Family Language Policy in Raising Bilingual Children

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Introduction

Currently, family has been increasingly considered as a significant domain for studying language policy because of its critical role in forming the child’s linguistic environment. A new field of family language policy also emerged recently focuses more on visible, explicit and overt planning in relation to language use. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the role that family language policy plays among family members in raising bilingual children through addressing the following issues: what are the models of bilingualism, how bilingual family language policy managed and carried out towards children, factors that influence the manipulation and effect of family language policy, common parental concerns towards bilingualism. This paper also provides a case study of language policy in Tibetan families in China to help viewers catch a glimpse of the situation of family language policy within a family domain and in a social context in certain part of China.

1. Models of bilingualism

The term “bilingualism” has been defined by different ways and adopts various forms. According to Ofelia Garcia in her work *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century*, bilingualism is divided into four models, subtractive, additive, recursive and dynamic. (2009, p.51).

Subjective bilingualism refers to “the student speaks a first language and a
second one is added while the first is subtracted.” Therefore, the outcome of this bilingualism is the child can only speak the second language.” (Garcia, 2009, p.51) This scenario is commonly found in families immigrated to a foreign country when their children are young, whose linguistic features of the first language receives a increasing lose due to the rare language input. The other form is called additive bilingualism. Additive indicates “a model under which the second language is added to the person’s repertoire and the two languages are maintained.” (Garcia, 2009, p. 52) One thing to be mentioned is that “bilingualism here is still seen from the perspective of a monolingual norm. That is, bilingualism within this model is simply double monolingualism, a category different from monolingualism, but with bilingual individuals expected to be and do with each of their languages the same thing as monolinguals.” (Garcia, 2009, p. 52) In other words, individual acquires a second language at no cost of the proficiency of their first language and demonstrates equivalent mastery in both linguistic systems.

In addition, there are another two models of bilingualism that have been constituted, however, “have not received scholarly attention.” (Garcia, 2009, p. 51) The two additional models of bilingualism are defined as recursive and dynamic. Recursive bilingualism refers to “bilingual individuals and communities often move back and forth along a bilingual continuum. And in so doing, the language is not added whole, but in bits and pieces…” (Garcia, 2009, p. 52) However, compared to recursive bilingualism, the model of dynamic bilingualism is more sufficient to reflect the complex bilingual competence needed in nowadays society. “Bilingualism is not
simply linear but dynamic, drawing from the different contexts in which it develops and functions.” ((Garcia, 2009, p. 53)

In our paper, we mainly illustrate issues occurring in family language policy in the realm of subjective and additive bilingualism, which are more commonly adopted and frequently demonstrated.

2. Critical Family Language Policies

With the development of globalization, more and more families are willing to raise a bilingual child. Nowadays, it is also feasible for more and more immigrant families in the United States, who have the perfect bilingual setting which both parents are different native speakers of their mother language or speak more than just their mother language. However, how to raise the child to be successful in two languages, attaining both accuracy and fluency in each language needs to be careful designed and planed. (Rosenberg, 1996) How to develop an appropriate approach to assist the bilingual child achieve proficiency in each language is also a tough task for these bilingual families.

There are two commonly used approaches in raising a bilingual child. First is the One Parent One Language (OPOL) approach, the other is the Minority Language at home (ML@H) approach.

“The One Parent One Language method, which each parent consistently speaks one language while the other parent speaks another language to their children is one
of the most popular methods adopted by parents so as to raise simultaneous bilingual children”. (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004, p.2) It was first mentioned by French linguist Maurice Grammont in a book he published in 1902 “as the optimal way to rear bilingual children who would not mix up their two languages”. (Spolsky, 2012, p.354) According to Döpke, “bilingual families who follow the one parent one language approach typically fall into one of the following patterns” (Döpke, 1992, p. 12):

Firstly, “the parents have different native languages, and the language spoken in the wider community is the same as that of one of the parents. Each parent speaks his or her own language to the child.” (Döpke, 1992, p. 12) For example, the mother in the family is the native speaker of Mandarin and the father is the native speaker of English who live in the United States. The mother speaks Mandarin to the child, while the father speaks English to the child. Secondly, “both parents are native speakers of the same minority language. One of the parents chooses to speak the language of the wider community to the child”. (Döpke, 1992, p. 12) In other words, both the mother and father are all native speakers of mandarin in Chinese, the minority language. Even so, one of the parents chooses to speak English, the language of the wider community to the child. This pattern is usually employed among immigrant families. Lastly, “both parents are native speakers of the language spoken by the wider community. One parent chooses to speak a language other than his or her native language to the child”. (Döpke, 1992, p. 13) In this case, both parents are native speakers of English, and one of the parents may know another foreign language. Therefore, the parent speaks another foreign language to the child.
Clearly, the benefits of this approach are as follows. In the first place, “by separating the languages from the beginning, it can prevent confusion and code-mixing in their child’s bilingual language development”. (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004, p. 2) In the second place, it also “ensures that the child has regular exposure to each language and has to make use of each language at home”, which plays an crucial role for providing support for the minority language, for it has little support outside the family. (Saunders, 1988, p. 49) Additionally, within the limited time the child spends at home, it is possible that the majority language minority language will not develop as strongly and accurately as the majority language because of the limited input to the minority language.

Apart from this, the “One Parent One Language” approach is not the only method works for the bilingual family in raising their bilingual children, there are also other options such as the Minority Language at Home (ML@H) in use in families, which is less commonly adopted but also quite successful. “It requires everyone in the family speaks the minority language at home, even if this language is not the native language of both parents”, as William (2009) said in his article The Minority Language at Home Bilingual Method. To be more precise, as Bosemark mentioned in her article Raising Bilingual Children: The Best Parenting Methods, “the child has more exposure to the minority language than with the one-parent-one-language approach, in which only one parent speaks the minority language with the child”. One of the other advantages of this approach is that “there is no switching back and forth between two languages at home, and the whole family can share the same common
language” (Larson-Wang, 2012). On the other hand, both parents are required to speak the same minority language at a proficient level. Because of this, this approach is not suitable for all bilingual families if the parents have different native languages.

3. Factors influence family language policies

Language policy in the family ranges from explicit and overt to unplanned and unconscious. And it’s rarely rigid because both the children and the family are socially connected and everything around them is changing all the time. So, where does consciously or unconsciously language policy come from?

Firstly it comes from personal experiences of the parents. Parents believe that adding a second or third language to a child is seen as giving an important advantage and enhanced social capital to their children because they can understand different culture, make friends with different countries so that their horizon, their opportunities and social circles are all widely extended.

Secondly, it comes from books, especially those famous and old linguistic theories that most common people are familiar with. Such as bilingual children have cognitive advantages; the earlier they began their bilingual family language policy, the better. Some of them turn out to be true, but some are non-research based, such as one-parent-one-language policy can keep the child from becoming linguistically confused.

And it also comes from lives. They evolve with the changing dynamics of family life, are adjusted to account for their perceived effectiveness, or are negotiated between family members. So here we can make a conclusion: the language policy a
family may start out with is not always the policy that they end up with because of ineffective or social pressures.

In general, many factors affect family language policy. Here we want to discuss this further from two perspectives, inside the family and outside the family.

1) Inside the family

Parents play the key role in deciding what language policy to adopt. And they usually select it based on cultural and economic reason. Culturally-based reason is that they want to maintain the original language of the family; usually it is the parents’ languages so that they can pass on its culture to the next generation and arouse interest/love for their mother countries. Besides, parents want to confer a positive economic advantage on their children so they hope children can use majority language fluently to be competitive in job market.

What’s more, siblings are also a very important affecting factor because according to research, approximately 80% of Western children have at least one sibling. The sibling relationship is likely to last longer than any other relationship in one’s lifetime and plays an integral part in the lives of families. Many researches have showed the special role siblings play in family language policy.

Firstly, elder siblings can act as language teachers and role models at home and a wide age gap would be more conducive to it. For example, older siblings often help the younger with their homework and correct mistakes of younger ones if needed. And the younger prefer to imitate older siblings’ learning behaviors, such as how to use a language dictionary.
In many cases, the younger views the older sibling as a role model because the first child may get more intensive language input since the parents don’t have to divide up their attention between two or more children, But other children have the advantage of being able to learn from their siblings.

2) Outside the Family

Government’s efforts to influence family language policy, social, political and economic by support and prohibition cannot be ignored. Government may support a language by government-funded researches, surveys, classes, TV/radio programs. But if the government is hostile to languages other than a specific language. Laws might be established to forbid teaching or using of other languages no matter in public or at home. Family under this pressure might not speak the minority language to their child to help them get a pure accent of the majority language or in rare cases, they will resist the pressure to conform.

In spite of the government’s inevitable influences, schooling is under family’s own control in most cases. Usually it’s the parents to choose which schools/programmes they enroll their children in. This may support or as a supplement of their family language policy. But sometimes, the school language becomes the majority or dominant language for children not only in school but also at home which means the school language can squeeze out parental languages if they are not accordant. So sometimes, parents change their family language policy because children are exposed too much to school language. We can see this point clearly in this case: a couple initially reared their child using one-parent-one language policy.
Father spoke only English while mother spoke only French. But later they found that their son was exposed too much English in his daily routine so they both began speaking only the minority language---French at home.

Finally, peer group should be viewed as a crucial factor as well. It’s an informal language learning experience for children since they spend most of their time studying and playing with their peers but not their parents. Children have to use language that most their peers use to avoid social isolation. So it might greatly change the proportion of exposure to different languages they acquire. Now it’s common to see that in order to practice children’s minority language more, which is usually their mother language, parents choose children’s peer group by spending vacation in mother country where they have more opportunity to listen and speak their mother tongue.

4. A case study: language policy in Tibetan families in China

According to Caldas, “All meaningful language policy is ultimately played out in the home and family language policy is not consciously planned, but rather has essentially been predetermined by history and circumstances beyond the family’s control (2012, p.351)”. That is to say, family language policy is influenced by many factors, such as political, economic, educational and social factors and it is a dynamic process. Therefore, to some extent, we can judge a certain social language change from the language policy that most family adopted in certain areas.

Jone County is located in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (GTAP). As one of ten Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in China, GTAP is on the northeast of
Tibet-Qinghai Plateau, that is to say, it is more geographically close to inland and it was under bigger influence of Chinese and Chinese culture. The family language policy adopted by most Tibetan people in Jone County is that children are sent to school where Chinese is the medium of instruction and they are encouraged to speak Chinese at home. There are many factors influencing family language policy in Jone County.

Firstly, political factor, according to Sun (2011), after three stages of language planning in China, Mandarin, as the official language, enjoys the highest priority in China. And now all Tibetan civil servants in GATP are required to take PSC (pu tong hua shui ping ce shi), a test for Mandarin. If they cannot pass the exam, they may not have the chance of having a job or getting promotion. Therefore, people are required to learn Chinese for their job consideration and Chinese is greatly promoted in Jone County.

Secondly, economic factor, the wave of immigrant not only brings more Chinese people to Tibetan areas, but also brings Chinese and their culture. For example, nowadays it is hard for Tibetan people to buy goods without knowing how to speak Chinese and almost all descriptions or instructions of appliances they used in their daily lives are written in Chinese. Therefore, without knowing Chinese, their life will be harder. Just as Nima (2008) found that” In the wake of socioeconomic developments in the Tibetan regions, society throughout the region is being flooded with a vast amount of modern terminology in Chinese, compelling people to use Chinese (p.52)”. Due to the influence of the economic factor, more and more school
gradually chooses to change their medium of instruction from Tibetan to Chinese.

Thirdly, educational factors, the consideration for children’ future development and opportunity also influences the family language policy in Jone County. Nima (2008) found that “After graduation, they (young Tibetans) have found that Chinese is more important, because the great majority of official documents, notices, letters and letters of certification are written in Chinese (p.54)”. Postiglione (2008) pointed that “competition for jobs in the non-farm sector has already led to a questioning of current language education policy (p.5)”. Thus, most parents will choose to send their children to the school where Chinese is the medium of instruction in order to help their children have a better starting point. After they enter into the school, their peers and schooling both will also have an influence family language policy, which proves what Caldas (2012) indicates that family language policy will be thwarted by the outside environment, such as schooling and peers. School language often becomes the majority or dominant language for children not only in school but also home which means the school language can squeeze out parental language. Peers also influence the children’s language learning because children have to use language that most their peers use to avoid social isolation. So it might greatly change the proportion of exposure to different languages they acquire.

As for me, when I was 3, I attended a kindergarten where Chinese is the medium of instruction and when I was 4, I attended Chinese primary school. At that time, even when I went back to home, my parents did not encourage me to speak Tibetan because my mother once majored in Tibetan language and literature, she told me that Tibetan
has a strong nasals and it will affect the pronunciation of Chinese. Also, Chinese and Tibetan belong to different linguistic system. Tibetan has 30 consonant and 4 vowels. It also has prefixes, suffixes, super scribed letters and subscribed letters. Because my mother tries not to arouse my language chaos and wants me to well fit into the Chinese society, she does not encourage me to learn Tibetan.

When I studied at Chinese primary school, there is no elective course for Tibetan language. We read Chinese book; we wrote Chinese character; we song Chinese songs. And almost all my friends are Chinese, so I have to speak Chinese when I was in school. Also, all of my 5 cousins and 1 sibling were sent to school where Chinese is the medium of instruction. So when we came back to home, Chinese is always our first choice.

In sum, the family language policy adopted by Tibetan people in Jone County that more and more Tibetan children are sent to school where the medium of instruction is Chinese and they are encouraged to speak Chinese at home is influenced by a variety of factors, including political, economic and educational factors. And it is a dynamic process and it is always changing.

5. Language delay and confusion in bilingualism

While raising bilingual children, one of the most consistent issues that parents concern about is bilingualism may cause language delay or language confusion, and even result in intellectual impediment. However, current researches have demonstrated that this is not the case. A quote from the American Academy of Family Physicians in 1999 stated:
“A bilingual home environment may cause a temporary delay in the onset of both languages. The bilingual child’s comprehension of the two languages is normal for a child of the same age, however, and the child usually becomes proficient in both languages before the age of five years.”

In addition, parallel researches have also indicated that there is no scientific evidence showing bilingualism can cause language delay or confusion, as De Houwer A. claimed in his article Two or more languages in early childhood: some general points and practical recommendations (1999), “There is no scientific evidence to date that hearing two or more languages leads to delays or disorders in language acquisition. Many children throughout the world group up with two or more languages from infancy with without showing any signs of languages delays or disorder”.

Moreover, a research conducted by Cornell’s Language Acquisition Lab (CLAL) & Virtual Center for the Study of Language Acquisition( VCLA) also concluded that Children learning a second language in an immersion setting show an overall success rate of grammatical knowledge similar to English monolinguals. Instead of hindering bilingual’s cognitive development, bilingualism turns out to be instrumental, “Bilingualism enhances the development of executive attention and facilitates superior performance in bilinguals as compared to monolingual counterparts on an executive attention test.” (Yang, S., & Lust, B. 2004,2007)

Two professors, Kendall King and Lyn Fogle of Georgetown University have conducted in-depth interviews with 24 culturally diverse families in Washington, DC.
In their article *Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research*, they summarized, in three key points, the findings of their investigation in light of current research literature on bilingual development: “First, although many parents believe that bilingualism results in language delay, research suggests that monolingual and bilingual children meet major language developmental milestones at similar times; Second, despite many parent’s fear that using two languages will result in confusion for their children, there is no research evidence to support this. On the contrary, use of two languages in the same conversation has been found to be a sign of mastery of both languages; Third, bilingualism contributes to the strengthening of some specific cognitive skills and areas such as relatively higher metalinguistic awareness.” (2006)

To conclude, there is no empirical evidence indicates any direct correlation between bilingualism and language delay or disorder of any sort. Perhaps more importantly, parents should deliberately adopt certain appropriate family language policy among family members so as to provide as much enrichment to their children as possible.

**Conclusion**

Under the trend of globalization, bilingualism is gaining its popularities among immigrants and minority groups all around the world. Therefore, it has become increasingly feasible for families living in foreign countries (which enjoy a perfect bilingual settings) to raise bilingual children in nowadays society. This paper have addressed on four issues related to family language policy upon bilingual children:
models of bilingualism prevailing and emerging in twenty-first century, critical family
language policies conducted among family members, factors influence the carry out
of family language policies, and current researches concerning common parental
concerns.

According to Ofelia Garcia’s publication, there are four models of bilingualism
prevailing and emerging in twenty-first century: subjective, additive, recursive and
dynamic (2009, p.51-53). Based on the first two most prosperous patterns of
bilingualism, two critical family language policies also become commonly used
among families: 1) One-parent-one-language policy, in which each parent consistently
speaks one language while the other parent speaks another language to the child; and
2) Minority language at home policy, in which everyone in the family speaks the
minority language at home. Both strengths and weakness of each language policy is
addressed in this paper. Moreover, during children’s process while acquiring more
than one language in the dynamic and interactive world among family, school and
society, family language policy is going through a constantly changing status. In
other words, the carry out of family language policy is subject to various personal,
social, political and economical factors. This paper chooses two perspectives to
further illustrate on this issue, inside the family and outside family, including factors
such as influence from parents, siblings, governments, school and peer group.
Furthermore, this paper also provides a case study of language policy in Tibetan
families in China to help viewers catch a glimpse of the situation of family language
policy within a family domain and in a social context in certain part of China. In
terms of the parental concerns that bilingualism may cause language delay or confusion, this paper provides adequate current research results clarifying on these issues, showing that there is no empirical evidence indicates any direct correlation between bilingualism and language delay or disorder of any sorts. More importantly, we warmly recommend that parents should deliberately adopt certain appropriate family language policy upon their children so as to provide as much enrichment to their children as possible.
References:


