Loss of Family Languages: Should Educators Be Concerned?
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By conservative estimates, 3.5 million children in U.S. schools are identified as limited in English proficiency (LEP) (Macias, 1998). Their knowledge of English is so limited that without linguistic help they are excluded “from effective participation in the educational program offered” by the schools they attend (Lau v. Nichols, 1974). The Supreme Court’s ruling in Lau v. Nichols held that these children must be provided instructional help to overcome the linguistic barrier to the school’s instructional programs. The Court did not specify a particular programmatic remedy, but suggested that bilingual education was one possible approach, while instruction in English as a second language (ESL) was another. Since then, both bilingual and ESL programs have been established in many states to help children learn English and gain access to the curriculum.

The dilemma facing immigrant children, however, may be viewed as less a problem of learning English than of primary language loss. While virtually all children who attend American schools learn English, most of them are at risk of losing their primary languages as they do so.

In one sense, primary language loss as children acquire English is not a new problem. Few immigrant groups have successfully maintained their ethnic languages as they became assimilated into American life. As they learned English, they used it more and more until English became their dominant language.

The outcome in earlier times was nonetheless bilingualism. The second generation could speak the ethnic language and English, although few people were equally proficient in both languages. The loss of the ethnic language occurred between the second and the third generations because second generation immigrants rarely used the ethnic language enough to impart it to their own children. Thus, the process of language loss used to take place over two generations (Fishman & Hofman, 1966; Portes & Rumbault, 1990).

The picture has changed dramatically in the case of present day immigrants. Few current second generation immigrants can be described as bilinguals (López, 1982). Ordinarily, we assume that when children acquire a second language, they add it to their primary language, and the result is bilingualism. But in the case of most present-day immigrant children, the learning of English is a subtractive process (Lambert, 1977), with English quickly displacing and replacing the primary language in young first generation immigrants. The result is that few immigrant children become bilinguals today by learning English. Over the past 25 years, this process of accelerated language loss in immigrant children and families has been documented repeatedly (Fillmore, 1991a, 1991b; Hinton, 1999;
A Case of Language Shift and Loss

The Chen family is like many Chinese immigrants who have come to the United States over the past several decades. The family came from China’s Canton province via Hong Kong, where they had spent nearly a decade waiting for a visa to immigrate to the United States. The Chens arrived in the United States in 1989: Mother, Father, Uncle (Father’s brother), Grandmother (Father’s mother), and the children, Kai-Fong, age 5 at the time of arrival (now 16); and Chu-Mei, age 4 (now 15). Once settled, the family quickly added two more children—the “ABC” (“American born Chinese”) members of the Chen family, both girls, Chu-wa (now 10); and Allison (now 9 years old).

A consideration of how the members of this family fared in their first decade in America is revealing. Sadly, it is a story that many immigrant families have experienced firsthand.

Contrasting experiences

The Chens settled in a suburban town in the San Francisco Bay area where Father, Mother, and Uncle had jobs waiting for them in a restaurant owned by a relative. They went to work in the restaurant’s kitchen, and because the kitchen workers were all Chinese, their lack of English was not a handicap. They worked long hours each day, leaving home early in the morning and returning close to midnight. Grandmother stayed at home with the children, and everything was fine at first. She got the children ready for school and was at home to care for them when they were out of school.

School was difficult for the children initially, but they did not complain much. The elementary school that Kai-fong and Chu-mei attended had many minority group students. Some, although not many, were LEP students like themselves. The school had no bilingual or ESL classes, so non-English speakers like Kai-fong and Chu-mei were simply placed in regular classes where it was assumed they would learn English. Both began kindergarten at the same time and were placed in the same classroom. The teacher spoke English only, but she gave the several non-English speakers in her class extra attention whenever she could.

Chu-mei soon made friends with classmates and learned some English from them and from the teacher. Her adjustment, after the first year in school, was excellent. She had learned enough English in kindergarten to make reading in the first grade more or less possible. She was neat, agreeable, and sociable. She fit into the social world of the classroom without difficulty.

Kai-fong had quite a different experience in school. He was not as outgoing as his sister, and from the start, had difficulty establishing himself socially with his classmates. Some of the boys in the class teased him mercilessly. After Grandmother had cut his hair, it stuck straight out and would not lie flat. They called him “Chi, chi, chi, Chia-pet,” after a then popular gift item that was advertised frequently on television—a pig-shaped vase that grew spikey grass hair when watered. Kai-fong probably did not know what a “chia-pet” was, but he knew his classmates were making fun of his appearance. He wore homemade trousers that Grandmother had made from some polyester stretch yardage for him and for Chu-mei. The fabric worked well for Chu-mei, but not for Kai-fong. The boys in his class teased him about his “flower pants.”

One day at school, there was a rock throwing incident involving Kai-fong and some other boys. It was unclear who started throwing rocks at whom, but they were all caught with rocks in their hands. The other children could tell their side of the story to the teacher on yard duty; Kai-fong could not. When the incident was reported to Father and Mother, they did not understand what had happened. They knew only that Kai-fong had gotten into trouble at school. Kai-fong was severely reprimanded by Father, Mother, and Grandmother, and he gradually began to withdraw.

In time, Kai-fong learned enough English to get by, and his wardrobe and hair became less distinctive. But he remained an outsider. In class, he was an indifferent student and rarely said anything spontaneously. He had a small group of friends with whom he played on the playground—other Asian immigrant boys who, like himself, were not finding it easy to fit into the social world of the school. Several boys were Vietnamese, one was...
Filipino, the others were Thai. The English they spoke had many dialect features that were picked up from the African-American children in the school, although they had little interaction with them. Kai-fong and his friends seemed to admire the African-American boys, and copied their dress, musical taste, and speech. The African-American boys were also outsiders at school, but they were the “cool guys,” and they operated within their own social sphere both in and out of school.

Increasing separation

At home, Kai-fong became increasingly an outsider. Once he learned a little English, he stopped speaking Cantonese altogether. When Grandmother spoke to him, he either ignored her or would mutter a response in English that she did not understand. When pushed, he would simply stop speaking. Grandmother’s complaints to Mother and Father resulted in frequent scoldings, and increasingly severe reprimands and sanctions. The more the adults scolded, the more sullen and angry Kai-fong became.

By the age of 10, Kai-fong, who was now known as Ken, was spending most of his time away from home, hanging out with his buddies, away from the scolding and haranguing. He and his friends spoke English only, and although some of them may have retained their primary languages, Kai-fong/Ken did not. He no longer understood Cantonese well and rarely said anything in that language.

Over time, Grandmother became withdrawn too. She had chronic headaches, which often immobilized her. Whether the headaches were caused by the tension in the home or not, it certainly did not help. The headaches made it hard for her to care for the younger children, and this was often left to Chu-mei. Each day, while her sisters were young, she hurried home from school and would play with them and teach them things she was learning. From her they learned English, the language she spoke at school and the language she could express herself in most easily.

Neither Chu-wa nor Allison (named after Chu-mei’s best friend at school) speak Cantonese. They call Grandmother “Ah Yin-Yin” (the address term for paternal grandmother in Cantonese), but they do not know how to say much else in Cantonese to their grandmother or their parents. In fact, the only child in this family who can still communicate with the adults in Cantonese is Chu-mei, or Sondra, as she prefers to be called. She interprets for her family members when they need to communicate with one another.

But although Chu-mei/Sondra still speaks Cantonese, she is not as fluent as she should be. She is unable to express herself completely in Cantonese, and occasionally slips English words and phrases into her speech as she attempts to communicate with the adults in the family. This could be evidence of language loss or an indication that her primary language has not continued to develop as she has grown more mature. Either way, she is not as proficient in Cantonese as Chinese children her age ordinarily are.

Deteriorating family relations

Accelerated language loss is a common occurrence these days among immigrant families, with the younger members losing the ethnic language after a short time in school. In the Chen family, the adult members have not learned much English after a decade of residence in the United States. Mother, Father, and Uncle would like to study English, but their long work days do not allow them to take English as a second language classes at the adult education center in town. Father and Uncle have begun to pick up a little English from co-workers and from the Americans they see occasionally, but Mother and Grandmother have not learned much at all, although Grandmother spends most of her time at home with her English speaking grandchildren.

Clearly, the Chen family was deeply affected by the ways in which the children adjusted to life in their new society. The shift from Cantonese to English in this family and the loss of the family language by the children have had a great impact on communication between the adults and the children and ultimately on family relations. There is tension in this home: The adults do not understand the children, and the children do not understand the adults. Father, Mother, and Grandmother do not feel they know the children, and they do not know what is happening in their lives.
This is most obvious in the case of Kai-fong/ Ken, who spends little time at home these days. He dropped out of school over a year ago and is out with his friends most of the time. His father says he does not know what Kai-fong is doing, but he does not think he has a job.

**What Is Lost When a Language Is Lost?**

From a strictly pragmatic perspective, what happened to this immigrant family appears unfortunate but hardly tragic. From the school’s point of view, this could even be seen as a relative success story. Of the four children in the Chen family, three are doing well in school. Only one has gotten lost, but that can happen in any family. But is it an acceptable loss? The questions that must be asked are these: What does school success mean, and can we afford to lose one child in four in the process of educating them? The three Chen children who can be described as successful students are so because they have learned English quickly and have made progress at school. They are acquiring the skills and information they need for educational advancement and participation in the work world. But is that all that is important? Can school provide children with everything they need to learn through the formal educational process?

I contend that the school cannot provide children what is most fundamental to success in life. The family plays a crucial role in providing the basic elements for successful functioning. These include: a sense of belonging; knowledge of who one is and where one comes from; an understanding of how one is connected to the important others and events in one’s life; the ability to deal with adversity; and knowing one’s responsibility to self, family, community. Other elements could be added to the list, but the point is that these are things the family must provide children at home while they are growing up. They cannot be taught at school. The content differs from family to family, but this is the curriculum of the home — what parents and other family members teach and inculcate in children in the socialization process.

The curriculum of the home is taught by word and example, by the way adults relate to the children of the family, beginning at birth and not ending until the children are mature and on their own. When parents send their children to school for formal education, they understand that their job of socializing their children is far from done. They continue to teach their children what they need to know as they mature. The school can take what the family has provided and augment or modify it even, but the foundation must be laid by the family.

What happens in families where parents cannot communicate easily with the children? What happens when the major means of socializing children into the beliefs, values, and knowledge base of the family and cultural group is lost? If the parents know any English, often they switch to that language and, while their capacity to socialize the children might be diminished, they are nonetheless able to teach their children some of what they need to learn. But it is not easy to socialize children in a language one does not know well. It takes thorough competence in a language to communicate the nuances of a culture to another.

In his autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* (1982), Rodriguez describes what happens in families when parents try to socialize their children in a language they do not know well. He recalls what happened as he and his siblings moved from Spanish to English after the parents were advised to stop using Spanish at home with the children:

My mother and father, for their part, responded differently as their children spoke to them less. She grew restless, seemed anxious at the scarcity of words exchanged in the house. It was she who would question me when I came home from school. She smiled at the small talk. She pricked at the edges of my sentences to get me to say something more. (What?) She’d join conversations she overheard, but her intrusions often stopped her children’s talking. By contrast, my father seemed reconciled to the new quiet. Though his English improved somewhat, he retired into silence. At dinner he spoke very little. One night his children and even his wife helplessly giggled at his garbled English pronunciation of the Catholic Grace before Meals. Thereafter he made his wife recite the prayer at the start of each meal, even on formal occasions, when guests were in the house. Hers became the public voice of the family. On official business, it was she, not my father, one would usually hear on the phone or in stores, talking to strangers. His children grew so accustomed to his silence that, years later, they would speak routinely of his shyness. But my father was not shy, I realized, when I’d watch him speaking Spanish with relatives. Using Spanish, he was quickly effusive.
Especially when talking with other men, his voice would spark, flicker, flare alive with sounds. In Spanish, he expressed ideas and feelings he rarely revealed in English. With firm Spanish sounds, he conveyed confidence and authority English would never allow him. (pp. 24-25)

Can parents keep informed of what is happening to their children? Can they stay connected with them when the children no longer understand the family language? Can parents maintain their roles as authority figures, teachers, and moral guides if they are not listened to? We discern in Rodriguez’s poignant description a family that has lost its intimacy—the closeness between parents and children. Children learn what it means to be parents by observing their own parents. In this family, the children saw shadows only and not true pictures of who their parents were and what they were like as persons. Rodriguez reveals how greatly the loss of language and intimacy in the family changed the very structure of the family as well. The loss of language in this family severed the spiritual bond between parents and children:

The silence at home, however, was finally more than a literal silence. Fewer words passed between parent and child, but more profound was the silence that resulted from my inattention to sounds. (p. 25)

That is the dilemma. That is what is lost. One might argue that despite all of this, Rodriguez has been a success. He is a talented writer; he is thoughtful and sensitive; and he has accomplished a great deal in his life. But what his writings reveal to this reader is a deeply conflicted and lonely man who is trying to figure out who he is, where he belongs, and what his culture means. Does it matter that children lose their family language as they learn English as long as it does not interfere with their educational development and success in school? I think it does.

For immigrant children, learning English as a second language and dealing with school successfully are just one set of problems to be faced. Hanging on to their first language as they learn English is an equally great problem. Hanging on to their sense of worth, their cultural identities, and their family connections as they become assimilated into the school and society is a tremendous problem for all immigrant children. What is at stake in becoming assimilated into the society is not only their educational development but their psychological and emotional well being as individuals as well (Cummins, 1996).

The questions we educators need to consider are these: How and why do children give up and lose their primary languages as they learn English? What is involved, and what role are the schools playing in the process?

How Is a Language Lost?

Language loss is not a necessary or inevitable outcome when children acquire second languages. Otherwise the world would have no bilinguals. In many places around the world, bilingualism and even multilingualism are commonplace. In the United States, however, and in other societies like it, powerful social and political forces operate against the retention of minority languages. To many and perhaps most Americans, English is more than a societal language; it is an ideology. The ideological stance is this: To be American, one must speak English.

English gives access to participation in the life of the society, but it is also proof of an individual’s acceptance of and loyalty to the American ideal. Conversely, the inability to speak English is a sign that a person has not accepted the conditions of being American. These sentiments are powerful forces in how people see and deal with one another, especially in places like California, which have heavy concentrations of recent immigrants.

How do these forces affect the children discussed in this article?

The inability to speak English in school is a handicapping condition in many communities, particularly in places that have no programs designed to help children who are limited in English proficiency. Children in such situations, irrespective of background or age, are quick to see that language is a social barrier, and the only way to gain access to the social world of the school is to learn English. The problem is that they also come to believe that the language they already know, the one spoken at home by their families, is the cause of the barrier to participation, inclusion, and social acceptance. They quickly discover that in the social world of the school, English is the only language that is acceptable. The message they get is
Children and Languages at School

this: “The home language is nothing; it has no value at all.” If they want to be fully accepted, children come to believe that they must disavow the low status language spoken at home.

Children often start using English almost exclusively outside of the home just as soon as they have learned barely enough to get by. Before long, they are speaking English at home as well, even with parents who do not understand the language. If the parents do not realize that this shift in language behavior signals a change in the children’s language loyalty, English will supplant the family language completely in the children’s speech.

Language loss is the result of both internal and external forces operating on children. The internal factors have to do with the desire for social inclusion, conformity, and the need to communicate with others. The external forces are the socio-political ones operating in the society against outsiders, against differences, against diversity. They are the forces behind the passage of various public referendums in California against “immigrants” and “outside influences”: Proposition 63 in 1986, banning the use of languages other than English in public life; Proposition 187 in 1994, denying undocumented immigrants health, welfare, and educational services provided by public funds; Proposition 209 in 1996, ending affirmative action programs in jobs and education; and finally Proposition 227 in 1998, eliminating bilingual education as the preferred instructional program for LEP students.

Children may not understand what these public actions mean, but they are aware of the underlying sentiment. They interpret it as saying to them: To be different is to be unacceptable. Thus children do what they believe they must to rid themselves of what makes them unacceptable. Language is an obvious difference, so it is the first to go. Names, dress, haircuts—whatever is obviously different is changed: Chu-mei becomes Sondra, Kai-fong becomes Ken, and Allison is Allison from the start. Baggy legged jeans and oversized T-shirts replace unfashionable homemade garments, and the children are transformed. They are still different from their schoolmates, but not quite as different as before. They are no longer outsiders: They are Americans, not foreigners like their parents.

The processes of language loss and social adaptation may differ across individuals in detail from the picture sketched here, but the broad outline of these processes is general enough so that many immigrants will be able to map their own experiences onto it. They know what happens in families when children abandon the family language, and parents are no longer able to communicate easily with them. They know about the gradual erosion of trust and understanding among family members and about the loss of parental control.

Why do people allow this to happen? Few of those who are involved in the process of language loss realize the consequences it can have on their family or children until it is too late. It is difficult for people to believe that children can actually lose a language. They recognize that their children are changing, becoming “Americanized,” as it were, or more independent. But few parents doubt that their children, if required to do so, could switch back to their primary language. And indeed, it might be somewhat true for some children. The loss of a primary language is rarely total. But in most cases, when children are not actively using their primary language in everyday interactions, they do not develop it further, as was the case with Chu-mei, or Sondra. She is still able to speak Cantonese, but not at an appropriate level for a child her age.

Suggestions for Educators

What can educators do to make the process of learning the school language and adapting to life in American culture easier on immigrant children and their families? What can they do to make English learning less subtractive than it is now? Ideally children would attend schools where the primary language is used along with English, and they would be given opportunities to develop both languages fully. But that may not be possible under current socio-political conditions. Whether or not it is, parents and teachers should be working together to find other ways to support children’s development and retention of their primary languages, and to make their adjustment to school an easier one for everyone involved.

Such collaborative efforts between educators and parents, although needed, are not easy. The
parents who need the most help are unlikely to speak or understand much English. If teachers can speak their language, they can work directly with them. Otherwise teachers must work through interpreters, and that is never easy. The parents must be convinced that they need to be involved and to find time to work with the school for efforts like this to work.

Many immigrant parents have long workdays and may find it difficult to participate in school activities after work. Others may lack the confidence to work with teachers with whom they are not able to communicate easily. Still others may not understand the need for joint action on the part of the home and school. Undertakings such the ones I am suggesting require a strong developmental effort on the part of the school. The suggestions that follow are meant to help educators become aware of the need to work with parents to make the situation in their school and community easier on immigrant students.

First, teachers can help parents understand that they must provide children opportunities to attain a mature command of their first language in the home, whether or not it is supported in school. This is done by using more and more mature forms of the language at home in talking with the children as they grow older and expecting more mature speech from them. Parents should be encouraged to find time to talk with their children, read to them (if this is a practice in the culture of the home), and teach them things that interest educated members of their group. Families that come from cultures with a rich oral tradition will have many stories and histories to share with the children. Teachers should encourage them to use these materials and to regard them as equal to written materials that other families might use with their children at home.

Second, teachers and parents should be aware of the traumatic experiences children may be undergoing as they try to fit themselves into the social world of the school. They need to be alert to signs of emotional problems and to treat such problems gently and supportively rather than cause children to withdraw further from family and teachers.

Third, teachers and parents need to work together to neutralize some of the negative forces that operate on children in our society. When children become alienated from parents in the process of becoming Americans, the parents do not always know what is going on in their children’s lives. Teachers sometimes see what is happening with children that the parents do not (Olsen, 1997).

Finally, teachers should help parents understand that the only way ethnic languages and cultures can survive in societies like the United States is through community action. Immigrant communities have historically been involved in supporting heritage language and cultural programs. This requires community action, and such action can be taken only by members of the immigrant community. Community action is necessary if the family’s language and culture are to survive the process of becoming Americans.

Notes
1. Some groups are more retentive of their ethnic languages than others, and have managed to maintain them even into the third generation (Fishman & Hofman, 1966; Portes & Hao, 1998).
2. The family name Chen is a pseudonym, as are all the given names used here. Chen is about as common a surname among the Chinese as Smith or Jones is among Americans. I have tried to use both Chinese and American given names that are similar enough to the real names of family members since their names revealed how they were adjusting to the American experience.
3. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, one of every four immigrants to the United States eventually resettles in California. When I was recently called for jury duty, I overheard three separate remarks from individuals complaining about “foreigners” who could not speak English well. The young woman who was calling names of prospective jurors on the public address system did so with evidence of Spanish in her pronunciation of English. Her English was nonetheless completely grammatical and intelligible. In the San Francisco Bay area, with its very diverse population, there were many unfamiliar surnames to be called, and she occasionally stumbled over the names she was reading, as anyone might. A woman who was sitting beside me in the jury assembly room complained to those seated around her: “They should not hire people who can’t speak English! People who don’t speak English properly shouldn’t be allowed to deal with the public.” That was just one of three such remarks I overhead that day.
4. Proposition 187 was declared to be unconstitutional in 1997 in a legal challenge brought before the federal court in Los Angeles. Invoking the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996,” the welfare reform legislation enacted by Congress, Judge
M.R. Pfaelzer found in *League of United Latin American Citizens v. Wilson*, that 187 was an effort by the state to regulate immigration by restricting access to welfare and educational services. The regulation of immigration is exclusively a federal responsibility, and the state does not have the power to override federal legislation with its “own legislative scheme to regulate access to public benefits,” the judge declared. Former Governor Pete Wilson appealed the decision in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, but he was out of office before the case was heard. It was left to the present governor, Gray Davis, to settle the matter. In 1999, Davis asked the court to submit the case for mediation. The state and the opponents of 187 recently came to terms of agreement, ending any future challenges to the ruling.

**References**


