

Which Language: A Question Of Either/Or?

by
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Introduction

Mass worldwide immigration has dislocated and relocated people from countries around the world. As immigrant people, these families constitute part of the 'home country' diaspora. Hall (1990: 235) says that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference". As people of the diaspora these families have been geographically torn from their extended families, traditions and homes. They have been scattered across the globe. At the same time they have retained links with their homelands but these connections are confused and ambiguous. They must 'normalise' with the new host country and are thus caught in-between. They have been caught in a time and place where their identities, their sense of self, cannot be fixed or secured. They are caught in a zone in which they must recreate their past, their present, their future identities, as well as their imagined communities (Beardsmore, 1982; Gee, 1990 and Noguchi, 1996). While these feelings may be acute for those forced to flee their own countries, they may also apply to those who have voluntarily chosen to emigrate.

Arnberg (1987), Luke, Luke and Carr (1994), Noguchi (1996), Aidman (1997) and McPake and Powney (1998) contend that cultural composites, shifting and multiple identities, and multilingualism are social realities in twenty-first century life, clearly visible in classrooms and playgrounds today. Bilingual individuals are caught in a sphere of confusion arising from the need or the ability to communicate in either language, be it the mother tongue or the newly acquired language.

Mother tongue maintenance

In their comparative study of French and English societies, Harding and Riley (1986) suggest that most immigrant families who face the issue of mother tongue maintenance are in fact left to their own devices and find themselves faced with a number of problems:

- the management of bilingualism is not cut and dried and little support is available, leaving the parents at a loss as to how to maintain two languages in the family;
- in many cases, the mother tongue concerned is not a 'high status foreign language' which means that the family in question is left to its own devices as the schools naturally concentrate on 'majority' languages;
- most such families will, therefore, send their children to the local state schools, where the modern language curriculum is, according to these authors, inadequate for their children's needs;
- if bilingualism is not maintained, it means that somewhere along the line, someone will lose his or her linguistic identity - and it is usually the mother tongue.

Harding and Riley argue that many parents faced with these problems, in the absence of any source of encouragement or practical instructions, simply give up. This often results in a deep sense of loss for one or both of the parents and has unfortunate social and practical repercussions such as the children's inability to communicate with their grandparents. The children may then become receptive bilinguals, where they understand the mother tongue, but cannot, will not and do not speak it. A bilingual pattern emerges where the parents use one language with one another and a different language with the children. A further variant involves one of the parents understanding but not speaking the language used between the other parent and the children.

Singh (1994), Schecter, Sharken-Taboada & Bayley (1996) and McPake and Powney (1998) argue that in order to survive and maintain their families, the immigrant parents are caught up in a struggle to counteract negative cultural and literary representations of their own cultures. Their 'cultural war' is largely confined to the private sphere of the home. Their voices, although infused with the voices of television, radio, newspapers, novels and school texts, are heard in the private spaces of their homes. The voices circulating in the home become a strange mixture of native and 'acquired' culture, language and practice.

A concern of immigrant parents in our age of changing demographics is how to maintain the mother tongue for their children who are deemed to be language minority children at every level of the educational system (Nawano, 1994; Yamamoto, 1995 and Lambert & Taylor, 1996). Singh (1994:96) stresses the importance of mother tongue maintenance when she says, "people who lose their language, their culture, lose their very souls". Parents are thus caught in a social and moral dilemma of recognising the importance of mother tongue maintenance and acquiring proficient use of English for their children. They recognize the role of English as the medium for educational success, which constitutes a key point of entry to access the world of employment and political power. Yet, maintaining the mother tongue is seen to be a way of retaining one's roots and not losing one's soul and identity (Yamamoto, 1995; Lambert & Taylor, 1996; Noguchi, 1996 and Schecter et al. 1996).

Perceptions of the mother tongue

Rogers (1976), Brown (1991) and Delgado-Gaitan (1993) argue that children do not learn a mother tongue or any other language spontaneously. They point out that the process is not automatic, but requires time, attention, concentration, effort and an emotional bond between the children and their parents. In learning a language, one adopts a "language ego" which refers to the way in which one's self-concept and sense of self-esteem are intertwined with language and the degree to which, in language transactions, one's ego is exposed. As children grow mentally and emotionally, they slowly develop an individual identity and an emotional bond with their parents based in part on a shared language. If the children have been raised speaking English, it would be difficult for the parents to introduce another language (mother tongue) at a later stage (Griffin & Cole, 1984). It has also been argued that language is the primary means of defining and expressing human identity (Rogers, 1976; Gee, 1990 and Fillmore, 1991). As such, introducing the mother tongue to children when they have mastered English may result in children resisting their parents' attempts to encourage the use of the mother tongue as these children have solidified their identities around the new language (Beardsmore, 1982; Griffin & Cole, 1984 and Delgado-Gaitan, 1993).

Harding and Riley (1986) contend that a child's attitude towards a linguistic community is central to its success of maintaining links. A child who has a positive attitude towards the native community (mother tongue) is going to try to make friends within this community: this in turn is going to make demands on his/her learning abilities and will also increase his/her motivation to learn. If the child feels rejected or ignored, on the other hand, he/she will not attempt to forge links with the native community and will consequently have a very low motivation and confidence. The child will then reduce the number of occasions that would require communication in that language (Fillmore, 1991; Schecter et al. 1996).

As non-native speaking children increase their proficiency in a second language (English), they will inevitably begin to take on a second identity. The prospect of becoming fluent in English then takes on a pervasive psychological dimension. The identity that the immigrant child has grown comfortable with encounters a 'host' self that thinks, feels and acts differently. As they begin to take on that new persona, they also begin to take on the culture of the 'host' language. These children want to "belong" to the new culture and have a strong need to be accepted into the new culture. They cannot exist in a vacuum and have to be part of the new "club". Speaking their mother tongue excludes them from this new "club" and so gradually they cease to use their mother tongue and adopt the new ('host') language as their language (Fillmore, 1991; Dopke, 1998). This leads to tensions in the home as the parents are still immersed in their mother-country culture and language.

The decision to bring up children as bilinguals from birth, or to switch to or add another language does not have a single possible solution. Parents are faced with the following questions:

- what is their own language background and history?
- what language(s) do they speak to one another?
- how do they use their respective languages?
- who is going to look after their children?
- what are their attitudes towards their own language?
- what contacts do they have with the rest of the family?
- what are the languages concerned?
- what means of support are available for maintaining the language?
- would they have to change the way they communicate with one another?
- is mother tongue maintenance an asset or a potential liability to their children's social advancement?

These are the primary questions emerging from the literature and this study aims to throw some light on the answers. The literature has adequately discussed and clarified the issues pertaining to mother tongue maintenance and the effects on the family environment in terms of the parents' perceptions. However some important questions remain and although they have been alluded to, they remain contentious. These issues are related to the perceptions of the children, how they feel about their mother tongue and the effects of the loss of the mother tongue on them. Fillmore (1991) has discussed some of these perceptions and has suggested some reasons why children choose to use the mother tongue less frequently as they grow older.

Methodology

The following research questions constituted the main emerging issues:

- What were the children's and families' perceptions of the mother tongue?
- What did the parents do to encourage the use of the mother tongue?
- Were there tensions/conflicts arising from the parents' efforts?
- What are the cognitive and educational consequences for these children?
- What are the emotional and social consequences for these children?

This paper then continues on from previous research and attempts to answer these questions, offering an insight, which has implications on the educational framework that these children are in.

Research Method

The case study method was used for this study. It was deemed appropriate for a number of reasons. It offered a method to observe phenomena in detail and relatively unencumbered by theoretical bias. Direct observation and systematic interviewing seemed appropriate because the focus was on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context without experimental intervention (Yin, 1994). As the study was designed to uncover something of the complexity of mother tongue use in a particular group of mother tongue users, it had an explicit descriptive purpose. The use of the mother tongue was observed and the results of that observation led to the judgements about the status of mother tongue maintenance. The interview was a flexible procedure that allowed for probing the participants' use of the mother tongue.

The case study has been misperceived as a weak form of inquiry as it has insufficient precision, quantification, objectivity and rigor (Yin, 1994). However Yin argues that validity and reliability are aspects of several tactics used in dealing with these issues and are implicit throughout the conduct of a case study and not just at the beginning.

The issue of validity and reliability in this case study was addressed in several ways. First, construct validity was established with the use of multiple sources of evidence (three families, with six adults and seven children), and by establishing a chain of evidence as indicated in the observation of family activities, interviews with the families and tape recordings of the families' activities. Second, external validity was sought through establishing the domain to which this study's findings could be generalized. The domain identified in this study was a group of families with similar conditions and internal issues. Reliability in this study remained an issue that could be addressed through further studies with similar data collection procedures applied to a similar group of families.

Participants

The participants were three immigrant families with school-aged children living in Australia. These families were entrenched in their own cultures and were faced with the impending problem of their children becoming "Australianised". The parents viewed mother tongue maintenance as essential and integral to maintaining their culture and identities. Yet, there were tensions within the families arising from the parents' efforts to maintain the mother tongue.

The family backgrounds were as follows:

- the Mwangis from Kenya, who had 3 girls, aged 2, 6 and 11. The family migrated from Nairobi and had been in Australia for nine months (at the start of the study). The father was employed as a quantity surveyor and the mother was unemployed although she was an accountant. The family was from the Kikuyu tribe and Kikuyu was the spoken language within the family. The family also spoke Swahili, which is the national language of Kenya. The parents were permanent residents and were both proficient in English.
- the Miyagis from Japan who had 2 girls aged 5 and 9. The family moved from Tokyo and had been in Australia for four years. The father was employed as a contract engineer and was proficient in English. The mother was unemployed and spoke very little English. Japanese was the spoken language at home. The parents were not permanent residents.
- the Wongs from Malaysia who had 2 girls and a boy aged 8, 10 and 12, and had been in Australia for fourteen years. Both parents were proficient in English. The father was self-employed and the mother was a nurse. The parents were Australian citizens. Cantonese and English were the spoken languages at home.

Method

The parents and children were interviewed on various aspects of mother tongue maintenance. The study involved:

- three interviews with each family, for an hour each (parents and children);
- tape recordings of each family's activities (five occasions, 30 minutes each);
- two interviews with the children from each family, for an hour each (in the presence of the parents);
- observation of the children and the parents (five occasions with each family, 20 minutes each).

Results

The Mwangi family

Mr and Mrs Mwangi spoke Kikuyu at home, Kikuyu and Swahili in the wider community and learned to speak fluent English at school. Their three children Esther aged 2, Josephine aged 6 and Mary aged 11, had been brought up speaking Kikuyu at home, whilst learning Swahili and English at school. Mary was fluent in Kikuyu and Swahili and spoke Kikuyu in the home environment, whilst Josephine spoke fluent Kikuyu, a little Swahili and a sprinkling of English. Esther only spoke Kikuyu and a few words of English. Both Josephine and Mary were enrolled in special English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the primary school they attended.

In order to support the development of Kikuyu the children attended a community language Saturday school conducted by three other Kenyan families. Esther and Josephine were content to continue with the learning at the community school but Mary was beginning to display some resentment (reported by Mrs Mwangi) at attending the school. Mr and Mrs Mwangi encouraged the children to speak Kikuyu at home by using it as the dominant language. They used Kikuyu-based story telling with Esther and Josephine but were finding it increasingly difficult to encourage Mary to use the language. Mrs Mwangi explained:

Mary comes home from school and speaks English... she wants to practise her English so she can speak as good as the other children at school. She says she speaks funny and sometimes children laugh at her. She gets upset and wants to fit in. What can I do? I explain to her Kikuyu is important for our family but she cry and say "I want to be like my friends and I want my friends to like me". It's so difficult for us. We know that she will lose her language. I don't mind about the children losing Swahili but Kikuyu is important...it's our culture and meaning of life.

Mrs Mwangi seemed particularly concerned about Mary because she had started to mix Kikuyu and English when speaking to her sisters. Mrs Mwangi was concerned that all three children would lose fluency in this language. She talked about the conflict she felt between wanting her children to retain Kikuyu and speak English fluently without an 'accent'. Mary made comments about her parents' pronunciation of English, although Mrs Mwangi did not appear to mind and took the comments in good humour. The family talked about how they learnt to speak new languages and why Mr and Mrs Mwangi pronounced words differently from the children.

Mary felt that she wanted to 'remember' her culture and language but she also wanted to be 'like the other children at school and not be different'. At the same time Mary did not want to upset her parents. Mary also talked about her relatives in Kenya and said that she missed them and would like to talk to them in Kikuyu. She felt rather 'mixed-up' and said that she was shy about inviting her new friends into her home, as they would not understand her family. Esther and Josephine were happy to speak Kikuyu and all their interactions in the home environment were in Kikuyu.

Language practices in the home seemed to revolve around religious and cultural activities, homework, and reading self-selected books in English and Kikuyu. Mrs Mwangi helped Josephine and Mary with their homework by asking them what they had learnt the previous week and used this as the basis for further development. Josephine and Mary were expected to do some homework every evening and this took priority over television and play. Mrs Mwangi checked that work was completed and 'tested' the children's spelling and mathematical tables as she saw appropriate. When she felt that she was unable to help Mary with her homework or school projects she encouraged her to seek help from her friends at school or teachers. Mrs Mwangi explained that Mr Mwangi did not feel able to help the girls with their homework as he worked full-time and was busy around the house when he got home. However, she insisted that he took responsibility for hearing Josephine read every evening and helped her learn particular words in English.

The family also read the Bible together, which was in the Kikuyu language and discussed issues that related to their everyday lives. The family attended the local church every Sunday and had made several friends who

shared a similar Christian faith. The children had also made friends from the church and attended Bible study classes in English. After the classes, Mr and Mrs Mwangi helped the girls understand the issues as they related to their language and culture.

Mrs Mwangi believed that reading was important and encouraged Josephine and Mary to bring books home from the school library. All the literature brought home was written in English. Mary bought secondhand books to swap with her friends and often shared a magazine with her mother. The children were discouraged from reading comics as Mrs Mwangi felt 'that you can't learn anything from a cartoon'. Mr Mwangi read a local newspaper every day, whilst Mrs Mwangi read religious texts and books about sewing and craft. Mary was expected to use a dictionary when she was reading to help her make sense of text and to develop her English by learning new vocabulary.

The Miyagi family

Mr and Mrs Miyagi grew up speaking Japanese. Mr Miyagi was on a work permit visa. He learnt English in Japan and was a proficient speaker. Mrs Miyagi spoke very little conversational English. They had two girls, Yukina aged 5 in Reception and Yumi aged 9 in Year 3. Japanese was the dominant language at home. The children had been brought up speaking Japanese at home, whilst learning English at school. Mrs Miyagi spoke Japanese with her husband and children. Mr Miyagi spoke a mixture of English and Japanese with the girls and the girls conversed with each other in a mixture of English and Japanese. Mrs Miyagi seemed anxious when the girls used English and chided them softly, reminding them to speak Japanese. She shook her head to show her disapproval. Yumi giggled and said in English that her Mum was funny. Mr Miyagi seemed embarrassed when Mrs Miyagi chided the girls. He explained:

My wife she feels worried the children are going to forget their language. She wants them to speak Japanese all the time so that when we go back to Japan, the children will be able to speak Japanese properly. She feels this is important for her family tradition. For me I think it is important for the children to know two languages, English and Japanese...then they will have more opportunities for their future. I like to live here in this country...more opportunities and good future but my wife she wants to go back to Japan... she feels this country too western and lose our tradition and culture...not good for children.

At this point Mrs Miyagi interrupted her husband and wanted to know what was being said. Mrs Miyagi seemed anxious during the interviews and wanted her husband to translate everything that was said. She laughed embarrassedly and said 'yes very important for me...no Japanese no thinking...children important speak Japanese but also education important'.

Both girls were enrolled in special English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the primary school they attended. Yumi did not appear to have difficulty with her English at school and understood her English texts. Yukina seemed to have some difficulty with English and Mr Miyagi explained that the teachers had to use simple instructions in English to help her along. Mrs Miyagi spent a considerable amount of time at the primary school with the children in the classroom, particularly in Yukina's class. She translated instructions in Japanese for Yukina and helped her with some of the tasks. She also encouraged Yukina to get help from the other children in the class. Mrs Miyagi did voluntary work at the school canteen on a regular basis and was enrolled in an English conversation class.

The children regularly attended a community Japanese language Saturday school, where Mrs Miyagi lent her support by providing texts she acquired from Japan. Mrs Miyagi encouraged the girls to bring home several texts in Japanese and waited for the girls while they attended the three-hour classes. As soon as classes were over, the lesson was reinforced at home, where Mrs Miyagi and the girls spent at least an hour going over the lesson. The girls appeared tired and complained a little but persevered with the session as Mrs Miyagi had promised them a treat at the end. However, it was evident that Yumi was unhappy (scowled and looked at

her watch several times). After the session, Mrs Miyagi apologised for Yumi's attitude.

Mrs Miyagi felt it was important for the girls to learn Japanese at home so they would not forget it when they went to school. Mrs Miyagi monitored the amount and type of television programs the children were allowed to watch, as they tended to imitate the language heard and she did not understand the meaning. Yumi translated some of the words from the programs for her mother and did seem weary and irritable at times.

Yumi felt that she would like to speak more English at home, especially with her mother so that her friends would be able to understand her when she was at the school. She enjoyed having her mother at school and would like her to speak more English 'just like the other Mums'. She did not understand why her mother needed to be different. Yumi invited friends home from school and was happy that her mother encouraged her friendships. She however felt that she would like to do more exciting things on Saturday mornings instead of spending three hours learning Japanese.

The family was involved in a number of language practices in Japanese, which included cultural and religious activities. Religion (Buddhism) seemed to play a significant role in their family life with many language practices revolving around activities with other Japanese families. Every week the whole family attended a religious study group, which met at various members' houses in turn. The religious text was translated into English for some of the older children in the group, but the prayers were in Japanese. The children were involved in a range of activities, including drawing pictures from the religious text, singing and religious text quizzes. The family also read the religious text and prayed on a regular basis at home, although Yumi seemed to be a reluctant participant at times and her mother got cross with her.

Mr Miyagi said that the children did reading and writing homework. He heard the children read and helped them with the identification and meaning of particular words and then signed the reading card. Mr Miyagi also helped Yumi with her weekly homework contract. He enjoyed reading and owned several books. He read a local newspaper and said that his wife took the children to the library as he had enough books to read at home. These included a set of encyclopaedias and philosophical and religious texts. He also read motor engineering journals and magazines. Yumi said her father read a lot and was good at reading. She wished her mother would do the same. The girls enjoyed reading and had several favourite books, both fiction and non-fiction.

In addition to these language practices, story telling was also a valued practice in the Miyagi household and Mrs Miyagi spent a lot of time telling about life in Japan. Many of these stories had a mythical quality. For the Miyagi family stories were a major source of the retelling of family history and the transmission of culture. Yumi explained:

My Mum tells us nice stories at bedtime before we go to sleep. She says when we grow up we can tell the same stories. I don't know if I can remember all the stories but I like them. She tells some in my class and my friends laugh. But I think they are laughing because she speaks funny and they don't understand her.

Every aspect of the conversation with the children was translated for Mrs Miyagi. The above instance elicited a strong look of disapproval from Mrs Miyagi and it was clear that she did not want the session to proceed any further.

The Wong family

Mr and Mrs Wong spoke Cantonese as their mother tongue, were fluent in Malay and learned English at school. They had three children, Joseph aged 12, Jessica aged 10 and Sarah aged 8. All three children were born in Australia and attended primary school. Mr and Mrs Wong spoke a mixture of Cantonese and English between them, although Cantonese seemed to be the dominant language. The children had been brought up

speaking a mixture of Cantonese and English. English was the dominant language among the children.

Mrs Wong explained:

It's like having Australian kids at home, because they are so used to speaking English...they spend six hours at school...all their friends are Australian and they are exposed to English all the time...very difficult lah. They come home from school and they probably use two or three Cantonese words in that sentence, so it becomes like a mix-up altogether. But they will not speak fluently to us, only talk, read, write English. Sometimes I get cross, say, 'Speak to me in Cantonese please,' but no use, they will not do this. What can I do? Sometimes I think it's our fault but cannot force...they are growing up and very strong.

When Joseph and Jessica were younger (aged 8 and 6 respectively) they attended a Cantonese community language school. However this did not last very long, and the attendance ceased after a year at the children's request as sporting and school activities took precedence. Sarah did not attend the community school as Mr and Mrs Wong deemed her too young at time. Sarah learnt some Cantonese at home in the interactions with her parents. Mr and Mrs Wong encouraged the children to speak Cantonese at home but found that they were increasingly reluctant to speak in a language other than English.

Mrs Wong seemed a little concerned about the children, especially since they had stopped speaking to each other in any Cantonese and she was concerned they would lose whatever Cantonese they had learnt in the early years. She was also concerned that they had lost touch with Cantonese as their daily activities revolved around the 'western' culture. Mrs Wong talked about her personal conflict between wanting the children to retain Cantonese and speak English without an 'accent'. The children made comments about their parents' accent and pronunciation of English, although both Mr and Mrs Wong did not seem to mind and took the comments in good humour, saying 'what's so funny, this is how we speak and we must be proud'.

Mrs Wong explained why she felt that speaking English fluently was important:

Easier for them as they grow older...must be able to speak properly so they will fit in the Western society, then the Australian people will understand them and not say 'why they speak funny' and then the children also will not say 'how come we speak funny?' Also better for them so that they get good education, easy to study and then get good jobs. We know they will not go back to Malaysia, they will stay here, so better for them to speak the same as others.

Language practices seemed to revolve around religious activities, homework, sporting and social activities. The family attended church every Sunday and followed up each lesson through a 'study book'. Mrs Wong encouraged the children to take a notebook to church and 'jot down notes and record anything that speaks to you and then use this to apply to your life'. The children completed their work individually, only questioning Mrs Wong if they needed help. She then referred them to the Bible. The family also read the Bible and prayed on a regular basis. Mrs Wong talked about the teachings in the Bible to the children and how they could apply it to their daily lives.

All the children were expected to do their homework every evening and this took priority over any other activities, although there seemed to be some conflict with Joseph as he preferred to play computer games or sport with his friends. Some negotiation took place with Joseph so that his homework was completed. As Mrs Wong did shift work in her employment as a nurse, Mr Wong supervised the homework at times. Joseph played cricket and Mr Wong accompanied him to each game, after which a few families congregated for a social evening. The Wongs and their friends, some Malaysian Chinese as well, all conversed in English, with a smattering of Cantonese thrown in and translation for the benefit of the non-Cantonese speaking friends.

Mr and Mrs Wong believed that reading was important and encouraged the children to bring books home

from the school library. All the literature that was read was written in English and the children seemed to enjoy reading, with the exception of Joseph who thought that he read 'well enough and could be doing something more exciting like going to the movies with his friends'. Both Mr and Mrs Wong read a local newspaper and magazines. Mrs Wong also enjoyed reading some Chinese literature which she exchanged with friends. The children were encouraged to use a dictionary when reading to help them understand new vocabulary.

Mr and Mrs Wong in turn helped the children with their homework, but asked Joseph to help Jessica with the mathematics which Mrs Wong felt was sometimes beyond her understanding. The children used books for projects and had a set of encyclopaedias which they were encouraged to refer to. The children also used the Internet as a reference for their projects. Joseph tended to be distracted when using the Internet and browsed unrelated sites. Mrs Wong showed her annoyance but did not say anything.

Analysis

The three families were involved in various language practices, which were embedded in their everyday lives and which reflected their cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The first thing that struck one was the families' access to, and mastery of, different language practices (reading, social activities, religious activities, educational framework, sports). It appeared that through their families and wider communities the children were, in fact, developing multiliterate perceptions of the world.

The following points from the children's involvement in these multiple literacies were concluded:

- The children in all three families had been learning a variety of scripts, which included Japanese, Chinese and the Roman script of English. However it was not only the skills of encoding and decoding the scripts of English and the whole languages that were different, but the actual language practices also differed as well.
- Some language practices, such as storybook reading, which Harding and Riley (1986) and Arnberg (1987) saw as vital in children's language development, were seen as important by each family.
- Children in all the families were learning to switch between languages. With the possible exception of Joseph, they seemed to be developing impressive language repertoires.

Factors affecting mother tongue maintenance and loss

The above conclusions were, however, somewhat complicated by the children's developing tacit awareness of the differential status and power associated with particular language practices. A further complication was the social pressures experienced by these children in the use of their mother tongue and their perceptions towards their language and families.

1. Different contexts of power and status

The language practices identified in the three families were accorded differential status and power by individuals within each family, the community in which they lived, and the schools the children attended. These seemed to vary according to who was involved in the practice and in what context the practice occurred. For example, it was very important for the Miyagi and Mwangi children to speak Japanese and Kikuyu respectively, and understand the religion of their community, where this ability was afforded high status.

The above observations influenced the ways in which the children viewed the languages they were developing. This was clearly reflected in the children's growing reluctance to use their mother tongues in everyday communication within the family. The way in which the children viewed their mother tongue was

also reflected in their attitude towards English and their comments about their parents' use of the language. Further the children's perceptions of the status and power of their developing languages were also being shaped by their parents.

2. Reluctance of the children to use the mother tongue

Regardless of the centrality of the children's mother tongue, all the children, with the exception of Esther, Josephine and Yukina, seemed to be increasingly reluctant to use their mother tongue either at home or within the wider community. It seemed that these children were prepared to act as translators and mediators between home and school but preferred to use English whenever possible.

For the Miyagi children, on the other hand, Japanese was the main form of communication with their mother. Yumi was beginning to realize the status accorded to the use of English among her school friends. As Yumi used English increasingly in her daily activities, she could find it less functional to use Japanese and could limit the use of Japanese to her interactions with her mother. Thus the potential loss of Japanese had serious implications for relationships within the family, especially between Mrs Miyagi and Yumi.

3. Emphasis on the 'correct' use of English

The Wongs and the Mwangis held frequent discussions about language and the differences between languages. Parents and children made comments about the importance of the 'correct' use of English. Mrs Wong explained that the children often remarked on her Chinese accent. She felt that it was important that the children fitted in because they were in Western society.

4. The need for English language skills in children's homework

The school attended by the children made demands upon children in relation to completing projects at home, preparing for tests and reading to parents, which had to be completed in English. Mrs Mwangi and Mrs Wong were both able to support their children or use other resources to meet the school's expectations. However, Yumi did not feel that her mother could help her with homework. As a result, she excluded her mother and often did not complete her homework.

5. Social pressures and challenges faced by the children

Social pressures at different levels confronted all the children. The children watched television programs, which were in English and were subsequently influenced by the media in terms of recreational activities, toys, language and fashion. Parental control was difficult with the older children and parents were subjected to pressure to concede with some of the restrictions.

The children learned quickly that if they wanted to be accepted by other children, they had to learn English, because the others were not going to learn their language. As such these children were motivated to stop using their mother tongues before they had mastered English (in the cases of Esther, Josephine and Yukina).

Discussion

The language dilemma

It was clear that the parents saw the importance of maintenance and development of the mother tongue. Each family had made some attempt to ensure that the children became literate in their mother tongue. However, the children's increasing reluctance to use their mother tongue highlighted the tension between the importance of maintaining their home culture and taking on the values of the dominant society.

The younger children were extremely vulnerable when they encountered these powerful assimilative forces. It

was especially problematic for children in the preschool period, that is, under the age of 6. At this age, Arnberg (1987), Fillmore (1991) and Delgado-Gaitan (1993) contended that children have simply not reached a stable enough command of their mother tongue not to be affected by contact with a language that is promoted as heavily as English is in this society. These young children know and care about prestige, status, belonging and acceptance. They quickly sense that without English they will not be able to participate in the English-speaking world of the school, and so they learn it, and give up their mother tongue (Lambert & Taylor, 1996; Dopke, 1998).

Tensions and conflicts

From the parents' comments there was evidence of a conflict between wanting their children to become fluent in English while at the same time wanting them to maintain and develop their mother tongue. But was it inevitable that fluency in English must be achieved at the expense of the mother tongue?

The Wong parents seemed to have accepted the inevitable - that Cantonese has to give way to English if the children were going to achieve outcomes. As a result of this choice, Mr and Mrs Wong were experiencing a personal conflict. Although the Mwangi and Miyagi parents were making conscious efforts to encourage their children to speak their mother tongue, there were undeniable tensions and conflicts within both households.

One of the more important issues raised in this study is that of negative perceptions experienced by the children in terms of their mother tongue. These negative perceptions are well encompassed in the term "anomie" which is defined as a feeling of personal disorientation, anxiety and social isolation (Beardsmore, 1982). Beardsmore (1982), Barrat-Pugh (1994) and McPake and Powney (1998) contended that immigrant children often reveal symptoms of bewilderment and frustration brought about by the conflict of loyalties and aspirations generated between the mother tongue and culture, and the language and culture of the outside world, overwhelmingly oriented towards the values of the 'host' culture.

For the Wong children, Yukina and Mary, this conflict could not be resolved without making a choice, either to withdraw from the all-pervading Australian environment into that of their home community, or to manifest an open preference for the Australian set of cultural values and language, thereby causing upset and ultimately severance from the family unit. A third alternative was withdrawal in a rather apathetic way from thinking in ethnic terms of any sort (Fillmore, 1991). All these solutions were beset by hazards for the children's psychological development as they implied rejection of an important component of these children's life-pattern. In short, it would lead to a confusion of identity (Dopke, 1998 and Lambert & Taylor, 1998).

The Wong children were unable to resolve the conflicting demands made upon them by the two linguistic-cultural communities in which they found themselves. Yukina was beginning to feel this conflict and it appeared inevitable that Mary would feel this conflict in the near future. Griffin and Cole (1984), Fillmore (1991), Dopke (1998) and Lambert and Taylor (1998), proposed that such conflicting demands are acute for the young adolescent trying to develop a complete set of personality traits along two different channels. These children tried to reconcile two divergent linguistic and cultural patterns and found this goal inaccessible, leading to feelings of frustration, especially so since the cultural norms of Australia and each of the cultures represented in this study were highly differentiated.

All the children, with the exception of Esther, were aware of their linguistic inadequacies and conscious of their cultural implications as they progressed further in the learning of English. The "new" community raised its expectations for these children to conform as they progressed towards greater proficiency in English. It was here that the children's communicative as opposed to their linguistic competence was brought home. These children spoke with acceptable accents and accurate syntax, but may not have been aware of the cultural implications of what they were saying and may have provoked astonishment and even hostility if the message did not coincide with the assumptions the Australian speaker associated with the particular code (Barrat-Pugh, 1994, Singh, 1994, and Yamamoto, 1995).

What is lost?

There was evidence, albeit anecdotal, to be gleaned from the interviews conducted in this study. The changes in the communication patterns in the home could have serious consequences on parent-child relationships. A serious problem for the children was how they managed the linguistic adjustments they must inevitably make if they were to live in this society. Fillmore (1991) and Delgado-Gaitan (1993) stressed that the consequences of losing the mother tongue are extensive, and that it does affect the social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development of these children, as well as the integrity of their families and the society they live in.

What is lost is the means by which the parents nurture their children. When the parents are unable to use the mother tongue with their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, or wisdom about how to cope with their new experiences (Fillmore, 1991, Singh, 1994, Noguchi, 1996 and Schecter et al, 1996). Singh suggested that parents are instrumental in ensuring children retain their souls through the maintenance of their mother tongue and culture. Language and culture form one's identity and are a set of practices that produce meanings for an individual (Hall, 1990). Hence, if the mother tongue is lost, then Singh (1994) argued that the invisible bond between a parent and child is severed and lost. Rifts develop and the families lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understandings.

Hall (1990), Delgado-Gaitan (1993) and Barrat-Pugh (1994) contended that there are cognitive and educational consequences of mother tongue loss. They argued that there is a connection between mother tongue loss and the educational difficulties experienced by many immigrant children. Younger children frequently give up their mother tongue long before they have mastered English. But what happens if their efforts to learn English are not altogether successful? This issue is highlighted in the cases of Esther, Josephine and Yumi. These children may end up with "fossilized versions" of the two languages, their mother tongue and English rather than with fully realized versions of either language (Yamamoto, 1995; Noguchi, 1996). In the classroom, these young learners spend a lot more time talking with one another than they do with their teachers, and the English they hear most often is the imperfect varieties spoken by classmates rather than the more standard varieties spoken by their teachers.

Conclusion

The findings of the study showed a rich variety of rationales invoked by the parents to explain their actions of behalf of the mother tongue, and indicated a multiplicity of strategies used in the interests of developing the children's mother tongue proficiency. The manner in which the parents described these rationales and explicated these strategies indicated that they viewed the children's language behaviours in terms of their own personal attitudes and views.

This study indicated that the three families were experiencing tensions and conflicts at various levels in their quest of maintaining the mother tongue. The parents viewed and experienced the events associated with mother tongue language use in day-to-day life as enablers of, or constraints on, the maturation of their children's identities as social and cultural beings. These attributed identities, moreover, were not necessarily stable. They tended to be reconfigured as circumstances shifted and the parents struggled to accommodate the continuities and discontinuities that defined their lives.

While consistent mother tongue use on the part of parents may be helpful in the beginning stages of bilingual development because it helps young children distinguish between the languages (Dopke, 1998), it should not be considered as an absolute requirement throughout bilingual children-raising (Harding & Riley, 1986, Fillmore, 1991, Noguchi, 1996 and Schecter et al, 1996). Rather than seeing themselves as models of a single language, that is the mother tongue, parents are probably more effective if they regard themselves as models of bilingualism and biculturalism, constantly adapting to their children's changing linguistic and social needs and being sensitive to these changes. Lambert and Taylor (1996) argued that flexibility, ingenuity and

sensitivity are far more important in raising well-adjusted bilingual children than absolute linguistic consistency could ever be.

In conclusion these families were experiencing tensions and conflicts (in the Wong family), some of which are imminent (in the Miyagi and the Mwangi families). It is evident that there were negative feelings experienced by the older children (Jessica and Joseph) towards the use of the mother tongue in the home environment. It may be said that Mr and Mrs Wong were sensitive to their children's feelings and perceptions and opted for the use of English, at the expense of their mother tongue, Cantonese, in the household to ease some of these tensions.

The Miyagi household was beginning to feel some of these negative feelings from Yukina towards the extensive use of Japanese in the home environment. The parents did not appear to be sensitive to Yukina's self-perceptions and were slightly dogmatic in their approach towards the maintenance of Japanese in the family. This approach has the potential to alienate Yukina from her parents as she grows older and more independent (Beardsmore, 1982), and may lead to a rebellious young person.

It was early days for the Mwangi family as they had been in Australia for nine months and had not had the length of time and opportunity as the other two families had, to have their family unity and strength tested against the influences of the outer environment. As such, the family was as yet close-knit and highly dependent on each other for emotional support in the new host country. However, even at this early stage, Mary had already started questioning some of her parents' strategies to maintain Kikuyu in the home environment.

It may thus be concluded that in these three families, the co-existence of two languages, the mother tongue and English was difficult to maintain, and as such, one language had to give way to the other. As English was the dominant language of the outer environment, it was inevitable that fluency and mastery of English was at the expense of the imminent loss of the mother tongue for these families. It was also clear that there were definite social pressures confronted by the children and that these pressures were from the outer environment, resulting in emotional, social, cognitive and educational consequences for the children.

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