

Parental Attitudes and Chinese Language Maintenance in Singapore

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Abstract—In a multilingual society like Singapore, where English is the dominant medium of instruction, the maintenance of Chinese Language (CL) often depends on family-level support. This study investigates parental attitudes toward their children’s CL learning in Singapore, with a focus on two groups: immigrant parents who primarily use Chinese at home, and local Chinese Singaporean parents who predominantly use English. Drawing on the exploratory survey data from both groups, the study examines patterns in parental attitudes toward children’s CL learning, satisfaction with children’s CL proficiency, reported investment in children’s learning of CL, and their opinions on the bilingual environment in the community. Findings showed that the two groups differ in their attitudes to children’s CL learning, their satisfaction with their children’s CL proficiency, and in their levels of both behavioral and emotional support of children’s CL learning, despite their similar views on the bilingual environment in the community. These findings are interpreted through the framework of language ideology and investment, which highlights how belief systems and self-perceptions affect parental behavior. The study contributes to the understanding of language maintenance at the family level in bilingual contexts and underscores the need for educational approaches that empower all parents, regardless of their proficiency, to support language maintenance.

Keywords—Chinese language maintenance, parental attitudes, language ideology, language investment, Bilingualism in Singapore

I. INTRODUCTION

In Singapore’s bilingual education system, English serves as the dominant medium of instruction, while the Chinese Language (CL) is taught as a second language (L2) to students of Chinese ethnicity. Although schools provide formal instruction in Chinese, the sustained use and development of the language, particularly in reading and everyday communication, depend heavily on support beyond the classroom. Among these external influences, parents play a crucial role in shaping CL maintenance. Their beliefs about the value of Chinese, their practices at home, and their expectations and support of their children’s CL learning significantly influence whether Chinese remains an active language in the family domain or becomes limited to academic use.

This study draws on the concepts of language ideology and investment as an interpretive framework to explain patterns in parental responses related to Chinese language maintenance. It focuses on two groups: local Singaporean Chinese parents who predominantly use English at home and immigrant Chinese parents who use Chinese at home.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Language Ideology

Language ideology involves beliefs, values, and assumptions that individuals and communities hold regarding languages and their social functions [1]. In Spolsky’s model of Family Language Policy (FLP), language ideology is defined as beliefs and attitudes about languages. It informs actual language practices and management strategies in the home. Language ideologies influence language practices by shaping perceptions of linguistic legitimacy, prestige, and appropriateness across different social and cultural contexts [1]. These ideologies determine which languages are promoted, maintained, or marginalized within families and communities. In bilingual households, parental language ideologies guide everyday decisions about which languages are spoken to and by children, how languages are prioritized, and the extent to which parents actively support heritage language development. For example, parents who view the majority language as more socially prestigious may reduce the input in the heritage language, even if they value bilingualism [2]. Conversely, parents with strong heritage language ideologies may deliberately create opportunities for its use and transmission, despite societal pressures.

Research on immigrant families demonstrates how these ideological orientations can directly shape language maintenance outcomes. Research on Chinese immigrant families in Quebec found that while all parents expressed a desire to maintain Chinese, only those who held strong ideological commitments to cultural continuity actively implemented structured language practices, such as enrolling children in heritage language schools and maintaining a Chinese-only home environment [3]. Distinct patterns were identified in how parents’ language ideologies shaped their family language policies in their study of bilingual parenting in the U.S. [4]. Some parents, influenced by ideologies of bilingualism as cognitive or social capital, actively sought out resources and community support to foster dual language development. Others, despite having positive attitudes toward bilingualism, lacked consistent practices due to uncertainty or conflicting beliefs about the role of English in academic success. These studies underscore that language maintenance is not simply a matter of exposure or proficiency, but is deeply rooted in the values, assumptions, and goals parents hold about language and identity.

Parental language ideologies are also fluid and multi-layered, particularly in multilingual contexts where parents navigate competing linguistic and cultural expectations. In a study interviewing Chinese transnational families in

multilingual Luxembourg, scholars found that parental language ideologies are not static, but are shaped and reshaped through interactions across home, school, and society [5]. These ideologies influence the extent to which parents feel responsible or capable of supporting their children's language development. This brings us to the concept of language investment, which describes how such beliefs turn into actual commitments, efforts, and practices in language support.

B. Language Investment

While parents may ideologically support language maintenance, their actual engagement in language-related practices can vary across contexts. Norton's concept of language investment [6] argues that individuals invest in language learning not only because of personal motivation, but because they expect it to provide access to symbolic and material resources. In the case of parents, their decision to actively support their children's learning of a language, through input, providing materials, encouragement, or supervision, may depend not only on ideological alignment, but also on whether they perceive such efforts as worthwhile or viable, given their social, emotional, and economic circumstances.

Besides, this investment is also influenced by their self-perceived language proficiency and confidence. As the most direct investment is the frequent input of the language, for parents who perceive their heritage language abilities as limited, they may experience linguistic insecurity, thereby reducing their investment despite positive attitudes towards heritage language [7]. Thus, language investment is a dynamic construct reflecting both ideological commitment and practical capacity, highlighting the complex interplay between belief and agency in language maintenance practices.

1) Parental satisfaction and language investment

In bilingual families, parental satisfaction with their children's language proficiency often signals that their investment in that language is, from their perspective, yielding positive returns. Parents may interpret growing proficiency as evidence that their efforts are leading to meaningful progress in the child's language development. Conversely, dissatisfaction may reflect frustration or doubt in the effectiveness and adequacy of their support. In this way, parental satisfaction functions not only as an evaluation of linguistic outcomes but also as a reflection of how parents perceive the value, success, and return on their language investment.

2) Parental encouragement, supervision, and investment in language materials

Beyond using the language themselves at home, parents often engage in direct investments to support their children's language development. These include offering verbal encouragement, which fosters positive attitudes toward language learning and enhances children's motivation [8]. Parents also supervise language-related activities, such as reading or homework, which has been shown to positively impact children's language abilities [9]. Additionally, parents may provide material resources, like bilingual books or tutoring services, to enrich their child's language exposure and learning opportunities [10]. These forms of investment

align with Norton's framework [6], wherein parents' emotional, cognitive, and financial contributions reflect their commitment to their children's linguistic development, thereby influencing the children's language learning experiences.

In families where parents are not native speakers of the heritage language, they lack confidence in using the language themselves. However, their support through encouragement, supervision, and learning materials also reflects their underlying language ideologies. Such actions indicate that they perceive the heritage language as valuable and are thus willing to invest effort and resources to ensure their children acquire it. This distinction between everyday language use and educational support illustrates how language ideologies are enacted unevenly across domains and influenced by parents' linguistic repertoires.

C. The Current Study

In the current study, language ideology refers to the beliefs and assumptions that parents hold about the function, status, and usefulness of CL in their children's lives. We examine two types of language ideologies, given the observed home language practices of our participants in two groups. Both heritage language ideology and pragmatic language ideology were discussed among the Singapore Chinese parents in previous studies (e.g., [11]). We expect these ideologies will be found in our participants. Language investment considers how these beliefs translate into actions. In the current study, we examine parents' actions such as encouraging CL use at home, purchasing CL reading materials, and providing emotional support and supervising CL learning.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Data Source and Participants

Data in the current study were generated from a research project investigating Singaporean Chinese children's home language environment. Children aged five to eight years, who attend CL lessons in preschools and public primary schools in Singapore, and their parents, are the target population of the project. Over 900 participants are recruited from primary schools and preschool centers island-widely in Singapore, representing the typical Chinese-English bilingual families with school-aged children (5-year-olds to 8-year-olds). Participating parents completed a comprehensive questionnaire on home language environments and their attitudes to their children's CL learning. Parents' demographic information, such as age, was not inquired about in the questionnaire.

When asking parents about their use of language at home when conversing with their children, most of the parents reported bilingual use at home. However, we noticed two groups of parents who reported using mainly or only CL or EL at home. Data from these two groups were then drawn from the survey responses. Group I (N = 86, Children gender F = 40, M = 46; numbers in each age group from 5- to 8-year-olds are 11, 11, 33, 31, respectively) comprised families where both parents use mainly or only CL at home. Further household information shows that these parents are mostly first-generation immigrants from CL-speaking places. Children from this group of families comprised 40 girls and

46 boys. Group L (N = 79, Children gender F = 27, M = 52; numbers in each age group from 5- to 8-year-olds are 7, 10, 29, 32, respectively) comprised families where both parents use mainly or only EL at home. These parents are local Singaporean Chinese. Both parents in these families are of Chinese ethnicity. Non-Chinese ethnicity families and multi-race families are excluded from the analysis.

Two groups shared Similar Socioeconomic Status (SES), measured by housing status and parents' education levels.

B. Instrument

Taking language ideology and investment as analytical lenses, we organize the survey items from the original data into the following categories:

- Heritage Language Ideology (two items). Items in this category measure how parents value CL as a core part of identity, tradition, and cultural continuity.
- Pragmatic Language Ideology (four items). Items in this category measure how parents value the learning of CL with practical benefits, such as career prospects, academic success, or social mobility.
- Satisfaction of children's CL proficiency (three items). Items in this category measure how satisfied parents are with their children's CL proficiency.
- Encouragement of children's CL learning (three items). Items in this category measure how parents support the children's learning of CL in different forms, ranging from emotional support, enrolling children in enrichment classes, or motivating regular practice.
- Supervision of children's CL learning (two items). Items in this category measure parents support of children's CL learning in a more general form. For example, by planning and supervising children's learning in general.
- Investment in reading materials (two items). Items in this category measure the number of children's books in English and Chinese at home.
- Parents' attitudes toward code-mixing (one item). This

item measures parents' acceptance of code-mixing in daily conversations as Singaporeans. Parents are also asked to provide their reasons for their choices. The items were designed in a 6-point Likert style that required the parent to choose one answer that best fit their opinion of the statement. The answers were recorded into one to six points for calculation. The higher the point, the more agreeable to the statement. The items asking about the number of children's books at home were also designed in six points, ranging from "1 = less than 10 books" to "6 = more than 50 books".

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive statistics of each survey item were examined for the two groups of participants, as the survey items are designed in an exploratory manner. Group comparison was examined by item instead of by category, because group differences were found in several items that were categorized together. Effect size, i.e. Cohen's *d*, was calculated in the analysis to illustrate the difference between the two groups.

Table 1. shows the means and the standard deviations of the items in each group, followed by the effect sizes of group comparison. The results showed that on average, parents are agreeable to both the Heritage Language Ideology and the Pragmatic Language Ideology. They are somehow satisfied with their children's CL proficiency, especially the immigrant parents. They supervise their children's CL learning and encourage their children to learn in different forms. They invest in reading materials for their children and accept the code-mixing of EL and CL in everyday lives. The lowest mean score was found in the number of CL books of children at home in local Singaporean families (N = 79, M = 1.97, SD = 1.31). The highest mean score was found in parents' beliefs about learning CL to communicate with others among the immigrant parents (N = 86, M = 5.6, SD = 0.82).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the survey items.

| Items | Group L(N=79) | | Group I (N=86) | | <i>d</i> |
|---|---------------|------|----------------|------|-------------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | |
| Heritage Language Ideology: Learning Chinese | | | | | |
| [helps my child to better understand the ways of life as a Chinese.] | 4.67 | 1.34 | 5.47 | 0.88 | 0.71 |
| [is important for my child as it helps him learn about Chinese culture and values.] | 4.26 | 1.31 | 5.42 | 0.89 | 1.04 |
| Pragmatic Language Ideology: It is important for my child to learn Chinese | | | | | |
| [so that he can communicate with other Mandarin speakers in the future.] | 5.33 | 0.67 | 5.60 | 0.82 | 0.36 |
| [for more opportunities to further his studies.] | 4.76 | 1.33 | 5.40 | 0.87 | 0.57 |
| [for better job prospects in future.] | 4.35 | 1.38 | 4.91 | 1.16 | 0.44 |
| [for higher achievement in the society.] | 4.03 | 1.41 | 4.84 | 1.18 | 0.62 |
| Satisfaction: [I am satisfied with] | | | | | |
| [the Mandarin proficiency of my child.] | 3.09 | 1.36 | 4.81 | 1.15 | 1.37 |
| the Chinese writing proficiencies of my child.] | 3.04 | 1.34 | 4.40 | 1.26 | 1.04 |
| [the Chinese reading proficiencies of my child.] | 2.92 | 1.38 | 4.45 | 1.32 | 1.13 |
| Supervision | | | | | |
| [I supervise the progress of my child's learning of Chinese.] | 3.82 | 1.36 | 4.62 | 1.19 | 0.62 |
| [I help my child to set practical goals in learning Chinese language.] | 3.44 | 1.32 | 4.12 | 1.36 | 0.51 |
| Encouragement: I encourage my child to | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|-------------|
| [take every opportunity to use Chinese language.] | 3.60 | 1.25 | 5.03 | 1.23 | 1.15 |
| [learn Chinese in our everyday life.] | 3.76 | 1.31 | 5.14 | 1.08 | 1.15 |
| [attend Chinese enrichment lessons.] | 4.15 | 1.35 | 4.13 | 1.59 | 0.02 |
| Book investment: Number of books for children at home | | | | | |
| EL books | 3.51 | 1.80 | 3.76 | 1.95 | 0.14 |
| CL books | 1.97 | 1.31 | 3.66 | 1.98 | 1.00 |
| Attitude to code-mixing | | | | | |
| [It is natural to mix English and Chinese in a conversation for Chinese Singaporeans.] | 4.34 | 1.39 | 4.48 | 1.26 | 0.10 |

Group differences can be observed in all categories, except for parents' attitudes to code-mixing. We use small ($0.2 < d < 0.5$), medium ($0.5 < d < 0.8$), and large ($d > 0.8$) effect sizes to describe the differences between the two groups on each item [12].

1) Heritage language ideology

Medium-to-large differences were found in the items of Heritage Language Ideology ($d=0.71, 1.04$). Immigrant parents value CL as a cultural and heritage identity more than the EL-speaking local Singaporean parents.

2) Pragmatic language ideology

Small-to-medium differences were found in the items of Pragmatic Language Ideology ($d=0.36, 0.44, 0.57, 0.62$). Immigrant parents also place higher importance on CL for academic success, career achievement, and social mobility than do the EL-speaking local Singaporean parents.

3) Satisfaction with children's CL proficiency

Large differences were found in parents' satisfaction with their children's CL proficiencies in terms of conversation, reading, and writing ($d=1.37, 1.13, 1.04$). As compared to immigrant parents, EL-speaking Singaporean parents were somewhat disappointed with their children's CL proficiencies, especially in CL reading ($M=2.92, SD=1.38$). The largest difference was found in parents' satisfaction of conversation skills in Mandarin. Interestingly, although parents in Group L reported speaking mostly or only English at home, many expressed strong disappointment in their children's CL proficiency. This sense of disappointment may stem from feelings of helplessness in supporting CL learning at home, combined with high expectations that may not align with their children's actual progress.

4) Supervision of children's CL learning

Medium differences were found in the supervision of CL learning ($d=0.51, 0.62$), with immigrant parents reporting a higher rate of supervision. As compared to immigrant parents, although unsatisfied with their children's CL proficiency, local parents still put less effort into supervising their children's CL learning.

5) Encouragement of children's CL learning

Large differences were found in the two items measuring encouragement of CL learning in everyday life ($d=1.15, 1.15$). Immigrant parents encourage their children to utilize everyday opportunities to learn and practice CL, while EL-speaking parents showed less passion for this method. EL-speaking parents were more encouraging of enrichment classes than of using CL in everyday life, while immigrant parents showed the opposite pattern. As a result, their ratings of encouraging children to CL enrichment classes showed no difference ($d=0.02$).

6) Investment in reading materials

We found a large difference in parents' investment in CL books for their children ($d=1.00$) but not in EL books ($d=0.14$). The lack of access to appropriate CL reading materials may have contributed to children's weaker performance in CL reading, which may, in turn, lead to Group L parents' dissatisfaction.

7) Attitudes to code-mixing

Parents in both groups held a similar acceptance of code-mixing in their everyday lives.

B. Discussion

In general, parents in both groups gave slightly higher ratings to items related to language ideologies than to those related to behaviors, i.e., supervision, encouragement, and book investment, suggesting that while they generally value the learning of CL, this may be reflected somewhat less consistently in everyday practice. This mild belief-practice gap, where parents rated language ideologies more strongly than language-related behaviors, echoes findings from previous research in language maintenance in bilingual or multilingual environments. Practical constraints often hinder the realization of parents' language beliefs in everyday practice. For instance, parents often struggle to provide heritage language support due to time limitations, work schedules, or lack of access to appropriate language resources [13]. Another reason is self-perceived confidence in using the language. Though parents were ideologically committed to passing on the heritage language, their lack of confidence in their own language skills hindered their actions of supporting their children to learn and practice that language in everyday life [3]. These constraints highlight that language maintenance is not merely a matter of belief but of navigating complex and often competing demands in daily family life. The present study reinforces these findings. Especially for EL-speaking parents, while they value their children's CL learning, they may be less confident in engaging and guiding their children's CL learning in their daily lives.

The patterns emerging from the group comparisons reveal both divergence and convergence in how different parent groups approach CL maintenance. Immigrant and local Singaporean Chinese parents expressed different levels of satisfaction with their children's CL proficiency and held differing attitudes toward active language use, yet both groups shared similar views on the acceptability of code-mixing and on decisions about CL enrichment classes. These findings not only reflected a simple investment-return relation but also pointed to the underlying reasons for the belief-practice gap that, other than ideology, practical constraints such as time and language proficiency influence

the choices and decisions of language maintenance [14].

Fundamentally, parental language ideologies influence how Chinese is positioned in the home. Immigrant parents hold a stronger heritage language ideology, linking Chinese to cultural continuity and thus valuing higher proficiency and active daily use. They are satisfied with the returns gained from their active supervision and encouragement, and are less passionate about sending their children to CL enrichment classes. This confidence in maintaining CL is also partly reflected in their attitude to code-mixing in their community. They are generally comfortable with and accepting of the mixed English–Mandarin language environment and do not seem to view it as a threat to their children’s CL maintenance.

In contrast, local parents lean toward a Pragmatic language ideology, accepting Chinese as part of the educational curriculum. The aim of maintaining this language is to possess a specialized skill applicable only when communicating with Mandarin speakers, but not necessarily as a language for daily communication. This Pragmatic ideology transferred to the less active investment in all the forms of support, including not only the aspects that involve the self-perceived CL confidence, such as encouragement in daily use of CL, but also learning support in general, such as supervision of learning and providing learning materials. Compared to themselves, they rely more on the enrichment classes in helping their children’s CL learning. And that investment, as our study showed, gained unsatisfactory returns. The low confidence in the CL skills of both parents themselves and their children also shaped the “natural” sense of a mixed use of EL and CL in daily conversations.

C. Limitations

This study has the following limitations.

Firstly, our findings are based on survey data. They do not capture the full complexity of parental motivations, home practices, or identity negotiations. Future research could explore these dynamics through qualitative interviews or longitudinal designs, and extend the inquiry to other heritage language communities in Singapore or similar bilingual contexts.

Secondly, while this study focused exclusively on CL maintenance within bilingual families, it did not examine the role of the dominant societal language (i.e., English), which may significantly shape family language practices. The dominant role of English in the education system, functioning as the main medium of instruction and a key to academic and economic success, may further reinforce parents’ preferences and language choices at home. As the previous study on Singaporean families showed, language ideologies and actual practices are often formed through dynamic negotiations between both the heritage and dominant languages [11]. This interplay can lead to contradictions between stated beliefs and language behaviors. Future research should consider both languages to more fully understand the complexities of family language policy and investment.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored how different parental backgrounds shape attitudes, behaviors, and investments in children’s Chinese language (CL) learning within Singapore’s bilingual environment. By comparing immigrant Chinese families and

local Chinese Singaporean families, the findings reveal important distinctions in parental language ideologies, satisfaction with children’s CL proficiency, and the extent of everyday support in children’s CL learning. Immigrant parents, who hold a stronger heritage language ideology, are more confident in their children’s CL development and more actively involved in home-based language practices. In contrast, local parents who choose to speak mostly or only EL at home demonstrate a more pragmatic ideology while recognizing the value of CL. They showed lower satisfaction with their children’s CL outcomes, yet they offered less direct support, often outsourcing learning to enrichment classes.

These differences also point to a broader belief–practice gap, common in bilingual settings, where ideological support for maintaining a language is not always matched by everyday engagement. Practical constraints, such as self-perceived language inadequacy, further complicate parents’ ability to translate ideology into action. The study reinforces the need for educational strategies that not only promote the value of the language but also provide practical support for families—especially those less confident in their own language skills. Ultimately, language maintenance requires more than valuing the language in principle; it calls for enabling all parents, regardless of background, to participate meaningfully in their children’s language learning at home.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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