Investigation of parents' involvement in minority language maintenance: case study of Chinese heritage learners' parents

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Investigation of Parents’ Involvement in Minority Language Maintenance: Case Study of Chinese Heritage Learners’ Parents

by

Shikun Li

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts & Education Degree in Education and English

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May 2013
In the past 40 years, studies have been conducted to determine the relationship between levels of parental involvement and school performance of bilingual students (Clark, 1983; Cronsoe, 2001; Epstein, 1995; Gillum, 1977). Among all the different factors that contribute to the bilingual learners’ literacy development, home-context is ranked as one of the most important factors. Children enter formal school settings holding the knowledge that arises within their home-context (Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck, 2010). Although extensive research has concluded that Chinese parents generally hold positive attitude towards bilingual education (Lao, 2004; Li, 2006), it remains largely unknown how they translate their beliefs into home practices (Li, 2006).

This study is an ethnographic case study of two Chinese families. These two groups of parents share a similar cultural background as well as their education level and annual revenue. However, one group of parents relies heavily on multi-media aids to promote their child’s literacy development at home, while the other group is inclined to encourage children’s interest in language learning by inviting them to participate in various culture-related activities. By controlling for cultural backgrounds, namely Chinese heritage and immigrant status (e.g. both groups of parents are green-card
holders, and they have been living in U. S for more than five years), this study examines 1) the different strategies which are employed by the parents in maintaining Chinese as a minority language and in promoting its culture’s heritage, 2) the potential influence these teaching strategies have upon the construction of bilingual learner’s ethnic identity, and 3) the role which ethnic identity has played in promoting heritage language acquisition.
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List of Abbreviations

CHS..........................Chinese Heritage Schools
CHL..........................Chinese Heritage Learners
HL............................Heritage Learners
Chapter One

Introduction

As we move into the 21st century, areas of the world that were once homogeneous (where most people shared the same background, grew up together and stayed in their own community) are now heterogeneous, with families from different backgrounds attending the same schools and working together (Killen & Coplan, 2010). Based on both 2000 and 2007 U.S Census data, it is obvious that even though English is still overwhelmingly the majority language, there is rapid increase in the number of people who speak languages other than English. Among people who speak other languages, the number of people who speak Chinese has increased from 2,022,143 to 2,464,572 (Census, 2010). However, rapid population increase has not come along with much attention on either Chinese/English bilingual education or Chinese heritage education. The majority of studies on bilingual education in the U.S focus on English/Spanish bilingual programs, and this has influenced the policy makers’ decisions greatly.

The history of Chinese language schools in the United States can be traced back to 1848, to the time of the immigration of Chinese laborers (Chao, 1996). However, Chinese Heritage school in the U.S did not start in the middle of 19th century (Lai, H.M, 2000). After World War II, more and more Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong created these community-based Chinese Heritage schools to ensure that their children would maintain their language and culture. Initially, these schools were small and most of them were church-based and family-oriented. Gradually, the schools developed in every aspect in terms of the number of the schools, the student population,
and the school size, as new immigrants from mainland China flooded into the United States (Gu, 2012). Typically, Chinese Heritage Schools rented or borrowed some classroom space of a formal school or church, or sometimes they even purchased their own school building. Most of them are nonprofit organizations which were operated entirely by volunteers. These volunteers were teaching staff as well as the voluntary administrators and board members (Chao, 1996). In 2012, there were over 1000 Chinese Heritage schools in the U.S. according to the survey conducted by Chinese Heritage Language Education and Research (Cheng, 2012). Nowadays, in some large Chinese Heritage Schools in California or northeast area, there are more than 2000 students enrolled each year. Gradually some public school districts have started to grant credit hours to students who have studied in Chinese Heritage schools, but most of Chinese heritage schools are still outside of the formal education system in the U.S. However, generally speaking, the number of Chinese Heritage Schools is grown.

Current research on Chinese/English bilingual education focuses mostly on Chinese as a heritage language. In order to provide a more comprehensive picture of Chinese heritage education, I would like to introduce the term which is the main composition of Chinese heritage education: the Chinese heritage learner. According to Agnes Weiyun and Yun Xiao in the book *Chinese as a Heritage Language: Fostering Rooted World Citizenry*, Chinese heritage learner (CHL) is defined broadly as “a language student who is raised in a home where a non-English target language is spoken and who speaks or at least understands the language and is to some degree bilingual in HL and in English” (He & Xiao, 2008).
Early researchers on the Chinese Heritage Learner (CHL) argue that the learning process of CHL is not only horizontal, but also vertical. To clarify, CHL acquires Chinese via different routes; some benefit mostly from formal education in the classroom, while others may learn the language mostly from their parents or older generations at home. By far, even though there is no integrated criterion to measure the degree of influences which these two routes have had upon CHL’s literacy development in the future, many qualitative studies have been conducted to reveal various factors which would contribute to the bilingual learner’s literacy development.

I have been teaching Chinese at a local Chinese heritage school for more than two years. During my teaching, I have come across many parents seeking the most efficient teaching strategies that they can employ at home. In the process of exchanging ideas and thoughts on the teaching strategies, I have noticed that more and more parents of Chinese heritage learners are starting to use home-context as a tool to accelerate language learning outside of school.

In addition to paying attention to the parental involvement, I also noticed that Chinese heritage learners would exhibit a positive attitude towards language learning, and would make more obvious academic progress in class when they came from a home-context where Chinese culture was celebrated or extra language assignments were provided by the parents. Therefore in order to clarify the relationship between different teaching strategies of parents and their children’s literacy development, I ask the following research questions:

1) What are the teaching strategies that parents of Chinese heritage learners employ in order to enhance their children’ language learning at home?
2) Are the teaching strategies casting a positive influence on the heritage learners’ in-class literacy performance?

Besides raising questions relating to the impact of teaching practices and language success, this study is also trying to answer another question concerning the relationship between heritage learners’ ethnic identity and his/her literacy development in the future.

3) In what ways could ethnic identity influence the acquisition of Chinese as a heritage language?

The literature review section of this study is divided into four parts. It begins with the early studies on the relationship between heritage learners’ ethnic identity and their future academic achievements, and then I introduce the factors of the Ethno-Linguistic vitality & subjective ethno-linguistic vitality. Ethno-linguistic vitality (EV) is defined at the status and prestige of a language as perceived by speakers of that language (Li, 2010). According to Tse (2001), Ethno-linguistic vitality (EV) is composed of three main factors: 1) a peer group who used the heritage language; 2) contact with institutions that valued the language; and 3) parents who spoke the heritage language and encouraged the development of their children’s language proficiency. In contrast, Chinen and Tucker (2006) point out that the concept of subjective ethno-linguistic vitality (SEV) should also be defined. SEV is the perception of minority-group members on their standing within the community, on a number of factors such as demography, economy, and social and cultural capital-including the use of their language (Ager, 2001; Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal, 1981). According to Bourhis, Giles, and Rosenthal (1981), SEV rather than EV, determines language and cultural maintenance or shift. In addition, I also cite studies on the relationship between parental involvement and school performance of bilingual
learners in general. Finally, I discuss the relationship between Asian parental involvement and minority language maintenance.

*Heritage Learner’s Ethnic Identity & Academic Achievement*

To begin with, there are many different ways to define ethnic identity because it is a complex and abstract concept. According to many early studies on the ethnic identity, the fact that there is no widely agreed upon definition is indicative of the confusion about the term. (Phinney, 1990; Chinem, and Tuckera, 2006). However, these researches have demonstrated that ethnic identity plays an important role in influencing the American adolescent. For example, Fuligni, Witkow and Garcia (2005) point out that specific social identity that is salient for an adolescent in American society, particularly for those from ethnic minority and immigrant families, is their identification with their ethnic or cultural background. Ethnic identities as a branch of a social identity have implications for other aspects of adolescent development because these identities have social meanings in terms of the stereotypical characteristics, norms, and behaviors that are associated with social groups (Hogg, 2003). For instance, Asian-American students are always assumed as “good at math”, while African American students are projected as “good at sports”. However, even though fewer studies prove that there is strong relationship in-between one’s identification of ethnic group and his academic achievement (Fuligni, Witkow, Garcia, 2005), some do conclude that the strength of adolescents’ ethnic identification accounted for the tendency for adolescents from a minority group to have more positive academic attitudes, in comparison to their peers (Fuligni, Witkow, Garcia, 2005).
Factors of the Ethno-Linguistic Vitality & Subjective Ethno-linguistic Vitality

The reason that ethnic identity could influence one’s future academic achievement, according to Phinney (1990), is that knowing one’s background likely gives meaning to adolescents’ goals and motivation. In other words, the implication that is associated with the ethnic identity could promote an individual to make an extra effort in a certain academic field and eventually meet the expectation of others. Therefore, heritage learners’ ethnic identification could cast influence on his or her academic achievement in the future.

Another study that demonstrates the relationship between ethnic identity and one’s future academic achievement is by Tse. In his study of successful bilinguals, he associates language attitude with ethno-linguistic vitality (EV) (Tse, 2009). Here, ethno-linguistic vitality is defined as the status and prestige of a language as perceived by speakers of that language (Li, 2010). In the article, Tse (2001) concludes that the factors of which the ethno-linguistic vitality is composed are 1) a peer group who used the heritage language; 2) contact with institutions that valued the language; and 3) parents who spoke the heritage language and encouraged the development of their children’s language proficiency.

To be more specific, first, Tse (2001) believes that having a peer group who values one’s heritage language can not only strengthen one’s confidence in language learning, but also encourage heritage learners to participate in various literacy-related activities, which enable them to practice language in different social contexts. Secondly, Tse admits that support from formal institution is able to expose participants to a learning environment that is outside their home, and the support from formal institution underlines
the importance of heritage language learning. However, Tse also emphasizes that no matter how much support heritage learners receive from the formal institution, heritage language community institutions, rather than those in broader society, sometimes provides the validation that learners need, during their childhood (Tse, 2001). Additionally, the third component of ethno-linguistic vitality, proposed by Tse, is home support. Tse believes that by implementing “Spanish only” or “German only” at home, parents can create a positive context for minority language maintenance. Later in his article, he points out that, “Early exposure to literacy resulted in all of the participants developing what we may term ‘latent literacy.’” He goes on to explain that latent literacy serves as the basis for heritage learner’s future literacy development. Latent literacy is not a stage of development or a level of proficiency, but an aspect of use (Tse, 2001). In this study, Tse successfully demonstrates that different ethnic-linguistic vitalities are intricately related and working together in promoting bilingual learners’ literacy development.

In addition to Tse’s study, Chinen and Tucker (2006) point out that the concept of subjective ethno-linguistic vitality (SEV) should also be defined. SEV is the perception of minority-group members on their standing within the community, on a number of factors such as demography, economy, and social and cultural capital-including the use of their language (Ager, 2001; Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal, 1981). Each group member has a different perception of his/her group and of other ethnic groups as well, and manifestations of individual’s perceptions of ethnic identity are influenced by these perceptions (Chinen and Tucker, 2006). According to Bourhis, Giles, and Rosenthal (1981), SEV rather than EV, determines language and cultural maintenance or shift. The
reason for this is according to Giles (1977), status, demographic, and institutional support factors combine to make up the vitality of an ethno-linguistic group. A group's strengths and weaknesses in each of these domains could be assessed so as to provide a rough classification of ethno-linguistic groups as having low, medium, or high vitality (Yagmur & Kroon, 2003). Low vitality groups are most likely to go through linguistic assimilation and would, in the end, not be considered a distinctive collective group (Bourhis, Giles and Rosenthal, 1981). In contrast, high vitality groups are likely to maintain their language and distinctive cultural traits in multilingual settings. It is argued, however, that if the group members identify strongly with their community, in spite of low ethno-linguistic vitality perceptions, a minority group might find an adequate strategy for the survival of the group (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Giles & Viladot, 1994).

*Parental Involvement and School Performance of Bilingual Students*

In the past 40 years, studies have been conducted to determine the relationship between levels of parental involvement and school performance of bilingual students (Clark, 1983; Cronsnoe, 2001; Epstein, 1995; Gillum, 1977). Among all the different factors that contribute to the bilingual learners’ literacy development, home-context is ranked as one of the most important factors. According to these past studies, it is obvious that children begin their schooling in the contexts of their families and communities. For example, children enter formal school settings holding knowledge that arises within these contexts (Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck, 2010). Also, studies have shown that high levels of parental involvement can improve children’s academic achievement (Jones & Velez, 1997), school attendance (Allen, Thompson, & Drapeaux, 1997), motivation (West,
school engagement (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999), and homework performance (Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998).

However, there have also been some studies suggesting a negative relationship between parental involvement and their children’s future academic performances. For instance, according to Li (2003), many people may attribute some Chinese children’s school failures to deficiencies in families themselves (Li, 2003; Taylor 1993). Furthermore, under certain circumstances, family members’ stories demonstrate that their literacy and way of life, embedded in heritage cultural values, are not congruent with the school culture, and the cultural discontinuity may eventually lead to a widespread minority school failure (Li, 2003).

Regardless, a solid relationship exists between parental involvement and their children’s literacy development, as is constantly established by many different researchers (e.g. Li, 2003; Yang, 2007; Garcia, Fuligni, & Witkow, 2005). Nowadays, more and more studies have been conducted on the teaching practices of parents from minority ethnic groups, for instance, Asian-Americans, Native Americans and other Pacific islanders. However, I believe that among all the minority groups, Asian American parents are very good examples to illustrate the intensive involvement in their children’s education because they believe the intensive involvement will contribute to their children’s academic success even when faced with cultural and language barriers (Siu, 2001; Sohn & Wang, 2006)

Asian Parental Involvement and Minority Language Maintenance

Many studies, which are conducted on the literacy development of bilingual learners, provide us with a gleam of the underlining relationship between minority
language maintenance and home-context. For example, Feinberg (2002) points out those non-English-speaking parents cannot pass on their traditional family values or provide direction to school behavior if their family language is unavailable to the children. In other words, non-English speaking parents could better encourage the maintenance and development of their traditional family values, if they speak their own family language to their children at home. Also, Kondo-Brown (2006) asserts that when a child with foreign-born parents starts to socialize in the dominant language outside the home, the child’s first-learned non-dominant language (which may also be called “mother tongues” or “first languages”) may remain strong or gradually become secondary to the dominant language. To be more specific, in order to promote the heritage language learning in the future, parents of heritage learners should start to teach their children the heritage language at home as early as possible. Therefore, in the future, if they walk into society and start to communicate with others via their dominant language, their family language will still remain strong.

Also, unlike traditional foreign language learner, heritage learners have initially acquired certain levels of linguistic and cultural competence in a non-dominant language mainly through interaction with foreign-born parents and/or other family and community members (UCLA Steering Committee, 2000; Valdes, 1995, 2001).

Although extensive research has concluded that Chinese parents generally hold positive attitudes towards bilingual education (e.g. Lao, 2004), it remains largely unknown how they translate their beliefs into home practices. In the beginning of 21th century, many Chinese American parents were considered “tiger moms”, which named for an authoritarian parenting style. An Authoritarian parenting style is always associated
with “obsessing with power control”. While through gradually receiving influences from western school systems and western culture in general, more and more Chinese-American parents have made changes to their parenting style, rejecting being viewed as “obsessing with power control” or “willing to make scarifies”, and some of them even start to claim that they have adopted an authoritative parenting style, (Baumrind, 1971) which highlights “sharing power with other family members” frequently at home.

Early research believe that authoritative parenting styles will contribute more on the children’s future academic performance than the authoritarian parenting styles (e.g. Baumrind, 1972). However, Chao (2000) points out that Baumrind’s (1972) finding in regards to the relationship between the authoritative parenting style and children’s academic outcomes is controversial. Chao (2000) suggests that Asian American adolescents, whose parents highlights authoritarian style, in fact have been maintaining the highest grades. (Dornbusch et al., 1987; Stainberg, Dornbusch, et al., 1992; Steinberg, Lamborn, et al., 1992). In other words, Chao advocates that it is too soon to make judgment that which parenting style is more helpful, towards children’s literacy development in the future.

This study is an ethnographic case study of two Chinese families. These two groups of parents share a similar cultural background as well as their education level and annual revenue. However, one group of parents relies heavily on multi-media aids to promote their child’s literacy development at home, while the other group is inclined to encourage children’s interest in language learning by inviting them to participate in various culture-related activities. By controlling for cultural backgrounds, namely Chinese heritage and immigrant status (e.g. both group of parents are green-card holders,
and they have been living in U.S for more than five years), this study examines the potential influences of different teaching strategies on heritage learners’ future literacy development. This study mainly utilizes phone interviews with parents to explore their teaching philosophy and strategies for minority language maintenance.
Chapter Two

Methodology

Research Site

This research is conducted at a Chinese heritage school in a city with a population of approximately 300,000 people in the Midwest. This school was founded in the 1970s, housed in a Chinese Church, with sponsorship by parents, the Chinese Church, and the local Chinese American community. In 2007, the weekend heritage school registered as a Federal 501(c) (3) non-profit organization and moved from the church to a local private school, which provided the CHS with better facilities in a schooling environment. The CHS currently has nearly 100 students, 8 board members on voluntary basis and 12 teaching and administrative and staff with nominal pays. The CHS offers courses two hours on weekend to all levels of Chinese language classes for heritage families and English-speaking families, from 3 years old and up. The missions of the CHS are to 1) promote the study the Chinese language; 2) enhance the appreciation of Chinese culture, and 3) provide a network of support among individuals or organizations having a common interest in the Chinese cultural heritage.

Participants

The current research includes three participants. Two of them are parents of two different Chinese heritage learners. The other is the language instructor of these two CHLs. In order to control for cultural and linguistic variables, these two parents who are involved in this research have shared a similar cultural background as well as their education level. These two parents were both born and raised in the Mainland China and came to the U.S. to pursue advanced degrees. They both have been staying in U.S. for
more than five years, and are residents of the United States but not citizens. They thus both prefer to be called as “Chinese”, instead of “Chinese-American”. In this study, the term “Chinese-American” refers to the parent or the heritage learners, who are either “Chinese born, but raised in U.S., or U.S. born, and raised in U.S.” As for the heritage learners’ linguistic background, they are in the same age group and the same grade level in the K-12 school system. These two Chinese heritage learners are attending the same class at the same local Chinese heritage school. According to the parents, the time when these two Chinese heritage learners started their language learning, is very close. I selected the heritage learners at age 11 to 12 is because in Chinen and Tucker’s research, they believe that heritage learners have developed some sort of ethnic awareness (e.g., ethnic stereotypes), which is necessary for ethnic identity to be formed in the future (Chinen & Tucker, 2006). Also, the evidence of the development of this ethnic can be found in Lambert, Frankel, and Tucker’s (1996) study, that indicates that ethnic stereotypes are formed by age 12 (Chinen & Tucker, 2006; Lamber, Frankel, & Tucker, 1996).

**Recruiting of the Participants**

At the beginning of this research, I sent out e-mail invitations to all the Chinese parents, who fulfilled the research requirement at the research site, to participate in this research. In the email, I include information concerning the purpose of this research, the procedure of data collection, and other details following the requirement of using human subjects in social studies. I sent out fifteen emails in total, and four of them agreed to participate in this research. Among these four families, I select two parents, because they
have shared similar personal background, as well as their children’ language learning experience.

Since these two Chinese heritage learners are enrolled in the same class, I only have to contact one language instructor. Therefore, different from the process of recruiting of the parents, I send emails to the language instructor Lily (pseudonym). After she agreed to participate in the research, I made a phone call to ask her about the difference of in-class literacy performances between these two CHLs.

Based on the condition of confidentiality, the names of the participants and their parents are replaced by pseudonyms.

*Interview Questions*

To address the research questions, two types of interview questions for both parents and the language instructor were developed. The first group of interview questions were for parents of CHL only and it intends to explore 1) the content of different teaching strategies at home, 2) CHL’s attitude towards language learning at home, 3) perceived vitality of their Chinese community, and 4) parents’ approaches in helping their children to develop ethnic awareness. All the interview questions were asked originally in Chinese then translated into English.

I split the general question about the teaching strategies into many specific open-ended questions. I wish to use these specific open-ended questions to help parents to recall their different teaching practices at home, and enable them to consider the reason why certain strategies are selected, while the others are not. For example, I ask parents questions as follow during the interview: “What strategies do you use at home to help your children to learn Chinese?” “Do you watch Chinese TV shows or movies at home?”
“Do you have any works of literature in Chinese at home?” And “Will your child read them voluntarily?” Besides enquiring about different teaching strategies, I also raise questions about the language attitude of CHL at home. By asking question as “Does your child like to study Chinese at home?” or “How is your child’s response to your cooking of Chinese food” I wish to understand how the CHL’s react to certain teaching practice of his parents, I also wonder whether a certain teaching strategy will influence one’s attitude towards language learning or not.

Later, in order to predict how people perceive the ethno-linguistic vitality of their community, I borrowed several questions from the subjective vitality questionnaire (SVQ) form, and made changes to it. The questions which I borrowed were originally designed to see how the Japanese community affects their members’ ethnic identity as Japanese and their Japanese language development (Chinen, Tucker, 2006). I revised it, according to the personal background of the participants and the characteristic of the Chinese community which these participants share. Additionally, the changes I made to the questions enable me to analyze the answers to these questions in a qualitative way, instead of a quantitative way. However, as I mentioned earlier in the literature review, subjective ethno linguistic vitality (SEV), rather than objective ethno linguistic vitality, determines language and culture maintenance or shift (Chinen, Tucker, 2006; Bourhis, Giles, & Rosenthal, 1981). Previous research argues that the attention should be given on perceived rather than actual (objective) vitality, because perceived vitality serves as a mediator of inter-ethnic behavior in real life (Chinen, Tucker, 2006). SVQ measures belief that group members hold about the relationship between their language and the social domains in which it is or should be used; therefore, it contributes to understanding
group members’ motives and attitude for reinforcing or changing their standing in social
domains such as demographic, economic, and social and culture capital (Ager, 2001).

The last aspect in interview questions is the approach which parents used to help
their children to develop ethnic awareness. I ask, for example, “How do you teach your
children about his ethnic identity?” and “How do you refer your child, as ‘Chinese-
American’; ‘Asian-American’ or ‘American’ outside of the home?” Through the answers
to these questions, I am able to exhibit different approaches which parents employ at
home to help their children develop ethnic awareness. For more detailed questions, please
see the Appendix A at end of the research. However, during my interview with parents, I
do receive negative responses for all the questions concerning about developing ethnic
awareness, as well. I therefore do find out that there are parents of CHL who did not
employ any approach to assist the development of one’s ethnic awareness.

The second type of interview questions is for Chinese instructor of CHL only and it is intend to measure the differences of literacy performances between these two CHLs in class. For example: I ask “Are there any differences in attitudes towards language
learning between these two students? If so, what are they?” “Are there any differences in
in-class literacy performances between these two students? If so, what are they?” Are
there any differences in the grades of any formal or informal assessment in class between
these two students? ”

All the interview questions are raised in order to help me to answer my research
questions eventually.
Data Analysis

All the interviews are tape-recorded first, and later are transcribed, word by word, into descriptive notes, including the questions and comments as well as the personal information of the participants. Also, I have included identifying and explanatory information at the beginning of the transcript and number all pages with tape number. Next, I have coded the descriptive notes based on different teaching strategies which parents claim to use at home, for example, provide culture related supplementary materials, encourage communication between Chinese heritage learners’ and their grandparents, supervise learners’ language assignments and so on.

After coding the different teaching strategies, I continued to arrange my codes in hierarchies. Some codes were combined, while some were pulled apart. Finally all of them were assigned to three main categories: building up a positive language/culture environment at home, encouraging active involvement in the community, and early promotion in establishing of one’s ethnic identity.

Coding of the descriptive notes helped me not only to identify different teaching practices of parents at home, but also assist me in interpreting the potential influence upon which distinctive home-context may have on the literacy develop of CHLs.

Besides coding the different teaching strategies which are employed by the parents, I also coded the descriptive notes of the conversation between the language instructor and me. I coded the description notes according to the language instructor’s reflection on the distinctive literacy performances of these two Chinese Heritage learners. For example, one of the Chinese heritage learners excels in reading and writing skills, while the other prefers to answer questions orally. By coding the content of interview
between language instructor and myself, I was able to show the influence which different teaching strategies at home would have upon one’s literacy performance in the class.

The researcher’s interpretations are then triangulated by sharing them with her participants in a form of discussion (Sakamoto, 2006). In case where misunderstandings or misinterpretations, or misrepresentations were identified, they were immediately rectified and documented.
Chapter Three

Results

In this section, I provide detailed descriptions of the efforts of two families in promoting maintenance and development of Chinese as a heritage language at home, including their personal education background, the background of their children, and the different teaching strategies which they employed at home. I intend to use these two stories to represent the influence which different teaching strategies have had upon on the literacy development and attitude toward language learning of Chinese heritage learners.

Zhang’s parent’s teaching strategies at home

Zhang’s mother came from mainland China. She had finished her undergraduate study in China and moved to the U.S. to pursue a higher level of education. Zhang’s father is now separated from Zhang’s mother and Zhang lives with her mother. Zhang’s mother has obtained a master degree in education from a U.S. university, and is currently working as a supplementary teacher at a local middle school. Zhang’s mother is a bilingual speaker of Mandarin and English.

Eleven-year-old Zhang attends a local Chinese heritage school every Friday, and is also a sixth grade student at a local elementary school. According to her mother, Zhang started to learn Chinese at a very early age. For the last three years Zhang has been attending the local Chinese heritage school to receive formal education of Chinese language. Zhang’s mother told me proudly that Zhang enjoys learning Chinese very much.

“She (Zhang) loves to tell me about what she has learned at school, and how other students behave at school too. And I could tell from her words that she enjoys
learning Chinese and making new friends at the Chinese school.” However, Zhang’s mother also agrees that two hours study at a local Chinese heritage school is not enough for Zhang to develop her language ability in reading and writing.

I have observed some of the classes, and I found that teachers at Chinese school preferred to ask students questions orally, instead of letting them write down the answers. My daughter’s oral Chinese is already pretty good, as well as her listening skill, so I wish teachers could spend more time on training students’ reading and writing skills.

After having a brief conversation on the Zhang’s mom’s opinion about the local Chinese heritage school and its education in general, I questioned Zhang’s mother about her teaching strategies at home. Zhang’s mother tells me that the main strategies which she employs at home is providing Zhang with extra homework and supervising Zhang to finish it. Zhang’s mother believes that the homework which teachers of Chinese heritage school assign is not enough. Zhang’s mother would go on-line and download some exercises which are aimed at strengthening learners’ reading and writing skills in Chinese, and print them out and give them to Zhang. “Sometimes, when a friend or a relative goes back to China, I will ask him or her to bring back some Chinese elementary school language exercise books.” Zhang’s mother goes on, saying that, “It helps too.” Zhang’s mother hopes that by providing Zhang extra homework and supervising her to finish it, Zhang would understand the importance of learning Chinese. Also, in the process of supervising Zhang’s homework, Zhang’s mother can find out Zhang’s
deficiencies in Chinese learning. Besides mentioning the efforts in preparing and supervising her child’s homework, Zhang’s mother also mentions her use of digital electronic devices as a tool to increase Zhang’s interest in learning Chinese. “Zhang is a quiet child and she enjoys being alone and doing her stuff. But I know how much she likes an iPad. Therefore, I promise to buy her an iPad as long as she promises to use it for learning.” Zhang’s mother has named some applications which she downloaded from the apple store to help Zhang to learn Chinese. According to her description, these applications have combined practice with games. Zhang’s mother also mentions collecting Chinese movies and cartoons. Zhang’s mother would let her child watch some Chinese cartoons or movies from time to time, in order to let her child be familiar with China and its culture.

“I love the idea that learning should be fun,” Zhang’s mother concludes at end of the interview. “Therefore, I think I have been paying a lot of effort in letting Zhang realize how much fun she would obtain, if she works hard in learning Chinese. And I am sure that Zhang understands how serious I am with her learning of Chinese.”

However, during the interview, when she is asked the question ‘Do you speak Chinese with your child at home?’ Zhang’s mother’s answer is no. Zhang’s mother explains later that it is more efficient, when you give order in English. “Sometimes, I just want her to get some jobs done as soon as possible, and I do not want to waste time in explaining the Chinese expressions.”

In sum, Zhang’s mother has stressed her effort in collecting and selecting different learning supplementary materials many times during the interview, and exhibits confidence in its influences on Zhang’s literacy development of Chinese.
Zhang’s in-class literacy performance

After conducting an interview with Zhang’s mother, I conducted another interview with Zhang’s language instructor at the Chinese school. Zhang’s language instructor, Lily, is a graduate student at a U.S. university, with concentration in English as second language. She says that Zhang is a very quiet student in class. Her voice is low whenever she answers a question, and apparently she is not confident with her answers to the question. She gave her answers in English first, before she answered it in Chinese. Lily seems to believe that Zhang is trying to confirm that she understands the questions, by doing so. Similarly Zhang prefers teachers to ask her questions in English rather than in Chinese. “She sometimes would ask me the same question again in English, just to make sure she did not misunderstand the question,” Lily says, “She is a very serious student, but also exhibits less confidence in her listening and speaking skills than her classmates.”

When asked about Zhang’s reading and writing skills, Lily says that she is surprised by Zhang’s homework. “Her handwriting is very neat, and she never missed one homework.” Lily adds that “Whenever I am teaching a new words or phrase in class, she will take out her exercise book and write it down at least three times.” Lily believes that Zhang is more confident in her writing skills. “She writes more quickly than most of her classmates, and she knows a lot Chinese idioms and tales.” Lily also confirms that Zhang has performed very well on the in-class quizzes, and in most of the major exams. “Because most of the questions which are included in the exam or quizzes are from the
homework, therefore I do not think Zhang would have any difficulty in answering them correctly.”

At the end of the interview, Lily says that she has experience of talking to Zhang’s mother, and realizes that Zhang’s mother is very serious about Zhang’s learning of Chinese, and has put a lot of effort in encouraging Zhang’s reviewing and practicing of Chinese. “But I am also surprised that Zhang’s mother barely speaks Chinese with her at home.” Lily added, “If she could start to use Chinese at home, maybe it would help Zhang to strengthen her oral skill in Chinese.”

Zin’s parents teaching strategies at home

Zin is now eleven years old and attends the sixth grade in a local elementary school. Zin goes to the same Chinese heritage school with Zhang, and has been studying under the same language instructor. Zin’s father and mother are both full-time workers at different companies. According to Zin’s mother, Zin was raised by his grandmother. Zin’s grandmother has been living with Zin’s families for more than six years and she is also in charge of taking care of Zin and his sister. Zin’s parents have finished their undergraduate study in mainland China. Zin’s father is the first one in their family who has found a job in U.S. and also is the first one to become a green card holder. Zin’s mother accompanied Zin’s father to the U.S. and finished her graduate studies in business in a U.S. university. Zin was born in U.S. However, he lived in Mainland China for more than a year. Consequently, Zin’s Chinese speaking and listening skills are better. Zin’s mother says in the interview that, “In fact, I do not have enough time to take care of Zin, as he grows up. His grandmother is in charge of his education mainly. Also, because we are living with Zin’s grandmother, we have to speak Chinese at home.” Zin’s mother
sounds very proud of his son’s oral Chinese. She tells me that when Zin was very little, Zin’s grandmother used to read Chinese traditional poems to him, and when he started to learn to speak, Zin’s grandmother would let him recite some of the easy poems. “I believe that Zin has a gift in language learning,” Zin’s mother says “He is good at imitating different dialects of Chinese from TV, even though we never taught him any dialects at home. And I did not see any other child in the Chinese school could do that.”

When asked by question that what kind of teaching strategies they have employed at home to promote Zin’s language learning, Zin’s mother says that since Zin’s father and she are both full-time employees at different companies, they did not have enough time to supervise Zin’s homework, nor provide him with supplementary learning materials. But, Zin’s mother tells me that they prefer to use dinner time or TV time to teach Zin some Chinese characters.

Zin loves Chinese food very much, and his grandmother is very good at cooking too. Therefore, Zin eats different dishes every day. We prefer to teach Zin how to read the names of different Chinese dishes at the table, and by doing so, sometimes we are teaching him some knowledge in Chinese history and culture.

Zin’s mother goes on mentioning that at their home, they celebrate different Chinese festivals, by cooking. “China has a very long history of cooking, we appreciate it, and it is a more efficient way for Zin to remember different festivals.”
In addition to using food and cooking to teach Zin Chinese at home, Zin’s mother also encourages Zin to participate in the video conferences with other relatives in China every week. Zin’s mother says that Zin’s father and she both have several relatives in China. Therefore, they communicate frequently with each other via video conferences each week. “I think it is a better chance for Zin to practice his language too” Zin’s mother claims, “Also, it helps Zin to realize how important it is to learn Chinese well.”

At the end of the interview, Zin’s mother put me on the phone with Zin’s grandmother, and his grandmother told me that she also used to be in charge of taking Zin to participate different community activities.

Sometimes, Zin’s parents will drive me and Zin to attend different events or celebrations, which are held by the local Chinese association. Even though Zin’s parents could not accompany him to the end of the event, I could do so and explain the theme of some the culture events to him.

In sum, Zin’s parents emphasize that they have made a lot of effort in promoting Zin’s language learning at home, by seizing different chances to let Zin to practice his heritage language, as well as teach him about China and its culture. But they admit that they are worrying about that they have paid less attention on Zin’s homework, or in-class literacy performances.

Zin’s in-class literacy performance

Since Zin and Zhang are attending the same class at the same Chinese school, I only have to conduct another interview with same language instructor Lily as before. This
interview is concerned with Zin’s in class literacy performances. According to Lily, Zin is a very active learner in class. He loves to answer questions, and he is also an attention seeker. “Different from Zhang, Zin loves to read everything aloud in class. Sometimes, I do not ask him for the answer to certain questions, but he will answer it voluntarily.” Lily reports that she seldom sees Zin’s parents at the CHS, though she occasionally meets his grandmother.

Lily believes that Zin’s grandmother has played a very important role in helping Zin’s language learning at home. “Zin likes to start a sentence by saying ‘my grandmother once told me that……’”, and also Zin prefers to share stories of her grandmother’s childhood with others.” Lily goes on saying that Zin always exhibits great interest in China in class and he says that he would like to come back to China and visit his cousins in the future.

But, Lily also admits that even though Zin’s speaking and listening skills are good, he does not like to read or write at all. Lily says that she has hard time to make Zin sit still and copy the words or expressions as others do. “He has too much energy and does not like to read or write Chinese words. I think the reason is that he thinks reading and writing is too hard, and he has less confidence in learning it.” Therefore, Zin does not do well in quizzes and exams, as he is unable and unwilling to finish all the questions. He requests his teachers to give him oral exams instead. “I have talked with Zin’s grandmother about this problem several times, but she seems troubled by the similar problem too. She told me that she could not find a way to enhance Zin’s reading and writing skills at home as well.”
At end of the interview, Lily concludes that Zin is a very quick learner; however, it is his advantage as well as disadvantage, because the sooner he understands the words or expressions, the less interest he will exhibit in using them in class.

The education background of Zhang and Zin’s parents is similar, as well as the attitude towards their child’s language learning at home. However, the teaching strategies that they employ at home to help their child Chinese learning are distinctive. Zhang’s mother focuses her attention on providing Zhang with extra language assignments, while Zin’s parents prefer to combine language learning with every day experience. Based on the reflections of the language instructor of Zhang and Zin, it is apparent that different teaching strategies do cast different influence on the learner’s literacy performances in the class.

Table 1

_Difference of in-class literacy performance between Zhang and Zin_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zhang’s in-class literacy performances</th>
<th>Zin’s in-class literacy performances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repeat answer in English first</td>
<td>Quick learner and also exceeded in listening and speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy asking questions in English</td>
<td>A slower reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excel in reading and writing skills</td>
<td>Barely finished all the questions on the exams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neat hand writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better performance in the quizzes and exams</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Apparently, even though Zhang’s mother has made a lot of effort in helping Zhang reviewing learned materials’ at home but not using Chinese in daily conversation with
Zhang may have lead to a change of the perception which Zhang has had toward language learning. That is she will start to perceive learning Chinese is as same as learning many other foreign languages. In contrast, Zin’s family has done a better job in raising learner’s interest in language learning using every-day experience to teach Zin about China and culture; Zin’s parents are building up Zin’s confidence in Chinese learning gradually. Factors discussed here are summarized in Table 2

Table 2

**Different Teaching Strategies of Parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zhang’s parent’s teaching strategies</th>
<th>Zin’s parents’ teaching strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Supervise Language assignment</td>
<td>- Chinese only” at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Watch Chinese movies/TV shows regularly</td>
<td>- Cook Chinese food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provide culture-related supplementary materials of learning.</td>
<td>- Celebrate Chinese Festivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Use iPad to assist CHL to review learned materials</td>
<td>- Encourage children to participate in various kinds of culture related competitions or activities within the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Praise children for naming the traits of Chinese value system</td>
<td>- Take children to go to celebrations of Chinese festivals which are organizing by the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Praise children for studying the history of China</td>
<td>- Encouraging children to identify with China culturally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Set up connections between children and their grandparents or relatives in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Take children back to China for a vacation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Four

Discussion

Factors that Influence the Choice of Teaching Practices at Home

In this research I have conducted interviews with parents of Chinese heritage learners on their different teaching strategies at home. Based on their answers to my interview questions, I found out that these two families are living in the same community, where Chinese has high ethno-linguistic vitality. In other words, Chinese hold high status within this community. For example, people from this community like to attend the celebrations of all the major Chinese festivals, and are prone to send their children to a Chinese heritage school to study Chinese.

In addition to receiving influence from their own community, there are three more factors which contribute to the choice of family language and the choice of different teaching strategies at home. These three factors are the structure of one’s family, the attitude which parents have towards language learning, and social interactions with people outside one’s community.

To begin with, family structure plays a very important role in affecting the parents’ choice of teaching strategies at home. One family could not easily borrow and copy the successful teaching strategies of another family. For instance, even though Zhang’s mother’s teaching strategies have its advantages in promoting the maintenance and development of Chinese as a heritage language at home, Zin’s family is not able to copy the Zhang’s mother’s teaching strategies at home. The reason of impossibility is...
very obvious, because Zin’s mother and father are both full-time employees at different
companies. Therefore they do not have enough time to spend on the internet and
downloading the extra language assignments for Zin to do at home. Meanwhile, Zin’s
grandparents’s knowledge in helping Zin to improve reading or writing skills at home is
very limited; therefore, she is not able to either understand Zhang’s mother’s teaching
strategies, or find a better way to promote Zin’s language learning at home.

Secondly, the attitude which parents have towards language learning also
influences the choice made by parents of CHLs. For instance, there is more significant
disadvantage with Zhang’s mother’s teaching practice. According to her causal talk
during the interview, I find out that Zhang’s mother perceives Chinese as a foreign
language instead of a heritage language. The fact that she made a lot of efforts in
preparing Zhang with more language assignment and exercises is because she wishes
Zhang to have the best grade in “all the exams at school.” Li (2006) once points out that
what parents do or do not do is vital in shaping the children’s attitude and learning
experience. The reason, according to early studies, is that “the children’s divergent paths
of language and literacy development are closely related to their parents’ perception of
the host society as well as the pragmatic and symbolic values they ascribed to the
language” (e.g., Schecter and Bayley, 2002; Li, 2006). In other words, no matter how
much effort a parent has put in preparing supplementary learning materials, as long as he
or she does not use Chinese at home, his child would still perceive Chinese as a second
language, instead of a heritage language. Therefore, the heritage learner’s interest in
learning Chinese may decrease gradually, a the parents stop putting more effort in
promoting language learning at home. Or due to the lack of appropriate context for the
heritage learner to utilize the language, the CHLs would lose interest in language learning automatically. However, a child’s perception of heritage language learning does not guarantee high language proficiency; his or her perception about heritage language learning do affect the process of learning.

The third factor which I listed above is the social interactions with people outside their community. Social interaction can influence the choice of parents of CHL in many aspects. For example, the choice of furniture, the choice of day care center, or even the choice of family language, or teaching strategies which are used to promote language learning. Research suggests that by identifying the conductive social factors that support bilingualism, parents can exercise their power in making decisions pertaining to language policy and language use (e.g., Berryman, 1983; Sancho, 1979; Sakamoto, 2006). In other words, sometimes other people’s narratives play an important role in changing parents’ minds about the certain teaching approaches, especially if the person is outside of his or her community. Another example will be that, during my interview with Zhang’s mother, she stopped several times to ask me whether her approach of teaching Chinese is efficient or not. Besides, according to the Chinese instructor Lily, Zin’s grandma also asked her a lot of questions about how to teach Zin at home. However, both Lily and I are not living in their communities. In this sense, narrative exchanges provided an integral source of information for immigrant families (Sakamoto, 2006). These questions all indicate how important parents of CHLs value the suggestions from others. 

**Early Development of Ethnic Awareness and Literacy Development**

The story of Zin’s family is a fine example to illustrate the importance of the early development of one’s ethnic awareness. Chinen and Tucker (2006) in their research
suggest that the earlier heritage learners start to be aware of his ethnic identity, it is easier for them to build an ethnic identity in the future.

An example in promoting early development of ethnic awareness is that Zin’s parents like to encourage the communication between heritage learner and native speakers of heritage language. It could spur the CHL’s interest in attempting to answer questions “How to become a Chinese”, or “What is the relationship between your child and Chinese people?” etc. In the process of trying to answering these questions, CHL would increase his interests in language learning and enhance his language proficiency eventually. Another example is that, due to the widely usage of Chinese at Zin’s home, and the frequent contacting with other relatives in China, Zin becomes proud of being a “Chinese expert”, and does not mind his classmates calling him “Chinese”. Cho (2000) suggests that those who have developed a higher degree of proficiency in their HL have strong ethnic identity and strong affiliation with their ethnic group, and such that individual have a greater understanding and knowledge of their group’s cultural values, ethnics, and manners (Cho, 2000).

Also, Zin’s story also indicates that intensive communication with native speaker of heritage language, especially with relatives, could promote the process of language socialization of HL. Language socialization is defined as both “socialization through the use of language and socialization to use language” (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Later, Park (2006) points out that intensive communication in between heritage learners and his relatives could promote language socialization of the HL, and eventually encourage the construction of HL’s ethnic identity as well as avoiding language shift (Park, 2006).
Many researchers suggest that early development of HL’s ethnic awareness promotes the construction of one’s ethnic identity in the future. Furthermore, ethnic identity can also be helpful for CHL’s future literacy development. Witkow and Garcia in their researches on the ethnic identity and academic achievement, advocate that

Specifically, adolescents who identify more with their family’s cultural background and use national origin labels, such as Mexican or Chinese to describe themselves would show greater levels of academic motivation and achievement as compared with adolescents who use hyphenated or compound labels such as Mexican-American or pan-ethnic labels such as Asian or Latino” (Witkow & Garcia, 2005).

And the reason for these phenomena is because these identities have social meanings in terms of the stereotypical characteristics, norms, and behaviors that are associated with social groups (Hogg, 2003).

However, there are also arguments concerning about the similar teaching strategies similar to those which are employed in Zin’s family. For instance, Sakamoto (2006) claims that this approach only necessitates the development of certain types of language skills while neglecting others, resulting in an unbalanced and incomplete first language (L1) proficiency (Sakamoto, 2006). Even though Zin’s parents emphasized their efforts in teaching Chinese at home, they also admit that they did not pay attention on Zin’s homework or providing Zin extra assignments to practice reading or writing skills.
Therefore, according to Zin’s language instructor’s reflection on his in-class literacy performances, Zin’s unbalanced L1 proficiency is very obvious.

Becoming a bilingual has been proven to have many benefits. (Li, 2006) Children who are more motivated to learn their HL tend to have a more positive outlook on their ethnic identity (Mills, 2001; Tse, 2000, Li, 2006), better academic achievement (Lee, 2002), better social interactions and relationship with heritage learning peers and more personal gains (Cho, 2000). But there are also many external and internal factors which would affect the process of language acquisition (Li, 2006). Many researches have supported a strong relationship between parent’s involvement and the maintenance and development of heritage language at home, but still a full-support from parents is not enough to guarantee the success of helping children become a proficient bilingual. Only if Chinese heritage schools, parents, community, and even the public schools could work together, may promote more and more Chinese heritage learners to become bilingual learners.

Limitation and Future Research

In this research, I have only conducted interviews with parents of two different Chinese heritage learners, and one language instructor at a local Chinese heritage school. Based on their answers to the interview questions, I am able to exhibit some teaching strategies which are employed by distinctive Chinese immigrant families. However, I do not have enough time to design more questions to evaluate the levels of ethnic awareness of these two CHLs, as well as include observation of the literacy performances of CHLs at home. Therefore the result of this research is not able to represent all the influence which teaching strategies have upon the CHL’s development of ethnic awareness, let
alone to be used as solid evidence to predict the influence of ethnic identity upon the literacy development of Chinese heritage learners in the U. S. People who interests in the relationship between teaching strategies of immigrant parents and their children’s literacy development should conduct a more comprehensive research on home-context of immigrant families, and different factors which contribute to the HL’s literacy development.


Appendix A

Questionnaire for Parents of Chinese Heritage Learner

This questionnaire is utilized during the phone interview with parents of Chinese heritage learners. These questions are asked originally in Chinese, and then translate into English.

Personal background info:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your occupation?
3. Are you an American citizen?
4. Are you a permanent resident or green-card holder?
5. How old is your child?
6. How many years has your child been learning Chinese?
7. How positive is your child’s attitude towards learning Chinese?

Teaching practices at home:

8. What strategies you used at home to help your children to learn Chinese?
9. Do you watch Chinese TV shows or movies at home?
10. Do you have any works of literature in Chinese at home? Will your child read them voluntarily?
11. Do you celebrate Chinese traditional festivals at home?
12. Do you cook Chinese food at home?
13. What do you do to raise your child’s interest in learning Chinese?
14. Do you supervise your child’s Chinese language homework?
15. How many hours have you spend on supervising your children’s Chinese language homework?
16. Do you design any supplementary teaching materials in Chinese for your child at home?

Home language:
17. Do you speak never/rarely/often/always with your child in Chinese at home?
18. Do you speak never/rarely/often/always with any other family members in Chinese at home?
19. Does your child speak never/rarely/often/always in Chinese with you at home?
20. Does your child speak never/rarely/often/always with his peers in Chinese at home or outside?

Language school vs. home-tutoring

21. What are the reasons you decided on a Chinese heritage school vs. home-tutoring?
22. Do you ever accompany your child, while he or she is attending language school?
23. How you ever observe your child’s language class?
24. How often do you talk to the language teacher of your child?
25. What is the content of the usual conversations between the language teacher and you?
26. What changes have you made to the teaching practices you had used, if you had made any changes, why?
27. What are your children’s reactions to any changes you made to the teaching practices?

Language tests and evaluations:

28. Has your child taken any standard language test of Chinese? If so, please specify the test name and the date of test.
29. Do you have any intention to let your child take any language test in the future?
30. Do you agree that the exams and quizzes which are given by the language school could reflect the language ability of your child? If not, why?

Community involvement & ethnic identity construction.
31. Have you joined, or intending to join the Chinese community in your city or participating in their community activities?

32. Do you agree that joining in the Chinese community would promote your child’s language acquisition? If so, how?

33. How do you teach your children about his ethnic identity?

34. How do you refer your child, as “Chinese-American”; “Asian-American” or “American” outside of the home?
Appendix B

Questionnaire for Chinese Language Instructor

This questionnaire is utilized during the phone interview with language instructor at the Chinese heritage school. These questions are asked originally in Chinese, and then translate into English.

In-Class Literacy Performance

1. Are there any differences in attitudes towards language learning between these two students? If so, what are they?
2. Are there any differences in in-class literacy performances between these two students? If so, what are they?
3. Are there any differences in the grades of any formal or informal assessment in class between these two students?
4. What factors do you think contributes to the existing differences in literacy performance between these two students?
5. How often you do communicate with the parents and what is the content of your usual conferences?
6. Do you think the parent’s involvement influences students’ attitudes about the language acquisition?
7. What are the pros and cons of parents’ involvement in a student’s language learning?