

What are the possibilities of using Chinese literacy learning to help Chinese American students maintain their racial and cultural identity?

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Abstract

The Chinese language schools in major cities across the U.S. play a role similar to the bilingual programs offered in American primary schools. While teaching at a Chinese language school, through my interaction with Chinese parents and students, I learned that their common experience is that no matter how diligently Chinese immigrants study and act within the mainstream culture, they are still perceived “differently” in many ways in American society. Preserving minority languages and cultures can be challenging in a predominantly monolingual society. This paper discusses the importance of putting children in bilingual learning environments and how Chinese teachers can use their teaching role to support Chinese students not only in maintaining cultural identity but also in recognizing their racial identity in U.S. society.

Key words: Chinese American, racial identity, cultural identify, language

Introduction

I once worked as a part-time teacher in a Chinese language school. My students were American-born Chinese (Chinese Americans). Chinese American children have difficulty in maintaining their native language if they and their families are not interested in learning the language. Students in my class had different levels of Chinese comprehension, as well as varying levels of interest in the Chinese language. While teaching Chinese, I related my personal experience of learning a second language to my students. I started to learn English when I was six years old. Although in Taiwan I did not have the opportunity to speak English every day, I paid attention to things that were in the English language. English is not my native language, but I have no doubt that I have been greatly affected by it.

As a Chinese teacher, I not only taught my students how to recognize Chinese characters, but I also had an obligation to help them maintain their cultural identity. Through my interaction with Chinese parents and students, I learned that no matter how much Chinese immigrants study and act within the mainstream culture, they are still perceived “differently” in many ways. In their view, this difference is strongly

connected to their racial identity in the U.S. social context. Thus, learning the Chinese language is an effective way for these students to maintain their cultural identity, and Chinese schools have become an important community support for these parents.

Background of the Chinese language school

According to the 2013 U.S. census, about 16 million Asian Americans lived in the U.S., and 3.7 million people were Chinese (U.S. Census, 2013). Most Chinese immigrants reside in large cities, such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Whether in big cities or small towns, Chinese immigrants usually establish networks and share their experiences with each other. In large metropolitan areas, the part of the city known as Chinatown is a symbol of Chinese culture and language. Most Chinese language schools are managed and operated by Chinese communities. In Chinese language schools, teachers not only teach the Chinese language but also teach or supervise extra-curricular activities, such as kung-fu, Chinese painting skills, and Chinese dancing. The materials used for the class lessons are generally supported and provided by the Chinese and Taiwanese governments. Some of the larger Chinese language schools also help Chinese American students cope with cultural differences in and homework from two different kinds of school systems (Wong, 1982; Tsai, 1986). Because the Chinese language is not a required subject in American schools, Chinese communities organize private Chinese schools to provide adequate Chinese language teaching. The funding for these schools is provided by Chinese parents and outside supporters. Children attend Chinese lessons every Sunday or after school. Therefore, the Chinese school plays a role similar to other primary schools in the United States.

The Chinese language school where I worked was established in 1978 as a non-profit organization. Since 1987, the school has enrolled more than 2,000 children. The lessons are conducted in both traditional and Zhuyin Chinese at one of the universities. The ages of the children enrolled in the school varies, as does the level of their Chinese language skills. The funding for the Chinese language school comes from parents and other supporters within the Chinese community. Of the eight classes, five are taught in Chinese only and three are taught in both Chinese and English. The school opens every Sunday from 1:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Instructors teach Chinese language lessons in speaking, writing, and listening from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.; after 3:00 p.m. students attend extracurricular activities, such as kung-fu, Chinese painting, and traditional Chinese dancing. The Chinese school is like a small Chinese community. For example, students, parents, and teachers celebrate the Chinese Spring Festival at Chinese language school each year. Every Sunday, parents

and grandparents help teachers attend the children and sometimes provide meals. At the end of each semester, students present their term projects by performing Chinese operas, creating drawings, and singing at the final conference meeting. This Chinese school is where Chinese migrant families feel comfortable practicing their home culture.

Maintaining the native tongue

Implementing bilingual programs has been a controversial issue in the United States; bilingual programs and education are frequently sources of contention within U.S. education debates (Cummins, 1998). The Chinese school plays a role similar to that of bilingual programs in American schools. In immigrants' families, the languages they speak at home are usually considered low prestige compared to the one taught at school (Zentella, 1997). Standard English is considered a "must-learn" language and holds a position that is superior to other languages in the United States. In addition, standard English is usually perceived as a vehicle for success in society.

However, when immigrant children receive their formal education in school, their native language and cultural identity might clash with the mainstream. To help children adapt to the new culture and hold on to their native language, studies have indicated that having children learn their native tongue both at school and at home ultimately helps them learn the other language (Cummins, 1998; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). In West Australia, Barratt-Pugh and Rohl (2001) investigated how bilingual education can enhance students' learning interests and academic achievement. In the study, a bilingual program was established to develop children's English language and literacy, while at the same time maintaining their native language, Khmer – an official Cambodian language. Students who were interviewed in this study had very positive feelings toward learning both languages. The Cambodian children who spoke Khmer felt comfortable interacting with their elders and family members. Also, they were able to develop a strong cultural identity through learning and speaking their native language in a predominantly monolingual country.

Cultural identity development

Even though bilingual researchers have reported many positive outcomes of maintaining the native language, many older Chinese American students do not want to continue their Chinese language education because of other priorities. For Chinese American children, learning two languages is sometimes a struggle, especially when they grow older and leave home for college. Although parents have high expectations for their children's learning their native language, children themselves might perceive Chinese language schools as unnecessary to their education and

future (Cheng & Kuo, 2000). For this reason, many Chinese-Americans might abandon their native language to assimilate into the mainstream culture.

Melting pot is a term used by the dominant group to explain different groups of people who have come to the United States and melted their cultures with each other's to become one culture, the American culture. There is no doubt that the American society proposes multiculturalism to immigrants. However, behind the scenes, assimilating into mainstream culture is usually the only way for minority people to achieve acceptance. When minority cultures are not appreciated and valued by the mainstream, the *differences* can be seen as a problem (Motani, 2002). Because of this pressure to assimilate, Chinese parents worry that their children cannot communicate with family elders due to their limited proficiency in the Chinese language. In this way, the struggle to maintain the culture and language heritage can become a major concern for Chinese families.

Bui and Stimpfl (2000) conducted a study using the Marcia identity status theory to identify the variations in ethnic identity within an immigrant population. They investigated how Vietnamese students adjust their life and cultural differences between school and home. The study revealed that students believe speaking Vietnamese and being bilingual is an important part of their culture. Language is considered a key attribute in an ethnic group that helps members develop their social and cultural identity. The cultural elements practiced at home and in the community can constitute an important basis for second-generation Asian Americans' ethnic identities (Min & Kim, 2000). Motani (2002) suggested that educators and non-dominant cultural groups should understand that certain kinds of education, such as attending Korean schools and becoming involved in community activities, can be effective in enhancing and restoring one's cultural identity and helping one develop assertive bicultural identity. Languages, cultural identities, and communities intertwine, and these three elements guide minority students throughout their educational journey.

Race matters

For migrant families, maintaining the home language often occupies a crucial position in the social construction process of their ethnicity, and the ability to use the ethnic language to communicate with other group members serves as a symbol of ethnic status (Cheng & Kuo, 2000). Nevertheless, race and racism toward language use should not and cannot be dismissed from the context, especially for people of color. In the United States, for non-dominant groups such as Latinos, Asians and blacks, the linguistic stigma is reinforced by physical differences (Attinasi, 1997).

Cambodian children in Western Australia share the same concerns as Chinese children in America. They struggle to find a balance between being involved in a bilingual program and not wanting to be seen as different from the mainstream group (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000). Developing a sense of belonging in their own community and at the same assimilating into the mainstream is challenging for many Cambodian children. At school, students who speak languages other than English tend to suffer devaluation from peers and teachers (Attinasi, 1997). Furthermore, Schmid (2001) states that many second-generation immigrants are expected to be better off than their parents and elders. To gain full acceptance in society and school, they not only drop their native language but they are also unwilling to maintain their cultural identity. Chinese Americans may view being able to speak Chinese as a hindrance to obtaining a higher social position.

Many Chinese Americans have internalized the notion of being forever foreign. The Chinese school should not only teach the Chinese language, but it should also inspire students toward critical thinking in relation to language learning. “The power of language is the power to define, to decide the nature of lived experience” (Ruiz, 1997, p. 320). By learning the Chinese language, Chinese American students can use this power of self-definition to raise racial consciousness and recognize the power relations among other minority groups. Being *yourself* and knowing where you are from is crucial across all Asian immigrant families.

Conclusion

Anzaldúa (1999) said, “If you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (p. 81). In a predominately monolingual society, it is always a struggle to preserve minority languages and cultures. Chinese language teachers should fully acknowledge their racial and cultural position so as to pass on the cultural traditions and language to youths. Our culture is always deeply rooted not only in our language but also in our skin. In addition, both the cultural and racial issues that Chinese Americans face today should be addressed at Chinese language school. In my view, Chinese teachers should not merely teach language lessons. Along with parents and other members of the Chinese community, they should also take responsibility to promote critical thinking skills in Chinese literacy learning.

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