

Parent's Attitude Toward Bilingual Education

Introduction

America is a multilingual society because the number of immigrants in the country keeps increasing. According to the United States Census Bureau in 2010, there are 302,005 immigrants in the United States from foreign countries. Due to the large different cultures and languages in the United States, English is not the only dominant language in America anymore. Being able to speak another language, or bilingual, in America is strongly viewed as an important matter because it brings opportunities for bilingual speakers to interact with other native speakers from other countries. According to the United States Census from 2010, 31.8 million people in the United States speak a language other than English in the home. Also, Chinese is the second most commonly spoken non-English language in the United States, with over 2.6 million speakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). By the U.S. government, Chinese is the language that classified as “critical ” because the national need for trained speakers in those languages exceeds the number of bilingual speakers available.

Recently, China has been a major source of immigration to the United States. The 2009 American Community Survey estimates that 2,600,150 people speak Chinese in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). McGinnis (2005) estimated that over 140,000 students enrolled in schools with over 600 bilingual programs in the United States. In terms of bilingual education in the United States, even President Barack Obama thinks that everyone should be bilingual or able to speak as much different languages as he or she

can because he believes that foreign language is a “powerful tool” for the global economy. In an article by Allison O’Keefe of the CBS News (2008), Obama said, “When we as a society do a really bad job teaching foreign languages – it is costing us when it comes to being competitive in a global marketplace”.

In China, bilingual education is becoming a hot issue in recent years. Since China has become one of the most important trading partners with the United States, bilingual learning becomes a vital communication key for China’s educational policies. There are currently around 200 million people in China leaning English as their second language (Li, 2005). Therefore, high proficiency in English brings more employment opportunities for Chinese people for all ages in China. In the 21st Century, students that are able to communicate in multiple languages will surely benefit in a career world. For these reasons, people in cities, like Shanghai and Beijing, are actively promoting bilingual education in elementary and high school’s academic program. After China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, schools are considering in launching multiple bilingual education programs to meet the needs for students that are interested in bilingual studies. Major courses, such as math, Chinese and sciences, will be given to both in Chinese and English (Li, 2005).

In the United States and China, the number of parents enrolling their kids to bilingual schools is increasing, which helps foster bilingualism for students. The goal for bilingual schools is to help students to become proficient in their target language and teach them the practice and understanding of other different cultures. In order for students to succeed in bilingualism, the role of the parents becomes crucial. According to Lao (2004), a study that surveyed 86 parents, who enrolled their children in a Chinese-English

bilingual school in San Francisco, about their opinion towards bilingual education, their expectations for their children, and their attitude towards bilingual education. The result from the study shows that whether children heritage language will be maintained or lost over the generations is important, depending on the language being used at home regularly. Li's result (1999) of a case study based on the language used between the minority mother and her daughter in the United States is quite similar to Lao's study. Li mentioned that immigrant children's heritage language skills and identity formation are greatly influenced by parents' positive attitudes toward the heritage language at home. This shows that parents' supportive interactions with their children at home will likely increase the possibility of maintaining their heritage language in further generations. To understand better and explore more about bilingual education in different context, such as China and United States, since the objectives of bilingual education are different in different countries. It is beneficial to view about bilingual education from the parent's perspective.

Background of Bilingual Education in United States and China

Bilingual education has been practiced in many forms, in many countries, for thousands of years. Schools in the United States are supporting not only English programs, but also help students to develop native language first. Nowadays, the majority of U.S. high schools and colleges are requiring students to take one to two years of a second language. United States is now becoming more supportive for bilingual education with the help by federal government and partly by state government, partly by local initiatives and partly by individuals (Shang, 2007).

In China, bilingual teaching is one of education reform in china, and bilingual learning becomes a vital part of China's educational policies since China has become one of the most important trading partners of the other western countries. Therefore, a lot schools are promoting bilingual education today. In 2001, China made English required in primary school, which started English-language learning as early as the third grade of elementary school (Li, 2005).

There are lots of things in common for China and the United States to have similar purposes in providing bilingual education for their students. From Yuan (2005) study shows the similarities between China and the United States are they both have the same decisions on the education of their language minority children in terms of age groups and grades, content of learning, and program approaches. However, the differences of bilingual education are in the financial resources between China and the United States. Most of the bilingual programs in United States are for limited English proficient children, and have depended upon government funding. In China, bilingual schooling for minority children is fully funded by the central government. Most bilingual schools around the country, except for a few hundreds in the more developed cities like Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou, are independent institutions supported with private money (Yuan, 2005).

Parents' Attitudes Toward L1 Maintenance in the U.S

In United State, Chinese parents' attitudes toward their children's heritage language maintenance are positive. The main reason for parents to send their children to

bilingual programs are to possess a foreign language skill to make them more competitive in the future job field. Regarding to parents' attitudes toward bilingual benefits in providing children with better career opportunities, Lao (2004) point out, major reason parents enrolled their kids to bilingual education is because high level of bilingualism could lead to practical, career related advantages. Study also shows that commonly pays bilinguals about five to twenty percent more than their non-bilingual counterparts. Bilingual employees can do such as reach new customers, and bilingual employees eliminate the need for translators and interpreters. ("The bilingual bonus," n.d.).

Another reasons for parents want to enroll their children to bilingual education because they think their children can increase their self-image and confidence by learning a foreign language. In the study conducted by Lao (2004) points out that 55.8% of the Chinese-dominant parents and 38.2% of the English-dominant parents believe that Chinese-English bilingual education would help children develop a positive self-image. The result is similar with the study done by Shannon and Milian (2002), showing that 70% of the parents who sent their children to Spanish dual-language programs in Colorado think that bilingual education will contribute to self-worth and pride. Furthermore, according to Saucedo's (1997) study, the result also shows that about 97% of the parents believe dual-language programs would help their children increase their self-esteem and confidence.

Besides the career benefits, the other reason for parents to be in favor of English learning in bilingual schools is that it can enhance children's communicative competence. A study done by Lee (1999) indicated that 83% of the parents support the implementation of bilingual education, and 67% of the parents believe that bilingual schools can facilitate

children's development of English communicative ability. According to Lao (2004) study demonstrated that parents believe that bilingual education can enhance overall learning and communicative ability, and development skills enabling effective communication with the target language speaking community, such as Chinese speaking community in the United States. The conclusion of those studies indicates that parents are in favor of bilingual education programs because it can increase children's communicative competence.

However, there are still some parents send their children to bilingual school just want to maintain their children's motivation to learn their heritage language in the United States. According to a recent study from Liu (2011) mentions that most Chinese parents of bilingual language schools support their children's heritage language or bilingual development. They thought of the schools as providing foundation and some hope in helping their children maintain their heritage language. However, parents seemed to realize that there was not much hope that the schools could directly affect their children's heritage language achievement. Instead, they seemed to hope the bilingual language schools can help their children maintain motivation to learn their heritage language and help them to learn more in the future.

Parents' Attitudes Toward L1 Maintenance in China

In China, for children to become a bilinguals parents viewed as what their children can be better and more in the future. The major reasons for parent to enroll their children in bilingual education in China are because parents want their kids to catch up

with others so they ask kids to learn English as young as possible, since English is the preferred foreign language of international communication and trade. Also, because of the international requirement for global competition, parents and education authorities in China are faced with the need to increase length of exposure to English in order to raise students' English communicative competence (Li, 1999). As a result, a significant number of studies show that parents would like to see their children begin learning English as early as kindergarten, as opposed to the current provision of third grade level (Oladejo, 2006). Shang (2007) also supports this idea through a study of 11 parents who enrolled their children in bilingual school in China. They believe that child can obtain more job opportunities if they start to learn English at an early age. Oppositely, they hardly think that bilingual education can increase children's self-confidence and English communicative ability. Because as the result show in Shang (2007) study, there are about 55% of the participants disagree that attending bilingual preschools can effectively increase children's self-confidence.

Parents' Expectation Toward Bilingual Education

Parents' attitude toward bilingual education also associates with personal characteristics of the parents. Parents' birthplace, national identity, length of residence in the United States, educational level, and socioeconomic status lead to consequences of their attitudes to a language, and the use of it (Pugliese, 2005). Therefore, Parents' expectation of their children's level of second language competency varies due to differences in parent's proficiency in child's first language and the availability of the first

language resource at home. As the studies had done in parental expectations of their children's Chinese proficiency by Lao (2004) shown that Chinese – dominant parents held much higher expectations for their children than English – dominant parents regarding their children's Chinese proficiency. More than half of the Chinese - dominant parents expected their children to achieve middle school to high school- level literacy since they believe that the mother tongue can be further developed in home environment. For English – domain parent's expectations are to enhance their children the opportunity of becoming Chinese – English bilingual by enrolled them in bilingual education.

Parent's expectation of their children's level of second language competency also regards to parental backgrounds. A research paper by Jillian Pugliese (2005) entitled "Parental Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education Programs and Policies", shown that higher-educated parents are more likely to choose bilingual programs for their children for the sake of the global implications, such as being more marketable in global employment; and less-educated parents are not as reorganized in their decisions for placing their children in bilingual programs, but many less-educated parents understand the limitations that their own monolingualism is not as good as bilingualism, and as a result, want their children to have access to resources that will enable them to maintain their heritage and ethnic culture, while experiencing the benefits of being able to relate to different groups of people (Pugliese, 2005).

Conclusion

To understand better and explore more about bilingual education in different context, such as China and United States, since the objectives of bilingual education are

different in different countries. It is beneficial to view about bilingual education from the parent's perspective. The role of the parents is very important in order for students to succeed in bilingualism. Therefore, it is beneficial to view about bilingual education from the parent's perspective.

Parents always plan the best for their child's future. For child's education, parents chose bilingual education. Most of the parents have positive attitudes toward bilingual education, and value bilingualism and understand the importance of being bilingual. The major reasons parents enrolled their children in bilingual education included particular advantages of being bilingual, positive effects on self-image, and development skills enabling effective communication with the target language speaking community (Lao, 2004). However, for parents who enrolled their children in bilingual school in china they believe that children can obtain more job opportunities if they start to learn English at an early age. Oppositely, hardly think that bilingual education can increase children's self-confidence and English communicative ability (Shang, 2006). For parent's expectations concerning the level of target language proficiency of the parents and also regards to parental backgrounds, for example, the majority of Chinese dominant parent's expected their children to achieve conversational fluency and a middle school to high school level literacy. For English dominant parents, the majority also expected their children to achieve conversational fluency. However, they were satisfied if their children achieved an elementary school level of literacy (Lao, 2004).

According to the research findings, these results about parents' attitudes toward bilingual education can provide a lot useful information for administrators, educational institutions, and bilingual teachers to take consideration into our bilingual children's

target language learning problems, such as what are children experiencing while learning their target language in different context? How to improve children's target language communicative ability? Does school and parents really pay attention to children's learning conditions?

References

- Lao, C. (2004). Parents' attitudes toward Chinese-English bilingual education and Chinese-language use. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 4, 147- 170.
- Lee, S. K. (1999). The linguistic minority parents' perception of bilingual education. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 23, 113-124.
- Li, M. (2005). The role of parents in Chinese heritage language schools. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 29, 197-207.
- Li, X. (1999) How can language minority parents help their children become bilingual in familial context?. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 23, 113-125.
- McGinnis, S. (2005). *Statistics on Chinese language enrollment*. Washington, DC: Chinese Language Teachers Association.
- Oladejo, J. (2006, January). *Parents' Attitudes Towards Bilingual Education Policy in Taiwan*. National Kaohsiung Normal University.
- O'Keefe, A. (2008, May 28). Obama Urges Education Reform. *CBS Interactive*. Retrieved from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-502443_162-4133425-502443.html
- Pugliese, J.K. (2010). *Parental attitudes toward bilingual education programs and policies*. Retrieved from http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jpk3/ParentalAttitudes_BilingualEducation.pdf
- Saucedo, L. (1997). *Parents' attitudes toward dual language immersion programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.
- Shang, H. F., Ingebritson, R. J., & Zeng, C. L. (2007). *Taiwanese parental perceptions toward English learning in bilingual kindergarten*. In Y. R. Tsai, H. F. Shang, & H. Hanreich (Eds.), *Applied English education: Trends and issues* (pp. 135-148). Taiwan: I-Shou University.
- Shannon, S. M. & Milian, M. (2002). Parents choose dual language programs in Colorado: A survey. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26, 681-696.
- The bilingual bonus. (n.d.). *Snagajob*. Retrieved from <http://www.snagajob.com/bilingual-jobs/the-bilingual-bonus.aspx>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *American Community Survey*. Washington, DC.

Wu, C-H. (2005). Attitude and behavior toward bilingualism for Chinese parents and children. In J. Cohen, K. T. McAlister, K. Rolstad, & J. MacSwan (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism* (pp. 2385-2394). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.

Yuan, C.Y. (2005) *Zong He Ying Yu Jiao Xue Lun [Teaching Methods of Integrated English]*. Guangzhou: Zhong San Da Xue Chu Ban She.