portfolio. Also, the author chose to write her English name rather than the full name in all her assignments and tests. Even though the author did not do this on purpose, it had happened to the author and to many of her age groups as well. It seems like a way to integrate into the target country and try not to be so different from those students in the dominant society. Furthermore, the author had the same situation as Chu-Mei in that the author would unintentionally slip few words of English words and phrases into her conversation. Though the author should not lose her first language competence since the author keeps using it when she communicates with her family members, it could be a sign that the author's ethnic language ability would not be able to improve anymore unless the author keeps getting more input.

6. The importance of language maintenance

As one can expect, there is a close relationship between the retention of the heritage language and one's achievement. The proficiency of the first language is considered to be beneficial for individuals and for the society. As declared by Krashen (2000, p. 8), the knowledge of the heritage language is helpful in promoting the cognitive development. The outcome would be better accomplishment in school and at work. According to a survey conducted by Lee (2002, p. 219), he asserts, "the results revealed that students who had a greater awareness of and interest in developing biculturalism had superior grade point average than their counterparts who had less interest in their heritage. The correlation was very statistically significant". Based on the school scores, Lee discovers that the students who accept the acculturation process, adapting to the dominant group while maintaining their own heritage language and culture, have better scholastic performance to those who prefer the integration process and who adopt the language and values of the target culture (Lee, 2002, p. 218). The Grade Point Average (GPA)

increases from 2.98 to 3.81 as the number of affirmative responses increases (The statistic is attached in the appendix). Other than the success in school, the heritage language competence is advantageous on the job market as well in the way that the bilinguals usually have slightly higher occupational status than those monolinguals (Krashen, 1998, p. 9). Furthermore, the first language preservation provides people more confidence, higher ambition, and even better English competence in many cases (Krashen, 2000, p. 8). It is also desirable for the society “in terms of business, diplomacy and national security” (Krashen, 2000, p. 8). The reason is that the speakers of the ethnic language can serve as natural resources in promoting the trade globally since the US economy relies on the language abilities of the bilinguals to sell products to countries that use other languages (Krashen, 1998, p. 7). In consequence, the maintenance of Chinese competence is valuable as China is a highly populated country, and thus there is a huge trade market that requires professionals who know Chinese language skills. In addition, the development of the heritage language encourages a positive view of multiculturalism, and helps to resolve the conflicting feelings of one’s own identity, which is known as “Ethnic Identity Incorporation” (Krashen, 2000, p. 8). Moreover, the maintenance of the ethnic language is considered to be very essential since people need this competence to communicate with the family members and with other people of the heritage language community as well. Therefore, having a common language helps to keep a closer bond between people.

7. Conclusion

Unquestionably, the maintenance of the ethnic language plays a significant role not only in the individual well-being, but also in the societal profits. Despite the fact that there are many difficulties through the process of maintaining the heritage language, the immigrants should always strive to keep their own language since the rejection of one’s native language only brings negative influence. The detrimental consequences include the children’s alienation from other heritage language speakers and the erosion of the family intimacy. Thus, the teachers and parents are recommended to work collaboratively in supporting the ethnic language. Also, the parents are encouraged to join the force of their own heritage language community in promoting their own language. All these actions are taken for the goal of preserving the ethnic language and culture. Nevertheless, the ultimate effectiveness of these actions still needs further investigation.

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Appendix:

1. The questions written by Steven K. Lee that have been asked in the survey:

(1) Have you attended a Chinese or Korean language/culture school for more than one year while you were in middle or high school?

(2) Do you know much about the history/culture of China or Korea?

(3) Have you studied Chinese or Korean for more than one year at your high school?

(4) Do you regularly attend (at least once a month) Chinese or Korean related cultural events/activities, including religious functions?

(5) Do you speak Chinese or Korean in the home and/or with relatives/friends?

(6) Are you interested in learning more about your cultural heritage?

(7) Do you feel it is important for you to maintain your cultural identity?

(8) Do you feel your culture/heritage contributes to the American culture/heritage?

(9) Do you feel there should be diverse cultures represented in the United States?

(10) Do you feel people should have a greater interest in their own ethnic culture/heritage than in the mainstream culture?

(Lee, 2002, p. 217)

2. The results of the survey

Subjects (N=105)	No. of "Yes" responses	GPA (M=3.54)
2	0	3.17
2	3	2.98
6	4	3.19
10	5	3.25
17	6	3.27
23	7	3.58
19	8	3.76
17	9	3.78
9	10	3.81

Note: GPA in relation to number of affirmative responses (Lee, 2002, p. 218).