

10 Parental Voices in Bilingual Education

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Pre-Reading

García, O. (2011) *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

May, S. (ed.) (2013) *The Multilingual Turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL, and Bilingual Education*. Oxford: Routledge.

Pre-Reading Discussion Questions

- (1) What are the key agencies in the education of bilingual learners? What role can families and parents play in this context?
- (2) In what way can translanguaging transform our understanding of bilingual education in the 21st century?

As García points out (2009: 151) ‘All successful education relies heavily on parents and schools sharing the same values’. And translanguaging is about giving voice to the inherent minoritized bilinguals, which, in the context of education, must include the parents. This chapter makes the case for the parents’ voices to be heard and taken seriously in implementing translanguaging approaches to teaching and learning in heritage language classes for children of immigrant and transnational backgrounds. We argue that this is important not simply because the parents are key stakeholders in education whose views should be taken seriously in any case, but because parents’ own experiences with bilingualism and bilingual education can shape their views. We draw upon examples from the Chinese complementary schools in Britain. These schools are set up by the parents and the community to meet the needs of the families with regard to developing language and literacy skills in Chinese amongst the British-born children. While the school policy appears to focus primarily on the development of Chinese, translanguaging is common practice both in learning and teaching at the school and in building an extended social network. Nevertheless, the complementary schools are often perceived by the wider society as

an example of minoritized communities wanting to insist on their own ethnic languages at the cost of English and to transmit these languages to the British-born generations. So how do the parents see the role of the Chinese complementary schools? How do they perceive translanguaging practices at these schools? What's more, how do the parents see their own children growing up in Britain?

Complementary Education and the Chinese Schools in the UK

First, a brief outline of the policy context of complementary schooling in Britain is necessary. Complementary schooling in the UK refers to language and literacy classes organized by minoritized transnational communities outside the normal school hours, usually over the weekend. Their primary aim is to teach the British-born children of these communities the heritage languages, especially the literacy in these languages. According to the National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (NRCSE) <https://www.supplementaryeducation.org.uk/>, there are between 3000 and 5000 complementary schools offering some 100 different languages, from Albanian and Bengali to Vietnamese and Urdu. Many of them were set up in the 1950s amidst racial tensions and failures of the mainstream education system to understand and accommodate the needs of minoritized children. Li Wei (2006) reviewed the sociopolitical history of the complementary school movement in Britain and argued that the existence of these schools reflected a failure of the mainstream school system not meeting the needs of the immigrant and ethnic minority children and their communities.

The current Chinese community in the UK is developed from post-war migrants, the vast majority of whom came from Hong Kong in the 1950s. Most of them are Cantonese and/or Hakka speakers. Initially they were engaged in family-based catering businesses and other service industries. Since the 1980s, Chinese migrants from mainland China have been arriving in Britain. Most of them are educational transients who are in the UK for various levels of education. Some have stayed on. There are also professionals who take up jobs in Britain. UK immigration regulations determine that anyone wishing to settle in this country needs to have guaranteed employment. The 1997 return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China triggered a small wave of new immigrants from Hong Kong. Again, they needed to have employment or substantial investment in order to gain settled status. Growth of the British Chinese community is mainly by the British-born generations. There has been a visible change of the hierarchy of the different Chinese languages in the Chinese community in Britain. The old community *lingua franca*, Cantonese, is being replaced by a new community *lingua franca*,

Mandarin or Putonghua. This is clearly influenced by the rise of China as a major political and economic world power (Zhu & Li, 2014). In the meantime, an intergenerational language shift from Chinese to English-dominant bilingualism/multilingualism has taken place. The majority of the British-born Chinese use English as their primary language of communication, even in the home setting.

Community language schools have been one of the three pillars of the Chinese diaspora worldwide; the other two being townsmen associations and community media. Wherever there is a Chinese immigrant community, there is bound to be a Chinese school. They are not only providing language teaching to the younger generations of Chinese heritage, but also a key social network connecting families who typically live in dispersed areas. In the UK, Chinese schools began to emerge in the 1970s and had a significant growth in number in the early 1990s. The UK Federation of Chinese Schools (<http://www.ukfcs.info/>) estimates that there are between 200 and 300 Chinese complementary schools of various sizes from about 30 pupils to 300 or 400 pupils, in all parts of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The establishment of the Chinese schools must be seen as a major achievement of the community in their determination to support themselves. These schools receive little support from the local education authorities. They are entirely self-financed. Parents pay fees to send their children, and local Chinese businesses offer sponsorships and other support (e.g. paying for the hire of premises and facilities). Many of the schools use teaching materials provided free of charge by voluntary organizations and other agencies in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The teachers are mainly enthusiastic Chinese parents and university students. In the last two decades, a pattern has emerged with four types of Chinese schools: (a) for Cantonese-speaking children from Hong Kong immigrant families; (b) for Cantonese-speaking children of Hong Kong immigrant families with particular religious affiliations (i.e. run by Christian churches); (c) for Mandarin-speaking children from mainland China; and (d) for Mandarin-speaking children of Buddhist families, mainly from Taiwan. Most of the schools run classes over the weekend for up to four hours. Parents play a crucial role in the schools – they pay, govern and teach. A typical Chinese complementary school in Britain looks like this: It rents its premises from a local school or education center. There is a temporary reception desk at the entrance for parents to speak to the teachers about any issues of interest. A sales desk or area is available for the children to buy snacks and drinks. Space is provided for the staff to have tea and coffee during break time and to have meetings. The children are grouped according to proficiency in Chinese. There are traditional Chinese dance, arts and sports sessions before or after the language and literacy sessions. Many schools also provide English language lessons for parents.

There are significant differences between the teachers' and the pupils' linguistic proficiency and preference: The teachers tend to be Chinese first language (L1) speakers; many of them have had a substantial monolingual experience as Chinese speakers, and their literacy level in Chinese is high; whereas the pupils have had limited and context-specific input in Chinese, have high proficiency in English, and use English as the *lingua franca* with their peers, including other children of Chinese ethnic origin. The children's English language proficiency in most cases is much more sophisticated than that of the teachers. What is happening in most of the Chinese complementary schools in the UK is rather similar to the situation Cen Williams (1994) described in terms of *trawsieithu* in Welsh revitalization schools where the input by the teacher and output by the pupils are often in two different languages. Li and Wu (2009) examined examples of how children manipulate the discrepancies in the language proficiencies and preferences in Chinese and English between themselves and their teachers to their own advantages in the classroom. When the teachers struggle to make the pupils understand something in Chinese, they often switch to English for explanations. Many teachers are keen to engage in co-learning (Li Wei, 2013) through translanguaging. They put themselves in a 'vulnerable' (Brantmeier, 2013) rather than authoritative position, open themselves up to pupils' bringing their own knowledge and skills into the learning process, and provide space for the pupils as well as themselves to maximize their bilingual potential by using whatever language they feel the most comfortable with.

It has to be said that we have been working with the Chinese complementary schools for more than two decades and have been promoting the idea of translanguaging, rather than an insistence on Chinese only, in the school context. The teachers are generally very happy to adopt a translanguaging pedagogy. They do recognize that the pupils are bilingual and multilingual British-Chinese, not monolingual Chinese in mainland China or Hong Kong. But some are concerned that the parents, who spend time and money to send their children to the Chinese schools, many of whom are running the schools behind the scenes, may not think that translanguaging would help to enhance their children's learning of Chinese, especially Chinese literacy. So what do the parents actually think?

Parental Voices

We have been studying the Chinese complementary schools in the UK since the 1990s through various projects. In particular, we carried out in-depth ethnographic observations in the Chinese schools in Newcastle, Manchester and London between 2005 and 2008. These were followed with further projects in Chinese schools in London in

2014 to 2016. As we said above, most of the complementary schools run for 3–4 hours over the weekend. Our ethnographic work was done during those hours, when we observed classes, talked to the teachers and the pupils, as well as the parents. We asked questions and listened to their views. None of these were formal, structured interviews. But our discussions with the parents focused on a number of themes: (i) their reasons to send their children to Chinese complementary schools; (ii) their beliefs in the importance of their children knowing Chinese especially Chinese literacy; (iii) their understanding of the children's identity; and (iv) flexible bilingual/multilingual approaches to learning as opposed to insistence on Chinese only at school and at home. Views on the first three themes were often voiced together. We will therefore discuss them together in the following. The fourth theme on translanguaging practice was the focus of our projects and will be discussed separately.

Language ideology and identity

The data below are from our work in the largest Chinese schools in London in 2014 and 2016, schools with over 300 pupils. We talked to more than 50 parents on different occasions during the fieldwork period. All the parents we talked to voiced strong beliefs that attending the Chinese school was beneficial to the children. This is not surprising because these are parents who chose to send their children to the complementary schools. But the reasons given by the parents differed. Some hold strong beliefs about the symbolic significance of the Chinese language, especially the writing system, as Parent A expressed:

Parent A (Mother, Cantonese L1 speaker): (NB. Cantonese speaker's remarks are given in complex Chinese characters, and Mandarin speakers in simplified characters, followed by English translation in italics.)

要學中文啦。中國人不懂中文還叫Chinese嗎？你看有些小孩，連自己的名字都不識。在家裡也說外語，speak English all the time。我們沒有時間教他們啦。聽是可以的，但中文學校教他們writing。好難的，我們都不知怎麼教。小朋友在一起學比較好。

They should learn Chinese. How can you be Chinese and don't know the language? You see some children can't even recognize their own name (in writing). They speak English even at home. I speak English all the time! We don't have the time to teach them. They can understand (spoken Chinese), but the Chinese school teaches them writing. It's very difficult to teach (writing). We don't know how to teach (writing). Children learn better together with other children.

She links the ability to read and write Chinese, which has a logographic writing system, to 'being Chinese': one cannot be Chinese if one does not read or write the Chinese characters. Similar views seem to

be very common amongst the Chinese and have been reported elsewhere (Li & Zhu, 2010). She also sees learning together with other children as beneficial.

Parent B sent her daughter to the Chinese school also to learn the Chinese characters. But she brought up another issue, which is to do with making Chinese friends and feeling connected with other Chinese people and the Chinese culture.

Parent B (Mother, Mandarin L1 speaker):

在家她是跟我们讲中文的，所以听和说都没有什么问题。到中文学校主要是想让她学汉字了。她只能看很少的。其实也不只是学中文啦。平时都没有几个中国朋友，这里还是有点文化氛围的。她也交了些朋友挺好的。我们也交了些朋友的。

She does speak Chinese with us at home. So she has no problem in listening and speaking. We sent her to the Chinese school to learn to read and write the Chinese characters. She can understand very few of them. But in fact it is not just about learning Chinese. She has very few Chinese friends during normal school days. Here (the Chinese school) provides a cultural atmosphere. It is good that she can make some Chinese friends. We have also made some friends.

When we further probed her about the ‘cultural atmosphere’ she meant, assuming that she had the cultural activities such as Chinese music, dance, painting, kung-fu etc. in mind, her response was very interesting:

Parent B:

就是在这里啦，和其他中国人在一起，聊聊天，speak Chinese, drink tea. 在中国人的圈里呀。

Just being here, with other Chinese people, chatting, (speak Chinese, drink tea), in a Chinese circle.

She is not essentializing the Chinese culture with stereotypical activities. To her being in the presence of other Chinese people is sufficient to provide a cultural environment for her and her daughter’s upbringing as a Chinese person.

Meeting other Chinese people and making friends seem to be a key motivation for lots of parents to want to send their children to the Chinese complementary schools, as Parent C says:

Parent C (from southern China, speaking a number of Chinese dialects):

交朋友啦！学点中文，但主要还是交朋友。你看她们在一起还是说英语。It’s OK啦。BBC都是这样的。在学校也没有什么华人同学。这里交朋友啦。她们一起组织活动。去年夏天她们和朋友家去度假，不用跟我们啦。挺好的。

Making friends (is why we want to send our daughters to the Chinese school)! Learning some Chinese, but most importantly, making friends.

You look at them: they are all speaking English with each other. (It's ok.) BBC (British-born Chinese) are like that. They don't have any Chinese school mates. They can make friends here. They do things together. Last summer, she went on holiday with their friend's family. They don't need us anymore, which is good.

She accepts that even at the Chinese school, the British-born children tend to talk to each other in English. But like Parent B, Parent C believes that the Chinese school helps the children to make more friends with other Chinese and provides a social support network for them all, which is more important than simply learning the language.

Parent D, on the other hand, expresses a view that the Chinese language is useful for the children's future.

Parent D (father from Hong Kong, fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin and English):

中文當然有用啦。大陸經濟越來越好，歐洲不行呀。英國Brexit一塌糊塗。年輕人將來都沒有好工作。懂中文也許會有幫助的。去香港大陸工作也好啦，我們都可以。只要他們能找到自己喜歡的事就可以的。在這裡也可以給中國公司做事啦。我就在大陸公司作啦。所以我學普通話。

Chinese is of course useful. Mainland China's economy is getting better and better, whereas Europe is getting nowhere. Brexit has made a mess for Britain. It's going to be more and more difficult for young people to find good jobs. Knowing Chinese may help. They can go and work in Hong Kong or mainland China. We (parents) would be happy about that. As long as they can find something they like, it's fine. They can also work for Chinese companies here (in Britain). I'm in fact working for a mainland Chinese company. That's why I learned Putonghua.

Aspiration of future life has been found to be an important factor in transnational communities' choice and decision-making regarding language use and language learning (Zhu & Li, 2016). Parent D articulated a view that knowing Chinese could help to enhance his children's employment opportunities in the future, a view that is shared by many other parents we spoke to. He also set an example himself by learning Putonghua, the standardized national language in mainland China, to work for a mainland Chinese business, and further explained to us that he did not send his children to a Cantonese school because he felt Putonghua would be more useful.

A rather different reason was given by Parent E:

Parent E (Cantonese L1 speaker from Hong Kong):

他們是華人誰都看得出的。會不會受歧視？當然會的。你跟人家長得不一樣嘛！你又不會自己的語言，人家不笑話你嗎？都說華人孩子clever，你那麼clever連自己的話都不會講，只會講外語？

Everybody can see that they are Chinese. Will they be discriminated against? Of course they will. You look different from the others. If you can't even speak your own language, how can they not laugh at you? Everybody says that Chinese children are clever, but if you are that clever, how come you can only speak a foreign language but not your own language?

Whilst having generally been regarded as a successful immigrant community in the UK, the Chinese have experienced their share of racial discrimination. This mother is clearly aware of the discrimination and prejudice that is out there against the Chinese. She is also very much aware of the deeply rooted assumption of one-race-one-language in the British society, i.e. a Chinese person must know Chinese and English is always foreign or additional to the Chinese. Not knowing Chinese seems to be considered an embarrassment, even a shame, to the Chinese community.

School language policy and translanguaging pedagogy and practices

Turning now to the parental views of the language policy and practice in the Chinese complementary schools. The vast majority of the parents we spoke to seem to accept that the children are bilingual, and more importantly, British Chinese, not simply Chinese. They also accept, rather pragmatically, that the children's proficiency in Chinese is much lower than that in English. Translanguaging by the teacher in the classroom, therefore, was not regarded as a problem. The following was voiced by Parent B whose other comments we saw earlier.

Parent B:

有的老师是会用英语的, sometimes, it's OK. 应为小孩子有的时候跟她们讲中文他们可能不会全能听懂, 老师用英语解释一下也没关系啦。她们懂最好啦。

Some teachers use English in teaching. (Sometimes; it's OK.) Because sometimes when you speak Chinese to the children, they can't understand everything. It doesn't matter if the teacher explains it in English. It's best for them to understand.

Many parents say that whilst they want their children to learn to read and write Chinese, they would not expect them to have the same standard as the children in China.

Parent F (mother from mainland China):

在这里出生的孩子没有几个能读写汉字的, 也不是在中国。在中国他们就完蛋了, 定跟不上。在这里学一学简单的, 差不多就可以, 不是完全的文盲就好。

Very few of the children born here can read or write Chinese characters. But they are not in China. If they were in China, they would be finished. They can't follow the class. Here they can learn some basics. It's fine to know just a few, as long as they are not completely illiterate.

Like the other parents, this mother recognizes the difference between a British-born Chinese child living in Britain and children growing up in China. Literacy is clearly important. But the parents are not expecting their children to have the same standard as those in China. This quote also indicates that the parents are very much aware of the school standard in China and differences in pedagogical approaches, which the following quote confirms:

Parent G (father from mainland China):

我也说不好哪种教学方法好：英国的就像放野鸭子，中国的是填鸭。其实他们并不一定能学到多少东西，但交了很多朋友，也有了华人感。教法不一定那么死板。

I can't say which pedagogy is better: the English way is like raising ducks in the wild, whereas the Chinese way is force feeding ducks. In fact they may not learn very much (in the Chinese school). But they make a lot of friends, and they gain a sense of being Chinese. Pedagogy shouldn't be so rigid.

When the Chinese school teachers give the children homework of copying characters repeatedly, many children and parents object, not only because they have little time other than the weekend to be devoted to the learning of Chinese, but also because they feel that it is an alien method in the British context as Parent G seems to be suggesting.

Many parents explicitly commented on the Chinese schools' teachers' teaching methods.

Parent H (mother from Hong Kong, Cantonese L1 speaker):

好多老師是中國留學生，好年輕嘞。她們不懂得這些小孩子的學習習慣。教學方法比較和國內一樣。其實這樣不行的。他們不是中國小孩啦。大的環境不同嘛。

Many teachers here are students from China. They are so young. They don't understand the study habits of the children. Their teaching method is rather similar to those in China. It's not going to work. The children are not in China. The wider context is different.

Not understanding the children's study habits and needs is a concern that many parents have voiced about the teachers at the Chinese schools. They are indeed mostly young students from China who are clearly very good with their Chinese and eager to help with the overseas Chinese community. But their lack of knowledge of the cultural context, especially of the way children are taught and learn in ordinary schools in the UK presents a barrier in using the appropriate methods to teach the British

Chinese children in the complementary schools. Elsewhere Li (2013) discussed this issue in terms of co-learning in Chinese schools.

A few parents raised the issue of the teachers' English language proficiency.

Parent I (father from mainland China):

有些老师英语很好，讲得很清楚。英语不太好的其实会有困难，学生的英语比老师的好，不好解释清楚。我儿子他们班里有两个广东小孩，父母是香港人，讲广东话。他们老师正好是广东人，有时跟他们讲广东话，给他们解释。我看挺好。

Some teachers have very good English. They explain very clearly. It's actually quite difficult if the teacher's English isn't very good. The students' English is usually better than the teachers'. It's not so easy to explain clearly (to the students if the teachers' English isn't good enough). There are two Cantonese-speaking kids in my son's class. Their parents are from Hong Kong, speaking Cantonese. As it happens the class teacher is a Cantonese speaker, and sometimes speaks Cantonese with them, explains to them (in Cantonese). I think that's very nice.

This parent appears to accept that the teacher needs to explain in class in a language that the students understand and prefer. And the discrepancy in English language proficiency between the teachers and the pupils may put the teachers in a 'vulnerable' position in the sense defined by Brantmeier (2013). The parent also seems to think very positively of the dialect accommodation between the Cantonese-speaking teacher and the two Cantonese-speaking pupils. Translanguaging does enable the teacher to accommodate different linguistic needs of the pupils.

When specifically asked whether they had thought to insist on using Chinese only with and by the children, Parent J's response was quite typical:

Parent J:

They are British啦。在家裡他們也是講英語啦。Bilingual啦嘛，英語華語都可以啦。堅持將中文也沒用的。他就不理啦，冇代溝喔。

(They are British). They speak English at home too. They are bilingual. They can speak both English and Chinese. It's useless to insist on speaking Chinese only. They will ignore you, causing generation gap.

Parents are clear about their children's identity as British Chinese and bilingual. They also seem to be concerned about a potential generation gap caused by differences in language proficiency and attitude. They therefore take a pragmatic approach to the issue of language use both at the Chinese school and at home.

While talking about the pedagogies in the Chinese complementary schools, the parents also comment on the practices of the mainstream schools that their children attend during the week. Like Parent G above, most parents are very aware of the different pedagogical traditions and approaches

between the schools in Britain and those in China. Many feel that they do not have the opportunity to be involved in the running of the mainstream schools compared to what they can do about the Chinese schools.

Parent H (father from Hong Kong):

中文學校是華人自己辦的學校嘛！這一點很重要，我們可以提意見。他們平常的學校不管我們的意見的。要贊助什麼活動的時候會找我們，平時不理我們的。家長會都是校長和老師在講，不會讓我們講的。其實有的時候他們老師教法有問題，可是我們也沒辦法，只能在家裡教小孩子學。有的時候又怕我們的方法不適合學校考試要求。（會不會以為家長不懂英語？）不清楚，有可能的。可能以為我們都不懂怎麼教。中文學校不一樣的。我們隨時可以提意見和建議。這裡的校長也是家長了，有的老師也是家長。和我們都一樣。大家都一樣，都有同樣的體會。

The Chinese schools are for the Chinese ourselves. This is a really important point. We can voice our opinions. The children's ordinary schools don't care about our opinions. They will contact us if they want sponsorship for some events. But ordinarily they just ignore us. At parents' evening, it is the head teacher and the teachers who will speak. We are not allowed to speak. In fact sometime there are problems with the teaching. But we can't do anything. We can only teach the children at home. Sometimes we are afraid that the way we teach (the children at home) won't meet the assessment requirements of the school. (Is it because they think the parents don't speak English?). I don't know, possibly. Maybe they think we don't know how to teach. The Chinese schools are different. We can make criticism and suggestions any time. The head teacher here is also a parent, and some of the teachers are also parents. We are all the same. Everybody is the same and has the same experience.

It is clear from this parent's remarks that the Chinese parents feel neglected and detached by the mainstream schools that their children attend during the week, but much more involved in the community schools over the weekend. They can see the differences in pedagogical approaches and what they believe are problems with the mainstream schools' teaching. But they feel they can only voice their views at the complementary schools.

Conclusion

The parental voices that we have represented through the quotes in this chapter dispel a myth popular amongst the majority social groups that the minoritized immigrant communities prefer to maintain their ethnic languages at the cost of learning English and that the community language schools are set up simply to transmit the heritage language to the children's generation. Whilst the Chinese parents we spoke to do perceive high value in their children's learning of the Chinese language, they absolutely accept that the children are British Chinese and are

bilingual. They have no problem with flexible use of languages either at the Chinese complementary schools or at home. They are very aware of the differences in language proficiency and preference between the generations and between the teachers at the Chinese schools and the children. They are also aware of the differences in pedagogical traditions between the mainstream schools and the Chinese complementary schools. Whilst all the complementary schools for the minoritized children in Britain are set up with the aim of maintaining their community languages, a one language only policy would neither be appropriate nor feasible. That is a clear message from the parents who themselves are key stakeholders of these schools. In the meantime, there are also important messages for the mainstream schools: there is much to be gained from listening to the minoritized parents' voices. More work certainly needs to be done to make their voices heard by the wider society.

Post-Reading Discussion Questions

- (1) Why is it important to hear parents' voice in making decisions regarding bilingual education policy and practice?
- (2) How can translanguaging contribute to the construction of bilingual learners' identities?

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