

Navigating Multilingualism: A Critical Review of Baker (2014) and Reflections

1.Introduction

In this essay, I will first examine key ideas for raising a bilingual child as presented in the book by Baker (2014). Then, by reflecting on my own experiences, I will explore the parental influence on children's language development. Finally, by adopting the framework of family language policy (FLP) to analyze the multilingual development of Children in Chinese transnational families, suggestions for children's multilingual development will be provided.

2. Discussion

2.1 Opinions from the Book

This book by Baker (2014) is highly informative, providing specific details and insights into raising a bilingual child. Firstly, rather than worrying about the accuracy of grammar and vocabulary, parents should make language learning a pleasurable, positive, and enjoyable experience for their children. Only in this way can children truly realize the values of two languages and cultures.

Secondly, children's attitudes and motivation towards bilingualism should be encouraged continuously. Expressing delight in their progress plays a crucial role in their bilingual development. The author notes that "encouragement and aptly directly praise will provide the positive ambience, the caring ethos and a helpful family atmosphere to surround the development of bilingualism" (Baker, 2014, p.38).

Thirdly, adequate exposure to both languages is also a significant factor in developing bilingualism. The author references Fred Genesee, who suggests that approximately equal exposure to both languages leads to successful bilingual development. In contrast, limited exposure may cause incomplete and delayed bilingual development. This is particularly important for children speaking a minority language, where encouraging the use of that minority language may need to be more rather than less.

Finally, the author highlights the importance of the language that surrounds language. Parents are compared to gardeners who provide certain conditions for bilingual development. Children may face challenges from external environments such as peer

pressure. What parents can do is to help maximize those conditions that are open to influence.

2.2 My Experience as a Multilingual Person

I am uncertain whether I can be considered a multilingual individual, as I speak Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Hakka dialect, and English. In China, Mandarin Chinese or Putonghua is the official language. According to Li (2006), there are over 290 languages and 2,000 dialects in Greater China. However, there is an ongoing debate about whether Cantonese and other dialects should be classified as distinct languages. Nevertheless, I would like to draw from my own experiences and reflections to explore the factors that influence raising a bilingual child.

I am from Heyuan, a city in Guangdong Province, located in the Southern part of China. To be more specific, I come from a small village in the northeast of the city. In Heyuan, people can speak the Hakka dialect. Like many families in China who migrate for work, my family is no exception. I spent most of my life in Dongguan, where my parents made their living. Dongguan is another city in Guangdong Province with a more developed economy. In Dongguan, most of the people speak Cantonese. To be honest, when people ask me where I am from, I often feel a sense of ambiguity since I am unsure whether to identify with Heyuan, my birthplace, or Dongguan, where I grew up.

As for the languages that I speak, the first one is my family language, the Hakka dialect. However, in some cases, I hesitate to speak Hakka, even with Hakka people, because I am afraid that others might identify with my background based on my accent. There are numerous regional accents of the Hakka dialects. People can often distinguish variations and determine where you are from based on your accent. For me, it seems that dialect represents underdevelopment. Besides, I often hesitate to speak my Hakka dialect with my relatives because they can easily notice changes in my accent and tease me for sounding like a "city person". Having lived in the city for a long time, my accent has shifted, mixing my hometown dialect with other accents, of which I am not entirely sure which ones.

My parents do not place much emphasis on my Hakka proficiency, though I am unsure why. Perhaps they believe it is not an issue as long as they can understand me. What I do remember is that my grandma once said to me that I should speak the family language when I am at home. Personally, I have mixed feelings about speaking Hakka. On one hand, I want to maintain this connection to my heritage and identity (Fang & Yao, 2025). On the

other hand, I feel a sense of shame because my family language is related to underdevelopment (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009). I never share these feelings with my family.

Regarding Cantonese and English, my parents have limited knowledge of these languages. To learn Cantonese, I primarily relied on watching Cantonese TV series and listening to Cantonese songs. There was a time when Cantonese songs and TV series from Hong Kong were trendy due to their economic advancement. I can speak Cantonese, but sometimes I make mistakes. Therefore, I will not speak Cantonese if it is not necessary. As for English, I learn it only at school (Gao & Zeng, 2021). My parents do not know how to speak English. For them, English is a compulsory subject which I should attempt to learn well. In their opinion, I will have more opportunities if I can speak English well (Xiong & Feng, 2020).

Additionally, I primarily learned Mandarin Chinese at school, where I used it exclusively to fulfil my communicative needs with my classmates. Outside of school, I also preferred speaking Mandarin when communicating with friends and relatives, as it serves as a common lingua franca (Feng & Adamson, 2018). My parents, however, were unable to teach me standard Mandarin, as they always spoke it with their accents.

When reading Baker's (2014) book, I do recognize parents indeed play an important role in children's language development. Besides, raising a bilingual child requires active parental involvement. It is believed that parents have the capacity to "make decisions about what measures should be implemented to promote or discourage the use and practice of particular languages based on their understanding of the functions and perceived values of the languages" (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018. p.236). However, when reflecting on my own language learning experience, I realize that parental influence is not always straightforward and can be constrained by multiple external factors. For example, parents who are from migrant or multilingual backgrounds may lack formal training in language education, and their own linguistic proficiency, time constraints, and socioeconomic status can significantly impact their ability to support children's multilingual development. In this case, children may encounter linguistic challenges and dilemmas. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of parents' perceptions of children's multilingual development is necessary. Besides, greater support and guidance should be provided to parents to help them navigate this process effectively.

2.3 Suggestion for Multilingual Development

2.3.1 Family Language Policy

It is admitted that multilingual development varies across different sociocultural contexts, making it essential to examine specific cases. To provide practical suggestions for parents raising multilingual children, I will use one specific example, Chinese transnational families. From a macro perspective, the multilingual development of transnational children could be influenced by migration pressure, national language policy and language in education policy (Canagarajah, 2008). In contrast, Family Language Policy (FLP) can provide a micro perspective to explore parents' explicit as well as implicit language planning in relation to language choice and literacy practices within the family domain (Feng & Adamson, 2018). There are three components in FLP, including language belief, language practices, and language management. Language beliefs refer to the ideological foundations behind language policies. Language practices concern the ecological environment of language, highlighting how languages are actively used across different contexts and purposes. Language management involves deliberate actions and interventions aimed at shaping or influencing language use (Spolsky, 2012). It is believed that FLP can help "understand why members of some immigrant groups maintain their languages, while members of other groups lose their languages. Why some children, growing up in a monolingual society, become bilinguals while other children, growing up in a bilingual environment, become monolinguals" (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013, p.278).

2.3.2 The Influence of Language Ideology

To understand how Chinese transnational families establish and implement their FLP, language ideology, which relates to political, economic and cultural aspects, serves as a useful analytical tool (Canagarajah, 2019).

Chinese transnational parents want their children to learn English well to succeed in school. On the one hand, learning English is associated with equal access to opportunities, higher income, and social prestige (Curdt-Christiansen & Palviainen, 2023). Conversely, a lack of proficiency in English can impede personal economic development. On the other hand, transnational parents have the desire for their children can maintain Chinese since the growing global influence of China has enhanced the economic value of Chinese (Gao & Zeng, 2021). Additionally, Chinese is their heritage language (HL), which provides a strong sense of belonging and identity (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009).

Furthermore, previous studies have indicated that flexible multilingual ideology can facilitate children's HL development (Pérez Báez, 2013). However, a fixed language

ideology, which means advocating monolingual language use in family communication, can have adverse influences on multilingual development (Gu et al., 2022).

2.3.3 The Influence of Home Literacy

Based on research examining the influence of language ideology on FLP, scholars have increasingly focused on home literacy practices, which are a key component of language management. Research has increasingly explored how transnational parents actively intervene in their children's language use and how their choices of language interventions, particularly in literacy development, reflect their language ideology (Curd-Christiansen, 2013). According to Dixon & Wu (2014), home literacy encompasses the home environment, parental involvement, and various forms of family capital that contribute to multilingual children's literacy development. Home environments include resources such as books, educational games, literacy-related materials, and access to libraries, which provide essential exposure to language (Curd-Christiansen & Morgia, 2018). Parental involvement consists of both formal and informal literacy activities, including reading to and with children, explicit reading instruction and homework help (Curd-Christiansen, 2013). Additionally, family capital comprises physical, human, and social capital, which can be transformed to enhance children's educational attainment (Wei et al., 2022).

Within the FLP framework, parents play an agentive role in shaping their children's multilingual development (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). Studies have shown that parental involvement and children's literacy experiences, including language environments, reading practices and enrichment activities, have long been reported to have a positive impact on children's academic experiences and learning. Curd-Christiansen and Morgia (2018) report that Chinese transnational parents provide a wide range of bilingual literacy resources and engaged their children in multiple literacy. For example, most Chinese parents allow an hour per day during the week for English TV programs since they believe it is an important tool for learning vocabulary and new English linguistic structure. Besides, reading every day in English for children has also been reported.

2.3.4 Suggestion for Chinese Transnational Family

From the above discussion, FLP has provided a better understanding of Chinese transnational parents' perception of children's multilingual development and the importance of home literacy which parents can provide. To provoke the discussion, there are some questions for Chinese transnational parents to reflect on.

1. If I were to raise a child in the UK, would I require them to speak both Chinese and English and what factors would influence this decision?
2. Should language use at home be strictly regulated, allowing the child to speak only Chinese or only English, or should a more flexible approach be adopted?
3. As a Chinese transnational parent, how can I effectively support my child's Chinese language development at home?
4. If my child struggles to learn Chinese, what support should I provide?

Based on these, several practical suggestions can help parents effectively support their children's multilingual development. Firstly, parents should realize the importance of multilingualism, acknowledging not only the significance of a dominant language such as English but also the importance of heritage or minority languages like Chinese. Additionally, adopting a flexible language ideology can enhance children's linguistic repertoire and cultural understanding and knowledge sharing (Gu et al., 2022). For example, establishing clear but flexible language rules, such as using Chinese at home and English in school or social settings, can help maintain a balanced approach to multilingualism. However, it is crucial for parents to take children's perspectives and preferences regarding language development into consideration (Gao & Zeng, 2021).

Secondly, parents should be actively involved in children's multilingual development. On one hand, parents should consciously observe children's language behavior, they also need to make conscious and reflective efforts to provide high-quality linguistic input. For example, engaging in interactive conversations with family members, storytelling, and daily reading in the heritage language (HL) is essential for children's multilingual development (Melgani, 2025). Additionally, parents should encourage children to take part in community-based cultural activities, such as cooking lessons, which provide immersive language experiences beyond the home environment (Fang & Yao, 2025). On the other hand, if children have difficulties in Chinese learning, parents can support their language development by providing access to weekend Chinese schools or community language classes (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). Moreover, parents should also be prepared to navigate the tension between FLP and formal educational policies, as schooling environments may prioritize English over heritage languages, potentially complicating children's multilingual maintenance efforts (Curdt-Christiansen, 2020; Garcia, 2015).

3. Conclusion

Language is an integral part of society. Baker's (2014) book provides a detailed discussion on raising a bilingual child, offering valuable insights for parents. Reflecting

on my own language development experience, I realize that multilingual development is a complex and dynamic process, influenced by multiple factors. Within the family domain, the FLP framework not only provides a deeper understanding of parents' perceptions of their children's multilingual development but also examines the support that parents can employ to facilitate multilingualism.

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