

Family language education and children's linguistic and social developments in China

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Keywords: family language education, family language ideology, family language practices, family language management.

Abstract: Family education plays a vital role in a child's development and has attracted many scholars to study its related fields. Most scholars believe that family language education and a child's academic performance are related to social development. The purpose of this paper is to study the importance and influence of family language education, and to point out the shortcomings of family language education research at the same time to make recommendations. The main aspect of the study was to explore the language development of children in different countries and the language development of the family with the interaction family language, family language practices and family language management. The results show that parents' behavior is the main reason that affects family language education, and has a significant influence on children's growth and behavior. At the same time, family background, school background, regional background and national background are all factors that can not be ignored in family language education. Most Chinese families now focus their language education on Mandarin and English, and in fact learning dialects is just as important. Parents should raise awareness of learning and family language education and decide how to teach language according to a variety of contexts, such as rural areas. This paper will help researchers choose the right method to make up for some inadequate research in the field of family language education as soon as possible, which is of great significance for future development in this field.

1. Introduction

It is evident that family education plays an essential role in children's development in many aspects, and the field of enquiry has been attracting scholars' increasing attention across the globe. In terms of existing literature, most research places their focus on one aspect of family language education or the relationship between families' education and their children's academic performance (see Davia-Kean, 2005; Gustafsson and Hansen, 2018), while other researchers emphasise the influence of family education on youth educational aspiration (Ng and Choo, 2021), the development of children's self-regulation (Povarenkov et al., 2019), adolescent health problems (Mikkonen et al., 2020) and family medicine education (Wu et al., 2017). However, parents, educators, researchers and policymakers have overestimated one research domain — family language education, as a crucial part of family education and family language policy, has a significant impact on children's linguistic and social developmental trajectories (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Spolsky, 2012).

China is a heterogeneous country, with 56 ethnic groups speaking around 2,000 Chinese language varieties called dialects or fangyans (Li, 2006). Since the reform and opening policies were implemented in 1978, in order to facilitate domestic communication within China and promote political, economic and cultural exchanges with other countries and regions, China has been focusing the importance of both Mandarin, namely Putonghua, and English and advocating these two languages' education among children in schools at all levels (Zhang, 2013). In this way, there have been pronounced changes to China' linguistic landscape and children' linguistic and social developments (Tsung, 2014). As Wang & Curdt-Christiansen (2017) notices, little existing knowledge is available to explain family language education's role in children's linguistic and social developments in such a context. Therefore, it is of great importance to shift researchers' attention to family language education. This paper aims to raise the essential role of family language education and the importance of investigating how family language education affects children's linguistics and social developments

in China by reviewing relevant literature. Also, it will provide potential researchers with a theoretical framework for their future research into family language education and point out possible research directions for the fields of family language education and children's linguistic and social developments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Family Language Education

In recent years, family language policy has been drawing growing attention from researchers and stakeholders owing to its provision of a conceptual framework for exploring linguistic and social developments in families (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). It is clear that family is "a key prerequisite for maintaining and preserving languages" (Schwartz & Verschik, 2013, p. 1). Family language education and parents are the agents of implementing family language policy and play an essential role in children's linguistic and social development. Based on previous research (see Curdt-Christiansen & LaMorgia, 2018; Smith-Christmas, 2016; Spolsky, 2009), there are three core elements of family language education, involving family language ideology, family language practices and family language management, which should be added to the conceptual framework of family language education.

To be more specific, family language ideology refers to how parents treat languages and their constructed values of languages in the social context where families are. Obviously, family language practices have a close relationship with family language ideology, and family language practices reflect a family's ideology about languages. Family language practices are the actual behaviours that are made by family members, usually children's parents. Language management is parents' conscious or unconscious language planning decisions in language practices, which facilitate or hinder children's linguistic and social development. These three elements constitute the general system of family language education.

2.2 Language Policy and Planning in China

It is evident that parents are the actors and agents of family language education, and family language education is significantly affected by language policy and planning in a specific region or a country. In the context of China, there are 56 peoples, over 91.5% of whom are Han. These people have one common written form when using their languages but speak around 2,000 dialects. Since the reform and opening policies in 1978, Mandarin, or Putonghua, has been promoted by governments on all levels due to political and economic reasons. It gradually "replaces local dialects with the standard language" (Li, 2005, p. 155). Consequently, dialects' education, from parents' perspective, is less critical than Putonghua's.

With the nation's focus on economic development, China has realised the importance of English education because there is an increasing demand for talents with a high level of English proficiency when learning about the latest knowledge and advanced technology in western countries (Shao & Gao, 2017; Wang, 2015). Accordingly, English has become a compulsory subject in different levels of China's education, ranging from primary school education to higher education. In particular, the English's academic performance of a child in the National College Entrance Examination, Gaokao, determines whether they can be admitted to a prestigious university. As a result, parents pay serious and complete attention to their children's English education, which is the most critical part of family language education.

Researchers investigating children's linguistic developments in dialects, Putonghua and English in China, are well worth exploring each aspect of family language education and the impact of China's family language education on children's linguistic and social developments.

2.3 Previous Research into Family Language Education

Much existing research has provided insights into the interactive relationship between family language practices and family language ideologies. However, the literature is quite limited to understanding “how languages ideologies can be incongruous and language policies can be conflicting” (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). Curdt-Christiansen (2016) carried out a piece of qualitative research in Singapore to answer a mentioned question. The study collected three categories of data, containing three families’ language audits, interviews with three families’ parents and recordings of authentic interactions. The ages of these families’ children ranged from 5 to 7 years old. The research results show three kinds of conflicts in participant families: conflicting family ideologies, incongruous family language ideologies and family language practices, and contradictions between family language practices and family language expectations. These conflicting patterns provide in-depth insights into the procedure of children’s linguistic and social developments.

In 2018, Curdt-Christiansen and her colleague, La Morgia, carried out a study to examine the language management of three types of transnational families in the United Kingdom (UK). To be more specific, the research explored how Chinese, Italian and Urdu-speaking Pakistani transnational families manage their children’s heritage language and their English development. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study applied a questionnaire survey and interviews to collect relevant data from 28 Chinese families, 28 Italian families and 10 Pakistani families in the UK. The study's finding indicates that family language practices determined by parents’ conscious and unconscious choices play an essential role in children’s linguistic and social development. Parents’ allowing their children to watch TV programmes in English and play educational games and their reading habits also had a crucial impact on children’s linguistic and social developments. Moreover, the influence of parents’ aspirations and expectations on children’s language development, especially literacy, was also identified. It is proved that parents’ involvement and children’s individual language experiences, including language environment, reading practices, and increased activities, contribute to children’s linguistic development.

Curdt-Christiansen & Wang (2018) adopted a qualitative approach to investigate:

how parents as gents support or hinder their children’s dialects’ development,

what types of language ideologies affect parents’ family language practices in dialects, Putonghua and English, and

what observable language managements behaviours parents have adopted to support their children’s English development.

Their research recruited eight middle-class families, and each family had only one child aged between 5 to 11 years old. By investigating eight families’ language attitudes, observing their language practices, and involving in conversations about parents’ language ideologies, the researchers collected 13 hours’ interviews, 21 hours’ family talk recordings, 48 pages’ home visits and observational field notes to conduct a complete and in-depth analysis. The findings show that the lack of a natural language environment impedes children’s dialect development. In addition, the investigated parents believe that Putonghua is their children’s mother tongue due to its high value in their situated context. Their family language education ranked English highly as it would provide their children with more accessible access to famous universities and more job opportunities. The study suggests that parents are the agents of family language education and family language education has a dominant impact on children’s linguistic and social development.

3. Comments on Literature

As family language policy attracts more attention from researchers and increasing literature focuses on the domain, a relatively comprehensive theoretical framework is available for researchers who are interested in family language policy. However, there is a lack of a conceptual framework in the field of family language education. Based on Spolsky’s (2009) theoretical framework, three core elements, including family language ideology, family language practices and family language management, are involved in family language education’s framework. That is to say, a further research can be carried

out to investigate children's linguistic and social development from the perspectives of family language ideology, family language practices and family language management.

To be more specific, family language ideology is the core element of family language education, and it is determined by national language policy and planning and sociocultural contexts. Family language ideology affects family language practices directly, and family language practices impact family language ideology in turn. However, the relationship between family language ideology and language practices is consistent or inconsistent due to a variety of reasons which need to be further examined. Family language management is about how family members control languages, and it does support or impede children's linguistic and social developments.

When it comes to children's linguistic and social developments in China, the situation is fairly complex. Since China is a demographically and linguistically heterogeneous country, family language education is of great importance. Both governments at all levels and all families have realised the importance of family language education, so they promote Putonghua and emphasise English education. However, parents, teachers, educators, and policymakers neglect children's dialect development due to an over-focus on Putonghua and English developments. As governments at levels have realised the importance of preserving Chinese dialects and improving children's dialect development, more research should place emphasis on the status quo of children's dialects and their development and investigate what roles children's dialects play in the development of Putonghua and English.

Through Curdt-Christiansen's (2016) collected data and analysis of the data, parents, teachers, and educators should realise that "language ideologies are 'power-inflected' and tend to become the source of educational and social tensions which in turn language practices" (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016, p. 694). The research highlights the interplay of family language ideology and practices, but their relationship is not always congruous as sociocultural contexts influence them. The study reminds researchers of exploring the consistent and inconsistent relationship between family language ideologies and language practices. Most researchers are likely to only focus on one specific element of family language education, but they overestimate the interaction between family language ideology, family language practices and family language management, making their research less significant. It should be noticed that the interplay of these three elements is complex and better explain how family language education influence children's linguistic and social developments. This research applied a qualitative approach, which offers an in-depth insight into the cases involved in the study, but it has not achieved a generalised conclusion that can explain similar phenomena in other contexts.

Curdt-Christiansen and La Morgia's (2018) study has raised the importance of family language management. The researchers explored the opportunities and challenges to manage heritage languages for three kinds of transnational families in the UK. The study offers convincing evidence to prove that parents' conscious decisions and planning activities have a crucial impact on their children's linguistic development. The researchers' suggestions on improving children's bilingual development lie in the educational system and schools, meaning that family language management is only one factor influencing children's linguistic development. Other sociocultural contexts also contribute to children's linguistic and social developments, like school context, district context and national state context that are put forward by Buehl and Beck (2015). Curdt-Christiansen and La Morgia (2018) adopted a mixed-method approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. These two types of data can support one another's findings, which provides a paradigm for potential researchers. Also, it is noticeable that compared with other research, the sampling of Curdt-Christiansen and La Morgia's (2018) research is relatively large, and those participants came from different backgrounds, involving 28 Chinese, 28 Italian and 10 Pakistani. As a result, future research should recruit a relatively large number of participants from different contexts to answer research questions better.

Another study conducted by Curdt-Christiansen and Wang (2018) shed light on how family language ideology shapes parents' language practices in their children's linguistic and social developments in China's urban contexts. While this study proves that parents' practices significantly impact their children's linguistic and social developments, it does not explain the phenomenon in China's rural contexts. As shown in the research, a wide range of data sources was collected, including

interviews, family talk recordings, home visits, observational field notes, and material artefacts; the limitation of the research is a lack of quantitative data to respond to research questions. Also, the social status of the involved families is middle-class, and a conclusion about how lower-class families and upper-class families cannot be reached. This research does not provide a comprehensive picture of the impact of family language ideology on parents' language practices and their children's linguistic and social developments. Apart from mentioned limitations, there were roughly 2,000 dialects spoken by Chinese people. It seems that each ethnic group holds different family language ideologies, makes various family language practices and adopts different family language management. More research into other ethnic groups is needed to fill the gap.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper first offers a brief introduction to family education and explains the rationale of family language education. Therefore, it puts forward what family language education consists of and what language policy and planning are in China. I have figured out what family language education has focused on and achieved so far by reviewing relevant literature. Obviously, many significant research directions and valuable data collection methods, as well as data analysis methods, are provided by those studies, which offer paradigms to the researchers who are interested in the domain. Following this part, I have made some comments on the reviewed literature and identify research gaps worth further investigating in the future.

Based on the existing literature about family language policy and family language education, this paper has proposed three core elements that form the conceptual framework of family language education:

1. family language ideology,
2. family language practices,
3. family language management.

Firstly, family language ideology is about how family members, especially parents, perceive languages and their constructed values of languages in the social context in which families are situated. Secondly, family language practices are behaviours made by parents. Lastly, language management refers to how parents manage activities related to linguistic development. Future research into family language education could follow this framework to explore children's linguistic and social development.

In addition, national language policy and planning and sociocultural contexts should be taken into consideration when investigating the impact of family language policy on children's linguistic and socio development. As mentioned above, more attention should be given to China's family language education due to its unique context. In China, family language education shifts its focus from children's dialect development to Putonghua and English developments. This is because family language education is influenced by national language policy and planning. Its national language policy encourages the widespread of Putonghua and English education so as to facilitate domestic communication among different ethnic groups and promote political, economic and cultural exchanges with other countries and regions. The feature of the Chinese context is that family education emphasises unilingual development, but bilingual or multilingual developments (Putonghua, dialects and English). These also belong to sociocultural contexts that influence family language education. Based on Buehl and Beck's (2015) classification of contexts, the sociocultural contexts in the domain of family language education can be divided into four levels: family context, school context, district context and national state context. These cannot be ignored when exploring family language education and children's linguistic and social developments.

5. Recommendations

Based on what has been analysed and discussed, family education has received much attention in the academic field. Many researchers have investigated one specific aspect of family education and

the relationship between family education and children's behaviours, such as academic achievement and regulation and family medicine education. However, family language education has been overestimated by scholars for a long time. Parents, teachers, educators, policymakers should raise their awareness of learning about and researching family language education. Future research should fill the research gap by examining family language education and its relationship with children's linguistic and social developments based on the conceptual framework proposed in the paper. Exploring only one aspect of family language education should be avoided. It is important to look at family language ideology, family language practices and family language management as a whole and examine the interaction between these three elements. Furthermore, regarding contexts, more research should explore the phenomenon in the context of China, especially in rural areas.

Moreover, researchers should not only examine children's Putonghua and English developments, but also their dialect development. The importance of dialects should not be neglected in China's contexts, so potential research should focus more on family dialect education and the relationship between parents' family language education and their children's dialect development.

Last but not least, although in the paper, the reviewed studies adopted qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods approaches respectively, it is clear that a qualitative method plays a dominant role in existing research. Obviously, the choice of research methods depends on both researchers' ontology and epistemology and their personal preferences, but the driving force of making a decision should be whether a chosen approach can help researchers better understand research questions and fully answer those questions. I would suggest that researchers apply a mixed-methods approach to design and conduct their studies as this approach can provide an in-depth understanding of research questions and generalised answers to research questions.

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