

Henry P.H. Chow
University of Regina

English-Language Use Among Chinese Adolescent Immigrants

Introduction

Proficiency in English is undoubtedly a prime consideration in the rapidity and ease with which immigrants adapt to an English-language-dominated milieu. It is required for communication and for the acquisition of information about the new society. Immigrant students' attendance at and in particular the successful completion of a course of study in an educational institution where English is the medium of instruction would require a minimum level of English-language skills. Earlier studies have demonstrated that language proficiency is associated with higher academic achievement among minority immigrant students (Chow, 2000; Marjoribanks, 1979; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). This article examines the factors that affect English-language use among Chinese immigrant students in Toronto.

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a larger investigation into the adaptation experiences of minority immigrant students (Chow, 1997). A total of 368 Chinese immigrant students from Hong Kong attending 26 public high schools in Toronto participated in a questionnaire survey. Length of residence in Canada of fewer than five years and legal status in Canada as a permanent resident (i.e., landed immigrant or citizen) were the two major eligibility criteria for participation in the study. The sample comprised 176 male (48.0%) and 191 female (52.0%) students with a mean age of 17.8 ($SD=2.8$).

English-language use was measured by an index of cultural adaptation, a factor score computed from students' frequency of exposure to English media and frequency of English use. This factor captured 24.9% of the variance (eigen value=3.24), and the mean loading for the variables was 0.68. A total of 11 predictor variables¹ classified under the categories of reasons for immigration,² personal characteristics, and socioeconomic characteristics were included in the regression model.

Data Analysis

Results of the ordinary least-squares regression analysis for English-language use are shown in Table 1. The overall regression model was significant ($F=7.126$, $p<0.001$), and 15.5% of the variance in English-language use was accounted for. Father's education ($\beta=.223$), prior experience in Canada ($\beta=.101$), and cultural ($\beta=.191$) and personal ($\beta=.145$) reasons for emigration were significantly and positively related to the dependent variable. More

Henry P.H. Chow is an assistant professor of sociology and social studies and an adjunct assistant professor of sociology at the University of Calgary. He can be reached at the Department of Sociology and Social Studies, University of Regina, 3737 Wascana Parkway, Regina, Saskatchewan, S4S 0A2; Tel: 306-585-5604; Fax: 306-585-4815; e-mail: chowhe@uregina.ca.

specifically, those whose father had a higher level of education and whose motives for emigration were culturally and personally related demonstrated a high frequency of English use. Location of residence ($\beta=-.092$) and age at immigration ($\beta=-.086$), on the contrary, were significantly and negatively related to the dependent variable. Those residing in the downtown Toronto area and who came to Canada at a later stage in life indicated a lower frequency of English use.

Discussion

This analysis has identified father's education, which is often used as a measure of an individual's socioeconomic status and as a form of human capital,³ as the strongest predictor of English-language use among the Chinese immigrant students. Indeed, earlier studies have found that socioeconomic status and English-language proficiency can explain differences in the educational achievement of language-minority and immigrant students (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Brantlinger, 1993; Kao, 1995; Lareau, 1989). Exactly how the father's education activates human capital, however, requires further research attention.

With respect to motivation, immigrants with a strong drive to leave their homeland and emigrate to a foreign country would definitely put more effort into the process of adapting to a new society, and as a consequence of greater

Table 1
Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients for Effects of Sociodemographic and Background Variables on English Language Use

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>beta (β)</i>
<i>Reasons for Immigration</i>		
1. Social	-.069	-.082
2. Educational	.053	.060
3. Political	.052	.066
4. Cultural	.167***	.191
5. Personal	.148**	.145
<i>Personal Characteristics</i>		
6. Age at immigration	-.026*	-.086
7. Self-assessed English proficiency	.085	.054
8. Location of residence	-.161*	-.091
9. Prior experience in Canada	.168*	.101
<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>		
10. Self-rated SES	.049	.068
11. Father's education	.119***	.223
(Constant)		-1.553***
R-Square		.181
Adjusted R-Square		.155
N	368	
F		7.126***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

effort would be more likely to achieve a satisfactory settlement. Richmond's (1988) remark on the importance of motivation is pertinent:

Original motives and intentions do influence the propensity of the migrant to learn the language of the receiving society, the types of social network developed, the degree of participation in the formal organization of the receiving society and the commitment to that country, including attitudes towards citizenship and political involvement. (p. 111)

It is, therefore, not surprising that those who expressed personal and cultural factors as the primary reasons for emigration demonstrated a higher frequency of English-language use. Earlier research has shown that motivational factors can be means for immigrants—those of Asian origin in particular—to overcome early deficits in school learning and to attain academic success (Arbeiter, 1984; Caplan, Whitmore, & Choy, 1989; Matute-Bianchi, 1986). The variable *prior experience in Canada either as a visitor or as a visa student* is indicative of one's socioeconomic status and is also closely related to the cultural orientation for emigration.

On the other hand, the analysis has revealed less frequent use of English among those who resided in the downtown area and those who emigrated to Canada at a later stage in life. Noticeably, the downtown area in Toronto has a high concentration of the Chinese population and a high degree of institutional completeness.⁴ The finding that those residing in the downtown area exhibited more frequent use of their ethnic language might be explained by the accessibility of a wide array of services in their ethnic community and a greater degree of exposure to ethnic media. With regard to age at immigration, the result is consistent with the literature on age and secondary-language acquisition. Past studies have documented that the ability to learn the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and pronunciation of a second language declines not only from childhood to adulthood, but also with age for adults (Johnson & Newport, 1991; Service & Craik, 1993; Spolsky, 1989; Stevens, 1999).

Conclusion

In order to participate fully in the economic, political, educational, and social domains of Canadian society, Chinese immigrant students must strive to attain a high level of English proficiency. Nevertheless, the evidence that minority students' literacy in their ethnic language can equally contribute to their academic achievement, which supports the view that advanced bilingualism promotes academic excellence (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Duran, 1983; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991), should not be overlooked. In fact, Cazden and Snow (1990) have aptly argued that the maintenance of a non-English language is in itself a valuable goal of academic achievement. Proficiency in a minority language can facilitate access to the social resources of ethnic communities. It is without doubt that effective English-as-a-second language programs should be offered to minority immigrant students. It will also be worthwhile for schools to promote activities actively that are aimed at maintaining minority students' skills in their ethnic languages.

Notes

1. The reasons for immigration were measured on a Likert-type scale (1=very unimportant to 5=very important). Age at immigration was measured in years. English proficiency was a

composite score based on self-assessed level of English proficiency in terms of skills in writing, reading, speaking, and understanding English (1=very unsatisfactory to 5=very satisfactory). Self-rated socioeconomic status had values ranged from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Father's education was measured on a 7-point scale (1=no formal education to 7=graduate degree). Prior experience in Canada (1=yes; 0=no) and location of residence (1=downtown Toronto; 0=other) were both measured as dichotomous variables.

2. This variable measures the respondents' perceptions of the major reasons why their families decided to emigrate to Canada. As pointed out by Fan and Skeldon (1995), emigration decisions in Chinese society typically involve all members of the immediate family and in many cases in Hong Kong the extended family as well. The decision of any family's member, therefore, represents the joint decision of the family.
3. As suggested by Coleman (1988), family background is analytically separable into at least three distinct components, including human capital, financial or physical capital, and social capital. Human capital, which constitutes the potential for a cognitive environment that is conducive to children's learning, is measured by the father's or parents' educational attainment.
4. The concept of "institutional completeness" formulated by Breton (1964) refers to the extent to which an ethnic group in a particular locale has organizations by or for members of that ethnoculture. According to the 1996 Census, the Chinese have become the largest visible minority group in Canada. Of a total 860,000 individuals who identified themselves as Chinese, 335,185 resided in the Toronto CMA (Statistics Canada, 1998). The degree of institutional completeness in the Chinese community in Toronto is indeed quite high.

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