



Language experiences, preferences and perceived proficiencies of multilingual Filipino-Chinese students: An exploratory study

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Abstract: Despite the indispensable benefits and advantages of being bilingual or multilingual, there may also be unwelcome effects. A unique demographic in the Philippine education system is the Filipino-Chinese students studying in Chinese high schools. Although they know and study the Filipino language since they live in the Philippines, and it is a part of the secondary curriculum, they typically use Hokkien at home because this is a common language in Chinese households that have a deep attachment to their cultural heritage, and traditional roots (Zhang, 2011). In these schools, the medium of instruction (MOI) is English except for the Chinese (Mandarin) and Filipino subjects. Thus, these students can be considered at least bilingual or even multilingual. The present study sought to look into two particular languages in the participants' linguistic repertoire: whether the participants perceive subtractive bilingualism or mild attrition occurring in either their English or their Mandarin because although these two languages are the dominant languages of instruction in school, one language may be more utilized and preferred over the other. The learners' perceptions of their proficiency in the two languages and their language preferences were also investigated. Results show that the multilingual Filipino-Chinese student participants do not believe that they are experiencing attrition in any of their languages. This is a highly positive attitude that may lead to higher motivation in maintaining and acquiring new and more languages. More studies like this should be conducted to increase literature centralized on subtractive/additive bilingualism and language attrition particularly concerning this type of learners in the Philippine setting.

Key Words: Bilingualism; Multilingualism; language attrition; Chinese learners

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, English continues to be a dominant language as it is used as medium of instruction in many content area subjects, especially in private schools and in both public and private higher educational institutions (Gonzalez, 2006).

A unique demographic in the Philippine education system is the Filipino-Chinese students studying in Chinese high schools. Although they know and study the Filipino language since they live in the Philippines, and it is a part of the secondary curriculum, they typically use Hokkien at home because this is a common language in Chinese households that have a deep attachment to their cultural heritage, and traditional roots (Zhang,

2011). Philippine Hokkien is the variant of Hokkien spoken by about 98.7% of the ethnic Chinese population of the Philippines.

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There has been a wealth of research on bilingualism and multilingualism over the years. Studies have found many benefits of being bilingual and a trait that was once considered a hindrance has now proved to have many advantages for both children and adults. However, despite the indispensable benefits and advantages of being bilingual or multilingual, there may also be unwelcome effects. Lambert (1975) distinguishes



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"additive" from "subtractive" bilingualism. Subtractive bilingualism refers to the situation where a person learns the second language to the detriment of the first language, especially if the first language is a minority language. In this case, mastery of the first language decreases, while mastery of the other language (usually the dominant language) increases.

Language attrition is a form of subtractive bilingualism where there is a gradual reduction or loss of linguistic knowledge and skills in an individual. It is defined as "the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual" (Kopke & Schmid, 2004, p.3). De Bot and Weltens (1991) define second-language attrition in particular as the decline of second-language skills, which occurs whenever the learner uses the second language to an insufficient degree or because of environmental changes, the language use is limited and another language is becoming the dominant one (Olshtain 1989).

The language learning situation of the aforementioned students in Chinese schools is not entirely ideal as these learners are faced with a curriculum that is quite congested with content to be studied and learned within a day in three languages: Filipino, English and Chinese. Instead of acquiring multiple languages, they may experience language processing issues such as subtractive bilingualism or even mild attrition due to the contact time with particular languages and interlocutors as permitted by the environment. They may "learn" the aforementioned languages, but only using a "get by" approach due to necessity.

Bilingualism and multilingualism are only an advantage if the learner is able to understand and maximize the benefits of being such kind of language user. It is thus necessary to investigate these learners' experiences and perceptions, considering the various languages they know so that more educative practices that may facilitate better L1/ L2 learning may be instituted by educators, and more supportive conditions that may promote L1/L2 progress be considered by all stakeholders.

Specifically, the present study sought to look into two particular languages in the participants' linguistic repertoire: whether the participants perceive subtractive bilingualism or mild attrition occurring in either their English or their Mandarin because although these two languages are the dominant languages of instruction in school, one language may be more utilized and preferred over

the other. The learners' perceptions of their proficiency in the two languages and their language preferences were also investigated.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

A total of forty (40) junior high school students (14 males, 26 females) were the participants. They were purposively selected due to their very "unique" linguistic feature which is being multilingual in Hokkien, Filipino, English, and Mandarin due to their being residents of a Chinese community and students in a Chinese school in the Philippines. The participants declared their languages to be the following: L1 Hokkien, L2 Filipino, L3 Mandarin, and L4 English.

2.2 Setting

The study was conducted in a Filipino-Chinese school for its unique and rich linguistic milieu. The school is the first institution of higher learning founded by the overseas Chinese-Filipinos, and is recognized by both governments of the Republic of the Philippines and the Republic of China. It offers education in all levels from preschool to graduate school. Instruction is in three languages: Filipino (for Filipino and Araling Panlipunan subjects), Mandarin (for Chinese Math, Chinese History and Chinese Literature) and English (for all other subjects) thus making it an ideal and interesting linguistic milieu for "multilingualism."

2.3 Instrument

A 20-item questionnaire adapted from Marian, Blumenfeld and Kaushanskaya (2007)'s Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) was administered to the participants.

Previous studies suggest that bilinguals' language profiles are best captured by assessing language experience and proficiency across multiple linguistic domains. It appears that bilinguals are able to assess their language proficiency and report their language history in a way that is consistent with behavioral performance (e.g., Chincotta & Underwood, 1998; Flege et al., 1999, 2002; Jia et al., 2002). However, the absence of a valid and uniformly used assessment measure makes it difficult to interpret existing findings and to make generalizations across studies and populations. The LEAP-Q combines relevant proficiency and experience variables into a single instrument.



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that 30% of the participants rated their proficiency in English as Moderate. The respondents seem to be quite modest in self-rating their English proficiency even though they can be said to have a good command of the English language given their years of L2 formal instruction and regular exposure, meaning daily or almost daily contact with English through interpersonal interaction or overhearing a language (De Houwer, 2009). Participants seemed to underrate themselves given their East Asian indirect cultural influence. Furthermore, such inconsistency is the usual issue of employing self-reported data, for respondents may have the tendency to overrate or underrate themselves (Blanche & Merino, 1989).

Table 1. Self-rating of proficiency in **English**

Self-rating of proficiency	Number of participants	Percentage
Very proficient	8	20%
Proficient	10	25%
Moderately proficient	12	30%
Adequately proficient	8	20%
Poor	2	5%
Total	40	100%

Table 2 illustrates the self-reported proficiency level of the participants in Mandarin. Similar to the findings in Table 2, the respondents seemed to underrate themselves considering that they belong to the premiere section, their L1 formal instruction and their regular exposure and non-regular exposure to Mandarin (De Houwer, 2009).

Table 2. Self-rating of proficiency in **Mandarin**

Self-rating of proficiency	Number of participants	Percentage
Very proficient	8	20%
Proficient	10	25%
Moderately proficient	12	30%
Adequately proficient	8	20%
Poor	2	5%
Total	40	100%

When asked regarding their willingness to learn other language/s aside from the ones they have already acquired, 95% of the participants are open to the idea. When asked whether they think learning more languages will mean they will “lose” the others, 95% of them did not think so. Kopke (2007) observed that school children are most prone to attrition since they are the age group most motivated to integrate into the L2 environment. However, age and previously-acquired literacy skills in L1 might counteract such a tendency. In the present study, the participants are already in their terminal year in junior high school and apparently are not concerned about integrating into only one language environment. Some of the motivations they gave for learning more languages are the following: to be able to communicate with more people, to be “globalized” citizens, and for job opportunities.

Table 3 shows the participants’ preferred language in different situations and contexts.

Table 3. **English** as the preferred language

Percentage of participants	Situation/ Context
30%	English class
20%	Talking to foreigners/ travel
5%	Formal events
25%	Out of the country
20%	When people don’t understand Chinese

Table 4. **Mandarin** as the preferred language

Percentage of participants	Situation/ Context
30%	At home
30%	When in China
10%	In Chinese restaurants
20%	When someone talks to me in Mandarin
10%	When I don’t want to be understood

As can be seen in the data, the participants are able to maximize two of the languages in their repertoire quite appropriately which is in agreement with studies such as those of Dewaele and Nakano (2013) and Sachdev and Giles (2008) that looked into bilingual accommodation. Most research on bilingual accommodation had school children as participants (e.g. Kinzler, Shutts, & Spelke, 2012; Yow, & Li



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(2018) but is equally if not more important to describe the experiences of older students. Kopke (2007) observed that the linguistic and cultural environment can also be considered a factor that may lead to attrition but in the case of the present investigation, the participants seem to be taking advantage of their multilingualism and are not too concerned about any of their languages being attrited.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study shows that the multilingual Filipino-Chinese student participants do not believe that they are experiencing attrition in any of their languages. This is a highly positive attitude that may lead to higher motivation in maintaining and acquiring new and more languages. More studies like this should be conducted to increase literature centralized on subtractive/additive bilingualism and language attrition particularly concerning this type of learners in the Philippine setting. Future investigations that might stem from this topic would further enhance the efficacy of language teaching and classroom practice of educators, and promote the betterment of not only language learning either in English or Mandarin but learning per se of the students, fostering intercultural understanding and respect.

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