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An Ethnographic Multiple-Case Study of
Mother-Child Interaction Strategies in Singapore-Based Chinese Families

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that differences in the speech that children are exposed to can lead to differences in their language, literacy and cognitive development, and may even affect subsequent success at school. Informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of language learning in early childhood and Sigel's Psychological Distancing Model, this ethnographic multiple-case study analyzes maternal interaction strategies in four Chinese families in Singapore – two local and two immigrant families – to explore factors that influence choice of interaction strategies. Cross-case comparisons are made in terms of the mothers' professional and cultural backgrounds, and within-case comparisons are made along the lines of contextual factors. The comparisons reveal both important similarities and differences in the mothers' use of interaction strategies which was shaped by an array of social, cultural, and contextual factors.

Keyword: family literacy practices, maternal interaction strategies, distancing strategies, immigrant families, Singapore

Introduction

Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) groundbreaking work has transformed our understanding of learning, especially language and literacy learning in early childhood. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, children acquire literacy by reading and writing for specific

purposes, with guidance and scaffolding from others possessing greater literacy proficiency. For most pre-school children, their parents are the more proficient others. Parental scaffolding is most visible in interactions such as joint storybook reading, direct instruction, and dyadic conversations (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988; DeLoache & DeMendoza, 1987; Ninio & Bruner, 1978). From a sociocultural theoretical perspective, the cognitive and linguistic richness of parent-child talk can mediate children's learning process and help them move beyond their current level of language and literacy development (Li, 2002, Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

Because the scaffolding role of parent-child interaction is vital, differences in the speech children hear can lead to differences in their language, literacy and cognitive development, and may even affect their school performance (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006). Therefore, there is a clear need to identify significant differences in parent-child interactions that have important implications for children's language development and literacy learning. Informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the present case study takes a close look at the interaction strategies used by mothers of four Chinese families in Singapore that differed in maternal profession and family cultural background. Although many studies have investigated parental interaction strategies, relatively little research has focused on interaction strategies in relation to parents' profession and cultural background. As Sigel (1982) has pointed out, however, parental interaction strategies may vary markedly with such demographic characteristics.

A pioneer study of parental interaction strategies was Heath's (1983) ethnography of three communities in southeastern United States. The three communities differed strikingly in their interaction strategies or, in Heath's words, "patterns of language use" manifested in storybook reading, in the paths of language socialization for children, and in the extent to which they prepared their children for schooling. Compared with their counterparts in the

mainstream community, children in the two working-class communities had greater difficulty in adjusting to school and fared less well academically, largely due to a lack of continuity between home and school literacy practices. Inspired by Heath's work, several studies (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1988; de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Hoff, 2006; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, & Brody, 1990) examined parental, especially maternal, interaction strategies and found them pivotal in children's language, literacy and cognitive development. An interesting finding from this research is that more complex maternal speech facilitates children's vocabulary development better than simpler speech (Hoff, 2006). This finding contradicts the intuitive belief that mothers can help their children acquire language by simplifying their speech. Such findings about the beneficial effects of complex maternal speech and certain parental interaction strategies, however, mesh with the Psychological Distancing Model developed by Sigel (1982, 2002).

Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Piaget's structuralist developmental perspective, the Psychological Distancing Model was proposed to study young children's intellectual development in the context of social interactions (Sigel, 2002). Psychological distancing refers to the "mental separation of events or instances in time or space" (Sigel, 2002, p.192), that is, the mental distancing of an individual from the immediate, ongoing present (Sigel, 1982). An example given by Sigel (2002, p.193) illustrates this construct: When a mother asks her boy to describe a past experience, he has to separate himself mentally from the immediate here and now to construct an appropriate response. Parental use of verbal distancing strategies has been found to influence the development of young children's representational and linguistic abilities (Bourdais, 2002; Sigel, 1982, Sigel & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1984). Because it relates parental interaction strategies to socio-cognitive demands on the verbal processes that a child engages in (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1991; Sigel, 1982), the Psychological Distancing Model allows for a microgenetic

focus on parent-child interactions. Three broad categories of verbal strategies are distinguished: high-, medium- and low-distancing strategies. High-distancing strategies are parental utterances that encourage children to extend their thoughts beyond the given information (e.g., making inferences) and thus create mental distance between the children and their ongoing environment (Wong, Bernas, & Eberhard, 2005). High-distancing strategies require some level of abstraction and are cognitively demanding. In contrast, low-distancing strategies (e.g., labeling an observable object) “make minimal demands on the child to separate self from the ongoing present and involve minimal representation” (Sigel, 2002, p.197). Medium-distancing strategies (e.g., classifying objects in view) fall in between high- and low-distancing strategies in terms of mental distance created for the child.

The essential assumption underlying the notion of distancing is that talk about the world beyond here and now sets the foundation for literacy learning and school achievement through promoting higher-order thinking (de Jong & Leseman, 1998; Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Leseman & de Jong, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It is important, however, to point out that although the Psychological Distancing Model illuminates the possible connections between parental interaction strategies and child language development, it has little to say about factors that influence parental choice of such strategies. Existing research suggests that parent-child interaction strategies are task-dependent (Sigel, 1982). Contextual factors, such as genre of the written or oral text involved and the parent-child dyad’s facility with the task concerned, can play a role in parental choice of interaction strategies (Pellegrini et al., 1990).

In addition to contextual factors, family demographics have also been related to aspects of parent-child interactions, especially the linguistic complexity of maternal speech (Hoff, 2006; Ninio, 1980), maternal teaching strategies (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein, & Serpell, 2001), and frequency of certain literacy activities at home (Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006;

Wan, 2000). The finding that family demographics and home literacy practices are closely related resonates with Street's (1995) ideological conceptualization of literacy practices, which highlights the embedded and social nature of literacy. An ideological view of literacy takes literacy as a set of social practices grounded or situated in social, historical, cultural and political contexts of use (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995). In this view, family backgrounds constitute important social, cultural, historical contexts where children are engaged in a variety of literacy activities. While many studies have examined family socio-economic status as a composite measure (e.g., Curenton, Craig, & Flanigan, 2008; Heath, 1983; Leseman & de Jong, 1998) or focused mainly on maternal educational level (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Torr, 2004), few have focused on the specific effects of mother's occupation on interaction strategies. Laosa's (1978) study of mothers and their five-year-old children was an exception and reported that teaching strategies used by mothers did not vary markedly as a function of their occupation. However, Li's (2002) ethnography of the literacy lives of four Chinese immigrant families in Canada demonstrated that the parents' educational background and occupations shaped their expectations for and involvement in their children's literacy acquisition. Such inconsistent findings point to the need for further research.

Previous research has also indicated that parental interaction strategies may vary as a result of parents' educational and cultural views. Wang, Bernas, and Eberhard's (2005) study of families from three cultural communities found that interaction strategies were culturally determined. Compared with the American mothers, the Chinese mothers in the study took greater control of parent-child interactions and preferred mother-directed interaction patterns. Similarly, Wan's (2000) study of a Chinese girl's home literacy life in the USA showed that a whole set of culturally shaped beliefs, attitudes, values, and assumptions underlay the literacy activity of reading aloud that her family members frequently engaged her in. These findings about cultural influences on home interaction patterns accord with a sociocultural-historical

theory of literacy that views literacy as contextually embedded (Larson & Marsh, 2005). For those who hold a sociocultural-historical view, literacy permeates all aspects of life and is part of culture (Au, 1993), so much so that a reciprocal relationship exists between cultural identity and the process of becoming literate (Ferdman, 1991). From a sociocultural-historical perspective, the nature of home literacy practices is determined by the social meaning and uses of literacy, cultural models of literacy practices, and socio-cognitive systems of beliefs, values and aspirations upheld by parents. Such a perspective was supported by Li's (2002, 2004, 2006) ethnographic and survey studies of Chinese immigrant families' literacy practices in North America.

As revealed by the literature review above, previous research has indicated that parental interaction strategies constitute an important influence on children's future development and that parent-child interaction patterns are shaped by an array of contextual, social, and cultural factors. There are, however, several gaps in the literature. First, almost all the research reviewed above has been conducted in Western contexts, usually Anglophone societies. This raises a question about the applicability of the findings to other societies. The question becomes doubly poignant from an ideological or sociocultural-historical view of literacy as situated social and cultural practices. Second, while the Psychological Distancing Model has been adopted to explain the observed connections between patterns of language use at home and children's language and literacy development, there is a lack of research that examines parents' use of distancing strategies in relation to several important family demographics and contextual factors. Third, much of existing research on parental interaction strategies has stopped at descriptive statistics or correlational analysis and has made no efforts to explore the motivations behind parents' choice of interaction strategies in context. To bridge these gaps, the present case study examines parent-child interactions in a non-Western society, exploring parental choice of interaction strategies (in particular, distancing strategies) in

relation to several contextual and sociocultural factors. Drawing on data collected with naturalistic observations and interviews, the study aims to provide a richly textured picture of parental interaction strategies and the factors motivating parental choice of such strategies. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What interaction strategies do the mothers of four case-study Chinese families use with their young children?
- 2) What are some of the social, cultural, and contextual factors that shape parental choice of interaction strategies?

Method

Research Design and Participating Families

To address our research questions, we conducted an ethnographic, explanatory study with a multiple-case research design (Yin, 2009). The case study was ethnographic not only because it employed such ethnographic methods of data collection as participant observations and semi-structured/open-ended interviews but also because the data collection involved prolonged fieldwork with the case-study families for 11 months. It was aimed to achieve an explanatory purpose, namely, to verify our theoretical propositions about the complex influences on parental interaction strategies of select social, cultural, and contextual variables that were informed by Vygotskyan sociocultural perspectives on early literacy development and Sigel's model of distancing strategies. To facilitate such analytic generalization (Yin, 2009), multiple cases – four middle-class Chinese families in Singapore – were purposively selected to operationalize different sociocultural and professional backgrounds: two local Singaporean families vs. two recent immigrant families from China and two teacher mothers vs. two non-teacher mothers. This multiple-case design was based on “the logic of replication” (Yin, 2009, p.39) and allowed us to make cross-case comparisons (i.e., local vs. immigrant families; teacher vs. non-teacher mothers) and within-case ones (e.g., the same

mother-child dyad engaging in different literacy activities) to identify differences and similarities. Such differences and similarities, as Svensson and Doumas (2013) point out, provide a valid basis for analytic generalization.

In each selected family, we focused on the mother's interactions with one child. All four focal children were born in 2003, and when data collection started in 2008, they were in their first year of kindergarten. Basic information about the four families is summarized in Table 1. To protect the privacy of participants, all names are pseudonyms.

Table 1 Family Profiles

	Family A	Family B	Family C	Family D
Focal child				
Name	Fiona	Leo	Steve	Helen
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Female
Age at start of study	4;7	4;3	4;5	4;3
Birth order	1 st	2 nd	2 nd	1 st
Family status	Local	Local	Immigrant	Immigrant
Parents' occupation				
Mother	Primary school English teacher	Financial consultant	Primary school Chinese teacher	Accountant
Father	Secondary school English & PE teacher	Police officer	Pre-university English teacher	Research associate
Parents' education				
Mother	BA	BA	BA	BA
Father	BS	BA	MA	PhD
Dominant home language	English	English	Mandarin	Mandarin

Fiona was the elder daughter of a local Chinese family. Her brother was three years younger than her. Both of her parents completed their undergraduate education at a university in Singapore. Her father had a bachelor of science in chemistry but was an English and physical education teacher in a secondary school; her mother had a bachelor of arts in English and was a primary school English teacher. The parents used to work on a half-time basis so that they were able to take turns to look after the children at home. After the father switched to a full-time teaching job in 2009, the mother began to spend more time with the children. Fiona attended a half-day Christian kindergarten.

Leo was the second child of the other local family and had two brothers. His father received his bachelor's degree from a UK university, and his mother from a local university. Both were business majors at university. Working as a financial consultant, Leo's mother enjoyed a relatively flexible working schedule and was able to spend more time at home with her three children than most working mothers can. Leo was sent to a half-day kindergarten. Like Fiona's family, the dominant home language was English for Leo's family.

Steve was the second child of the immigrant family with teacher parents. Unlike his elder sister, he was born in Singapore. The sister was 14 years older than Steve and was an undergraduate student at a prestigious university in the USA. Everyone in the family, especially the mother, was very proud of her academic achievement. The parents used to be college English teachers in China. The father came to Singapore in 1998 and obtained his master's degree in applied linguistics from a university in Singapore. He worked as a pre-university teacher of English and was also a part-time teacher of Chinese at a language center. The mother and the daughter joined the father in 2001. She was a Chinese teacher at an international primary school. As both his parents worked full-time, Steve attended a full-day community-run child-care center.

Helen was from the other immigrant family. She was born in Singapore and was the only child in the family until July 2009, when her sister was born. Her father came to Singapore in 1997 and earned his MA and PhD degrees in linguistics from a local university. At the time of data collection, he worked as a research associate at a research center. The mother obtained her bachelor's degree in finance in China and came to Singapore in 2001. She worked as an accountant for a company. As both her parents had full-time jobs, Helen attended a full-day child-care center near her home.

Data Collection and Analysis

From August 2008 to June 2009, a total of 8-10 visits were made to each of the families,

with each visit lasting 2-4 hours. During these visits, the first author observed mother-child interactions because all four mothers were the primary caregivers in their families. The observations were audio-recorded, and extensive field notes were also taken. A wide range of mother-child interaction events were observed in each family, including art and craft activities, piano playing, abacus and mental arithmetic exercise, homework supervision and tutoring, storybook reading, parent-child toy play, and casual conversations. On multiple occasions the parents were asked to audio-record interactions with their children themselves when the events took place outside of the visiting hours (e.g., bedtime storytelling). Semi-structured and open-ended interviews were also conducted with the parents. These interviews focused on family history, parents' beliefs about literacy learning and bilingualism, attitudes towards the children's (pre-)schools, views of the bilingual education policy implemented in Singapore, educational expectations for the children, and parental literacy practices.

To analyze the data, audio recordings of mother-child interactions were transcribed and coded for interaction strategies. On average, 30 hours of interactions were recorded for each family. This study is based on part of the collected data. Given the variety of literacy events observed and to ensure comparability across the families, only data from three types of parent-child interaction activity – casual conversation, parental help with schoolwork, and storybook reading – were included for this study. A close examination of the data showed that these three types of activity occurred more frequently in the families and elicited more interaction strategies than other types of activity did. Consequently, the final dataset consisted of transcripts of about 4 hours of mother-child interactions for each family. To minimize potential observer effects on the mothers' interaction strategies, the data were selected mainly from the recordings made in the last few months of data collection when the families grew used to researcher presence and from the recordings made by the parents themselves in the absence of the researcher-observer.

A preliminary coding scheme of distancing strategies was developed by reviewing and drawing on coding schemes found in previous research (i.e., de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1992; Laosa, 1978; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Pellegrini et al., 1990; Sigel, 1982). Only high-distancing and low-distancing strategies were included in the coding scheme because previous research (e.g., Sigel, 1982; Sigel & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1984) found relationships only between these two categories of distancing strategies and children's language development. Furthermore, considering the characteristics of Chinese families' interaction strategies, we also developed a second coding scheme that focused on the regulation functions of maternal utterances, namely, strategies used by mothers to regulate the interactions or their children's behavior. This coding scheme incorporated some regulation strategies identified by Wang et al. (2005). The two coding schemes were used separately to code the data. In other words, an utterance like "Yes, continue" would be coded as the low-distancing strategy of *using directives* in the first coding scheme and as the regulation strategy of *taking control of the interaction* in the second coding scheme. The initial coding schemes were then modified and refined iteratively as the first author tried them out on the observational data. Such iterative revision and refining were necessary to develop valid and reliable coding schemes for qualitative data like ours (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The finalized coding scheme for distancing strategies consisted of 8 high-distancing and 11 low-distancing strategies (see Table 2). There were 7 regulation strategies in the final version of the second coding scheme (see Table 3).

Formal coding of the observational data was done in two phases. In Phase 1, the first author trained a doctoral student of applied linguistics to use the finalized coding schemes. They then coded 5% of the observational data independently. An analysis of the coding results revealed an acceptable level of inter-rater agreement (90%) for both coding schemes. Inconsistencies and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Since there was

acceptable inter-rater reliability, the first author coded all the remaining data alone in Phase 2. The coded interaction strategies were subjected to a case-based analysis (Svensson & Doumas, 2013), in which the data of each case were both considered together and compared “in relation to each other and within the case as a whole” (p.445) to identify cross- and within-case differences and similarities.

Interviews with the parents were transcribed and analyzed mainly to help interpret the observed patterns of mother-child interactions. The method of interpretational analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to identify salient, recurrent themes in family history and background, home (bi)literacy practices, parental beliefs about education, literacy learning and bilingualism, parents’ attitudes towards the (pre-)schools attended by their children and the bilingual education offered there, and educational expectations for their children. These themes were then related to home literacy practices and maternal interaction strategies to explore and explain why the mothers interacted with their children in the way they did.

Findings

Cross-Case Similarities in Interaction Strategies

Our analysis of the observation and interview data revealed several salient similarities in home literacy events and maternal interaction strategies in the four families. First, all focal children were frequently involved in literacy-related interactions with their mothers. Such literacy events as storybook reading, art and craft, joint toy play, and parental help with homework were regular happenings in all four families. Shared book reading was especially popular and was conducted routinely. Leo’s mother, for example, started to read books to Leo when he was a toddler. Bedtime reading was simply indispensable in Fiona’s family and usually lasted half an hour to one hour every day. “Nobody initiates it,” remarked the mother, “the children just know it’s time to read books.” Similarly, book reading was part of daily life in the two Chinese immigrant families. Steve loved stories and would usually make requests

for story reading. Besides stories that his mother read to him, Steve also listened to stories with his MP3 player before going to bed. For Helen, bedtime story reading had also started early and became a daily routine. Sometimes, it even became a headache for her parents to send her to bed because the more stories she was read to, the more excited she became.

Another salient cross-case similarity lay in the wide range of strategies adopted by the mothers in interactions with their children. All together 26 distinct interaction strategies were identified in the observational data (see Tables 2 and 3). Notably, Fiona's mother used all 26 interaction strategies, and Steve's mother used 25 of them. The total incidence of the interaction strategies in the analyzed data was 372 for Fiona's mother, 217 for Leo's mother, 249 for Steve's mother, and 257 for Helen's mother. The mothers were adroit at using the various strategies flexibly according to the different goals and learning materials for the activities that they interactionally engaged their children in.

A third striking cross-case similarity concerned the relative frequency with which the mothers used high-distancing strategies. As can be seen from Table 2, such strategies accounted for 43.2%, 33.8%, 38.5%, and 37.1% of the total frequency of distancing strategies in the four families respectively. Although the high-distancing strategies as a group were not as frequent as the other two groups of interaction strategies, their relative frequency in each family was still quite impressive, given the young age of the children participating in the observed interactions.

Table 2 Frequency and Percentage of Distancing Strategies

Distancing strategy	Fiona's mother		Steve's mother		Helen's mother		Leo's mother	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
High-distancing strategies	104	43.2	48	33.8	62	38.5	60	37.3
Eliciting evaluation	2	0.8	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eliciting cause inference	24	10.0	16	11.3	17	10.6	19	11.8
Eliciting similarity/difference judgment	2	0.8	4	2.8	6	3.7	12	7.5
Connecting with personal experience	8	3.3	3	2.1	6	3.7	10	6.2
Extending	7	2.9	5	3.5	15	9.3	8	5.0
Asking open-ended questions	12	5.0	4	2.8	0	0	3	1.9
Eliciting alternatives	16	6.6	1	0.7	9	5.6	4	2.5
Using cognitive state verbs	33	13.7	15	10.6	9	5.6	4	2.5
Low-distancing strategies	137	56.8	94	66.2	99	61.5	101	62.7
Using directives	54	22.4	30	21.1	22	13.7	20	12.4
Eliciting clarification	5	2.1	3	2.1	5	3.1	9	5.6
Eliciting repetition	17	7.1	16	11.3	2	1.2	3	1.9
Asking simple 'what' questions	22	9.1	20	14.1	36	22.4	22	13.7
Asking yes/no questions	12	5.0	7	4.9	17	10.6	16	9.9
Labeling	2	0.8	1	0.7	2	1.2	5	3.1
Describing	5	2.1	3	2.1	2	1.2	3	1.9
Eliciting pointing response	4	1.7	5	3.5	4	2.5	5	3.1
Demonstrating	14	5.8	2	1.4	0	0	0	0
Eliciting completion	2	0.8	7	4.9	9	5.6	18	11.2

Table 3 Frequency and Percentage of Regulation Strategies

Regulation strategy	Fiona's mother		Steve's mother		Helen's mother		Leo's mother	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Prompting with cues	14	10.7	21	19.6	45	46.9	12	21.4
Attending to handwriting	20	15.3	10	9.3	0	0	3	5.4
Correcting mistakes	23	17.6	29	27.1	8	8.3	13	23.2
Regulating attention	7	5.3	10	9.3	1	1.0	1	1.8
Structuring activity	6	4.6	5	4.7	1	1.0	1	1.8
Accepting child's response	20	15.3	22	20.6	30	31.3	10	17.9
Taking control of interaction	35	26.7	3	2.8	0	0	0	0
Praising	6	4.6	7	6.5	11	11.5	16	28.6
Total	131	100	107	100	96	100	56	100

Cross-Case Differences in Interaction Patterns

Several differences in mother-child interactions were identified between the families compared along the lines of the mothers' occupational and cultural backgrounds.

Interactional differences between teacher and non-teacher mothers

The two teacher mothers (i.e., Fiona's and Steve's mother) shared some characteristics which distinguished their interactions with the children from those of the non-teacher mothers (i.e., Helen's and Leo's mother). First, the teacher mothers exerted markedly greater control over the interaction activities, usually leading the activities in their desired directions. This was true of informal interactions (e.g., toy play) and formal tutoring (e.g., mother helping with English spelling). The stronger control was most clearly reflected in the teacher mothers' more frequent use of three interaction strategies: *using directives*, *structuring activity*, and *taking control of interaction* (see Tables 2 and 3). Although they did invite their children to give alternatives from time to time, these choices were provided and granted by themselves. Consequently, the interactions were firmly under the mothers' control, as illustrated in Excerpts 1 and 2 (see the Appendix for transcription notations).

Excerpt 1: Fiona and her mother were reading a storybook.

- 1 M: Fiona, sit. Ok~ we are going to read "The Elephant and Teddy Bear." What do you know about elephant?
- 2 C: Umm, big ears.

Excerpt 2: Steve's mother was reading a nursery rhyme with him.

- 1 M: 来, 儿子, 来认认字, 《小儿郎》。先读, 不是唱啊。我们来读。你放下, 我们都看到, 啊。你用手点著, 用这个牙刷点著也行(passes the child a toothbrush)。来吧, 点著。

[Come, my boy, see if you can recognize some words in "The Little Boy." You read aloud first; don't sing. Let's read aloud. Put the book down so that both of us can see. Use your finger to point, or you can use this toothbrush (passes the child a toothbrush). Come on, you point.]

- 2 C: “小～儿～郎, 小嘛小儿郎呀, 小, 背著, 背上书本上学堂, 不怕太阳晒, 不怕风雨狂, 只怕先生骂我懒啦, 恩...”

[“The ~little~boy, the little boy, carries, carries his bag on his way to school. He goes to school, fearing neither scorching sunshine nor heavy rain. He is only afraid

that the teacher may scold him for being lazy.”]

In both Excerpts 1 and 2, the mother initiated the interaction and led it in the desired direction through several directives (Turn 1 in both excerpts), whereas the child followed the instruction dutifully. By contrast, there were more opportunities for negotiation between the non-teacher mothers and their children in their literacy-related interactions, as clearly illustrated by Excerpts 3 and 4. Although Helen’s mother initiated the interaction in Excerpt 3, she invited Helen to decide if she would like to joint-read a story book (Turn 1) and which story she wished to read (Turn 3). She then accepted, in a typical manner, the choice made by the child (Turn 7). In Excerpt 4, Leo’s mother also gave him the opportunity to choose which books to read (Turn 1), and his choice was accepted (Turns 5 and 7).

Excerpt 3: Helen’s mother was asking her about storybook reading.

- 1 M: 你要不要读故事？
[Would you like to read stories?]
- 2 C: 哪一个？
[Which story?]
- 3 M: 你喜欢读哪个？
[Which one would you like to read?]
- 4 C: (Points to a page in a storybook)
- 5 M: 读这一个啊？
[This one?]
- 6 C: 噢， 我喜欢嘛。
[Yes, I like it.]
- 7 M: 可以啊。 (Starts to read the book)
[Ok.]

Excerpt 4: Leo’s mother was asking which book he would like to read.

- 1 M: Which one would you like? “Star Wars”?
- 2 C: Umm, no.
- 3 M: You choose lah
- 4 C: (Chooses “Transformers”)
- 5 M: Oh, you want “Transformers”? You like “Transformers,” right?
- 6 C: Yeah.
- 7 M: Ok~ (Starts to read the book)

A second cross-case difference was that the teacher mothers paid close attention to the semantic accuracy and formal well-formedness of their children’s language. They used the

interaction strategy of *correcting mistakes* much more often than the non-teacher mothers in activities other than helping with homework: 14.5% and 16.8% vs. 7.2% and 7.1%. They were constantly on the alert for and corrected language mistakes made by the children even in interactions unrelated to homework supervision, where the focus was on correct language. They were satisfied only after the children reproduced the correct forms. This emphasis on accuracy and well formedness is clearly manifested in Turn 3 of Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5: Fiona was outlining a picture she had drawn, and her mother wanted her to stop.

- 1 M: You've finished? What else do you want to do?
- 2 C: I have not to finish the outline.
- 3 M: Don't say I have not to finish the outline. Can you speak in a proper way? I have not finished my outline.
- 4 C: I have not finished my outline.
- 5 M: Ok, I want you to come here and wash your hands. Enough already.

By contrast, Helen's mother rarely corrected her in non-homework activities. As Excerpt 6 illustrates, the mother's focus was not the formal accuracy but the content of Helen's utterances. She ignored grammatical mistakes in Turns 1 and 3.

Excerpt 6: Helen was retelling a cartoon titled 'Dora' to her mother and the maid.

- 1 C: Dora and, and friends want find way home. They meet Mary have a little lamb.
- 2 M: What happened next?
- 3 C: Little lamb come home.

The teacher mothers' emphasis on formal accuracy was also manifested in their attention to the handwriting of their children. When supervising homework (English spelling or Chinese dictation assigned by kindergarten or tuition classes), they often asked their children to write neatly and erase or correct poorly written words. While *attending to children's handwriting* accounted for 15.3% and 9.3%, respectively, of their use of regulation strategies, the non-teacher mothers either did not use this strategy or used it at a much lower frequency.

Another notable cross-case difference concerns the interaction strategies that the teacher mothers used to maintain their children's on-task behavior. For the teacher mothers, literacy-related interactions in the family were serious endeavors. Therefore, concentration on the task

was very important, and they reminded their children to be attentive. As Table 3 shows, the strategy of *regulating attention* accounted for 5.3% and 9.3% of the regulation strategies used by Fiona's and Steve's mother respectively. They usually regulated their children's attention by telling them that their attention had wandered (Turn 3 in Excerpt 7), as most teachers would do to a large class of students. Additionally, they used the low-distancing strategy of *eliciting repetition* partly to keep their children on task. By contrast, the non-teacher mothers used both strategies much less frequently (see Tables 2 and 3).

Excerpt 7: Fiona's mother was reading a book to Fiona and her brother.

1. M: "Luckily Crow could see more clearly than Poldy. Far below he could see a long line of camels"
2. C: (Attention is diverted when seeing her younger brother sitting on her favorite mat)
3. M: Fiona, are you concentrating? You are not concentrating today. Sit properly. Sit up straight.
4. C: (Complies by sitting properly)
5. M: "He could see a long line of camels making their way slowly across the sands."

Finally, our analyses also revealed a difference in the content of and motivations behind the interaction activities that the teacher and non-teacher mothers engaged their children in. The literacy-related interaction activities in the teachers' families usually centered on certain "core skills" (e.g., learning beautiful/useful phrases from storybooks, reinforcing learning at kindergarten through extra workbooks, and practicing abacus and mental arithmetic skills). Thus, literacy-related interactions in the teacher families were strongly purposive, aiming at knowledge and skill learning (see Turns 1, 3, and 5 of Excerpt 8). These activities were usually initiated by the mothers and were completed by the children as assignments.

Excerpt 8: Fiona's mother was teaching her vocabulary from a storybook they read.

- 1 M: Ok, after reading this story, what is something that you've learned from it?
- 2 C: Umm
- 3 M: Are there any nice phrases that you learned and you think are quite nice?
- 4 C: Umm, "rest in the pool"
- 5 M: "Rest in the pool"? Is it a nice phrase? ... Ok, there are some nice phrases here that I'd like to highlight to you. Can you see these highlighted words? "Dry golden sand shimmered in the desert." If you write in your composition, you write in this way. Don't say that there is sand in the desert. There is dry golden sand in the desert that

shimmered in the desert. Wow, really nice!

For the non-teacher mothers, literacy events were usually for fun and involved much less school-like interaction. These literacy events included game playing with cell phones, playing computer games or board games, watching cartoons on TV, and doing arts and crafts. They were often accompanied by impromptu interactions initiated by the children, and the mothers made no attempt to give formal teaching. As Excerpt 9 illustrates, Helen's mother, unlike the two teacher mothers, did not highlight any linguistic features for Helen to learn and use after reading a story with her but just moved on to the next story (see Turn 1). Furthermore, when Helen did not want to read the story (Turns 2, 4, and 6), she did not force her to continue but simply wound it up (Turn 7).

Excerpt 9: Helen and her mother were reading stories.

- 1 M: “Curly squeals and squeals... And Curly is never ever hungry again.” (Finishes the first story and starts to read the title of the second one) “Naughty Sheep”
- 2 C: 我不要讲“Naughty Sheep,”这么难读。
[I don't want to read “Naughty Sheep.” It's very hard to read.]
- 3 M: 都是一样的, 看, “This is apple tree farm.”
[Not really harder. Look, “This is apple tree farm.”]
- 4 C: “Naughty Sheep” 不~要~读~
[Do~ not~ read~ “Naughty Sheep.”]
- 5 M: Which one do you want?
- 6 C: 什么都不要读。
[None.]
- 7 M: 那讲故事的时间结束, 你不要读了嘛。
[Story time is over since you don't want to read any more.]

Interaction differences between local and immigrant mothers

A comparison of the interaction strategies used by the local and immigrant mothers revealed one salient difference. The two immigrant mothers tended to solicit more active participation from their children in literacy-related interactions by showing a markedly greater willingness to accept the children's initiatives and follow their suggestions. This tendency was most clearly reflected in the higher relative frequency with which they used the regulation strategy of *accepting child's response*: 20.6% and 31.3% vs. 15.3% and 17.9%.

The following excerpts of representative mother-child interactions demonstrate the difference clearly. In Excerpt 10, Leo's mother insisted on his following her directions (Turn 3), though he wanted to try another way (Turn 2). By contrast, Excerpt 11 shows that in a similar activity, Helen's mother was much more receptive to Helen's initiatives (Turns 5 and 7), even when they conflicted with her own ideas.

Excerpt 10: Leo's mother was playing a board game with him.

- 1 M: Oh, something extra. So color something extra.... From here to here, what did he add?
- 2 C: (Ignores her instructions and starts from the opposite direction)
- 3 M: No, no, you start from the black first. So black is?
- 4 C: This?
- 5 M: Yeah.

Excerpt 11: Helen was drawing a picture with her mother.

- 1 M: Why your sun is yellow?
- 2 C: Because it is~ yellow.
- 3 M: No, the sun is red. We draw red sun in all pictures.
- 4 C: But what I see is yellow.
- 5 M: All right. And the cloud, it should be white. You have sun here.
- 6 C: Yesterday the cloud was black and there's sun. It was going to rain.
- 7 M: Umm, you are right.

Within-Case Variations in Interaction Strategies

Our data analyses also revealed within-case variations in the use of maternal interaction strategies. These variations were closely related to such factors as the type of literacy event engaged in, the language (i.e., English or Chinese) of the oral/written text in question, and the relative competence of the mothers and their children in the languages used for interaction.

Variations in strategy use associated with the language factors were especially salient in the interaction data of the immigrant mothers, who had markedly lower proficiency in English (i.e., their second language) than in Chinese (i.e., their mother tongue). Take Helen's mother for example. Interviews with her revealed that she felt confident and at ease with Chinese storybooks but less competent with English ones. Her weaker competence in English restricted her use of those interaction strategies that required good facility with the language.

A closer examination of her interaction data revealed that she used several high-distancing strategies more frequently in her interactions with Helen that centered on Chinese storybooks. For instance, the high-distancing strategy of *eliciting causal inference* was used 8 times in Chinese storybook reading but only once in English storybook reading. By contrast, the low-distancing strategy of *eliciting pointing response* was found only in interactions based on English storybooks. Language competence also shaped Helen's storybook reading activities. As she was less proficient in English, she was usually less motivated to read English storybooks and preferred Chinese ones. This led to fewer opportunities for her to interact about English texts and to carry out such interactions in English. Excerpt 12 records one of those occasions where she explicitly expressed her lack of interest in an English storybook.

Excerpt 12: Helen's mother was reading an English storybook with her.

- 1 C: 不要讲了
[Don't read any more]
- 2 M: 跟前面的都一样。很简单, /都是/
[It's like the previous one. It's simple, it's]
- 3 C: /我不/~要~讲~了~。我要讲这个(flips the Chinese book to find the story she wants)
[I don't~ want~ to~ read~ it~. I want to read this.]
- 4 M: 你要讲中文的?
[You want to read Chinese stories?]
- 5 C: 哦, 我要讲, 我要找小猪的。
[Yes, I do. I want Chinese stories about pigs.]

There was also evidence that the type of literacy event a mother-child dyad engaged in was another source of influence on the maternal use of interaction strategies. As shown in Table 4, for example, Fiona's mother adopted such high-distancing strategies as *connecting with personal experience* and *extending* more frequently during joint reading than in art and craft activities. The latter, however, saw a higher incidence of the low-distancing strategies of *using directives* and *demonstrating*. Notably, two strategies encouraging child participation – *eliciting alternatives* and *accepting child's response* – occurred much more frequently in art and craft activities, which, in the words of Fiona's mother, were not “essential things.”

Table 4 Strategy Use by Fiona's Mother in Different Types of Activity

Strategy	Art and craft	Storybook reading
Connecting with personal experience	1	6
Extending	0	7
Eliciting alternatives	12	4
Using directives	45	6
Demonstrating	10	4
Accepting child's response	20	0

Such contextual variations in strategy use were also evident in the interactions between Steve and his mother. For example, Steve's mother used cognitive state verbs frequently when guiding Steve in abacus and mental arithmetic exercise but rarely used them in other kinds of interactions. This markedly greater incidence of cognitive state verbs had to do with her perception that thinking in imagery – that is, “to create an abacus in the mind” – was key to success in abacus and mental arithmetic. A comparison of the strategies used by Steve's mother in supervising his abacus and mental arithmetic activities with those used in other activities also suggested that strategy use varied as a function of maternal facility with the tasks in question. For example, Steve's mother acknowledged her lack of facility with abacus and mental arithmetic:

Kids learn mental abacus faster, and I'm old and can't calculate as fast as my son does. Especially when I must calculate in their way of thinking in imagery, not the way we do calculations, with the multiplication table. It's not easy for me.

As a result, she was more receptive to Steve's initiatives, suggestions, and disagreements, compared with her other interactions.

The mothers also adapted their interaction strategies to their children's language proficiency and age. This tendency was particularly clear in the interaction data collected from Fiona and her mother, which involved Fiona's younger brother on several occasions. A comparison of the mother's interactions with Fiona and her 3-year-old brother showed that the mother varied her speech and requirements to suit her addressees. Excerpt 13 gives clear

evidence of such interactional variations. The mother was doing sponge painting with her two children. She gave more freedom to the more competent elder daughter and asked her to work on her own (Turn 2). In contrast, she used a succession of “wh” questions (Turn 2) and directives (Turn 4) to guide the younger son in completing his painting. She also patiently explained why he needed more guidance and help from her than his sister did (Turn 4).

Excerpt 13: Fiona and her younger brother, Kevin, were doing sponge painting their mother.

- 1 C1: Mummy, I'm done.
- 2 M: You are done? You just do it on your own. Fiona, you should be independent. What color do you want, Kevin? ... Would you want to put your blue? Where would you want to put your blue? Here?
- 3 C2: XXX
- 4 M: No, no, no, only the trees first. Later on we'll do the rest. Kevin, can I hold your hand because I need to guide you? Because you are three years old so you need help. Ok, when you are older like your sister, five years old, you will do it all~ by yourself~. Then you don't need my help, right? Now you are learning how to do it... Blue here? Ok

Discussion

In this study, we have examined mother-child interaction patterns in four middle-class Chinese families in Singapore and explored the factors influencing maternal use of interaction strategies. With regard to our first research question, a wide range of interaction strategies was identified in all four families. With regard to our second research question, we identified several social, cultural and contextual factors that were implicated in cross-case differences as well as within-case variations in the use of maternal interaction strategies.

The wide range of literacy-related interactions commonly observed in all four families revealed a strong emphasis on exposure to literacy and the concomitant prominence of literacy events in these Chinese families. This emphasis could be attributed partly to the influences of the societal values and cultural practices that dominate in China and Singapore. Both societies valorize education and literacy (Huang & Prochner, 2004; Koh, 2010; Li, 2002, 2006). As literacy learning is a key component of education and because education has been widely perceived as a chief means of achieving upward mobility and self-improvement

in China and Singapore (Cheah, 1998; Cheng & Wong, 1996; Hu, 2002), parents in these societies typically strive to provide an home environment conducive to their children's literacy learning and actively prepare their children for school (Koh, 2010; Zhang, Ollila, & Harvey, 1998). Our interview data provided some clear evidence in this regard. The interviews revealed that for all participating families education was very important, and the parents held very high educational expectations for their children. For example, all mothers expected their children to have a university education "at the minimum." Inspired by the success of her elder daughter, Steve's mother even expected him to obtain a PhD. She proudly observed that "We Chinese families attach more importance to education." Clearly, our finding about the prominence of literacy-related activities in the focal families is resonant with the sociocultural-historical perspective on literacy (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff et al., 2001). This perspective recognizes literacy as a "cultural artifact" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.58) and home literacy practices as sociocultural practices shaped by the literacy tradition and cultural values that parents hold dear (Ferdman, 1991; Li, 2002).

As reported earlier, high-distancing strategies accounted for 33.8% - 43.2% of all observed distancing strategies in the four mothers' interactions with their children. The frequent use of high-distancing strategies by the middle-class mothers is consistent with findings of previous studies (Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Torr, 2004) that middle-class parents tend to move in their talk from here-and-now to the more abstract and the more distant, which typically involves the use of high-distancing interaction strategies. Such interaction strategies have been found to enhance children's cognitive development (Sigel, 1982; Wang et al., 2005), reading achievement (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1991; Snow et al., 1998), and readiness for school literacy practices because of their congruence with such practices (Koh, 2010). Thus, the interaction strategies used by the mothers in our study were likely to stand

their children in good stead when schooling started for them.

Our study has not only provided new empirical evidence of the Psychological Distancing Model's usefulness in studying parental interaction strategies but also contributed to the theory by exploring factors influencing parental choice of distancing strategies. Contrary to Laosa's (1978) finding that maternal teaching strategies in Chicano families did not vary as a function of parental occupation status, maternal occupation is one of the factors we have found impacting on maternal use of distancing and regulation strategies. The strategies used by the two teacher mothers bore clear marks of professional work in the primary school language classroom. The identified influence of maternal occupation on literacy-related interactions is consistent with findings from previous studies (Hart & Risley, 1992; Ninio, 1980; Sigel, 1982; Sirin, 2005) that socio-economic status or constellations of family demographics impacted children's literacy development through the mediation of parental interaction strategies. The observed effect of maternal occupation on the use of interaction strategies at home can be readily explained in terms of Bourdieu's (1977) notion of *habitus*. Habitus refers to "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations" (p.72). In other words, one's habitus consists of deep-seated dispositions that have been shaped by one's environment, history, experiences and socialization, and that predispose one to act in a particular way (Bourdieu, 1990). Thus, the two teacher mothers' habitus, shaped by their history and experience as teachers, was transposed from their professional life to their parenting, predisposing them to interact with their children in a teacherly manner and dominate the interactions as they did with their students in the classroom. It would be interesting to examine, in future research, how other professions may exert an influence on the way mothers interact with their children.

Another factor we have found influencing interaction strategies at home is parents'

cultural background. Specifically, the two immigrant mothers were observed to be more supportive of their children's active participation in interaction activities, whereas the local mothers tended to dominate decision-making in such activities. Our interviews with the mothers revealed that this difference was closely related to the parents' past experiences and educational beliefs developed in the specific sociocultural contexts of Singapore and China, respectively. As suggested above, such experiences and beliefs were constitutive of the parents' habitus (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). Singapore is a highly competitive society characterized by meritocracy and a widely spread social attitude of kiasuism (literarily "fear of losing out") (see Koh, 2010; See, 2005). Having grown up under the influence of this social attitude, Fiona's mother admitted that "there's a fear you may lose out." This social attitude led her to see a critical need for her daughter to continue studying after school. Although she knew that her daughter did not like it, she insisted that "You can't let the child decide... she's too young to make decisions. We parents must decide for her.... She must learn even if she has no interest. Otherwise she will fall behind others in primary school....I guess I'm kind of kiasu. I wanted her to achieve higher than I did." Leo's mother also believed that the child should "not have the final call" when it came to literacy learning. The immigrant mothers, on the other hand, were under less pressure to compete against others. For both families, academic excellence, though important, was not the only goal for their children at the preschool stage. Inspired by the success of her parenting experience with the elder daughter and influenced by such educational theories as multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) that were very popular in China before she came to Singapore, Steve's mother emphasized the importance of exposing Steve to various extra-curricular activities so as to cultivate a wide range of interests and develop multiple intelligences in him. She also stressed the need to respect his interests: "If he loses interest in the enrichment classes and is unwilling to go, we'll just withdraw him." Similarly, with strong confidence gained from

their own learning experiences, Helen's parents did not believe in teaching in advance what the child should learn at school: "We had a care-free childhood in China without the burden of enrichment classes, and yet we were able to achieve at school." Helen's mother told us that she did not want to give her child any pressure at this stage. Thus, she was the most relaxed in her interaction strategies. These findings resonate with the Bourdieusian notion of habitus and provide new empirical support for Rogoff's (2003) developmental theory that emphasizes literacy as a cultural practice situated in a particular socio-historical context. They indicate that the "cultural repertoires" of Chinese Singaporean families and immigrant families from China differ in distinct ways.

Finally, our examination of interaction patterns across different literacy events has revealed significant within-case variations in maternal interaction strategies. Those variations were closely related, but not restricted, to two broad groups of factors: those concerning the language in which mother-child interactions were conducted (e.g., the mothers' and their children's proficiency in the medium of interaction) and those associated with the type of literacy event engaged in (e.g., the mothers' and their children's competence in a particular literacy event). Broadly speaking, the mothers varied their interaction strategies according to their children's proficiency in the medium of interaction and competence in the specific literacy event in question. These results corroborate the findings of many previous studies that parent-child interaction patterns are task-dependent and that middle-class mothers are adept at tuning up their strategies to their children's needs (see Curenton et al., 2008; Ninio, 1980; Pellegrini et al., 1990; Purcell-Gates, 1996). From a Vygotskian perspective, the systematic maternal adjustments to interaction strategies evident in this study had an important role to play in the children's cognitive, language, and literacy development. That is, it provided the crucial scaffolding capable of guiding the children through successive zones of proximal development and facilitating their internalization and appropriation of

socioculturally valued language and literacy practices (Vygotsky, 1978).

Conclusion

This study has revealed important similarities in the maternal use of interaction strategies across the different families as well as significant cross- and within-case differences in interaction patterns. These similarities and differences have been attributed to an array of social, cultural, and contextual factors which impinges on the day-to-day conduct of literacy practices at home. The complexity of socioculturally situated family literacy practices unveiled in this study points to a number of implications. First, given inter-family differences in home literacy practices and interaction strategies, teachers need to have a good understanding of the complex relationships between various sociocultural factors and literacy learning at home to provide effective literacy instruction to immigrant children as well as local children from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Such an understanding is a prerequisite for teachers to draw on children's home literacy practices as resources, provide literacy activities and interaction opportunities that complement those found at home, and foster home-school continuity in children's literacy development. Second, a situated knowledge of different home literacy practices and parental interaction strategies is indispensable if schools are to develop effective family literacy programs for parents. This kind of knowledge can help school-organized family literacy programs cater to parents' specific needs to support literacy learning at home, equip them with facilitative literacy practices and interaction strategies, and build school partnerships with families in creating supportive home literacy environments. Finally, in view of the fact that families differ in their educational beliefs, interaction strategies, and literacy practices, there is a clear need for further research on home literacy practices to be conducted in a wide range of sociocultural contexts and involve families from different social strata. Such research is crucial to building up an adequate knowledge base that can support the development of effective home and

school literacy programs to enhance children's literacy acquisition and their opportunity to succeed in and beyond school.

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Appendix: Transcription Notations

.	falling intonation followed by noticeable pause
,	continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
!	animated tone
~	lengthened syllable
CAPS	emphatic stress
//	overlapping speech
xxx	indecipherable speech
()	verbal description of the speaker's acts
[]	English translation of Chinese utterances
‘ ’	original texts from the book
...	short pause