
Title	The significance of children's English network patterns on community language use
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Source	<i>ERA-AME-AMIC Joint Conference, Singapore, 4-6 September 2000</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN'S ENGLISH NETWORK PATTERNS ON COMMUNITY LANGUAGE USE

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Abstract: In an earlier survey on three generation bilingual families, children's language choice patterns was reported in (Saravanan,1999). Chinese children tended to choose more English than Malay or Tamil children during interaction with parents and siblings. Data on bilingual and trilingual networks, as well as the range of bilingual networks speakers in the community (cf. Wei, 1994) have contact with and establish, was analysed in the form of family case studies in Saravanan (1999). Several network types and patterns of language use in family networks have emerged from the analysis. While there were patterns of both functional and social intersectional behaviour the observations show that families which have fewer contacts with extended familial relations of grandparents, aunts and uncles will find it more difficult to maintain their mother tongues compared to families which belong to an active familial network that includes the grandparent generation.

This Study

The general trend is that community language is preferred when interacting with the grandparent generation and English is preferred when speaking to different children from similar age groups. The maintenance of community language tends to be higher for Malay children compared to Chinese and Tamil children. With the parent generation the choice tends to be both English and community language.

The study looked at community language proficiency or mother tongue proficiency in the skills of speaking, reading and writing.

Further data was analysed on the three linguistic groups of Chinese, Malay and Tamil children. Data on the variable of language choice patterns in both English and community languages was analysed. 54 families were analysed with a 108 parents and 54 children.

Methodology

Analysis of Variables

The following variables were calculated:

Community language proficiency: refers to community language abilities in speaking parents, both fathers and mothers in the sample of 54 families i.e their own community language in speaking and writing Chinese, Malay or Tamil.

English language proficiency: refers to parents' (sample of 54 families) English language proficiency in speaking and writing.

A five point scale was set up to set up proficiency scales for speaking and writing in English, community and other languages using Li Wei, (1994).

Scale for proficiency in speaking:

1. Can understand simple questions and statements
2. Can answer such statements and make simple requests
3. Can take part in casual conversation
4. Can understand radio, television programmes, film, etc.
5. Can communicate effectively with general ease in a range of topics

Scale for proficiency in reading/writing

1. Can understand simple signs/notices
2. Can write own name and a few simple words
3. Can fill in forms and write informal letters/notes
4. Can read books and newspapers, magazines
5. Can effectively communicate through writing

Language choice pattern score: refers to parents' frequent use of English and community languages during their interaction with their children using a scale of 'all the time', most of the time, 50/50, 'some of the time' to 'never'. Respondents found the scale easier to make sense. This was found to be more meaningful than an arbitrary scale set up using percentages, i.e. 100% & 50% etc.

English preference refers to language codes chosen during network interaction with other speakers.

Correlation of fathers' data from three groups (Chinese, Malay and Tamil)

- (1) correlation of fathers' community languages proficiency with English language proficiency, English preference, language choice patterns score (LCPS).
- (2) correlation of children's community language proficiency with their fathers' English language proficiency, English preference, language choice pattern score, and community language proficiency .

Table 1
Fathers (all groups, N=54) and children (all groups, N=54)

Fathers	English Proficiency	English Preference	LCPS	Community Language Proficiency
Fathers' Community Language Proficiency	n.s.	n.s.	-.335*	-.282*
Children's Community Language Proficiency	-.307*	-.429**	-.406**	-.451**

Table 1 shows that fathers' community language proficiency is negatively correlated with their language choice pattern scores (-.335*). This is interpreted to mean that the more fathers choose English when they interact with other speakers, the lower their community language proficiency and abilities.

Table 1 also shows the correlation of children's community language proficiency with their fathers' English proficiency (-.307*), English preference (-.429**), language choice pattern score (-.406**), and community language proficiency (.350**).

One factor analysis of variance ANOVA was carried out to test our findings.

Table 2
One Way ANOVA: data on fathers and children (54 families, all groups)

Fathers'	English Proficiency	English Preference	LCPS	Community Language Proficiency
Fathers' Community Language Proficiency	n.s. (.586)	.043*	n.s. (.055)	n.s. (.086)
Children's Community Language Proficiency	n.s. (.181)	.003**	n.s. (.055)	.017*

ANOVA analysis shows that fathers' community language proficiency in speaking is significantly correlated with their English preference (.043*, $p < .05$) and almost significantly correlated with their language choice pattern score (.055).

ANOVA analysis confirms our findings on the significant correlation of children's

community language proficiency in speaking and their fathers' English preference (.003**, $p < .01$) and community language proficiency (.012**, $p < .01$). But no significance was found between children's community language proficiency and their fathers' English proficiency and language choice pattern score (almost significant at .055).

Discussion

Fathers' community language proficiency in speaking (CLPS) correlated with English language preference. When fathers' proficiency in CLPS is lower, they tend to choose English as their preferred language. If their proficiency in CLPS is higher, they tend to choose either English or community language as their preferred languages. But there are a small number of fathers who tend to choose CLPS even when their proficiency in CLPS is lower. This can be explained by the fact that fathers try very hard to speak community language to communicate with their children. It could be a desire to maintain culture and identity.

Correlation of mothers' data from three groups (Chinese, Malay and Tamil)

Correlation of Community Language Proficiency of mothers' data with children was carried out (Chinese, Malay & Tamil).

- (1) Correlation of mothers' community language proficiency with English proficiency, English preference, language choice pattern score (LCPS).
- (2) Correlation of children's community language proficiency with their mothers' English proficiency, English preference, language choice pattern score and community language proficiency.

Table 3

Mothers (54 all groups) and children (54 all groups)

Mothers'	English Proficiency	English Preference	LCPS	Community Language Proficiency
Mothers' Community Language Proficiency	n.s.	-.454**	-.387**	n.s.
Children's Community Language Proficiency	-.352**	-.449**	-.485**	-.491**

Table 3 shows that mothers' community language proficiency is negatively correlated with their English preference (-.454**) and language choice pattern score (-.387**). The results also shows the correlation of children's community language proficiency with their mothers' English proficiency (-.352*), English preference(-.449**), language choice pattern score(-.485**), and community language proficiency (.337*). Furthermore, the results show that when mothers' community language proficiency is low, they prefer English. When they have high proficiency in community language, they have more chances to choose their preferred languages (English or community languages).

ANOVA: One way analysis of variance was also carried out to confirm our findings.

Table 4

One Way ANOVA for mothers and children (54 families, all groups)

Mothers'	English Proficiency	English Preference	LCPS	Community Language proficiency
Mothers' Community Language Proficiency	n.s.(.179)	.001**	.019*	n.s.(.124)
Children's Community Language Proficiency	n.s.(.105)	.007**	.003**	.003**

ANOVA analysis confirms our findings on significant correlation between mothers' community language proficiency and English preference (.001**, $p < .01$) and language choice pattern score (.019*, $p < .05$).

ANOVA analysis provides significant correlation between children's community language proficiency and their mothers' English preference (.007**, $p < .01$), language choice pattern score (.003**, $p < .01$), and community language proficiency (.022*, $p < .05$).

Mothers' community language proficiency determines their English preference and language choice pattern score. Language choice preference in speaking moves in favour of Chinese if proficiency in Chinese is higher.

There is significant correlation between children's community language proficiency and their mothers' English preference, language choice pattern score and community language proficiency.

Discussion

The results show that the spread of English in Singapore is at least partly at the expense of the community languages.

Pre-school language learning

The pre-school mother tongue acquisition of languages depends on the availability of mother tongue classes. In the case of Indian children out of 197 primary schools, only 146 offer Tamil classes. Out of the 10 new primary schools opening in 1999 only four offer Tamil language. This is reflected in the caption 'Parents want Tamil in Unity Primary' (Straits Times Report: 13/8/98). The report said that some Indian parents were upset that this school located in Choa Chu Kang, a new HDB town had places for primary one but does not offer Tamil. Teck Whye a 40 year old school had primary school places but parents resident

in Choa Chu Kang found it too far a distance for their young children to travel to. This reflects part of the problem related to the availability of Tamil classes and the location of Tamil classes for the Tamil speaking population. These are governed by constraints of the availability of trained Tamil teachers. The situation for Tamil teaching in kindergartens is even more critical. Some 40 PAP and a few private kindergartens offer Tamil. Only three private kindergartens offer Tamil. When kindergartens do not offer Tamil children end up taking Chinese during their pre-school years. Such children lose out 3 years of mother tongue learning in kindergartens.

Proficiency in languages: English abilities

It is inevitable that there is an emphasis on English language abilities as the major thrust is towards a curriculum that emphasises English across the curriculum. This emphasis is on an English based curriculum that starts with nursery and kindergarten classes. This emphasis is reflected in the higher interest and motivation to acquire proficiency in English language right through the school years.

Activities in English

Play time activities in private kindergartens tend to be in English. There is more use of bilingual languages in childcare centres and in PAP kindergartens. Children's language choice patterns is also determined by the family literacy patterns. It is determined by parents' choice of other families they interact with. Parents' higher abilities in English would naturally lead them toward other English speaking families. Patterns of interaction are determined by language abilities and by social networks of interaction. Ironically, it has been reported that parents are in the practice of employing maids who speak the mother tongue languages as parents themselves are not confident in mother tongue languages and their higher proficiency tends to be in English.

In a survey on Chinese language (Straits Times report 22/1/99), it was reported that good students in schools spent more time on Chinese than any other subject. Weak students spent 70% more time on Chinese. The survey also reported that more Singaporean students were coming from English speaking homes, from one in five in 1988 to two in five students in primary one in 1998.

Language preference & usage

The survey also reported on whether Chinese children like to speak Chinese and reported that it had dropped from 51.3% in primary 2 to 5.9% in junior college. Language usage patterns both at home and at kindergartens help to determine preferences in language choice and the survey and data from kindergartens point towards English.

Conclusion

In conclusion there is need to look at some of the sociolinguistic debate reported in surveys and discussed in the media as it helps to provide a background to language use patterns, language choices made by families and a broader base to the current study on language use patterns in bilingual, trilingual societies.

The debate points to the concern that Chinese language and culture has suffered from an

image problem. It points out that Chinese language has to revamp its all too gloomy image and revitalise itself if it is to inject younger Singaporeans with a sense of confidence and pride in their Chinese mother tongue culture.

In another report in (Straits Times dated 2./2./99), it was reported that no student had taken up the option to study his mother tongue at first language level. It was in a response from some MPs who had requested a revival of Chinese medium schools where the curriculum would be largely in Chinese. It was reported that in fact parents and students wanted the opposite - not whether there was too much English. but whether there was enough English. Given a choice today, parents opted to put their children in the English stream and wanted them to study as much English as possible. The mastery of English has become one of the major concerns of parents.

In a debate 'To be or not to be Chinese' in (Straits Times 15/1 2000), there was a debate on the perceived decline of ethnic identity among young Singaporean youth who wanted to be either Caucasians or Japanese. The survey polled 811 secondary school, junior college and university students and 807 parents.

In comparison to Chinese, Malays have the strongest ethnic identity, with more than 90% of the young people expressing no desire to belong to any other race. 94.9 % of adults want to remain Chinese compared to 78.4% of the young people. About 15% of young Indians prefer to be Caucasians. This survey has again caused concern among mother tongue teachers and educators as they see it as a decline in Chinese language and identity.

Writers in *Zaobao*, the Chinese daily, traced the cause to the decline of Chinese language standards and a social environment that has regarded the language as low-class and unsophisticated. Writers pointed out that Chinese youths who had taken Chinese as a second language had read books that had been simplified and that these materials had few references to forming emotional ties to the language and culture of the Chinese speaking community. It was argued that while there has been no doubt that the bilingual policy had a positive role to play in Singapore's economic miracle, the price would be a weakened ethnic identity among the youth.

This year's chairman of the Promote Mandarin Council, Professor Wee Chow Hou, noted that fewer Chinese families have been using Mandarin at home, with figures dropping from 69.1% to 53.8%. In contrast the number of families using English is on the rise from 21% in 1988 to 43.2% in 2000. Hence the thrust of the Speak Mandarin campaign, which is into its 22nd year, is to "convince and encourage " English speakers to speak Mandarin. This year's thrust is to attract Singaporeans to learn Mandarin in an unobtrusive, entertaining and cultural way, by selecting Mandarin movies to promote its campaign " Speak Mandarin, it's an asset". Other ongoing campaigns include the Chinese Heritage Series comprising arts and cultural performances, and the campaign's webchats with celebrities.

In this study the inverse (negative) correlation of community language abilities of the parent and child generations with their *English abilities* and *English usage* show that the acquisition of English for those families is more of a replacive rather than an additive

bilingual process.

It raises concern as to whether the bilingual policy has been able to produce balanced bilinguals or bilinguals who can communicate in two or more languages. As home language forms the basis of the language maintenance of community language and mother languages the shift to English reduces the functions of community languages. Home is considered as one of the strong bastions of community languages. Parents and care givers need to provide continuous support for community languages to be spoken and maintained at home. Children need modelling and functional activities to provide the opportunities for language use.

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