Distinct pathways from parental cultural orientation to young children’s bilingual development

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ABSTRACT

Among immigrant families, parents are important socialization agents in transmitting cultural practices to their children, including the use of the heritage language (HL). In the current study, we examined whether parents’ cultural orientation facilitates children’s HL use with their children supported children’s HL development without adversely affecting their HL proficiency, the specific practice of HL use with their children. Findings suggest that the specific practice of HL use, rather than general cultural maintenance values, represents the link by which parents’ ethnic cultural orientation might support children’s HL development.

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In light of the rising rates of immigration to the U.S., research has focused on how American and ethnic cultural processes shape the adjustment of children from immigrant families. One area of research that has become increasingly important centers on the short life expectancy of heritage languages (HL) in contemporary American society. Immigration scholars Portes and Rumbaut (1990) have described the U.S. as a ‘graveyard’ for languages, given its history of receiving immigrants and extinguishing their mother tongues within a few generations. Through processes of acculturation, complete linguistic assimilation from the HL to English is expected to occur by the third generation (Alba, Logan, Lutz, & Stults, 2002). In their analysis of linguistic life expectancies, Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean (2006) culled data from two large representative surveys in six contiguous Southern California counties from the Mexican border to Los Angeles. Mexicans, Salvadorean, Guatemalans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Koreans made up 78% of the 5703 participants surveyed from 2001 to 2004. Even in the context of the nation’s largest Spanish-speaking enclave with the highest proportion of immigrants, Spanish ‘died’ by the third generation of Mexican Americans while other home languages met their demise between the second and third generations.

While languages may extinguish wholesale at the community level within three generations, HL loss is often observed among second-generation children of immigrant parents. Following Mexico, Chinese immigrants represent the second largest foreign-born group in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Linguistic survival rates indicate that less than half of 1.5-generation (i.e., foreign born, but immigrated prior to age 15) and just over one fifth of second-generation (i.e., born in the U.S.) Chinese Americans speak Chinese very well (Rumbaut et al., 2006).

Heritage language loss is a pressing matter because HL plays an important role in transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and practices onto younger generations (Fillmore, 1991). Moreover, research has documented the important implications of HL use on parent–child relationships and adjustment. However, little research has focused on adolescents. For example, among 6th to 10th grade adolescents, their reports of reciprocal HL communication were associated with close and intimate relationships with their parents (Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). Additionally, when mothers and their adolescents do not have the same level of HL proficiency, this discrepancy in language skills is related to poorer academic achievement among 12–15-year-old adolescents (Liu, Benner, Lau, & Kim, 2009) and motivation among 9–15-year-old children (Costigan & Dokis, 2006). On the other hand, when both mothers and adolescents have high HL proficiency, they experience less parent–child conflict (Costigan & Dokis, 2006) and adolescents experience fewer depressive symptoms (Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Liu, Benner, et al., 2009). Thus, reciprocal and proficient HL communication between parents and children seems to foster supportive and close family relationships as well as positive academic and psychological well-being for adolescents. Interestingly, reciprocal communication in English is not related to better academic achievement or well-being (Liu, Benner, et al., 2009; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). There appears to be something unique about communicating in the HL that facilitates parent–child relationships, academic achievement, and well-being that is not observed when ethnic minority families communicate in English.

It is encouraging that HL is associated with positive outcomes especially during adolescence, a critical period when declines in parent–child...
Distinct pathways from parental acculturation to children's language proficiency

Within immigrant families, parents are central agents in transmitting cultural knowledge of their ethnic heritage to the second generation (Hughes et al., 2006; Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993). The extent to which cultural transmission occurs may depend on parents' acculturation and their resulting cultural orientations. Current research views immigrant acculturation as bi-dimensional, such that acculturation to the host culture can occur independently of enculturation to the heritage culture (Berry, 1997). That is, exposure to the host culture upon immigration may initiate the development of an American cultural orientation, but this does not necessarily weaken their ethnic orientation and ties to the ethnic heritage. This is because cultural orientations consist of several behavioral and attitudinal domains, including cultural pride, language use, social affiliation, and food or media preferences (Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000). For example, Chinese Americans may report use of English and preferences for American media, but interact mostly with other Chinese-Americans. Thus, cultural orientations can be differentiated across domains and individuals can develop different ways of identifying with and connecting to both their ethnic heritage and to mainstream American society.

There are two potential pathways in which parent's cultural orientation can ultimately shape children's heritage language proficiency. First, parents who have a strong ethnic orientation are likely to engage in activities that promote the vitality of cultural values, beliefs, and practices in the family. For example, immigrant parents may engage in various activities to teach their children about their ethnic heritage by talking about the history of their native country, celebrating cultural traditions, and encouraging HL use at home. Importantly, these ethnic socialization practices have been found to have a positive association with adolescents' attitudes toward HL preservation, frequency and choice of HL use (Hakuta & D'Andrea, 1992; Luo & Wiseman, 2000) and HL proficiency (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001) among adolescents. Therefore, one plausible pathway from parents' cultural orientations to their young children's HL proficiency is through parents' intention and commitment to a family climate that encourages the transmission of the ethnic culture to their children, which may in turn shape children's own cultural practices, including their mastery and use of the HL.

Therefore, parents who strongly identify with their ethnic group are more likely to value and speak their HL (Hung & Lo, 2009; Kwak, 1998), which in turn could facilitate HL development among their children through immersion and modeling.

Thus, the current study examined whether parental cultural maintenance factors and parental HL use represent two distinct pathways that link parental cultural orientation to HL proficiency among young children. We hypothesized that both types of cultural socialization processes during early childhood may be instrumental in understanding the link between parental ethnic cultural orientation and development of HL among young children in immigrant families.

Yet, less is known about how parental acculturation to the host society influences HL development. It is less understood whether parents' adoption of American cultural values and practices and English language use directly or indirectly erodes their children's HL development. On the one hand, it is possible that the higher endorsement of American values and behaviors, the less likely parents will prefer to use the HL in interacting with their children. Therefore, a strong American orientation could undermine children's HL development.

On the other hand, acquiring an American cultural orientation may not necessarily hamper children's HL growth given the observed orthogonality of cultural identities (Berry, 1997) and previous research suggesting that English and HL acquisition need not be subtractive (Winsler, Díaz, Espinosa, & Rodríguez, 1999). In the current study, we examined how parents' ethnic and American cultural orientations influence their cultural maintenance and HL use, which in turn, can impact their children's HL proficiency.

Supporting heritage language at the expense of English?

Despite the value of HL among immigrant families and research indicating that children's English language development is unharmed by the use of the HL language, there is a misinformed belief among the general public, particularly among immigrant parents, that HL growth and maintenance develop at the expense of English fluency and achievement (Cummins, 2000; Raguenau, 2006). In fact, immigrant parents give accounts of being pressured by educators to speak to their children only in English to promote their adjustment in school (Raguenau, 2006). This sentiment is embodied in the rise of English-Only education policies. Nevertheless, research has shown that neither English fluency nor school performance is adversely affected by maintenance of the HL. On the contrary, proficiency in the HL predicts school effort (Kim & Chao, 2009), English reading ability, and later high school achievement (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Guglielmi, 2008) among high school students from Latino and Asian American families. What is less well understood is whether parental cultural factors, such as their ethnic orientation, HL use and cultural maintenance, may be associated with slowed development of English in young children upon entry into formal schooling. Therefore, we examined whether immigrant parents' cultural maintenance and HL use with their children are associated with their children's HL and English language development.

Current study

There are several domains of language proficiency. For instance, it is important to distinguish expressive language (the ability to speak) from receptive language (the ability to comprehend what others are saying). Valdes (2001) notes that bilingual abilities fall along a continuum that involves several types of competence, and it is not uncommon for children of immigrants to retain understanding of the HL when they cannot converse in the HL. Thus, we examined children's expressive and receptive skills separately in order to better understand how parental factors can impact these different aspects of language development. Moreover, unlike much of the research on HL development that relied on participants' self-reports of their language skills, the current study utilized objective, performance-based measures of Chinese and English language proficiency. The goal of the present study was to examine how parents' Chinese and American cultural orientations influenced parents' cultural
maintenance and HL language use, which in turn can influence children's HL and English expressive and receptive proficiency. Based on prior research, we expect that parents' Chinese cultural orientation will be positively associated with parents' cultural maintenance and HL use, which in turn, will be predictive of children's Chinese expressive and receptive language proficiency. We examined whether parents' cultural maintenance and HL use are two distinct pathways that individually contribute to children's HL development. Additionally, given the novelty of exploring the link between parents' American cultural orientation and children's HL proficiency, no hypothesis was made about this association.

**Method**

**Participants**

Recruitment initially began at community-based HL schools in the greater Los Angeles area. Although previous research has shown there to be considerable variability in HL outcomes among children who attend HL classes (e.g. Cheng & Kuo, 2000), we ensured variability in our sample by recruiting additional families not enrolled in HL instruction through network sampling. Of the 79 families in the study, half (50%) the children were attending a HL school. Families were eligible if at least one parent was a Mandarin or Cantonese speaker who immigrated to the U.S. after the age of 18. Our sample included parents (84% mothers; M_age = 39.29 years) and their child (57% boys, M_age = 5.11 years, Age range: 4–7 years, SD = 0.51). Both parents were immigrants to the U.S., with fathers (M = 15.47 years, SD = 7.65) having lived in the U.S. for a longer period than mothers (M = 13.15 years, SD = 6.23). Using a scale ranging from 1 (49999) to 12 (>100,000), the average family income was in the range of $60,000–$69,999 (M = 6.13, SD = 3.57). Majority of parents could speak Mandarin (85%) and several spoke Cantonese (34%) and Taiwanese (20%).

**Measures**

**Parent self-report measures**

All questionnaires were available in English and Chinese.

*Ethnic and American orientation.* The Vancouver Index of Acculturation (VIA, Ryder, Lynn, & Paulhus, 2000) has been successfully used to assess Chinese and American cultural orientation of parents from Chinese backgrounds (Liu, Lau, Chen, Dinh, & Kim, 2009). The measure consisted of questions on values, cultural practices, and interactions with people from Chinese and American backgrounds. Ten questions assessed their Chinese orientation (e.g., “I often follow Chinese cultural traditions,” “I enjoy Chinese entertainment”). To assess the parents’ American orientation, the same ten questions were used, except that the word Chinese was changed to American (e.g. “I often follow American cultural traditions,” “I enjoy American entertainment”). Responses were on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The average score on the items was computed separately for Chinese and American orientations. High internal consistencies were found on the items (Chinese orientation: α = .84; American orientation: α = .81).

*Parental cultural maintenance.* We measured the extent to which parents purposefully make efforts to instill cultural values and behaviors to their children with the six-item Parental Cultural Maintenance Scale (PCM, Phinney et al., 2001). Sample items included “We teach our child what it means to be Chinese American,” and “We encourage our child to learn about Chinese traditions and customs.” Responses were on a 5-point scale (1 = almost never; 5 = almost always). High internal consistency was found (α = .87). This scale has been used successfully in research with other ethnic minority and immigrant parents (Phinney et al., 2001).

*Heritage language use.* The Language Use and Preference Questionnaire (LUPQ; Tannenbaum, 2003) examined parents’ language use and preference across twelve different types of parent–child interactions (e.g., “I am angry with my child for not doing her/his homework,” “The whole family is together at dinner, and I ask my child what s/he would like to eat”). For each statement, parents reported whether they would use English, Chinese, or both and whether the chosen language was the preferred language. Responses were scored as 0 (English), 1 (Both), and 2 (Chinese) with higher scores indicating a stronger use and preference for the HL. Two versions of the LUPQ were administered—one for children under six and one for children over six years of age. Only two items differed to accommodate for age-appropriate parent–child interactions with children under six years (e.g., “I am angry with my child for not picking up her/his toys when s/he promised to do it hours ago”) and children older than six years old (e.g. “I am angry with my child for not doing his/her homework when s/he promised to do it hours ago”). Validity and reliability of these measures have been demonstrated with Chinese immigrant families (Tannenbaum, 2003). We also found high internal consistency (α = .93).

In our preliminary analyses, we found Chinese language use and preference to be strongly correlated (r = .90, p = .001), indicating that these two constructs were highly overlapping and essentially indistinctive. To reduce multicollinearity, the path analyses described in the results included parents’ language use only, because language use represents a more proximal mechanism by which parent cultural orientation may influence their children’s HL development.

*Child performance-based language measures**

*Chinese and English expressive language proficiency.* Children's expressive Chinese and English language skills were assessed separately using the Language Assessment Scales — Oral (LAS-O, De Avila & Duncan, 1981) as used in previous research on children's Spanish HL maintenance (Rodríguez, Diaz, Duran, & Espinoso, 1995; Winsler et al., 1999). This study used the Pre-LAS version, which was created for the assessment of oral language skills of kindergarten and first-graders. The order in which Chinese and English proficiency were assessed was counterbalanced across the participants. The first subtest of the Pre-LAS consisted of a listening comprehension subtest, a receptive test of the child’s ability to follow instructions. In another subtest, children were asked to repeat orally-presented stimulus sentences, which assessed both receptive and expressive language abilities. The Pre-LAS also consisted of two vocabulary subtests, which required children to produce labels for common household objects, animals, and action words.

Lastly, the LAS-O included a story retelling task that required children to listen to two stories, one in Chinese and the other in English, and retell it in the respective languages. The researcher read a ten-page picture book to the child with the words removed from each page. The child was given the book, assisted in turning pages, and asked to retell the story in their own words as much as possible. Children's utterances were recorded and transcribed. Language production was measured by the number or distinct words produced in the child's narrative. Language complexity was measured by calculating the number of verbs produced by the child during the story telling task and by calculating the average number of words per verb phrase used in these narrative productions. The Pre-LAS yields a total composite score consisting of weighted scores from the four subtests and two stories (Chinese: M = 28.92, SD = 8.52; English: M = 33.57, SD = 7.27). This assessment had high internal consistency (Chinese: α = .79; English: α = .85).

*Chinese and English receptive language proficiency.* The English Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Third Edition (PPVT—III; Dunn & Dunn,
1997) and a modified Chinese version (Luk, 2003) of the PPVT were used to assess children's English and Chinese receptive language skills. During this task, the children were orally presented with a word and four different pictures, one of which corresponded to the word spoken by the researcher. There were 204 possible words participants could identify and words were presented in 17 sets of 12 words each. Children were asked to select the picture that best represents the word's meaning. Words were presented one at a time with increasing difficulty. For example, experimenters would say, "Now I want you to look at some pictures with me. I'm going to say some words. For each word I say, you tell me the number or point to the picture that best shows what the words mean." The experimenter moved on to a next set of words when the child misidentified eight words in a set. We measured the number of words correctly identified by the child. On average, children correctly identified at least 50 words (Chinese: M = 50.24, SD = 28.24; English: M = 64.97, SD = 28.08). This assessment had high internal consistency (Chinese: α = .95; English: α = .98).

Data analysis strategy

We examined the influence of parent Chinese and American cultural orientations on children's Chinese expressive and receptive proficiency via parents' cultural maintenance and Chinese language use. Additional models were conducted to predict English expressive and receptive proficiency. To examine the proposed models, we conducted path analyses using Mplus version 5.0 (Muthen & Muthen, 2007). In testing the path models, all parameters were estimated freely. We assessed the fit of all models by examining model chi-square, the comparative fit indices, and root mean squared error approximation. The modification indices were examined to determine whether additional paths were indicated based on the covariation matrix.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Bivariate correlations for all variables of interest are presented in Table 1. Parental Chinese cultural orientation was significantly associated with parental American cultural orientation, Chinese language use, and cultural maintenance. However, there was no association between parental cultural maintenance values and Chinese language use. Moreover, parental Chinese cultural orientation was not significantly related to children's Chinese expressive or receptive proficiency. Whereas parental cultural maintenance was not correlated with children's Chinese expressive or receptive language, parent's Chinese language use was associated with children's expressive Chinese proficiency and marginally significantly correlated to children's Chinese receptive proficiency. There were also no significant associations between parents' American cultural orientation with children's language proficiency.

Path analysis predicting Chinese expressive and receptive proficiency

Based on bivariate correlations that indicated a nonsignificant relation between parental cultural maintenance and parents' Chinese language use, we examined how parental cultural maintenance and parent's Chinese language use contribute to children's Chinese proficiency by conducting two separate path analytic models testing indirect effects using Mplus version 5.0 (Muthen & Muthen, 2007). In all of our models, we also included the direct path between parental Chinese and American orientation to children's HL expressive and receptive language, thus controlling for these direct paths. Additionally, each model estimated paths from parents' Chinese and American cultural orientation to children's Chinese expressive and receptive proficiency separately via parents' cultural maintenance and Chinese language use (see Figs. 1 and 2, respectively). We controlled for household income and child's age and sex by allowing children's Chinese expressive and receptive proficiency to freely correlate with these variables. Additionally, given the positive association between parents' Chinese cultural orientation and child's age, these two variables were also allowed to freely correlate with one another.

In our first path analytic model in which parent cultural maintenance was the intervening variable, findings indicated that parents' cultural maintenance was positively predicted by parents' Chinese (β = .38, p < .001) and American (β = .34, p = .001) cultural orientations (see Fig. 1). However, parents' cultural maintenance was not related to children's language expressive nor receptive proficiency. Results of our second path analytic model with parent Chinese language use as the intervening variable are presented in Fig. 2. Findings revealed that parents' Chinese, but not American, cultural orientation predicted greater parent Chinese language use, (β = .38, p = .002). In this model, parents' Chinese language use predicted greater Chinese expressive (β = .38, p < .001) and receptive (β = .27, p = .016) proficiency.

Direct effects from parents' Chinese and American orientation to children's expressive and receptive Chinese proficiency were not significant in both models. Examination of indirect paths from parents' cultural orientation to children's HL proficiency via parental cultural maintenance was also not significant. However, there was a significant indirect effect of parents' Chinese orientation on children's expressive (βindirect = .15, p = .027) and marginally significant indirect effect on children's receptive Chinese proficiency (βindirect = .11, p = .062) via parental Chinese language use. Indirect paths from parents' American orientation to children's Chinese expressive or receptive proficiency were not significant in both models.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>1. Chinese orientation</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.38*</td>
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<td>2. American orientation</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>.48***</td>
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<td>3. Cultural maintenance</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>.53***</td>
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<td>4. Chinese language use</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
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<td>Child</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Chinese expressive</td>
<td>28.92</td>
<td>8.52</td>
<td>0–42</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.38**</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Chinese receptive</td>
<td>50.24</td>
<td>28.24</td>
<td>0–204</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.24+</td>
<td>.37**</td>
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<td>7. English expressive</td>
<td>33.57</td>
<td>7.27</td>
<td>0–42</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. English receptive</td>
<td>64.97</td>
<td>21.08</td>
<td>0–204</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.23+</td>
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<td>Demographics</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Income</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1–12</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Child age</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>4–7</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.43***</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Child sex</td>
<td>57% boys</td>
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</table>

Note: Gender was coded such that male = 0 and female = 1. To measure household income, we used a scale ranging from 1 ($4999) to 12 (> $100,000). 
+p <.10, *p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

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Path analyses predicting English expressive and receptive proficiency

Given that Chinese language use, but not cultural maintenance, was associated with children’s Chinese language skills, we conducted path analytic models similar to the one illustrated in Fig. 2 to investigate how these same factors influence English proficiency. Based on the positive correlations between Chinese and English expressive and receptive proficiency, we conducted two separate analyses which included Chinese and English expressive proficiency together in one model, and Chinese and English receptive proficiency together in a different model (see Figs. 3 and 4). We also controlled for the direct paths between parental Chinese and American orientation to children’s Chinese and English language proficiency measures.

In Models 3 and 4, results revealed that parents’ Chinese, but not American, cultural orientation predicted greater Chinese language use ($b = .38$–.39, $p = .001$–.002), which in turn, positively predicted children’s Chinese expressive ($b = .37$, $p = .001$) and receptive proficiency ($b = .26$, $p = .022$), respectively. In both models, parental cultural orientation and language use were not predictive of either English expressive or receptive proficiency. Direct effects from parents’ Chinese and American orientation to children’s expressive and receptive Chinese proficiency were not significant in both models. Similar to Model 2, we found a significant indirect effect of parents’ Chinese orientation on children’s Chinese expressive ($β_{\text{indirect}} = .14$, $p = .027$) via parental Chinese language use. However, this indirect effect was marginally significant in predicting Chinese receptive proficiency ($β_{\text{indirect}} = .10$, $p = .071$). There were no indirect effects of parents’ Chinese orientation on children’s English expressive or receptive proficiency.

Discussion

The current study examined two distinct paths by which parental cultural orientations could contribute to children’s HL expressive and receptive proficiency. Whereas parental ethnic cultural orientation was not associated with children’s HL proficiency via cultural maintenance values, parents’ HL use was an important link between parents’ Chinese orientation and children’s expressive, but not receptive, HL proficiency. That is, parental Chinese orientation is positively related to children’s Chinese expressive proficiency by means of parents’ Chinese language use. Parents’ American cultural orientation was not significantly associated with children’s HL skills. Lastly, our measures of parental cultural orientation, cultural maintenance and language use were not related to children’s English proficiency.

Our results are in line with previous research reporting that parents who have a strong ethnic orientation are more likely to transmit cultural knowledge (Hughes et al., 2006; Knight et al., 1993) and use HL with their children (Hungr & Lo, 2009; Kwak, 1998). Moreover, we found that parental HL use, and not cultural maintenance, to be the more critical manifestation of parental ethnic cultural orientation that is positively related to children’s HL proficiency, particularly their expressive language skills. Thus, parental cultural maintenance and HL use are distinct mechanisms of cultural orientation that have differentiated effects in shaping HL development during young childhood. The general commitment to transmitting cultural values was not predictive of children’s proficiency. Rather, it is the specific practice of HL during parent–child relationships that is important towards children’s HL development. Similarly, past research (e.g., Hakuta & D’Andrea, 1992; Luo & Wiseman, 2000) found that parents’ attitudes about HL maintenance were positively associated to adolescent’s own attitudes about HL perseverence, and their frequency and decision to speak HL, but not specifically to their HL proficiency. Therefore, parents’ Chinese cultural maintenance values more generally may not predict children’s HL skills, but parents’ use of HL with their child, specifically, is a critical component of their Chinese cultural orientation that is a more proximal and stronger indicator of their child’s HL proficiency.

Moreover, we found that parents’ Chinese cultural orientation had an indirect effect on children’s Chinese expressive, but not receptive language skills via parents’ Chinese language use. These findings provide support that language skills fall along a continuum that includes different types of competence (Valdes, 2001). Among young children who are still developing their language skills, our results suggest that parents’ HL use is particularly important in fostering their children’s expressive proficiency. Perhaps the ability to produce language is more challenging and hinges more closely on voluminous language.

![Fig. 1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2012.07.002)

Fig. 1. No significant associations between parents’ cultural orientations to children’s HL proficiency via parental cultural maintenance. Path analyses tested with all parameters freed, $x^2(19) = 23.59$, $p = .21$, $CFI = .94$, RMSEA = .06. Household income, child’s age and sex were controlled for. Parents’ Chinese orientation was freely correlated with child’s age. $^* p<.01$, $^{**} p<.001$.

![Fig. 2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2012.07.002)

Fig. 2. Positive association between parents’ Chinese orientation and children’s Chinese expressive language proficiency via parent’s Chinese language use. Path analyses tested with all parameters freed, $x^2(19) = 24.96$, $p = .16$, $CFI = .90$, RMSEA = .06. Household income, child’s age and sex were controlled for. Parents’ Chinese orientation was freely correlated with child’s age. $^* p<.05$, $^{**} p<.01$, $^{***} p<.001$.
exposure compared to the ability to understand the language. In fact, we also see a weaker direct association between parents’ Chinese language use and children’s receptive, as compared to expressive, language. Future research should continue to distinguish and examine the developmental trajectories of expressive and receptive language separately.

Although prior research (e.g., Phinney et al., 2001) has directly linked parental cultural orientation to adolescents’ HL proficiency, our findings revealed only indirect relations between parent’s ethnic cultural orientation and their child’s Chinese language skills. Specifically, the strength of parents’ Chinese orientation is positively related to their child’s Chinese expressive proficiency through their own use of Chinese with their children. A possible reason why our results did not align with previous research (i.e., Phinney et al., 2001) can be their reliance on self-report measures of HL proficiency whereas our study independently assessed HL proficiency thereby reducing shared method variance.

It is interesting that parents’ Chinese and American orientations were positively related to one another, yet only parents’ Chinese orientation was significantly related to children’s HL proficiency. Additionally, parents’ Chinese and American orientations were both positively linked to parental cultural maintenance values. These results provide additional evidence that cultural identity and orientation are bi-dimensional (Berry, 1997; Tsai et al., 2000). Individuals, including immigrants to the U.S., can feel connected to and identify with different aspects of their ethnic heritage as well as the American culture. For instance, the current study indicated that parents’ Chinese, but not American, orientation was related to their HL use, suggesting that HL use is an important component of Chinese cultural orientation. Moreover, results showed that parents’ American orientation is not detrimental to children’s Chinese proficiency and similarly, parents’ Chinese orientation and Chinese language use may not jeopardize children’s English language development. Acculturating to a host society and embracing dominant culture do not necessitate the loss in practices, values and beliefs related to the heritage culture. Along the same lines, practice of the HL in the home may not necessarily hinder their child’s English language development. Indeed, our results demonstrated a positive association between children’s Chinese and English expressive and receptive language. Children younger than seven years are still within the optimal developmental period to acquire fluency in multiple languages (Long, 1990).

Along the same lines, we were curious to investigate how parents’ cultural practices and use of HL with their children may influence children’s English proficiency. As our results indicated, parents’ cultural orientation and HL use were not associated with children’s English language skills. These findings do not support the sentiment from some educators and parents that acquiring and maintaining HL skills adversely impact children’s English language development. Instead, our findings indicate that cultural orientation is beneficial in fostering related cultural practices, including HL development, and there is no concomitant cost to the timely development of languages dominant in the broader national context. Moreover, our data show a positive association between Chinese and English proficiency which supports our general understanding that young children can be competent bilinguals, simultaneously mastering the ability to speak and comprehend their HL and English.

Although this was not directly related to our guiding research questions, we noted interesting associations between children’s age and sex and parental Chinese cultural orientation. These results require replication, but we offer some tentative interpretations that require investigation. First, parents of older children in our sample reported stronger Chinese cultural orientation. In raising children into middle childhood, immigrant parents may be prompted to reaffirm the importance and affiliation to their heritage culture as they decide how they will socialize their children in a bicultural context. Furthermore, parents of daughters reported stronger Chinese orientation than parents of sons in our sample. This may reflect patriarchal patterns of socialization that result in parents becoming more invested to maintain heritage cultural practices and traditions when rearing girls than boys. Some evidence suggests that immigrant families give girls less latitude than boys in acculturating toward more American social behaviors (Dasgupta, 1998), and that girls perceive more pressure for traditionalism from parents (Tang & Dion, 1999).

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Despite some key strengths in our study, including recruitment of parent-child dyads and reliance on performance-based measures of language proficiency rather than self-reports, there are limitations that require attention. First, our sample size may have prevented us from detecting small effects. For example, more research is needed to rule out potential effects of parental cultural orientation and HL use on children's English language development. Second, our study is limited in its cross-sectional design. Children are not passive recipients of their parents' socialization processes and it is possible that there can be child-driven effects such that children's developmental outcomes can shape parents' behavior, practices and values as well. That is, children's language use can influence parents' cultural orientation, maintenance and language use. Future research should examine the bidirectionality between children's language proficiency and parental cultural factors.

Although the current study focused on HL and English as two distinct languages, it is important for future research to acknowledge that a potential overlap may occur across different languages as families may find different means to communicate with one another. For example, children and parents may communicate through either the HL or English solely or use a mixture of both languages (e.g., combining Chinese and English words during conversations). Further research should examine the implications of language practices such as code switching and language brokering in immigrant families as both reflections of, and influences upon child and family bicultural adaptation (Shankar, 2011). Moreover, a small proportion of our families reported speaking more than two languages in the home. Thus, there may be more than one HL in the family, which may render the task of HL maintenance more complex.

**Conclusion and future research**

The current study provides support that ethnic cultural orientation is multifaceted and encompasses many different aspects of one's attitudes, beliefs and practices related to a particular culture (Tsai et al., 2000), thus the conceptualization of ethnic orientation can have many differentiated meanings. Specifically, we found that ethnic orientation and cultural maintenance, broadly, may not be strong predictors of young children's HL proficiency. Rather, what is important towards children's HL proficiency is parents' practice of the HL with their children. Future studies should continue to disentangle cultural orientation and more closely examine proximal and specific components of cultural orientation to further understand what particular aspects of one's attitude or behavior are related to children's development. Such research can help to inform not only parents, but also educators who wish to promote heritage cultural maintenance in the classroom, by selecting foci that will promote particular skills in their students. Whereas sharing of cultural traditions may be important for aspects of children's ethnic pride and identity development (e.g., ethnic identity), opportunities to practice and share their knowledge of HL may facilitate HL maintenance.

Moreover, the current study focused on early childhood when language development is optimized. It is beneficial to further understand how parental cultural factors during childhood predict future HL and English skills. For instance, it is not clear whether the predictors of HL proficiency we found among our sample of four- to seven-year-old children may still hold during adolescence. Thus, it would be valuable to follow-up our sample when they are adolescents to explore whether the same predictors continue to be significantly associated with HL proficiency at a later age. Such research would help to shed light on the important predictors during childhood that have long term effects on HL proficiency over time. Moreover, continuing research on parent-child dyads is valuable because parents are a primary source of cultural socialization and have an impact on children's development of cultural beliefs and practices that ultimately shape their development. Overtime, as children may begin to seek autonomy, researchers can understand what parental and cultural factors continue to be strong indicators of children's values and abilities. Furthermore, it is also important to consider other influential factors outside of the family context such as school and peer networks, particularly as children's social worlds broaden over the course of development. Luo and Wiseman (2000) found that peers were the most important influence on Chinese American adolescents' language preferences and HL maintenance. Additionally, broader community conditions help to support children's HL maintenance where there is a greater co-ethnic density of HL users and community institutions that use and provided HL print (Tsai, 2001).

With the growing immigrant population in the U.S., navigating between two linguistic worlds will become an increasingly common experience. Through efforts from researchers and educators, dissemination of research findings such as those in the current study can help to better serve immigrant families, communities and schools. Public sentiment that HL maintenance occurs at the expense of English language development (particularly during the transition to formal schooling) contributed to the promotion of legislation prohibiting bilingual education in the 1990's (Ovando, 2003). More recently, anti-immigrant sentiment still fuels English-Only municipal ordinances, state legislation, and instructional language policy (Gandara & Orfield, 2012). However, findings such as these reaffirm that the vitality of HL at home is concomitant with English mastery. In many settings, policy and public sentiments have not yet been reconciled with data concerning the bi-dimensional structure of cultural orientation (i.e., individuals may be oriented towards their ethnic and American cultures), the orthogonality of dual language development, and the benefits of bilingualism. Timely support for multiculturality in schools and bilingualism in families is needed given the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of American communities.

**References**


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