

# A Study of Australian Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes toward Chinese Children's Home language and English Development in Early Childhood Settings

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## Abstract

*This study focused on five Australian early childhood educators' language attitudes regarding Chinese children's home language and English development in their early childhood settings<sup>1</sup>. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with five educators from five early childhood settings. The data were organized and analysed according to propositions from research on teachers' language attitudes [3] [21] [34]. Findings revealed that the educators held positive attitudes toward Chinese children learning two languages as they acknowledged the functional benefit of bilingualism. However, educators had different ideas about the role they should play in supporting Chinese children's language development in early childhood settings. Three educators thought their role was to help Chinese children to develop English skills in the settings whereas the other two claimed supporting both home language and English was one of their duties. Educators' training experiences and Chinese parents' language expectation were found to be related to educators' attitudes. The implications of these findings were discussed.*

## 1. Introduction

The number of children entering Australian early childhood settings and schools with limited or no experience with English language is rising rapidly due to the high level of migration to Australia [1]. In 2011, 29.7% of students in NSW government schools were of language backgrounds other than English [28]. As a result classrooms are often characterised by a variety of ethnic and cultural groups and many languages and dialects.

Many immigrant children have developed linguistic skills in their home language before entering Australian educational environments

where they start to pick up English as an additional language. These children go through a stage of simultaneously developing two languages. They have the potential to develop bilingual skills which is beneficial to the wider society and to the individual. Research reports that bilingualism benefits communities and the wider society through bridging different linguistic and cultural groups and facilitating smooth communications based on full understandings [25]. There are positive associations between bilingualism and children's linguistic, cognitive or academic growth, such as bilingual children show more developed metalinguistic abilities and they are more sensitive to social contextual changes in communication [5]. However, the benefit of bilingualism may be only maximized when the two languages continue to develop to a certain level of proficiency. Continued development of both languages is a precondition for enhanced cognitive, linguistic and academic growth. If one of the languages is of low proficiency, the positive effect of bilingualism will decline [10]. Supporting children to continue learning and developing both languages is critical for immigrant children to gain the potential advantage of being bilinguals and therefore benefit the wider community.

Research shows that in English speaking countries, many immigrant children are prone to lose their home language and shift to English completely because English is the common language which is powerful in the society [10] [24] [16]. The key point of fostering immigrant children's bilingualism is to support and encourage them to maintain their home languages. Educators' language attitudes play an important role in this process [6]. If educators hold positive attitudes towards immigrant children's linguistic background, these children are more motivated to develop their home language, achieving better results in language and academic development and also develop a higher self-esteem [10] [22]. In contrast, teachers' negative language attitudes may result in lower expectations and stereotyped practices, and consequently contribute to low school performance of immigrant children [2] [9] [26].

The early years of a child's life are a crucial time for their language development. Evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Early childhood setting refers to centre based children education and care services, including preschools (9am to 3pm) and long day care centres (7am to 6 pm).

shows that even young children in preschool can sense the power of different languages and demonstrate conscious language choice [13]. For many immigrant children, their preschool experience will also be their first exposure to English, and early childhood settings provide rich opportunities for individual interactions with educators. For these reasons educators' language attitudes may have a strong influence on these children's language choice and development. Yet little literature is available specifically on early childhood educators' attitudes regarding language diversity of young immigrant children because the research pertaining teachers' attitudes to linguistic diversity was mainly conducted in primary or high schools. The current study is designed to investigate the attitudes that Australian early childhood educators hold towards home language and English development of Chinese children – one the most rapidly increasing ethnic groups in Australian educational settings [28].

## 2. Home language development and English acquisition

Home language enables a child to develop the feeling of belonging and a sense of cultural identity. It significantly influences immigrant children' overall development including their second language acquisition [9] [10]. Research has shown that in an educational setting where immigrant children' home language is respected and used for educational purposes (e.g. for discussion in academic activities), the degree of language and culture shock among these children is reduced and their self-esteem is increased. These children's English learning results are better than those who attend English only programs [17] [33]. Cummins states that home language should be treated as a resource rather than a problem that interferes with English language development. Supporting the development of home language reinforces students' identity, in turn, encouraging their motivation to engage in learning activities [9]. Furthermore, some language and academic skills developed in the home language can be transferred to the second languages [8]. For instance, children who have developed first language understand there are rules in languages and rules affect meanings, and therefore they are sensitive to grammatical structures. A good foundation in the first language helps lessen the burden of learning a second language.

## 3. Relevant research on educators' language attitudes

The research on teacher attitudes to migrant children's language development and their role in this process, not only revealed considerable ambivalence in their attitudes, but also highlighted the effect of those attitudes on classroom practices. Many educators claimed cultural and linguistic diversity should be welcomed in schools, but were concerned about having too many immigrant children (Spanish background children) in their class. They thought these students might bring deficits to the classroom [4]. While educators value bilingualism and language diversity in general, they think their role is more about helping immigrant children develop English, rather than supporting their home languages as well [21] [31]. Educators who perceived home language as an interference to English learning were less active in supporting home language in educational settings and were less interested in receiving professional training in this area [11]. While most of relevant research focused on educators' language attitudes toward children in the United States who are academically disadvantaged such students from African or Hispanic backgrounds, it does foreground the influence that teachers' attitudes have on their practice and the consequences this can have for children's language development [2] [7].

Researchers have identified several factors which shape educators' language attitudes. The personal language experiences and educational background of educators are related to their language attitudes. Educators who had overseas experiences and bilingual education training tend to have more positive attitudes towards home languages maintenance [3] [11] [27]. Garcia-Nevarez, Stafford and Beatriz investigated 152 Arizona elementary teachers' attitudes towards language development of children from different linguistic background [17]. They found that teachers' personal linguistic experiences and teaching years are correlated. Bilingual-certified teachers showed more positive attitudes towards English learners' home languages and culture. They were more respective of using the home languages for instructive purposes than other monolingual teachers who were less positive and showed less understanding about the underlying philosophy of home language benefiting English language learners academically and socioemotionally. Teachers with more teaching years seem to be more negative to their children's home languages. Yongs and Youngs investigated 143 teachers' attitudes toward English language learners in United States. They found that positive attitudes are more likely to be found among teachers who received more multicultural education

course and who had foreign language learning or overseas teaching experiences [11].

Some researchers have argued for the importance of considering the broad social environment which fosters educator attitudes. Language is embedded in cultures and communities [10] [16]. Different cultures and communities have different influences in a society. English language represents English culture and English communities that is powerful in English speaking countries. This is the reason for English to be easily valued as a more important language than others. Educators need to develop the awareness of the connection between language and the wide social-political environment, thus be able to reflect their language attitudes and practices with a broad view [15].

This review of the research offers some insights into educator attitudes to linguistic and cultural diversity which can impact on children’s language development. However, there are several limitations in the scope of the available research. First, the published research mainly focused on Spanish background children. Findings from this research may not be applicable to Asian ethnic groups including Chinese children. Evidence shows that educators’ attitudes toward cultural/linguistic diversity are associated with different ethnic groups and consequently educators’ attitudes about Chinese background children may be different from those about Spanish background children [22] [26]. Second, most previous research was conducted in America in the 1990s and early 2000s, political and social contexts which differ from contemporary Australia. Third, as mentioned earlier in the review, most of the available research focuses on primary and secondary school contexts, leaving the early childhood sphere largely unexplored.

In conclusion, there has been little work done to explore present Australian early childhood educators’ language attitudes. In recent years, Australian educators are under the influence of a big reform in Australian early childhood education with National Quality Framework (NQF). A key component of NQF is Early Yearly Learning Framework, a national curriculum that highlights diverse cultures and languages being incorporated in daily practice [12]. Present Australian educators’ thinking might be different from the views of educators in other countries and other decades. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating Australian early childhood educators’ language attitudes relating to Chinese children’s language development. This study is designed to address the issue with the question:

What attitudes do Australian early childhood educators have regarding Chinese children’s home language and English development in early childhood settings?

## 4. Research methodology

This article is based on a case study from a PhD project that investigates Chinese children’s language experiences in early childhood settings and their homes. Educators’ language attitude is an important part of this project. The methods of organizing a case study overarched this study.

### 4.1. Participants

The participants were recruited by the author who is an Australian Chinese and has worked for a long time in an Australian early childhood centre. The participants were chosen because they met the criterion of being educators from an English speaking background with experience working with Chinese children learning English as second language.

Early childhood centres located in Chinese community areas in Sydney were identified and visited by the author. Information about the study, including the criterion for choosing the interviewees was sent to the directors and they were invited to participate. The directors who agreed to be involved helped to select one participant from their centre. In all, five educators from five different early childhood centres in the Sydney region were involved in this study. Information on the educators is in Table 1.

**Table 1. Educators’ information**

Name	Types of early childhood settings	Total years in early childhood	Educational background	Relevant in-service training
Anna	Long day care centre	8	Bachelor in early childhood teaching	No
Lindy	Preschool	32	Diploma in children services	No
Mary	Long day care centre	4	Diploma in children services	No
Rae	Preschool	7	Bachelor in childhood teaching	Yes
Virginia	Long day care centre	4	Bachelor in childhood teaching	No

### 4.2. Propositions

A study design involving propositions was chosen for this project. Propositions are small topics or issues within larger research questions [34]. Theories and relevant research findings can be used in a case study as formulated propositions [29] [34]. A research question is usually general and

doesn't give a clear direction for data collection and analysis. Propositions help focus attention on specific areas which address the research question. For example, in this study, one proposition from previous research findings is *Teachers may think their role in language education of immigrant children is to help them to develop English rather than support their home language as well*, this proposition provides a clear direction for data collection and analysis [21].

A study design involving propositions has the advantage of building up a close link between the current study and relevant theories and research, thus enabling the transfer of the findings from the current study of a small number of cases to wider contexts [34]. In other words, propositions served in the study as hypotheses, and the findings from the study were used to justify these hypotheses. The research question was addressed in this process. The propositions guiding data collection and analysis in this study are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Propositions guiding data collection and analysis**

Propositions	Sources
P1: <i>Educators have positive attitudes toward Chinese children learning two languages.</i>	(Karabenich & Noda, 2004) [31]
P2: <i>Educators may think their role in language education of Chinese children is to help their English development rather than support their home language development as well.</i>	(Lee & Oxelson, 2006) [21]
P3: <i>Educators' attitudes are related to their training experiences</i>	Garca-Nevarez, Stafford, & Beatriz, 2005; Youngs & Youngs, 2001) [3, 11]

### 4.3. Data collection and analysis

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with the five educators. The propositions listed above guided the interviews. The author made four or five visits to each of the early childhood settings where the interviewees worked. The interviews were undertaken in the third visit. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour, during which the educators expressed their general attitudes toward

Chinese children's home language and English development in their early childhood settings and explained reasons for their ideas.

The data were analysed by taking the following steps in Nvivo 8 software: a) the interviews were transcribed verbatim; b) the transcribed evidence was coded according to the three propositions; c) the evidence associated with each proposition from across the five cases was studied and compared. In each case, it was determined whether or not the evidence supported the relevant proposition. The possible reasons and explanations for the current study findings about the propositions were identified and listed. Finally some conclusions were drawn from the analysis of the data.

During the analysis, a new theme emerged from the data which was not covered by the initial three propositions. This theme was *"Educators' attitudes are related to Chinese parents' expectation on their children's English development in the centre."* In a qualitative study, the issues or topics can be initiated with top down approach, like the propositions summarized from previous research. Additionally themes can be abstracted from the data with a bottom up approach as those themes emerge from the data [18]. Very little research reports the relationship between parents' language expectation and educators' language attitudes. This is a new topic in this research field.

## 5. Results

The findings are presented for each of the three propositions and the one theme listed above.

### 5.1. Educators have positive attitudes toward Chinese children learning two languages

All five educators spoke in positive terms about Chinese children learning two languages. They stated the benefits of bilingualism, although they focused on different aspects of bilingualism in children's lives. Lindy, Anna and Virginia said that bilingualism enables children to interact with a wide range of people in different contexts and communities:

"Oh, it's important for them to have home language so they can communicate with families, and it is equally important to English, so they can communicate with people of the society here and preschool settings. So they are equally important." (Lindy)

"Supporting them (bilingual skills), and I suppose it's a part of daily life now. It's a part of the way of everyone now, living in this country, and speaking a lot of languages." (Anna)

“I think it’s important that they definitely keep their heritage or home language and that’s still valued. But if they are prior to school, they will be going to school and if they have picked a school that is an English school then it is important to encourage that so they feel confident around that environment and that environment that they will go into.” (Virginia)

Mary referred to the theory of Critical Period Hypothesis. She mentioned the benefit of children acquiring different language skills in preschool years. “Oh, I encourage that. If I knew another language, I would teach the other language because I have been taught that children at this age is the best time to teach them as many as languages.” (Mary)

Rae claimed that home language was a foundation for immigrant children’s growth and development. She felt that a supporting their home language would help them ‘fit in’ and learn new skills at the centre. “I guess, the first language or the languages that are introduced in child’s early years need to be fostered and taught throughout life ideally. Then the child is able to take on new knowledge.” (Rae)

## **5.2. Educators may think their role in language education of Chinese children is to help them develop English skills rather than support their home language development as well**

Though the educators value bilingualism in general, they showed different opinions about the roles that they should play in supporting Chinese children as they develop two languages. While showing respect for Chinese children’s home language, Lindy, Mary and Anna thought their role in Chinese children’s language education was to develop the children’s English language skills in early childhood centres. The reasons provided by the educators include the importance of preparing children for the transition to primary schools, their own lack of knowledge of children’s home language, and the idea of “home language for home and English language for early childhood centres”.

Both Mary and Lindy mentioned that helping children to develop English is necessary for the smooth transition to primary schools. “I guess, in preschool, it’s our responsibility to encourage their English because we are helping them to get ready for school and school is in English. Without English, they are not able to do school works. It is important that English is encouraged, but not to the point of denying the other language”. (Lindy)

These three educators thought that it would be necessary to know the home language in order to help the child to continue learning it. Anna’s statement demonstrated this belief. “I suppose, to

help them learn English. Obviously it’s hard for me to speak their home language. But it’s also important for me to respect their home language.”

Mary and Anna expressed the opinion that the ideal pattern for bilingual education is home language being supported at home by parents and English language being fostered in the centre by educators. “I, with parents, I encourage them to speak their home language at home. And then, like kind of when they (Chinese children) walk into the door, they start speaking English, so the children learn that. This is the equal environment.” (Mary)

Unlike the above three educators, Virginia thought her role was to support both languages in the centre. Her view was that the early childhood centre should create an environment in which the children were confident with their identity as speakers of their home language and as learners of English. “I think both. Fostering the home language still let them feel confident in that part of their life, but while being a role model and providing opportunities for English and integrating across all boards.”

Rae was more motivated to play an active role in bilingual education than all the other educators. She introduced many strategies for fostering the bilingual sensitivity of all children, such as greeting children in different languages or having bilingual staff read stories in two languages. She was not concerned about the lack of knowledge of home languages. “Yes, our responsibility is to try our best to be not fearful of thinking how I’m going to teach a child when I do not have knowledge about their home language, just to use our initiative to go about making resources with simple key words, even if that is a starting point.”

Comparing the statements of the five educators, it is clear that their thoughts about the concept of home language support affected their ideas about the role they should play. Anna, Lindy and Mary assumed that supporting home language was equivalent to teaching and speaking the language, so they tended to think they may only be able to play an active role in English education. Rae and Virginia had a broader view on fostering home language that involved socioemotional support and attempt to show home language as being valued. Both of them were more confident to play an important role in supporting two languages.

## **5.3. Educators’ attitudes are related to their training experiences**

The five educators are from monolingual English background and are all local Australian. None of them had overseas teaching experiences. Their personal language experiences are similar, however, their training background including pre-service and in-service training varied. The findings suggest that while pre-service training provided

information for educators to develop positive attitudes to bilingualism in general, in-service training may have helped to shape the educator's ideas about how to support two language development with updated information from current research.

In pre-service training, three educators obtained bachelor qualification and the other two are diploma qualified. All the educators stated in the interviews that they had received some training on the topic about linguistic and cultural diversity when studying in TAFE (technical and further education) or University. They learnt from text books and classes about the importance of supporting and respecting different language and culture. For example, Mary stated, "Yeah they basically said to us you know, you need to support and help as many as these cultures, cause we are doing in such a array and vast society of different cultures".

Regarding in-service training, four educators claimed that they didn't attend any workshops on the topic about working with children learning English as an additional language. Rae is the only educators who claimed that she had plenty of training on bilingual education. She showed keen interest in increasing knowledge in this area. Besides attending specific workshops, she tried to access the information on internet. "I must say the most recent professional development that I have done for myself around bilingualism was to do a search on the internet myself." (Rae)

There is no obvious difference among educators in their general positive attitudes towards bilingualism regardless their pre-service qualification or in-service training. However, educators' thoughts about how to foster home language development and what role they should play are different. Rae appeared to be the most motivated and confident educator in playing an active role in supporting children home language. According to her statement, this is related to her motivation of upgrading knowledge through constant in-service training based on current research that emphasizes the importance and strategies of home language development for immigrant children.

#### **5.4. Educators' attitudes are related to Chinese parents' expectation on their children's English development in the centre.**

All educators except Lindy reported that Chinese parents showed an expectation for their children to develop English skills and learn English culture in early childhood centres. Parents showed concerns in front of the educators regarding their children's language development. They seemed to worry about their children's language usage in the

centre. According to educators' statements, parents appeared to view the early childhood centre as a place for their children to learn English language and English culture, instead of fostering their home language.

"Like the parents from the Chinese background sometimes want their children to have the Australian culture, it's almost as if the parents send them here for that." (Anna)

"They (Chinese parents) explained: we are worried. It (their children speaking Chinese in the centre) could be wrong because our child speaks Chinese at home. We send our child here to learn English. We want to prepare them for English class in primary school." (Rae)

The parent's expectations seemed to have differing effects on the views of these educators about the role they should play in language education for Chinese children. Mary used the parents' request to justify her idea about playing an active role of encouraging Chinese children's use of English in the centre. However, Mary also expressed other reasons in support of her idea such as English is important for the transition to school and socializing with different background peers. "I encourage them to speak English, so then they can interact with all of the children in the room, not just the selected people that only speak their language." (Mary) Parents' request seemed to strengthen her idea about encouraging more English in her centre. "And especially when parents say to me like 'I would like my child to learn English and that's why they are here'. That's why I encourage them as much as possible to speak English." (Mary)

To Anna and Virginia, the parents' expectations made them more circumspect when considering their roles. Virginia thought her role was to support both languages, but also admitted that sometimes it depend on the parents. "So I think it's both (supporting English and home language), I do, but it does depend on the parents." (Virginia) Anna thought her role was to support English but not to the extent of discouraging home language, as some parents requested. "I don't want children to think that one language is more important than the other. All languages are equally important."

Rae, however, was very determined to support children learning two languages. Parents' expectation and requests seemed to have no influence on her ideas about the role she should play. She insisted on supporting home language in her centre. She tried to change parents' ideas by sharing her knowledge of bilingualism. "I go about try to educate families. The core base is that using home language is fantastic. There is different time of the day, children speak English with educators and we will keep the communication up." According to Rae's statement, she had gained parents' support in bilingual education finally.

Parents were regularly invited to read stories in home languages in the centre.

## 6. Discussions

This study set out to investigate five Australian early childhood educators' general attitudes toward Chinese children's home language and English development as well as the factors influencing their attitudes. Little research has done to reveal current Australian early childhood educators' language attitudes. This study sheds insight in this area. The findings have a few implications for early childhood policies and practices.

This study reveals that all the five educators held positive attitudes to Chinese children developing bilingual skills. Research suggests that supporting immigrant children to develop both English and home language skills helps them to become bilingual which has functional advantages in communication, but it also facilitates a sense of belonging which is a fundamental basis for their overall development [10]. While the educators in this study focused on the pragmatic advantage of bilingualism, some of them ignored the great potential that bilingualism may bring to children in academic and socioemotional areas of development. This finding suggests that there is potential for some educators to increase relevant knowledge about less tangible benefit of bilingualism.

A noticeable point in educators' statement about the benefit of developing two languages is some knowledge that educators obtained is not accurate, for example, Mary mentioned that preschool children are at good age to acquire different languages and that's why young children should be supported to develop bilingual skills. This opinion stems from the perspective of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which assumed there is a best time for learning second language easily and quickly [19], and beyond this time second language acquisition becomes more difficult [20]. Research on CPH hasn't provided evidence showing that preschool age is the best time for bilingual development. Some current research doesn't support CPH by indicating there is no evidence for discontinuity in the level of English proficiency among a big range of age groups [23]. This finding indicates that the updated information from current bilingual research needs to be provided to educators who are having more opportunities to educate immigrant children who learn English as an additional language.

While educators all had positive attitudes towards children developing two languages, they showed different ideas about the role they should play in language education. Their views on how to support home language significantly affect their thoughts. The three educators who thought their

role is to support immigrant children's English development perceived supporting home language is about to teach and speak home language which is beyond their capability. The other two educators viewed home language support as a socioemotional support that refers to home language being valued and accepted. They were more confident in playing an active role in supporting two languages. This finding suggests that educators' understandings about the concept of home language supporting are very different and that may affect their confidence and motivation in language education. To English background educators, showing respect to home language and creating an environment to make children feel their languages are actively valued is a great support to home language. All educators can play an active role in this area [32]. Educators need to develop a broad view on the concept about home language support.

The findings from this study resonate with relevant research by suggesting that training experiences may be related to educators' attitudes. While pre-service training develops educators' general attitudes towards bilingualism and diverse languages, in-service training may be critical for educators to obtain knowledge from current research about strategies for language education for English learners. In this study, four out of five educators claimed that they didn't have enough opportunities to have in-service training relating to bilingual education. Rae is the educator who had most in-service training in this area and she showed most confidence in supporting children developing two languages in practice. This finding suggests there is a need for opportunities of in-service training on bilingual topic to be increased.

Another important finding from this study is that educators reported that Chinese parents want their children to learn English and speak only English in early childhood settings. Research about Chinese parents' language attitude shows that many Chinese parents have strong desire to maintain their children's home language and that they are willing to put considerable time and effort in supporting their children developing home language at home or in weekend community schools [14] [30]. Very little research addresses what Chinese parents think about their children's home language issues in conventional education environments. Further research is needed to gain a more comprehensive picture of parents' expectations of educators in early childhood settings.

The findings from this research suggest that parents' expectations and requests may have some bearing on the way in which educator's conceive and execute their role in language education. The parent's expectations however, may not always facilitate best practice in terms of supporting the use of both home language and English in the early childhood settings as the views and practice of

Anna, Virginia and Rae demonstrated. These findings emphasise the importance of increasing educators' understanding and knowledge so that they have the confidence and skills to enact best practice and work with the parents to share this knowledge.

## 7. Conclusions

To sum up, these five Australian early childhood educators were aware of the need to support children's home language and English development, and some of them had knowledge about how to provide this support in appropriate ways. However, there is potential for them to achieve a higher level of understanding of the ways in which both home language and English development can be achieved and of the importance of this for children's general academic development and socio-emotional well-being. This research indicates that Australian early childhood educators may well benefit from professional development programs, based on recent research, that emphasize the relationship between bilingualism and overall development, and which make explicit the role educators can play in supporting home language development.

Further research may investigate the educators' daily practice of language education for Chinese children, specifically explore how they address the tension between Chinese parents' language expectations and their positive attitudes toward bilingualism in general.

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