Promoting Native Language Retention in First Generation Chinese Americans:

A Design Study Proposal

Situative Design Project Study Proposal

ED 333A

Submitted to Dr. Deedee Perez-Granados

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July 12, 2004
Introduction

Many first-generation Chinese American children are initially exposed to the Chinese language by their parents in the home. However, because Chinese American children must learn to communicate in English in order to assimilate into mainstream American society, they are faced with a distinct challenge. There is the social pressure to speak English in their daily life that competes with yet another social pressure to retain their native language and preserve their heritage. The child’s social interactions may provide both constraints and affordances in the retention of their native language. The focus of our paper is to examine what social interactions may be responsible for the loss of Chinese language among 12-14 year old first generation Chinese American children and what social constructs may also provide solutions to this issue.

The Learning Problem

A large slice of the ethnically diverse population of the United States consists of Chinese Americans. According to the US Census Bureau in 2002, there were an estimated 1.04 million Chinese-Americans in California alone. Because of various social factors, many first generation Chinese Americans find it difficult to retain their native language by the time they reach high school. Some of the contributing factors to this learning problem include social pressures to assimilate, being surrounded by media in English, inconsistent use of the Chinese language at home and a lack of motivation to converse in Chinese. It can be stated that attrition of the native language for many first generation Chinese American children occurs with an increased social interaction with the environment outside the home. While the first several years of the child’s life may be spent interacting
with parents, siblings and family friends who also speak Chinese; as soon as the child explores the world beyond the walls of the home - (i.e. day care, preschool, school, friends of different ethnic backgrounds, interaction with media such as television and computer games), they gain fluency in English – the language that dominates most social domains. Many children, then, do not feel the need to use Chinese when most social interaction going on around them is in English, and thus end up losing their proficiency. Children might also fear being ostracized by their peers because of the use of a different language, or they might feel hesitant to use a language they feel they don’t have mastery over. Lack of Chinese-speaking social networks outside the home leads to fewer opportunities for these first generation children to exercise their ability to converse in Chinese.

**The Learning Goal/Aim**

The aim of this study is to determine what situations and social environments will best foster Chinese language retention amongst first generation Chinese Americans. The ability to remain bilingual is an asset for all first-generation Americans. According to a study by Portes and Hao (1998), first and second-generation fluent bilinguals performed better academically than their monolingual peers. In addition, proficiency in both English and Chinese may help participatory learning and collaborative practices in their communities.
**Design principle**

Our proposed study is based on the following principle of situative learning theory, as documented by Greeno, et al. (1996)

*Environments of participation in social practices of inquiry and learning.* Learning environments can be organized to foster students’ learning to participate in practices of inquiry and learning and to support the development of students’ personal identities as capable and confident learners and knowers.

We propose that particular social envelopes affect the attrition or retention of native language. Social systems the children are involved in may affect the level of motivation to exercise fluency in Chinese as illustrated below:

- **School:**
  1. Children from different backgrounds have a common language to communicate (English) and hence they don’t feel the need to use any other language.
  2. Children may feel social pressure to fit in, encouraging them to use the common vernacular.
  3. Parents might want children to be fluent in English to ensure that they can excel in school, thus steering them away from speaking Chinese, even if the parents do intrinsically value their native language.
• Family/Home:
   1. In the home environment, parents may or may not consistently speak Chinese with their children.
   2. There are television channels providing Chinese programs and news.
   3. Relationships with siblings and extended family – what language do they use to interact?
   4. Engaged participation in cultural activities – recognizing traditions in the home.

• Social Interaction:
   1. Peer group outside of school.
   2. Places of worship.
   3. Concentration of native population in community child lives in.
   4. Level of confidence in abilities to speak Chinese -- Lack of confidence in abilities to speak Chinese may deter children from speaking it amongst other Chinese speakers.

• Media interaction:
   This society places great value in entertainment provided by television, the Internet and video games. Children are entertained and engaged in this media; therefore the language of the media has a significant role to play in the individual’s motivation to retain and use the Chinese language. It has been noted that many children don’t value pastimes that involve native language because they may be considered uninteresting. Hence, there is a shift in the entertainment source (example:
storytelling from grandfather vs. latest television show). [Crawford, 1996] Electronic media replaces traditional entertainment that makes use of the native language.

**Proposed study**

The purpose of our study is to evaluate the social influences that may affect Chinese language retention of Chinese American children. In order to conduct a study that focuses on the situative perspective and how participation in practices of community affect learning, we will focus on the retention of conversational/spoken-language Chinese abilities, rather than fluency in writing and reading Chinese. We will therefore be able to observe how the individuals converse with others in their social environments to retrieve our data. Our qualitative research method will include the following:

I. Participants:

   Ten 12-14 year-old Chinese-Americans - we chose this age group because adolescents are susceptible to both peer and family influences.

II. Location:

   San Francisco – we chose this region to provide a realistic ethnically diverse setting.

III. Timeframe

   Three-year study. The study will be conducted over this timeframe to allow researchers to observe children during their middle-school years as they become more susceptible to influences not only from their parents but also from their peers.
Methodology

Pre and Post-Study Interviews:
At the onset of the study, an individual interview with each of the 10 students will be conducted to assess their comfort-level with conversational Chinese. In addition, we will conduct initial interviews with parents to gather data such as the parents’ education level, their fluency in English, and frequency of Chinese language usage at home. A Chinese language expert will be involved in the interview process. Again, at the end of the 3-year study, a post-study interview will be conducted to assess the students’ current comfort-level with conversational Chinese. This will be a qualitative analysis rather than a quantitative assessment. Observers will videotape the interviews and evaluate the confidence level with which the students speak Chinese.

During the 3-year study, we will use the following instruments to gather data:

Audio Journal:
Once per month, each child will be asked to describe his/her month on a digital recorder that will be uploaded to our research website. The child will be asked to discuss some of their daily activities and interactions with other people and how they communicate, including which language they use and why and to whom they speak with each language within their daily environments.

Field study:
Once per month for the course of the 3-year period, an observer will shadow each child and follow his/her day’s activities. The observer will document the people, environments, occasions, and instances the child is involved in and his/her usage of each language paying particular attention to when they use Chinese without external pressure and when they use it instinctively.

*Interviews:*

Once per month, we will conduct an interview with each child to have an in-depth conversation about his/her usage of Chinese and English. In these interviews, the researchers will focus on the child’s self-assessment of his/her interaction with other people within the various communities they’re involved in and how these factors influence his/her usage of English or Chinese.

Based on the above three research instruments, we will evaluate the following data:

1) Review of pre-study and post-study Chinese language interviews/conversations.

2) Data regarding family background, including parents’ level of education and proficiency in both English and Chinese language and social involvement with extended family from outside of the household, including those from their homeland.

3) We will observe the interaction dynamics between family members at home to determine if there is a pattern of Chinese usage between different family members, such as between the child and his/her siblings and with his/her parents.
4) Observation of after-school social activities – when, where and how the children use Chinese or English. We are interested in determining which social factors may influence the child to use either language.

5) Type of peer groups – observe percentage of time that children socialize with peers of similar ethnic/cultural background to determine how they may influence the language choice.

6) Media - The percentage of time children watch English-speaking television shows and listen to English language radio.

Assessment:

Based on the data above, we are hoping to determine social conditions that maximize and promote children’s Chinese language retention. We will set up a comparative analysis to include the self-assessment of the participant, level of involvement in Chinese-American community and fluency/proficiency in Chinese based on interviews and observation data.

**Potential Findings of Study**

For our study, we hypothesized that a child’s social interactions within the family, peer groups and media, contribute to the individual’s loss of fluency in conversational Chinese. The findings we concluded at the end of the 3-year study show that:

- Parents play a very important role in a child’s Chinese language retention. Children who had at least one parent communicate to them only in
Chinese were most likely to communicate with the rest of their family members (siblings, grandparents etc.) in Chinese.

- Most of the participants spoke Chinese the least, if at all, when they were in school. Their classroom lessons and activities, as well as their peers’ various ethnic backgrounds required them to communicate in English.

- Children who participated in school clubs and varsity sports also communicated solely in English while involved in these activities. These children also mentioned that their membership in these clubs and varsity sports played an important role in their identity and sense of self.

- A few of the children in our study were able to visit extended family in China once a year. When interviewed, these children expressed their gratefulness for being able to speak Chinese as it enabled them to communicate with their family members and contributed to the enjoyment of their visit. Hence they felt motivated to maintain their fluency in Chinese.

- Four participants were enrolled in Chinese Sunday School. They displayed the most consistent retention and even improvement in Chinese fluency.

- Participants that were involved in Chinese-American social groups exhibited more confidence in their Chinese language abilities as witnessed in conversations with peers.
Proposed design solution

According to Greeno et al, “An example of powerful learning of a social practice is learning one’s native language in the contexts of communicating with other members of the family and community.”(1996) While social practices tend to foster the initial learning process of Chinese American children learning to speak Chinese, we extend this premise to the retention of the language over time. Hence, we propose that certain social practices can aid in reinforcing the fluency in the native language. We emphasize home and after-school activities as our findings show that these social envelopes offer the most opportunities for children to retain Chinese.

At home:

1. One parent should only communicate in Chinese with the child. While this requires discipline on the parents’ part, the child will have consistent exposure to Chinese every day.

2. Parents should foster and encourage family activities that include the usage of Chinese. For example, as a family, they can have a weekly Chinese movie night, or set up a Chinese language hour in the home environment – (example: between 7 and 8 pm, during dinner, only Chinese is spoken).

3. Parents could expose their children regularly to Chinese news radio and Chinese television programs

Community outside the home:
1. Parents could enroll their children in Chinese Sunday School or other Chinese immersion programs where they are exposed to other Chinese-speaking children.

2. Parents could send their children to visit extended family in the native homeland in order help them appreciate the ability to communicate in their native language.

3. Parents could involve the whole family in traditional Chinese events or celebrations, such as Chinese New Year and Chinese Spring Festival when the Chinese community gathers to pray and observe these occasions.


5. Children can be exposed to Chinese neighborhoods including markets and restaurants – allowing them to communicate with shop-owners in Chinese and order meals in Chinese.

We propose that participation in these activities will provide a support structure for the students to feel confident in their Chinese proficiency and provide them with social arenas in which it is socially acceptable and preferred to speak Chinese.
Conclusion:

First generation Chinese American children are initially exposed to the Chinese language at home. However, as they enter school and build their social network, they are affected by external influences that require them to converse and interact using English.

Our findings show that children are motivated to speak Chinese if they feel it’s an advantage for them to do so. Therefore, it is important to consistently expose children to social activities that show them the advantages of being able to communicate in Chinese.

A child’s social environments at home and outside the school provide them with the largest opportunities to retain and even improve upon their Chinese language abilities. While children are immersed in predominantly English language activities in school, these other social environments can play an important role in balancing the child’s exposure to both English and their native Chinese language, hence improving their chances or retaining Chinese fluency.
References:


