

A Pilot Study of Singapore's Young Chinese Parent's Perceptions, Attitude and Behaviours Towards Bilingual Learning

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This study aims to study parents' attitude, perceptions, and behaviours towards bilingual education in Singapore's bilingual social context. The study involves 78 young Singapore's Chinese parents, using mixed methodologies including multiple choice questionnaire, interview, checklist, and focus group discussion to collect data. Qualitative and quantitative researches have shown four important findings. First, young parents acknowledge the importance of learning mother tongue to maintain cultural heritage. They also realize that Chinese could become their next generation's crucial social capital in the future. Those families have great potential in raising bilingual children. Second, more attention should be paid to the gap between young parents' positive attitude and passive behaviour in supporting children's bilingual learning. Third, there are some misunderstandings about bilingual learning. Some parents doubt or deny the possibilities of fostering bilingual children and simply think learning Chinese language would impede children's English competence. Fourth, parents focus more on children's primary school study rather than kindergarten period, including learning interest, reading, and writing of written language abilities. More in-depth researches are needed to examine the relevance of those four findings as well as propose a more comprehensive perspective for researches on Singapore's future bilingual education reform and development.

Keywords: Singapore, bilingual education, parents' attitude, parents' perceptions, parents' behaviours

Introduction

Bilingual education has long been lauded as a cornerstone and one of the key strengths of Singapore's education system (MOE, 2010). Enacted since the nation's independence in 1965 (Ng, 2014), the bilingual education policy has been in effect for half a century. Today, all students, starting from pre-school, are educated in English (EL) as their first language, which is also the common language of instruction for most subjects. At the same time, they take one of the three official languages (Chinese, Malay, and Tamil) as their mother tongue (MTL) subject in school. This model of "English-knowing bilingualism" (Bokhorst-Heng & Caleon, 2009) aims to enable Singaporeans to plug into a globalized world through their knowledge of EL and to build an economic environment conducive for international business in Singapore. At the same time, the

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learning of MTL is posited to provide a link to one's ethnic heritage, so that Singaporeans retain their Asian roots and cultural outlook even as they are educated in EL (MOE, 2010). In short, Singapore's bilingual education policy is premised on pragmatism, so as to meet the economic needs in nation-building and to foster a cohesive and multi-cultural society.

The success of the bilingual policy has resulted in not only an increasing shift in home language from MTL to EL, but also a change in social language landscape. Data from the Ministry of Education revealed that since 2000, increase in the second and third generation of Singaporean core families has contributed to an increasing number of primary one students who come from English-speaking families. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of the primary one cohort in 2009 came from families that were dominantly English-speaking, compared to 49% in 2004 (Oon & Kor, 2009). The percentage of primary one students from dominantly English-speaking families increased to 61% in 2011 (Goh & Ng, 2015). Besides, other researches like national census (2010) and academic researches (HUANG, 2008) also proved the fact that English has gradually become the preferred language of Singaporean, especially the younger generation. Some researches on language use are even claiming that English is likely to be the mother tongue of Singaporeans (TAN, 2014).

Ministry of Education has attached great importance on the language shift. In 2004, Mother Tongue Language Review Committee was established to participate in the MT curriculum reform, including reformulate MT teaching objectives, teaching material, pedagogy, and examinations. In order that students could be proficient users of their MTL, the committee has set three main objectives: (1) Communication—This is a valuable skill for life and work. In addition to their mastery of the English language, proficiency and ability to communicate in MTL gives Singaporeans a competitive edge; (2) Culture—Learning MTL enables our students to understand and develop their unique identity through a deeper appreciation of culture, traditions, literature, and history. This is a critical base to preserve the transmission of cultural values and traditions associated with each MTL in our society; and (3) Connection—Proficiency in MTL enables our students to connect with communities across Asia and the people who speak that language or share that culture (MOE, 2010, p. 13). Furthermore, MOE reviewed MTL teaching and assessment of MTL and proposed “Active Learners, Proficient Users” as guidelines for MTL education.

Viewing from a language acquisition perspective, learning and acquiring are two approaches toward language learning. MTL reform mainly focused on “learning” and postulated that reforming school curriculum would change current MTL situation. However, social language change is a matter of “acquiring”. Home language environment plays a dominant role in affecting the language acquisition ability of school-aged children (Gathercole & Thomas, 2009). Parents pose great influence on children's early development of language and communicative abilities and parents' behaviours reflect their opinions (Johnson & Martin, 1985). Therefore, language reform also needs to take changes in social language landscape into consideration and probe into the root causes so as to turn the situation.

Literature Review

Studies on Bilingual Education in Singapore

Bilingual education has long been lauded as a cornerstone and one of the key strengths of Singapore's education system (MOE, 2010). Today, all students, starting from pre-school, are educated in English (EL) as their first language, which is also the common language of instruction for most subjects. At the same time, they take one of the three official languages (Chinese, Malay, and Tamil) as their mother tongue (MTL) subject in

school. Enacted since the nation's independence in 1965 (Ng, 2014), the bilingual education policy has been in effect for half a century. More and more studies are suggesting a trend of preferred language shift from Chinese to English. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of the primary one cohort in 2009 came from families that were dominantly English-speaking, compared to 49% in 2004 (Oon & Kor, 2009). In 2011, the percentage has increased to 61% (Goh & Ng, 2015). Many newspaper reviews and academic studies are discussing issues related to MTL education, such as the implementation of MTL pedagogies. According to this paper, studies were mainly focusing on two angles, namely, social languages and MTL education. Researches taking the perspective of social languages were mainly concentrating on language use in different age groups (TAN, 2014; HUANG, 2008) and using a comparison strategy to reflect changes in preferred social language; researches on MTL education mainly focus on Chinese curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and teachers' professional development, among which the formulation and implementation of language policies have been the centre issue. For instance, in the MTL Review Report, the committee has identified four recommendations to further enhance our MTL teaching and learning: (1) Aligning teaching and testing to achieve proficiency; (2) Enhancing different provisions for learners of different abilities; (3) Creating an environment more conducive for MTL usage and learning; and (4) Deploying and developing more MTL teachers (MOE, 2010). Based on implementation-oriented studies, rare attention has been laid upon parents and parenting behaviours. In 2015, researchers from National Institute of Education found that in the comprehensive literature review from 2010 to 2015, some scholars have proposed that focused researches should have been done on parents' perceptions and attitude toward children's bilingual education and strategies they have adopted to support children's bilingual abilities (Curdt-Christiansen, HU, & SUN, 2015; LI, ZHANG, & ZHAO, 2013). However, few studies were probing into parents' and families' influence on supporting children's bilingual language and culture learning and acquisition (Aw, Chai, & Wong, 2015).

Parents and the Development of Children's Bilingual Ability

Western developmental psychologists have long been studying parent-child relationship (I. -E. Sigel, I. Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992). Researchers have found that parents' ideas underlie parents' practices, which in turn are seen to be strong determinants of children's development (Johnson & Martin, 1985). Among various influences that school and home language environment pose on school-age children's language acquisition, home language plays a vital role in affecting their language acquisition process (Hakuta & d'Andrea, 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Veltman, 1981). Bilingual parents' linguistic behaviour towards their children could be seen as a direct result of parental beliefs and attitudes, which included their attitudes towards a particular language, towards bilingualism in general, and towards particular patterns of language choice (De Houwer, 1999). Existing studies have investigated parents' language use and the influence that they provide their children with language learning materials on the actual bilingual competence of children. And the results showed that only by reading out loud can positive impact be posed on children's mastery of language (Chong & Seilhamer, 2014). All factors, such as parents' education level (especially mother's), the choice of language learning materials at home, attitude towards language learning, affect children's bilingual learning (Sharpe, 1997). Meanwhile, studies also found that if children who grow up in bilingual environment do not use two languages, they will not be able to speak two languages to their children when they become parents (De Houwer, 1999). In other words, the language environment that parents provide for their children will greatly affect children's language learning outcomes. Besides, parents' social and economic status also influences children's master of two languages (Dixon, WU, & Daraghmeh, 2012).

However, whether children would actually use two languages in their interactions or limit themselves mainly to one language depends on many different aspects of parents' linguistic behaviour (De Houwer, 1999). Different studies involving different parental language input patterns and language pairs were examined to find out the effective parental input patterns for active bilingual children (Sirén, 1991; Portes & Hao, 1998; Yamamoto, 2001; De Houwer, 2007). Most of the research studies yielded a similar result that the home input patterns where both parents used the minority language or where at most one parent spoke the majority language had a high chance of success in nurturing children who were actively bilingual (De Houwer, 2007). Moreover, researches on Chinese immigrant families found social capital to be an essential component in home environment influences parents' educational concepts and career choices and even poses further influence on the language input of next generation (REN & HU, 2011). In short, there is still considerable lack of studies on home language environment inputs. Therefore, this pilot study is expected to broach a discussion on related topics.

Research Design

Participants

Selected participants would have to fulfil all of the following criteria:

- (1) Possess either Singapore citizenship or Singapore permanent residency;
- (2) Have at least one child currently studying in either a Singapore pre-school or Singapore primary school (lower primary level);
- (3) Below 45 years old;
- (4) Either educated or is currently living in Singapore and has preferably gone through the mandatory 10 years of bilingual education in Singapore;
- (5) Whose child is considered to be the second or third generation Singaporean (Singapore citizens or PR).

Research Questions

Based on the above-mentioned objectives of this study, the following six research questions are proposed:

- (1) What are parents' perceptions toward bilingual learning?
- (2) What are parents' perceptions toward using two languages at home?
- (3) What are the possibilities of a balanced bilingual input in families that speak two languages?
- (4) What language do parents choose as their home language and how well do they master the language?
- (5) What are parents' perceptions towards their child's bilingual learning and bilingual proficiency?
- (6) What are the effective strategies that parents have adopted to better support their child's bilingual learning?

Research Tools

Research data will be collected through four modes, namely surveys, checklists, face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions. Sixty-five parents completed multiple choice surveys, 4 parents participated in face-to-face interviews, and 8 parents joined focus group discussions. The total number is 77, all of which are voluntary.

Multiple Choice Survey

This survey was a semi-formal research consented by a government-owned kindergarten *My First Skool* and conducted in a preschool parents lecture in 2015. One hundred questionnaires were distributed in total, 65 of which were valid. Before the survey commenced, each question was explained to the participants to

minimise any possible confusion during answering. Participants were also told of the questions that they were allowed to select multiple choices. Sufficient time (1 hour) was then given to the parents to complete the questionnaire at their own pace. The aim of this survey is to gather information on how parents view their own bilingual proficiency and their child's bilingual proficiency. The researcher's questions are divided as following categories: parents' perception toward their own language use (What language/s do you speak? What is your dominant language? What language/s do you use when communicating with your spouse?); parents' perception toward children's language use (What language/s can your child speak? What is your child's dominant language?); parents' perception toward home language use (What language/s do you use when communicating with your child? Do you raise your child mono-lingually or bilingually? How did you start your child's bilingual input? What do you think is the appropriate age to start bilingual input to your child?); parents' perceptions toward bilingualism (Why did you decide to raise your child bilingually? Why is bilingualism important to you? How do you perceive your child's learning of Chinese Language?).

Checklist

Each survey will be accompanied by a checklist. This checklist will be divided into two sections—ways to help my child learn languages and ways to help my child acquire languages. There are two aims to this checklist—firstly, to gather information on what parents have done to support their child's bilingual learning and to compare the different modes of support parents have provided when dealing with different languages; secondly, to help parents to find out the differences between language learning and language acquisition, so that they could effectively help their children's language study.

Face-to-Face Interview

To gain deeper insights into parents' perceptions and the reasons behind their language behaviour with their children at home, four face-to-face interviews relating to bilingualism have been conducted with four parents who volunteered to take part in this survey out of their concern to their children's bilingual learning. Four interviewees did not participate in previous studies because questions in the survey were all covered in the interview. Each interview lasted around two hours. All interviews will be recorded and then transcribed for analysis. In data analysis and research findings part, names will be replaced by initials. Two of the four interviewees have at least one child enrolled in local kindergartens and the other two parents have at least one child enrolled in local primary schools. Interviews were conducted to further understand parents' perceptions toward bilingual education, situations of their using two languages at home, and challenges they face.

Focus Group Discussion

Researchers and nine voluntary parents held an informal focus group discussion in an informal party. Participating parents have, in average, two to five children, aging from 3 to 16. Every parent has at least one child enrolled in local primary schools. Parents who took part in focus group discussion did not participate in previous interviews or researches. Before discussion, researchers would hand out surveys similar to the multi-choice surveys mentioned before and take back after discussion. The whole session is three-hour-long.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaire was first collated and quantified by frequency calculation using SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions). The data were analysed and categorised according to the three research questions. The recorded interviews were transcribed by Chinese-English bilingual transcribers. The

quantitative and qualitative data were then triangulated. Table 1 to table 4 showed research results and analysis of the multiple choice questionnaire.

Table 1

Parents' Perception of Their Own Language Use

Question	Choices	Answered times	Percentage of times (%)	Percentage of subjects (%)
How many languages do you speak?	English	64	43.5	100
	Chinese	60	40.8	93.8
	Others	23	15.6	35.9
What is your dominant language?	English	37	50.0	56.9
	Chinese	32	43.2	49.2
	Others	5	6.8	7.7
What language/s do you use when communicating with your spouse?	English	35	42.2	53.3
	Chinese	41	49.9	63.1
	Others	7	8.4	10.8

Table 2

Parents' Perception of Their Children's Language Use

Question	Multiple choices	Answered times	Percentage of times (%)	Percentage of subjects (%)
What language/s can your child speak?	English	59	49.2	93.7
	Chinese	55	45.8	87.3
	Others	6	5.0	9.5
What is his/her dominant language?	English	47	69.1	72.3
	Chinese	17	25.0	26.2
	Others	4	5.9	6.2

Table 3

Parents' Perception of Family Language Use

Question	Multiple choices	Answered times	Percentage of times (%)	Percentage of subjects (%)
What language/s do you use when communicating with your children?	English	58	56.9	89.2
	Chinese	41	40.2	63.1
	Others	3	2.9	4.6
Do you raise your child mono-lingually or bilingually?	Mono-lingually	9	14.8	14.8
	Bilingually	52	85.2	85.2
How did you start your child's bilingual input?	At home	46	50.5	75.4
	In school	36	39.6	59.0
	In learning centres	8	8.8	13.1
	Others	1	1.1	1.6
What do you think is the appropriate age to start bilingual input to your child?	Since young	58	85.3	90.6
	Kindergarten years	5	7.4	7.8
	Lower Primary years	0	0	0
	Upper Primary years	0	0	0
	Secondary years	0	0	0
	The child can start whenever they are ready to learn the language	5	7.4	7.8
	Others	0	0	0

Table 4

Parents' View on Bilingualism

Question	Multiple choices	Answered times	Percentage of times (%)	Percentage of subjects (%)
Why did you decide to raise your child bilingually?	Personal Decision	24	28.9	38.7
	Family Decision	27	32.5	43.5
	Social Decision	31	37.3	50.0
	Others	1	1.2	1.6
Why is bilingualism important to you?	Cultural	51	51.5	83.6
	Economic	36	36.4	59.0
	Others	12	12.1	19.7
How do you perceive your child's learning of Chinese Language?	It's a compulsory subject in school.	25	20.0	40.3
	It's a gradable subject in PSLE. (for parents whose child is studying in local schools)	13	10.4	21.0
	It's for future survival.	37	29.6	59.7
	It's part of my culture.	45	36.0	72.6
	Others	5	4.0	8.1

Research Findings**Parents' Perception About Chinese**

First, the majority of the surveyed parents share a common understanding that Chinese language is important in defining one's ethnic identity and as a form of symbolic capital to tap into future economic opportunities. Parents think that the Chinese language serves as a channel for the child to better understand his/her culture and heritage. 83.6% of the parents who answered Question 14 (see Appendix) of the questionnaire believe that the learning of Chinese language is important due to cultural reasons. In Question 15 (see Appendix), 72.6% of the parents view Chinese language as a mark of ethnicity identity and that the learning of Chinese language inculcates and imparts Chinese values to their children. In short, the data show that parents have a strong belief that through the learning of Chinese language, the children will be able to achieve a "Chinese identity". An anecdote from an interview with Mrs T epitomises how parents view Chinese language as an essential tool to relate to one's roots and identity. When her son asked her for 10 reasons to substantiate why he should learn Chinese, Mrs T answered in a firm and certain tone that just one reason would suffice, "as an ethnic Chinese, you have to learn the Chinese language".

Data showed that most parents view Chinese language as a symbol of ethnic identity in a multi-cultural context like Singapore and they view Chinese learning as an important channel for cultural inheritance. As pointed out by Collier and Thomas (1988), parents are eager to preserve Chinese Language as their mother tongue language for their children in that they believe that would help their children and future generations to identify themselves and find acceptance in Chinese community. Besides viewing Chinese language as a doorway to cultural understanding, 59.7% of the parents surveyed also consider Chinese language as a survival skill, namely, as a way to gain better prospects in the economy of future. When asked about the importance of bilingualism in Question 14, 59% of the parents chose economic reasons. An example of how Chinese language speakers may have an advantage in the economy is illustrated by B during his interview. Currently based in Dubai for work, B experienced first-hand the importance of Chinese language in helping him tap into the vast

and increasing business opportunities in Dubai due to the influx of businessmen from China. The value of Chinese language is therefore seen as a tool that allows one to tap into economic opportunities and networks of relationships that may enhance an individual's productivity (Coleman, QIANG, & LI, 1998).

Possibilities of Bilingual Families and Balanced Bilingual Inputs

In the first question, 100% of the surveyed parents reported that they are able to speak English language, while 93.8% reported that they are able to speak Chinese language (see Table 1). Since parents are able to select multiple options each question, there is a large overlapping number of parents who are able to speak both English and Chinese language. These numbers reflect that many parents are bilingual and possess the capacities to create bilingual environments at home. Qualitative data from interviews also highlighted that some parents are aware of their potential to nurture bilingual children and do try to utilise their knowledge of two languages to foster bilingual home environments.

Parents participating in face-to-face interviews (T, S, B, and M) are examples of parents who understand the importance of home environment on their children's bilingual learning. These two families have chosen the one-parent-one-language strategy when their children embarked on their language learning journey, so as to create a bilingual home environment with balanced bilingual inputs for their children. In parent-child conversations, Mrs T always uses Chinese language, while her husband uses English to communicate with children. Where possible, parents will also tap on the language proficiencies of other family members as a linguistic resource in their child's language development. For instance, Mrs T gets her mother, who is a Chinese teacher, to speak to her children in Mandarin. In B and S's (husband and wife) family, S speaks English and B speaks Chinese. Mrs. M is competent in both languages and now she takes every opportunity to speak Chinese with her pre-school aged daughter. She encourages her daughter to speak Mandarin more often in public places and chooses the pre-school with good Chinese teaching quality for her. Mrs M insists speaking Chinese at home with her child and believes that language is learned by using it in daily life.

An interesting observation from the interview data was also that parents who believe in the importance of home environment on bilingual learning had the tendency to associate this belief with their personal experiences learning Chinese language through informal language acquisition beyond school. Several parents mentioned that they learnt Chinese through watching television and movies and listening to Chinese songs when they were young. Meanwhile, they also try to immerse their children in a Chinese-speaking home environment to improve their kids' Chinese language learning. However, some parents lack confidence in their own Chinese proficiency and thus do not believe in themselves in nurturing children's bilingual ability, which is one of the cognitive misconceptions in raising bilingual children.

Language Choice and Linguistic Behaviour at Home

Quantitative researches showed that the percentage of young parents using English to communicate with their spouse is slightly higher than that of using Chinese to communicate. In Question 3, we found that 63.1% of the parents use Chinese when communicating with their spouses, while 53.3% use English when communicating with their spouse (see Table 1). It is not rare to see parents speaking Chinese at home. However, the trend was reversed in the choice of language used by the parents to communicate with their children. 89.2% of the parents chose to speak English language to their child, as compared to 63.1% who choose to communicate with their child in Chinese language (see Table 3). The data are indicative of the possibility that parents are making deliberate choices in their linguistic behaviour with their children.

Though the percentage of children being able to speak English and Chinese are 93.7% and 87.3% respectively, the more common language choice appears to be English language, as only 26.2% of the surveyed parents indicated that their children use Chinese as their dominant language at home (see Table 2). Besides, one parent from focus group discussion said that when communicating with siblings, English is also the preferred language.

The difference choice of language between husband-wife communication and parent-child communication is clearly caused by several reasons. Parents are facing various challenges in balancing bilingual inputs. The first reason is an act of compromise by parents in deference to their children's preferred language, who observed that English is the main language used among siblings, resulting in some parents making compromises in their language choice by switching to English when their children refused to speak Mandarin to them. The second reason is the inability of parents to maintain the equilibrium in their bilingual communication with their children. During the interviews, Mrs T and S mentioned that their ideal interaction strategy of providing balanced bilingual inputs to their children has been challenged as the father in both families are very busy with work and are seldom at home. In the case of Mrs. T, when she noticed the lack of an English-speaking parental figure at home and found no improvement in her son's English language, she quickly made the decision to stop speaking Mandarin to her son and switched to speaking English, "I speak to my son in Mandarin since he was young, (but) stopped speaking Mandarin to him when I realize that he is not doing well in his English. I think it is because my husband is busy and no one speaks to him in English". A similar situation is observed in S's case. Her husband is often out of town and no one speaks Mandarin to her children. However, S did not make any changes to her language choice and continues to speak English to her children. She shared the same concern regarding her son's English standard as Mrs T, "I am afraid my son's English standard will fall if I speak more Mandarin at home. His English is not as good too". Both Mrs T and S made their language choices because they felt the pressure of competition and examination when their children entered primary school.

The interview data revealed a common underlying perception among the parents that it is more important for their child to master English language than Chinese language in Singapore, a country that implements the English knowing bilingualism. As such, parents are more inclined to make compromises and choose to speak English with their children when they perceive no improvement or deterioration in their children's grasp of English. It also appears that parents tend to treat bilingual input at home as a zero-sum game, in which the use of more English has to be accompanied with a reduction in the usage of Mandarin and vice-versa. Researchers believe this is also a common misconception in language learning.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the inconsistency between parents' insisting on learning Chinese and their actual language choices and linguistic behaviours is that parents are experiencing a conflict of active attitude and passive behaviours. Although they hold positive beliefs toward bilingual policy, yet they demonstrate passive behaviours or even give up Chinese when confronting with challenges on children's English ability, especially when children are enrolled in primary school and face great pressure. It is undeniable that the social economic status of a language will pose influence on parents' attitude toward this language (Dixon, WU, & Daraghmeh, 2012). Researchers see this conflict as quite detrimental to bilingual learning and it calls for further in-depth studies.

Parents' Attitude Toward Chinese Language Study

Through the surveys, checklists, focus group discussions, and interviews, parents shared the channels through which they have attempted to enhance Chinese language input to their children. Some parents demonstrated strong awareness of the importance of creating a Chinese environment that heightens language exposure and stimulates language use, such as bringing their children to the libraries to borrow Chinese books, buying Chinese reading materials for their children, as well as downloading Chinese games and videos on electronic devices for their children to play and watch. However, most parents indicated that they sent their children to learning centres for Chinese enrichment programmes. 75% of parents participating in interviews and focus group discussions chose to send their children to learning centres. When asking about parents' Chinese learning experiences, they usually learn from daily uses like watching Chinese TV programmes and listening to Chinese songs. However, most parents still chose tuition centres. As Mrs. T mentioned, even though she learnt Chinese from TV programmes and Chinese songs, she did not encourage children to watch TV or listen to music because she believed watching TV would affect their children's study. Although many parents are aware of the need to create a Chinese speaking environment for their child, their preference is to enroll their children in enrichment programmes that provide a Chinese language environment instead of creating the language environment at home for their children to learn the Chinese language through acquisition and daily use of the language. This is another misconception about language acquisition.

Parents' Major Concerns Toward Chinese Learning

The interview data also showed that study interest and test scores are two main focuses of parents toward Chinese learning. These two topics culminate in two learning phases, namely, one, when the child progresses from pre-school to primary school and two, when their child progresses from lower primary to upper primary.

In terms of study interest, many parents are complaining about the fact that primary school Chinese education emphasizes on practice, which is relatively boring for children. Parents also pointed out that inadaptation would appear when the child progresses from pre-school to primary school, the change from an informal learning environment in pre-school to a formal learning environment in primary school. Many parents gave feedback that Chinese lessons in primary schools lacked the element of fun, as many games and activities that were conducted in pre-school are not carried forward to primary school. Hence, children do not enjoy primary Chinese lessons as much as pre-school Chinese lessons. During an interview with M, she raised concerns that the formalised teaching environment in primary schools may reduce her daughter's interest in Chinese language. She thus intends to send her daughter to Chinese drama classes when her daughter progresses to primary school, so as to sustain the fun element in learning Chinese language. Improving study interest has been attached great importance on since 2004, but when it comes to formal learning, the fun element will be inevitably reduced, no matter in what subject. Researchers believe the fun element in Chinese learning needs further exploration as well.

When the child progresses from lower primary to upper primary, many parents become concerned about how to help their child to do well in school and national examinations. As shared by Mrs. T, her son has requested to drop Higher Chinese in school due to a dip in his grades. Mrs. T noticed the need to seek help for her son in Chinese language and have since changed three tuition centres in the hope of improving her son's Higher Chinese grades. Focus group discussion also reflected the concerns parents held toward the high standard of local Chinese language curriculums and tests. Parents raised and discussed several questions: (1)

How to make our children learn more effectively and have fun at the same time? (2) All of our children are struggling with Chinese language study, especially writing. How can we help them learn and apply proverbs and maxims into their writing? (3) How to make children like reading Chinese story books? (4) How to understand long and complex Chinese sentences? (5) What are the reading strategies for Chinese passages? (6) Are there any good resources, reading materials, or tuition centres to recommend for our children? Among these questions, language acquisition related questions are reading related, including reading materials, reading resources, and reading Chinese story books. Others are language learning related questions that focus mainly on written skills. It is obvious that all these questions are pointing at written skills—reading and writing, which is high relevant for current Chinese education reform.

Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study is a pilot study conducted in a multiracial small country which takes the English-knowing bilingualism for the purpose of social harmony and economic development to understand parental perception towards bilingual learning as well as parents' language choices and linguistic behaviours at home. It is of great significance since this is utterly different from Western researches which study the bilingual situation of minority of immigrants emerging in European countries. Despite the fact that this is a pilot study, there are four important findings:

First, young Singaporean parents are growing in a bilingual education system, which enables them to be able to communicate in both English and Mandarin. Some of their parents are also good at Chinese. Therefore, these young families have great potential to raise bilingual children. They also knew the importance of Chinese language as a marker of their ethical identity and a tool that could bring about economic advantage for themselves and their children. Parents' support is great social resources in encouraging bilingual acquisition.

Second, the majority of young Singaporean parents are supportive of the bilingual education policy and demonstrate positive attitudes towards Chinese language learning. However, as the pragmatism is widely recognized, even when parents were trying to achieve a balanced bilingual input in mind, they are still more inclined to use English with their children, either as a primary choice or as a result of compromise when they do not see substantial improvement in their children's English proficiency. The stark contradiction between parents' positive attitudes and passive behaviours towards Chinese language learning is testament of the impact that "English knowing bilingualism" in Singapore has on parents' language choice and linguistic behaviour with their children. This also reflects a lack of confidence in parents' MTL, which may possibly influence children's bilingual learning outcomes. Whether this lack confidence phenomenon is wide spread or is of universal relevance needs further discussions.

Third, there are some cognitive misunderstandings toward bilingual acquisition, which can be boiled down into three aspects showed in this study: first, parents doubt the possibilities of nurturing bilingual children simply out of the reason that they themselves could not speak Chinese well; second, believing the "zero-sum" perception that communication with their children in Chinese language would need to be reduced or even stopped, in order for their children to improve in their English language; third, regarding Chinese tuition centres as the most convenient way to improve children's language competence.

Fourth, issues that parents concern, including reading and writing abilities, are not focused in pre-school phase, but in primary school period, while current MTL reform and its emphasis on "active learners, proficient users" mainly concentrate on improving students' speaking and listening abilities.

Future Implications

The current small-scaled pilot study has provided a substantial base on which future research can be premised. After identifying the above key areas, moving forth, there is potential for more research. Future research can include the following areas:

(1) To conduct more in-depth and large-scaled research to find out more about young parent's perception and behaviours towards their child's (the third and fourth generation since the founding of Singapore) active bilingual learning in Singapore's English-knowing society. There is also scope to explore the necessity of adjusting the bilingualism policy in the future.

(2) To explore the possibility of parental education towards active bilingual learning and building a balanced bilingual input families; to explore the pull and push factors behind the conflict between passive behaviour and positive attitude so as to find proper solutions; to probe into parents' perception, anxiety, and blind spots toward bilingual education and to explore the necessity of promoting parental education.

(3) To conduct formal researches on the necessity and challenges of MTL learning from the perspectives of student and parents to provide implications for future researches.

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Appendix**Questionnaire of parents' attitude toward pre-school children's Chinese language study**

Please put a tick next to your selected option. You may choose more than one option.

1. What is your nationality?
2. What is your Mother Tongue and what language/s do you speak at home?
3. How many languages do you speak?
 - a. English
 - b. Chinese
 - c. Others
4. What is your dominant language?
 - a. English
 - b. Chinese
 - c. Others
5. What language/s do you use when communicating with your spouse?
 - a. English
 - b. Chinese
 - c. Others
6. What language/s do you use when communicating with your children?
 - a. English
 - b. Chinese
 - c. Others
7. How old is your child now?
8. Do you raise your child mono-lingually or bilingually?
 - a. Mono-lingually
 - b. Bilingually
9. What language(s) can your child speak?
 - a. English
 - b. Chinese
 - c. Others
10. What is his/her dominant language?
 - a. English
 - b. Chinese
 - c. Others
11. How did you start your child's bilingual input?
 - a. At home
 - b. In school
 - c. In learning centres
 - d. Others

12. What do you think is the appropriate age to start bilingual input to your child?
 - a. Since young
 - b. Kindergarten years
 - c. Lower Primary years
 - d. Upper Primary years
 - e. Secondary years
 - f. The child can start whenever they are ready to learn the language
 - g. Others
13. Why did you decide to raise your child bilingually?
 - a. Personal Decision
 - b. Family Decision
 - c. Social Decision
 - d. Others
14. Why is bilingualism important to you?
 - a. Cultural
 - b. Economic
 - c. Others
15. How do you perceive your child's learning of Chinese Language?
 - a. It's a compulsory subject in school.
 - b. It's a gradable subject in PSLE. (for parents whose child is studying in local schools)
 - c. It's for future survival.
 - d. It's part of my culture.
 - e. Others
16. What is your child's reaction to bilingual input?
 - a. When using English, my child mixes Chinese into the language.
 - b. When using Chinese, my child mixes English into the language.
 - c. My child does not mix both languages together.
 - d. My child cannot understand why he/she has to learn two languages.
 - e. My child understands the benefits of being bilingual.
 - f. My child shows no interest in learning two languages.
 - g. Others. Please specify:
17. When my child is learning Chinese, he/she displays
 - a. Unwilling to converse in Chinese
 - b. Does not share experiences relating to Chinese
 - c. Unmotivated to complete Chinese tasks
 - d. Easy distracted while completing Chinese tasks
 - e. Able to perform well in other subjects except Chinese
 - f. Others. Please specify:

18. What have I done to provide your child with a bilingual environment?
- a. Attending after school or weekend Mandarin classes
 - b. Private Chinese tutor for my children
 - c. Chinese speaking nanny/helper
 - d. Take my children to the Library to read and borrow Chinese books
 - e. Take my children to Chinese movies or culture performances
 - f. Subscribe Chinese newspaper and magazines
 - g. Watch Chinese TV program, listen to Chinese radio stations
 - h. Download Chinese learning apps on phone and iPad for my children to play with
 - i. Use an English/Chinese Dictionary or search online with my child when she/he has a question in Chinese
 - j. Participate in community and extracurricular activities where my children can practice their Chinese
 - k. Chinese Summer Camp
 - l. Family Holiday to Chinese speaking countries
 - m. Buy Chinese books for my children to read
 - n. Learn Chinese myself so I will be able to communicate with my children
 - o. Visit friends and family members who can speak Chinese with my children
 - p. I use Chinese when speaking to my child
 - q. I use Chinese when texting my child
19. What I did when my child does not response positively to the given support?
- a. I compromise to my child's response and give up eventually.
 - b. I am firm but allow appropriate compromises.
 - c. I stand firm on my decision and force my child to learn the language.
 - d. Others. Please specify:

Name: Mr/Ms/Mrs/Dr. _____ Signature: _____

Email: _____

Are you willing to take part in future discussions related to bilingual learning?

Yes No