

Immigrant Parents and Mother Tongue Language Education in Singapore's Bilingual System

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Abstract

Bilingualism has been the cornerstone of Singapore's language policy since 1959 (Lee & Phua, 2020). Given Singapore's diverse population, it is crucial to understand how immigrant parents from various cultural backgrounds perceive and engage with the country's bilingual education system. This paper investigates the perceptions and involvement of immigrant parents in the Mother Tongue Language (MTL) component of Singapore's bilingual education framework. The study focuses on two groups: Chinese immigrants from mainland China and non-Chinese immigrants from countries such as India and the Philippines. The research highlights immigrant parents' positive views on bilingual education framework as a benefit of migrating to Singapore for their children's education. Parents consider factors like future career prospects, cultural preservation, social integration, and reducing academic pressure when selecting their children's MTL. While some face challenges in navigating their children's MTL learning, others find their children adapt well. Nevertheless, all parents actively engage in efforts to enhance their children's MTL

proficiency, whether by enrolling them in tuition classes, incorporating language-focused activities at home, or through other supportive measures.

Introduction

Singapore is a city-state of rich diversities. As of 2024, the non-resident population in Singapore numbered about 1.86 million, constituting approximately 30 percent of the country's total population of around 6.04 million (Prime Minister's Office, 2024). This substantial group plays a pivotal role in society, not only due to their numbers but also because of their potential impact on Singapore's social and cultural fabric. As immigrants integrate into the local community, their experiences, values, and perspectives can profoundly shape and be shaped by the existing cultural milieu. Paying research attention to the immigrant population, particularly immigrant parents who are often deeply invested in their children's education, can provide an important lens through which to examine the wider dynamics of cultural integration, educational adaptation, and community cohesion. Moreover, given Singapore's foundational bilingual education model, studying immigrant

parents' interactions with the educational system can offer valuable insights for shaping policies and practices aimed at fostering linguistic inclusivity within society. Immigrant parents, therefore, represent an important demographic for research, offering invaluable perspectives on the evolving multicultural landscape of Singapore.

Singapore's bilingual policy was implemented following the election of the People's Action Party (PAP) to power in 1959 (National Library Board, 2023). Under this policy, students are required to achieve proficiency in their official mother tongue—Chinese, Malay, or Tamil—while simultaneously receiving instruction in English as their 'first language'. The PAP government instituted English as Singapore's primary working language due to its significance in international business, diplomacy, and technology (Lee & Phua, 2020). Beyond its role in facilitating international trade and knowledge transfer, English also serves as a unifying force in Singaporean society, effectively bridging the linguistic diversity among the country's various ethnic groups, enabling interaction, collaboration, and mutual understanding (Wang, 2015). Recognizing the significance of mastering the English language, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew also emphasized the importance of being proficient in one's mother tongue, stressing that it is more than a simple communication tool (Lee, 2012). Mother tongue is central in preserving cultural heritage, allowing individuals to connect with the rich history, traditions, and customs of their ancestors. Additionally, it serves as a repository of a community's values and beliefs. Mastering one's mother tongue also nurtures a sense of cultural identity and belonging.

While it is mandatory for students in Singapore to learn an official MTL, there

are exceptions for foreign students and those with special needs. With the flexibility offered by the Ministry of Education (MOE), immigrant parents have the option to decide whether they want their children to study an official MTL or opt for a Foreign Language such as French, German, or Japanese, Arabic, or an Asian Language like Burmese, or Thai (Ministry of Education Singapore, n.d.). Factors influencing the decisions made by immigrant parents for their children's MTL education may include their cultural backgrounds, language preferences, and educational aspirations for their children. However, to date, there has been limited research on this topic. Therefore, understanding the immigrant parents' perceptions and involvement of Singapore's educational landscape can offer valuable insights on the complexities of immigrant families' experiences within the educational system.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have examined the language experiences of immigrant families within various countries' educational systems. For example, Barkhuizen (2006) and Park and Sarkar (2007) explored immigrant parents' perceptions and involvement in heritage language (HL) maintenance in their new countries of residence. Focusing on Afrikaans-speaking South African immigrants residing in New Zealand, Barkhuizen's study revealed that immigrant parents were concerned about their children potentially losing the Afrikaans language and culture. They struggled to balance their emotional attachment to Afrikaans with the practical need for their children to adapt to an English-speaking society. In contrast, Park and Sarkar's study on Korean immigrants residing in Montreal, Canada observed differing opinions among immigrant parents regarding the impact of Montreal's

multilingual environment on their children's language development. While some parents found managing the multilingual environment—comprising English, French, and Korean—challenging, others viewed it as an advantage, believing it fostered their children's appreciation for multilingualism in a diverse society.

Furthermore, some parents believed that the language environment in Montreal had little effect on their children's HL development and that a positive parental attitude towards the Korean language was the most crucial factor in helping their children maintain their HL. Both studies suggested that immigrant parents across different contexts face unique challenges and hold varying perspectives regarding their children's language development and cultural preservation. Additionally, both studies highlighted that immigrant parents often used their HL during family conversations to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage. This finding was further supported by a recent study conducted by Liao and Huang (2020), who examined cross-cultural families in Australia. Their case study, featuring six interviewees from three different cross-cultural family units, revealed that Chinese parents prioritized the acquisition of HL, emphasising its use in family conversations as a means to enhance their children's HL learning.

Liao and Huang's study also highlighted the differences in parental perceptions regarding HL maintenance, particularly in relation to ethnic background. Chinese parents typically showed positive attitudes towards their children's acquisition of HL, in contrast to the often negative perceptions held by non-Chinese parents. These differing attitudes influenced how parents approached language learning. Chinese parents were highly proactive in managing their children's HL learning, such as by reading Chinese storybooks and practicing

Chinese as much as possible. In contrast, non-Chinese parents were less active, focusing more on leisure activities like preparing Chinese meals at home and dining at Chinese restaurants. Liao and Huang (2020) noted that these findings were expected, as Australian parents without a Chinese cultural background often lacked the proficiency and ability to directly assist in their children's HL learning.

The existing literature also provides valuable insights on how immigrant parents in various countries perceive the challenges and opportunities associated with HL maintenance for their children, as well as the strategies they employ to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage. It is also important to note that several scholars have thoroughly researched parents' language ideologies regarding the maintenance of their children's HL. For instance, a study by Wang and Li (2024) revealed a noticeable trend among Chinese immigrant parents in Australia, showing a preference for economic benefits over cultural pride in their efforts to maintain their children's Mandarin proficiency. This shift was driven by the increasing commercialization of Mandarin. Nonetheless, parents continued to view language as a means of preserving their cultural heritage. These insights from existing research elsewhere prompt us to delve deeper into the motivations behind the language choices made by immigrant parents within the context of Singapore.

Overall, while extensive research has been conducted on the language experiences of immigrant families in different countries' educational systems and their motivations to maintain HL, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning Singapore. Limited research has been conducted on the perspectives of immigrant parents regarding Singapore's education system, particularly the MTL

education within its bilingual framework. Given Singapore’s ethnically diverse population, this presents an intriguing opportunity to investigate how immigrant parents from diverse backgrounds perceive the educational landscape in Singapore.

Methodology

The data used in this study were collected from an ongoing qualitative study conducted by NTU-NIE, which investigates how immigrant parents influence their children’s education in Singapore. Participants were selected based on specific criteria: both parents had to be foreign-born, regardless of their residential status. Participants of Malaysian background were excluded due to their cultural proximity to Singapore. Additionally, participants needed to have children enrolled in mainstream Singapore schools, excluding international and specialized institutions, covering the educational range from Primary to Post-Secondary stages.

Participants were primarily recruited through snowball sampling and advertisements on public noticeboards. At the time of data analysis, a total of 64 participants (Chinese = 31, Filipino = 12,

Indian = 14, Indonesian = 4, Others = 3) had been interviewed. However, this paper focuses on data from 20 participants (Chinese = 10, Filipino = 3, Indian = 5, Indonesian = 1, Others = 1) (see Figure 1). The majority of these participants were mothers from China, the Philippines, and India, mostly in their 40s to 50s. Many held Singaporean citizenship or permanent resident status.

Data collection began with an online survey to gather basic demographic information from the participants before the interviews. This was followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one, typically over two sessions, in the participants’ preferred language—either Mandarin or English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages, with Mandarin transcripts being translated into English. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives about the parents’ migration experiences and, more importantly, to explore their perspectives on parental involvement, expectations, and ideologies. Special attention was given to the participants’ unique immigrant trajectories and backgrounds.

Figure 1: Table of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Residential status	Child’s age	Migration age (child)
Camila	Female	40	China	Singapore Citizen	7.5	Before 12 years old
Cecilia	Female	40	China	Singapore Citizen	9	Before 12 years old
Penny	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	8, 11	Before 12 years old
Linda	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	13, 17	Not applicable
Sam	Male	40	China	Singapore Citizen	11	Not applicable

Winnie	Female	48	China	Long Term Visit Pass (LTVP)	17	Before 12 years old
Harley	Female	53	China	Singapore Citizen	14	Not applicable
Jenny	Female	40	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	12, 18, 20	Not applicable
Yvette	Female	45	China	Singapore Citizen	14, 16	Not applicable
Sandy	Female	39	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	12	Before 12 years old
Melanie	Female	40	Philippines	Singapore Citizen	6, 8	Before 12 years old
Jessica	Female	47	Philippines	Permanent Resident (PR)	16, 18	Before 12 years old
Richard	Male	48	Philippines	Singapore Citizen	13	Not applicable
Aanya	Female	38	India	Employment Pass (EP)	6	Not applicable
Amrita	Female	42	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	16	Before 12 years old
Siara	Female	49	India	Singapore Citizen	19	Before 12 years old
Manish	Male	39	India	Employment Pass (EP)	10	Before 12 years old
Maya	Female	38	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	7	Before 12 years old
Moses	Male	61	Indonesia	Singapore Citizen	20	Not applicable
Caitlyn	Female	40	Germany	Permanent Resident (PR)	9	Not applicable

Chinese immigrant parents’ perceptions of bilingualism as an advantage of migrating

When discussing the advantages of migrating to Singapore, most Chinese immigrant parents viewed Singapore’s bilingual education system as a significant benefit, whereas none of the non-Chinese immigrant parents cited it as an advantage. Winnie, a 48-year-old Chinese mother of one, viewed the system positively, acknowledging the substantial value and unique benefits the system offered her son:

So, in this case, the various conditions, including the bilingual education, make it rather advantageous for Chinese children to come here. No matter what the case is, my son’s Mother Tongue is Chinese, in addition to English [which he is learning], we hope he can become an international talent in the future. So, in this bilingual education environment, I think only Singapore can do it thoroughly, among more than 200 countries in the world.

Many other Chinese immigrant parents echoed Winnie’s sentiments, believing that Singapore’s education system’s appeal lies

in its ability to nurture international talent through its emphasis on bilingualism. Camila, a 40-year-old Chinese mother of one, explained:

One of the advantages of Singapore education that attracts me is the bilingual programme. Although we had an opportunity in UK or other English-speaking countries at that time, my child will lose the advantage of bilingualism because it is quite difficult to learn Chinese in those countries.

Camila's view of Singapore's unique linguistic blend as a significant advantage over other English-speaking countries parallels Ren and Hu's (2012) study, which revealed that Chinese immigrant families consider Singapore's bilingual education system a favourable aspect of living in the country.

Immigrant parents' choices in MTL education for their children

In the context of Singapore's bilingual education framework, various MTLs are offered, and immigrant parents often weigh four main considerations when selecting an MTL for their children: career prospects, cultural connection, social integration, and alleviating learning burdens.

Career Prospects

One of the most significant considerations is career prospects. Many immigrant parents view proficiency in a particular MTL as a valuable asset that can enhance their children's future career opportunities. Among the available MTLs, the Chinese Language (CL) is particularly seen as advantageous. A considerable number of parents, including those who are not of Chinese descent, believed that acquiring proficiency in CL could greatly improve their children's competitiveness in

the professional arena, especially by providing access to the Chinese economy. This perspective aligns with Wang and Li's (2024) study, which finds a strong preference among participants for the economic benefits associated with choosing CL as their children's MTL.

For instance, Richard, a 48-year-old Filipino father of one, strongly advocated for his son to learn CL. He expressed, "I never had second thoughts on having him learn Chinese...it will definitely be useful probably in a business context or in a corporate context that he knows it." This statement underscores Richard's deliberate and strategic decision, highlighting his high expectations for his child's future and his proactive approach to his son's language education. Jessica, a 47-year-old Filipino mother of two, shared Richard's views on the importance of CL proficiency for her children. She noted, "Internationally, we know that China has a big percentage of influence around the world. Aside from English, the second language that can communicate well, is Chinese." By recognising China's substantial global influence and positioning CL as a key language for effective international communication, Jessica acknowledged the practical and career-related benefits that come with choosing CL as her child's MTL.

Similarly, Melanie, a 40-year-old Filipino mother of two, echoed the perspectives of Richard and Jessica. Reflecting on her decision, she explained:

It's been...like when he was young, when he was 3 years old, then I sent him to a center for Chinese class because we have no...because we know we will put him in the local schools and also I like him to learn Chinese. It is good to have a good... you know, to learn Chinese right so ya, in my work, as [a Relations Manager], like most of the Chinese, they really bring in the big

clients right, so ya it is good to learn Chinese.

Melanie's decision was driven by practical considerations from her role as a Relations Manager. She recognized the advantages of CL proficiency in engaging clients and creating business opportunities, which led her to select CL as her child's MTL.

Cultural Connection

Some immigrant parents emphasize the role of language in preserving and enhancing cultural identity. They deliberately choose their own mother tongue to deepen their children's connection to their home culture, fostering a deep understanding of their cultural roots and heritage. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Barkhuizen (2006), which highlights a shared sentiment among different immigrant communities regarding the significance of language in maintaining cultural ties and heritage.

While acknowledging the advantages of learning CL, Aanya, a 38-year-old Indian mother of one, opted for Tamil as her child's MTL. She explained:

See, a lot of people they prefer to take Chinese. I mean I know a lot of Indians or non-Chinese people also take Chinese. I think the main reasons why they do it is because, one, it's a very important language to pick up; I mean, if you can speak English and Chinese, you can communicate with most of the world, right? So, it's definitely a language that's highly useful. But Tamil is important for me, because otherwise she cannot integrate with our family, right? And for her to feel that she is Indian, I feel that it's one of the important parts. So, for that integration, I definitely need her to pick up Tamil.

Aanya's decision reflects her priority in strengthening her child's cultural roots and sense of belonging to their ethnic community. This highlights the complex considerations that influence immigrant parents' decisions regarding their children's MTL education.

Siara, a 49-year-old Indian mother of one, shared a similar perspective with Aanya. Initially, she chose an international school for her child due to uncertainty about the availability of Indian mother tongue education in local schools. However, upon learning that local schools do provide Indian mother tongue education, she decided to transfer her child to a local school. She remarked:

When we put him into the international school, we were not so much aware of...you know, whether mother tongue would be offered in the local schools, because we still wanted him to be close with his roots as well, though he's in Singapore.

Another thing which also made us take this decision was that in terms of mother tongue there was an opportunity of him studying an Indian mother tongue even in the local schools, which is that he took up his mother tongue, which is Hindi, in his primary school as well as in secondary school.

Siara's decision reveals a conscious effort by immigrant parents to ensure their children maintain a deep understanding of their cultural heritage, even abroad. It underscores their dedication to passing down their cultural legacy and highlights the pivotal role language plays in preserving and transmitting cultural identity across generations and borders.

Additionally, although Chinese immigrant parents did not provide explicit justifications for choosing CL as the MTL

for their children—since it is their HL—they did emphasize the significance of MTL as a means of preserving cultural heritage. For example, Cecilia, a 40-year-old Chinese mother of one, mentioned:

We speak Chinese in our family, so I think actually language is the carrier of culture, so when you speak the language, your culture is inside, so I think I also did not deliberately go to him to introduce or give him a special kind of lesson to understand, to strengthen his understanding of this culture. But I think naturally he will be very interested in Chinese culture.

Cecilia's perspective suggests that through everyday language use within the family, children naturally absorb their cultural background, fostering a genuine interest and appreciation for their heritage without the need for formal instruction. This underscores the idea that language serves as more than just a means of communication; it is a vessel that carries the essence of one's heritage and roots.

Social Integration

Some parents give preference to a particular MTL to facilitate their children's integration into Singapore, emphasizing the importance of linguistic assimilation. This preference often leans toward CL, as reflected in Jessica's following statement:

First thing is because, aside from English, Chinese also is like 50-50 used here in Singapore, like communication.

At first we wanted Chinese, so that they can adapt well. Because Chinese generally if you know Chinese, easier to communicate here in Singapore. And then we want them to belong here because most of the students are also talking in Chinese. There are Malay, there are Indian but we know that majority are still Chinese, right?

So we want them also to belong, so that they can play with them or they can be friends with them. (47-year-old Filipino mother of two)

Jessica's choice of Chinese as her children's MTL reflects both practical and strategic considerations. For her, Chinese offers more than career benefits; it serves as a cultural bridge that aids in social integration, forming friendships, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Winnie's view echoed Jessica's, emphasizing the significance of cultural and linguistic familiarity in facilitating integration into Singaporean society. Winnie noted that one of Singapore's advantages, particularly for her as a Chinese immigrant parent, is the substantial presence of the Chinese community, which constitutes the largest ethnic group in the country. She stated:

One of the reasons is 70% of the population here is Chinese, be it the lifestyle or language environment, it is more suitable for us as Chinese citizens, because some of the living habits, ways of communication, we will not have language barriers, because our English is not very good. (48-year-old Chinese mother of one)

By acknowledging the predominantly Chinese community in Singapore, both Jessica's and Winnie's perspectives demonstrate a strategic decision-making approach, driven by the desire for integration and cultural alignment within the Singapore context.

Alleviating Learning Burden

Lastly, some immigrant parents consciously opted for a specific MTL to alleviate the learning burden on their children. In such cases, they often leaned toward the "Mother Tongue in-lieu" option,

choosing a Foreign Language or Asian Language instead of the official MTLs. This choice could be motivated by two main reasons.

Firstly, some immigrant parents opted for an MTL that aligned with their native language to avoid potential academic struggles for their children. This strategic decision was exemplified in the case of Caitlyn, a 40-year-old German mother, who mentioned that her child did not take a local mother tongue in school, despite having studied Chinese in preschool. Caitlyn explained:

He's not taking a local Mother Tongue, although he started Chinese in preschool..... Chinese is not a language which you can compare to English and German, or a Latin-based language. So, I, or my husband mainly, made the decision to not put my son under this stress, because we had an option. MOE actually provides an option to not be exempted from Mother Tongue, but to do a Mother Tongue in-lieu, and German is such a language. And since my son is bilingual, and his Mother Tongue is German, this is the option we chose. So outside of primary school time, he is learning German.

Caitlyn's insights shed light on how some immigrant parents strategically navigate the education system, considering alternatives that align with their children's linguistic background while aiming to alleviate academic stress.

Another group of parents made their language choice not because it aligned with their native language, but to avoid negatively impacting their children's performance on the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Unlike official MTLs, Foreign Language or Asian Language examinations are not part of the PSLE, giving parents the flexibility to

choose a language without affecting their children's academic results—crucial in Singapore's high-stakes education environment. Jessica shared her experience of this strategic decision. Her eldest child initially studied Chinese as his MTL but switched to French in Primary 5. She explained:

But then, the difficulty is when they are already primary 3 or primary 4 where they need to write [in Chinese]. Initially, speaking or like writing the *han yu pin yin*, still in the alphabets, still they can cope. But the moment [laughs] they already starting to, you know, write those Chinese character, wah, they start to fail already, really fail. So we... that's the worry[ing] part, so that's why we were recommended by the school also to...if we wanted to go for another mother tongue, which is our selection during the time is, I remember Malay, Tamil or French. So of course we go French ah. So we selected French for both of them. (47-year-old Filipino mother of two)

Jessica's decision stemmed from concerns about her son's ability to cope with the increasing difficulty of CL, especially the challenge of writing Chinese characters, which is emphasized in Singapore's curriculum. By choosing French, Jessica ensured that her son's language study would not negatively impact his PSLE results. This decision reflects a strategic approach to navigating the education system, aligning language choices with the children's strengths and academic goals while maintaining flexibility. Jessica's experience also highlights how her initial intention—introducing her child to CL for spoken proficiency—shifted as the curriculum in Primary 5 began to focus more on writing. This prompted her to reassess the situation and opt for a different MTL that better suited her child's abilities and academic prospects.

Actions taken by immigrant parents to enhance their children's MTL learning

Immigrant parents have varying perspectives on the difficulty of MTL education, which in turn shape the actions taken to enhance their children's MTL skills. Most Chinese immigrant parents, whose children were studying CL as their MTL, found the level of difficulty in MTL education to be manageable, which can be attributed to their immigrant background. Having come from China, where Chinese is the native language, their children likely had a strong foundation in CL, as exemplified by Winnie:

In terms of grades, you also know that Chinese children do not need to worry about advanced Chinese because Mandarin is their mother tongue and the foundation of Chinese children is very good. (48-year-old Chinese mother of one)

Similarly, Sandy, a 39-year-old Chinese mother of one, noted that her son's solid foundation in Chinese stemmed from his previous education in China. She stated:

His Chinese was always better, because he did come over at an older age [having studied prior in China].

Linda, a 44-year-old Chinese mother of two, also noted that Chinese immigrant students could achieve high grades effortlessly due to their proficiency in CL. She stated:

Chinese is an advantage for immigrant children, as their Chinese skills are usually good. My children have never learned Chinese and do not attend any Chinese tutoring classes, but they perform very well. This is an absolute advantage in Singapore, where Chinese and Higher Chinese are required subjects in the Primary 6 exam,

they definitely can get a good grade in these two subjects. Even in middle school, he doesn't need tutoring, and he consistently performs well in his exams.

In fact, some Chinese immigrant parents found the CL education offered in Singapore to be too basic. To address this concern, some arranged short-term stays in China for their children to ensure sustained proficiency in their native language. This deliberate action highlights the importance these parents placed on maintaining a high level of proficiency in their native language. Harley, a 53-year-old Chinese mother of one, shared her experience:

In order to let my daughter's Chinese to be better, I have made a very special decision. When my daughter was in the third grade of primary school. She did not study for three months. I took her back to China to study. This is also what I discussed with her form teacher. I told her form teacher and had a discussion which I felt that the Chinese here could not meet my expectations.

Harley further emphasized her expectation of high proficiency in CL by enrolling her child in Chinese tuition. She stated, "I didn't give my elder daughter any tutoring except Chinese."

Jenny, a 40-year-old Chinese mother of three, provided further insights into how Chinese immigrant parents perceived MTL education in Singapore. She noted that her first two children, who had spent considerable time in China—one attending a local nursery center and the other enrolled in a Mandarin Center affiliated with a primary school—had established a strong foundation in Chinese and did not require additional Chinese tuition. However, her third child, who did not have the opportunity to stay in China for an extended period, showed a noticeable difference in

Chinese proficiency. Jenny explained:

My first and second children, we did bring them back to China for about a year. They went to a local nursery center, my oldest daughter even went to the CNY Mandarin Center which is affiliated to a primary school for more than half a year, so she [refers to the oldest daughter] built a very good foundation for Chinese. But of course, the Chinese level cannot compare to that of China. But they have good Chinese reading habit, which they don't need to go for tuition, their Chinese is very good. But my third child has such problem since she never stayed in China at all, she goes back China just to visit relatives, maybe 10 days or half a month only, so her Chinese is relatively poor. Yes, so it is very weird when our third child has the need of looking for Chinese tuition. You see our family, we are a Chinese family and we speak Chinese at home, but her Chinese is not good and doesn't like to read Chinese, so she didn't cultivate a good habit.

Jenny and Harley's experiences suggest that Singapore's educational environment might have fallen short in providing optimal conditions for Chinese children to excel in CL.

In contrast, many non-Chinese immigrant parents conveyed that MTL education posed considerable challenges for their children. Siara illustrated this perspective and discussed the steps she took in response to the perceived difficulty. She stated:

In primary school, he just took tuition for mother tongue, which is Hindi, because yes, it is a bit challenging, the Hindi syllabus is quite tough, I think it goes for all the MT languages, because they try to keep it at par with Chinese, as well as Tamil, and all the other languages. (49-year-old Indian mother of one)

Moses, a 61-year-old Indonesian Chinese father, who missed the opportunity to learn Chinese as a child, also highlighted the challenges faced by non-Chinese-speaking parents in navigating their children's education:

I think Mother Tongue, I think it's a bit... because for non-speaking Chinese, maybe it's not really that easy to learn Chinese. Even though my wife can speak a bit, but in terms of the writing, in terms of grammar, we don't really know about it.

Additionally, he pointed out the added challenge posed by the graded nature of the MTL education system, believing it places undue stress on students and their families, particularly those lacking proficiency in the language. He mentioned, "I think, why Mother Tongue? Maybe can be compulsory, but cannot be one of the main determinant in grading the student."

Melanie also shed light on the challenges faced by non-Chinese immigrant children in adapting to the CL curriculum, which in turn stressed the parents. She shared:

The Chinese class he can't comprehend most of the words and he's sleeping in school, now I feel stressed also for him. (40-year-old Filipino mother of two)

To support her child's CL learning, Melanie hired a tutor twice a week. However, the outcome was less than satisfactory, as the tutor noted her son's difficulty with memorizing Chinese words. This underscores the complexity of MTL education for immigrant children and parents, suggesting that extra classes alone may not be enough to overcome these difficulties.

In addition to strategies like enrolling their children in tuition and sending them

back to their home country, immigrant parents also organize language-focused activities at home to improve their children's MTL proficiency, as exemplified by Caitlyn:

Apart from the daily environment, we talk, my husband, my son and me, we talk in German. (40-year-old German mother of one)

Similarly, numerous immigrant parents, including Amrita, Penny, and Linda, insisted that their children speak their MTL at home. Linda, in particular, went the extra step of requesting her children to repeat themselves in Chinese if they spoke in English. She expressed her desire to enhance her children's proficiency in Chinese, fearing they might struggle to communicate with family members when visiting China in the future. Below are the original quotes by Amrita, Penny, and Linda.

We... till now we talk in Tamil. Tamil is the main source [sic] of communication in our house. (Amrita, a 42-year-old Indian mother)

We always insist on speaking Chinese to them, so, although their Chinese is relatively weak, they are still better than their peers who have been speaking English at home since childhood although they are Chinese. (Penny, a 44-year-old Chinese mother)

We require them to use Chinese at home. If they speak English, I'll make them say it again in Chinese. Because of my children, I worry that they won't be able to communicate with the adults when they return to China in the future, we go back quite often, but less during the pandemic, but normally we still go back quite often, so I must make sure that they speak Chinese well. Otherwise, if their Chinese is not good,

it will be a huge obstacle when we go back to China to visit grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives. It will create a sense of distance. I hope they speak Chinese very well. (Linda, a 44-year-old Chinese mother)

Additionally, immigrant parents like Caitlyn, Jenny, and Sandy also actively provided various resources, such as audiobooks, books, and TV shows, to immerse their children in the language and culture of their MTL:

He listens to German audiobooks, and he has German books, and he watches German TV, this is like the daily setting. (Caitlyn, a 40-year-old German mother of one)

My first two children, they have very good reading habits so they have good grasp of language, basically they can understand Chinese in a short time, so we never have tuition before, we don't have any tuition in art stream subjects at all, but we did have the cultivation since childhood. (Jenny, a 40-year-old Chinese mother)

I emphasized a lot on reading when we were in China, I would read with him a lot. Before he entered Primary 1, he basically could achieve self-reading already. (Sandy, a 39-year-old Chinese mother of one)

These insights highlight a shared commitment among immigrant parents to maintaining their children's proficiency in their MTL and nurturing a strong cultural identity.

Conclusion

This paper explored the perceptions and involvement of immigrant families in Mother Tongue Language (MTL) education within Singapore's bilingual education system. The findings reveal that most Chinese immigrant parents view

bilingualism as a significant advantage of relocating to Singapore, emphasizing the importance they place on the country's bilingual education system compared to their non-Chinese counterparts. However, when selecting their children's MTL, both Chinese and non-Chinese immigrant parents weighed various considerations, such as future career prospects, cultural connections, social integration, and academic pressure. These considerations can at times be conflicting, thus adding complexity to their decision-making process.

Some parents might choose a MTL perceived to lead to better career prospects, such as CL. However, this decision may come at the expense of their children's connection to their native language and culture, highlighting the trade-offs immigrant parents face. Similarly, while some parents might initially select a MTL to facilitate social integration, the academic pressure associated with mastering a challenging language may cause them to reconsider their choice, prioritizing their child's well-being over initial goals.

Given their immigrant backgrounds and the decisions they made, immigrant parents held differing opinions about the standards of MTL education. While most Chinese immigrant parents considered the MTL education standard in Singapore to be relatively easy compared to China, non-Chinese immigrant parents, particularly those who chose Chinese as their children's MTL, encountered challenges in supporting their children's language learning. This finding echoes the study by Liao and Huang (2020), which showed that Australian parents in cross-cultural families, whose children's heritage language was Chinese, struggled to assist their children due to their own lack of proficiency in the language. This language barrier similarly affected non-Chinese immigrant parents in

Singapore, making it difficult for them to provide effective support and potentially hindering their children's progress in MTL.

Despite these challenges, all immigrant parents in this study actively involve themselves in enhancing their children's MTL proficiency through tuition classes, language-focused activities at home, and other methods. This finding contrasts with Liao and Huang's (2020) study, where non-Chinese parents in Australia often did not prioritize Chinese language learning, citing reasons such as the dominance of English in Australia and the perceived limited utility of Chinese unless planning to relocate to a Chinese-speaking country. The difference in attitudes highlights the unique cultural and educational contexts influencing parental perceptions and involvement in MTL education in Singapore.

Lastly, while this study contributes to the understanding of immigrant parents' perceptions and involvement in Singapore's bilingual education system, its generalizability is limited by the small sample size. With data from only 20 participants (10 Chinese immigrants from China and 10 non-Chinese immigrants from various backgrounds) analysed in this paper, the findings may not be representative of the broader immigrant population in Singapore. Future research could increase the sample size and include a more diverse representation of immigrant communities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this topic.

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