

Parents Attitudes and Efforts in Heritage Language Maintenance: An Interview Study of Nepalese Families in Tokyo

MEHTA Kalu Singh

Abstract:

This paper looks at the migrant Nepalese parents' attitudes toward heritage language maintenance for their children and their efforts to help their children in maintaining the heritage language development in Tokyo. Ten parents were interviewed for this study. A set of closed-ended and open-ended questionnaire was used. The parents were first interviewed through personal contact, and then asked to refer the parents who they know. The questionnaire was based on the parent's attitudes towards heritage language development of their children and their efforts on maintaining heritage language in a foreign context. The findings reveal that Nepalese parents have a very positive attitude towards heritage language development of their children in Tokyo. It was observed, that Nepalese parents believe if their children have good command in Nepalese language that will certainly help to get better opportunities in their future and that will help to maintain their cultural identity as Nepalese too. The results also suggest that Nepalese parents are following different strategies towards the maintenance of the heritage language on their children in Tokyo.

Keywords: Language choice, Heritage Language maintenance, Nepalese families, cultural identity

Background

According to the International Organization of Migrants (IOM), "the word migrants refers to the people who are moving or moved to another place in order to find work, better living conditions from their habitual place of residence, whatever their legal status, causes of movement, and length of stay" .

Heritage languages are the languages spoken by the minority and ethnic language speakers of the world. There are several heritage languages which can be divided into two sub categories; languages spoken by indigenous/ ethnic peoples and language spoken by the migrants who have settled to a new place where another majority language is spoken (Cum-

mins, 1995; de Bot & Gorter, 1995; Fishman, 1991). In this study heritage language means migrant's languages. When we look back on the definition of heritage language speaker by Valde's (2001) which says that "a student who is raised in a home where non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language" .

Researches on heritage language loss and management in the multicultural situation was likely to be undermined until the beginning of 21st century, where main emphasis was given to second language acquisition for better opportunities and to compete in the new society where peoples have migrated (Guardado, 2002). But it has slightly changed over time, language loss is now taken seriously by society and linguists. A broader emphasis is given to language loss and the maintenance of the heritage language of immigrant families. And these days minority and ethnic languages are given more emphasis to preserve and maintain the balance between different languages in a multilingual and multicultural society.

The relation between Nepal and Japan started formally in 1956, but the number of Nepalese started to increase steadily in recent years. According to the immigration bureau of Japan, the number of Nepalese was 85,321 in 2018, among them the number of school-aged children below 18 years were 7,484.

These school-aged children are attending different schools in Japan, such as Japanese government school, Nepalese international school, and Indian international school. Depending upon the nature of school exposure of language varies from Japanese to English and Nepali. One can assume that living in Japan is more likely to get exposure of Japanese language. Due to the use of different language by children at school and home somehow is affecting the smooth communication between parents and children. This can be attributed to the fact that Nepalese parents want their children to learn their heritage language as well as English as a international language and Japanese for the use of possible long-term residence in Japan.

Literature Review

It is estimated that children from migrant families often experience a unique challenge in school due to the use of the second language at school and the heritage language at home. Garcia reviewed some literature in 2003 and found that the field of ethnic and minority language maintenance and shift is of great benefit for the practical ends of all nations that require international communication (Garcia, 2003). Another study conducted in Canada, found that the role of family, school, and community should be taken into consideration in order to help to maintain the minority languages and enhance their first language development. Schools, educators, community, friends and the use of language at home play a determinant

role in maintaining their first language (Kouritzin, 1999). Li through her study on language minority mother and her daughter in the US context, mentions that immigrant children's language skills and identity formation are influenced by parents' positive attitudes towards heritage language at home (Li, 1999, Lao (2004). This all shows that parents' role is important in maintaining the heritage language of their children. If the relationship between parents and children are secure, maintaining the first language is not a barrier to second language acquisition (Tannebaum and Howie, 2002)

The loss of heritage language has been identified as a historical phenomenon in the U.S., which was expected and accepted under the notion of "melting pot" of many cultures, with a deal to become American (Krashen, 1998). Parents should provide some basic elements to ensure the development of family language to the children, for example; cultural identity, role and responsibility of children to family and community because they cannot learn these things of home at school. (Wong Fillmore, 2000)

With regard to the parents' attitudes towards heritage language maintenance and their efforts to help their children maintain the heritage language a study by Park & Sarkar on Korean-Canadian immigrants in Montreal, they interviewed nine parents who had a child between the ages of 6-18 years. The mean length of stay of participants in Montreal was six years and seven months, they were aged between 32-50 years. All participants were all born in South Korea and migrated to Canada as adults and they identified Korean as their native language. All the parents had strongly positive attitudes towards heritage language for their children. This study reveals that parents use different strategies for maintaining heritage languages such as using Korean books, sending their children to Korean ethnic churches using of the Bible and Korean videotapes for educational purposes (Park & Sarkar, 2007). Another study on maintaining the heritage language from the perspective of Korean parents suggests that parents are positive on the development of heritage language for their children. Parents believe that heritage language best describes and helps to preserve their identity as a Korean immigrant in the U.S. (Brown (2011).

On the other hand, some studies report that parents speak English far more than their heritage language. Immigrant parents think that speaking English at home will help their children learn English faster (Hilton, 1999; Suarez, 2002). Parents tell their children that learning English is most important for their academic and career success. In these conditions' parental dominance in English language have a direct effect on heritage language loss of their children.

Participants

This study is a part of the master's thesis which is based on language planning, practice and heritage language management of Nepalese families in Tokyo. Once a few parents were interviewed, they were asked if they know other parents. Snowball sampling¹⁾ was used to contact and collect data. Although some parents didn't show any interest in the study and some parents refused to talk on their children's language development, the process of data collection took almost 4 months, a bit longer than the expected. The selection criteria for parents was based on whether the children are attending any formal school in Japan (excluding daycare and nursery). A total of ten parents were interviewed for this study.

Procedure

A questionnaire with set of 10 questions were prepared for this study. Both open-ended and closed-ended questions were in the study, which focused on heritage language use, maintenance, and concern on the loss of their heritage language. Freedom was given to the parents to choose language either Nepali or English. The answers in Nepali language were later transcribed in English. Data from parent interviews were examined and categorized such as attitudes and efforts on heritage language of their children. Once these categories were set, the data were analyzed through a descriptive process which determines themes regarding the participation of parents' thoughts in maintaining heritage language.

Findings

By analyzing data three basic themes were identified: parents tend to be more positive towards the development of heritage language due to the fact that home is the only place to learn heritage language. Parents are far more aware of the benefits of maintaining heritage language and parents are equalizing heritage language as their cultural identity. The interviewed parents possessed a strong desire to develop and maintain heritage language of their children. Parents seem to have afforded the heritage language development of their children through different strategies and building a sense of cultural identity as a Nepalese in Tokyo.

Discussion

Parents attitudes towards heritage language

The results of this study indicate that all parents have positive attitudes towards their children's heritage language development. The answer of the question all parents replied,

1) Snowball sampling is the technique of knowing one person, after winning his trust ask him to other people he/she knows and vice versa.

that heritage language is the key factor to describe who they are, and it will somehow help to develop their children's Nepalese identity. Majority of parents in this study reveal that they use more heritage language rather than Japanese or English at home. When parents were asked why they are concerned about the heritage language development, all parents strongly insisted that heritage language is the key factor in the formation of cultural identity. Language is one of the key factors in building a cultural identity in the multilingual situation, bilingualism promotes acceptance on majority culture and heritage culture (Cho & Krashen, 1998; Lee 2002; Cavallaro, 2005). Nepalese parents tend to rely more on the heritage language for their children's cultural identity development as a Nepalese.

Another reason for heritage language development tends to be children's multilingual development.²⁾ Studies in third language acquisition suggest that bilinguals have some advantages over the monolingual for the acquisition of new language. They also reveal that the more competent a bilingual with similar competence in two languages is supposed to commit less mistakes when comparing to the less balanced bilinguals (Nation & McLaughlin, 1986; Bild & Swain (1989) and Swain, Lapkin, Rowen & Hart (1990). Young children are not confused by hearing two or more languages but develop the ability to discriminate among the languages they hear; they are more open to new language learning than their monolingually exposed counterparts (Petitto, Berens, Kovelman, Dubins, Jasinka & Shalinsky, 2012).

Another parent considered that heritage language development will create more opportunity in their career. If his/her child has good proficiency in Nepali that might open space for job finding here in Japan or outside Japan. It might be easier to find bilingual jobs. With regard to the career of multilingual speakers in this global society, the heritage language development might create opportunities in communicating with different peoples who speak Nepali language. But some parents with heritage language different than Nepali (minority language and ethnic language) were found in a dilemma to choose a home language for their children. The parents said that if they speak in their heritage language it might create problems for their children when they talk with other Nepalese families here in Japan. When children return to Nepal there might be different problems due to lack of Nepali language command in their career too. Parents with other than Nepali language informed that they were using their heritage language as well as Nepali language at home with children to develop

2) where parent gives an example of himself stating that he is a minority language speaker in Nepal, that he learned a home (native) language before going to the school to learn a second language, Nepali, at school and learned a third language English, also, in his early academic stage. He believes that he had less problems in learning English in the classroom and Japanese when he came to Japan and claims to be a good speaker of Japanese.

the capability of speaking both languages.

Parents efforts in maintaining heritage language

Most of the parents were helping children to maintain their heritage language. All parents were aware of the fact that home is the main place to learn heritage language for a migrant child. When asked about the language use at home with their children and spouse, most of the parents replied that they use their own language/ heritage language at home, although parents and children are code-switching or mixing the language at word level unknowingly. It seems clear that all families are using their heritage language as a home language policy. 60% of the parents of this study were sending their children to the Nepalese international school in Tokyo, where students were taught Nepali language for one hour each day. When asked about the Nepalese international school preference for their children parents said that if children return back to Nepal, they can easily compete with Nepalese counterpart.

One parent said that they use Nepalese TV for at home and other parent said they have changed the language of smartphone in Nepali. Parents also revealed that they call their relatives who are back in Nepal in a regular basis. Media is not only for using language but it is a means of education too (Fishman, 1991). Some parents said that they are visiting other families who are living near Tokyo. Social interaction is a way of language learning (Bruner, 1983). Another parent replied that they are using Nepalese coursebooks at home as a reference for their child, because his child is attending Japanese school.

Most parents were concerned about the proficiency level of their children in heritage language. Parents assume that high proficiency will create more opportunity to find bilingual jobs. Parents are concerned in speaking proficiency of children although it might be hard to develop writing fluency in foreign situation.

Conclusion

Findings from this study reveal that parents' attitudes were positive on heritage language development of their children in Tokyo. The results reveal that the majority of parents are speaking Nepali language (heritage language) at home with their children. Nepalese parents think that Nepali language development might have positive results on building the cultural identity of their children as Nepalese migrants in Japan. Although some parents whose heritage language is other than Nepali (minority language speakers and ethnic language speakers) seems to be confused about selecting a home language, Nepali or their own language ethnic language or minority language).

The findings from this study also indicate that Nepalese parents are very conscious of their children's heritage language maintenance. They believe that family and parents are the most important factor in the heritage language development of their children. Nepalese parents are trying different areas such as educating children at home, getting access to the Nepalese TV programs, songs and talking with children's grandparents regular time intervals. Parents positive attitudes towards heritage language will help their children to develop and maintain their heritage language skills in the multilingual situation.

It is important that the findings reported here are only views of only ten Nepalese parents living in Tokyo, so they cannot be generalizable to Nepalese families in Tokyo, although the findings are suggestive. This study is one phase of a master's thesis in the field of language policy and planning of the Nepalese families in Tokyo. Lastly, further research in the field of heritage language maintenance should focus on the children's views on their heritage language maintenance and enhancing the new ways of heritage language maintenance rather than looking at parents' views only.

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