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## The Relationships among Heritage Language Proficiency, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Esteem

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# The Relationships among Heritage Language Proficiency, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Esteem

## **Abstract**

With the trend toward globalization and the continual change of the ethnic composition of the U.S. population, there is increasing awareness in the U.S. that not every child is raised in an English-only family. The purpose of this research is to explore the relationships among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem in the American-born Chinese (ABC) children who go to Chinese language schools for Chinese language learning on weekends. A total of 63 students and their 56 parents are surveyed in the quantitative study. Results show that there are positive relationships between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity ( $r = .316, p = .006$ ), language proficiency and self-esteem ( $r = .255, p = .022$ ), and ethnic identity and self-esteem ( $r = .240, p = .029$ ). The study provides implications for the Chinese language schools, parents, educators, and policymakers, as well as the implications for future study.

## **Keywords**

heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, self-esteem, Chinese language school

# **THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG HERITAGE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, ETHNIC IDENTITY, AND SELF-ESTEEM**

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## **Introduction**

With the trend toward globalization and the continual change of the ethnic composition of the U.S. population, awareness that not every child is raised in an English-only family is increasing. However, the language ideology of English hegemony over the home languages of children in immigrant families, implicit at schools and in mainstream society, can accelerate the pace of language shift for those children and lead to an unwillingness to speak home languages (Zhang, 2008). Once these children have mastered English, they make English their primary, preferred language, which is often achieved at the expense of heritage language loss (Veltman, 2000; Zhang, 2008). The situation is especially obvious in second-generation immigrants (Maloof, Rubin, & Niller, 2006; Portes, 2002; Zhang, 2008).

In order to maintain their heritage languages, immigrant parents often send their native-born children to community-based heritage language schools. Taking Chinese immigrants as an example, first-generation Chinese parents work hard with Chinese language schools to ensure their children maintain the heritage language. Preserving Chinese culture, which strengthens family ties and maintains the Chinese identity, is the primary reason parents send their children to Chinese language schools (Lu, 2001).

During the 2000s, the population of Asians in the U.S. had increased by 43.3% and became the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S. (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). According to the 2010 census, Chinese were the largest Asian group in the U.S. and accounted for 1.1% of the U.S. total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With a dramatically increasing population in the U.S., Asians, especially Chinese, have become an important minority group for educational researchers. Moreover, a majority of studies on heritage language learning focus on high school and college students in traditional school settings (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Boshier, 1997; Kim & Chao, 2009). Research on heritage language learning, targeting children attending community-based language schools, is scarce.

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The purpose of this study is to explore the relationships among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem of American-born Chinese (ABC) children who attend Chinese language schools on weekends. Heritage language proficiency, in this study, denotes the proficiency of Mandarin Chinese in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing. The aim of the research is to provide meaningful information regarding Chinese teaching and learning to the Chinese language schools. The researcher also hopes to shed some light on the useful resources the community-based heritage language schools can provide for K-12 school systems in terms of heritage language development, language maintenance, and second language acquisition.

## Literature Review

### Learning Chinese Heritage Language in Chinese Language Schools

A heritage language is usually spoken in the home or connected to the heritage culture (Krashen, 1998). The systematic lack of support for students' native languages in U.S. public schools has led to a crisis of heritage language loss (Garcia, 2002; Wong & López, 2000; Zhang, 2008). Portes (2002) finds that, by age 17, second generation students are not proficient in heritage language in terms of the ability to speak, understand, read, and write well. Chinese is one language that literally disappeared in this second-generation sample. To maintain the heritage languages and transmit the value of the heritage cultures to their children, immigrant parents and religious organizations often establish community-based heritage language schools (Bradunas, 1988; Man, 2006).

There are two types of Chinese language schools (CLSs) in the U.S. One type is for-profit, held on weekdays after regular school hours; the other is non-profit, open on weekends (Liu, 2010; Zhou & Li, 2003). The for-profit CLSs held on weekdays are usually found in major cities with a large concentration of Chinese, such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The majority of the CLSs, however, are non-profit and operate on weekends (Liu, 2010). The funding of the non-profit Chinese language schools generally comes from tuition and fundraising, such as sponsoring dinners, picnics, exhibits, and selling gift certificates.

Wiley et al. (2008) conducted a survey with 766 Chinese respondents coming from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong on their perspectives of heritage language learning and maintenance. Over 90% of the respondents found it important for children to retain/learn their parents' languages, assuming they were already learning English. About 92.3% of respondents felt that there should be private instruction (tutors/weekend schools) in Mandarin for Chinese origin children, if not available in the public schools. The prosperity of the CLSs in recent years reveals immigrant parents' commitment and enthusiasm to maintain their heritage language (Zhang, 2008). Through active parental involvement, the CLSs not only teach the language and cultural values but also offer a variety of culture-related, extracurricular activities that are difficult for parents to offer in their homes, such as calligraphy, Chinese folk dance, martial arts, Chinese cooking, and Chinese painting (Lai, 2004; Wong & López, 2000).

One of the most important functions of CLSs is to create a sense of cultural and ethnic pride (Chuang, 1997; Lu, 2001). In the CLSs, the identity formation process involves learning Chinese, communicating with each other, and participating in activities. Chinese cultural values and core symbols are taught through textbooks, reinforced through participation in traditional events, and learned through interaction and socialization in the CLSs. For immigrants immersed in mainstream society throughout the week, the once-a-week CLSs are "an environment for cultural adjustment, identity confirmation, and social acceptance, which is essential to their psychological well-being and quality of life" (Lu, 2001, p. 203).

### **Heritage Language Proficiency, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Esteem**

The development and proficiency of heritage languages has benefited language minority children in many aspects (Bankston & Zhou, 1995), including strengthening their ethnic identity (He, 2008; Kim & Chao, 2009; Wong-Fillmore, 1991) and self-esteem (Cummins, 1983; Lu, 2001; Yearwood, 2008). Inside and outside our communities, we encounter people of diverse ethnic backgrounds using their languages to communicate. Language, under such circumstance, becomes a distinguishing feature to reflect one's ethnic identity (Fong, 2004). Moreover, the fluency in one's heritage language is positively related to self-esteem (Garcia, 1985). Minority children tend to display higher self-esteem when they feel positively about their own ethnic identities (Bradford, Burrell, & Mabry, 2004). In other words, there are connections among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem, which may further affect children's school performance and attitude toward future education (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Portes, 2002).

**Ethnic Identity.** Ethnic identity is dynamic and socially constructed, and reflects a sense of belonging to an ethnic group with shared heritage, including language use, traditions, religious practices, values, ancestry, and the like (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). The formation of ethnic identity is through interaction with others (Yep, 1998). Simply stated, one's ethnic identity is a composite of both one's self perception of an ethnic group and the views held by others about one's identity (Nagel, 1999). After a review of more than 70 studies of ethnic identity, Phinney (1990) found that identity development is especially difficult for those ethnic and racial minority groups who want to preserve their cultural values while fitting in to the host culture. And the formation of ethnic identity is key to the development of self-esteem (Phinney, 1992).

**Self-Esteem.** Self-esteem is one of a larger constellation of self-related emotions and cognitions, such as internal locus of control, perceptions of competence, persistence in the face of challenges, coping skills, and social support that potentially influence school performance (Baumeister et al., 2003; Koch, 2006; Whitesell et al., 2009). It is often used to assess well-being on youth (Perez, 2011) and immigrants (Berry et al., 2006). Children with more positive self-esteem tend to be socially well-adjusted, more successful in school, and have close, trusting relationships with their parents (Gove, Style, & Hughes, 1990).

Although there is evidence that positive self-esteem is a predictor of academic achievement (Whitesell et al., 2009), negative self-esteem is one key element that may indicate children's psychological and social problems (Hosogi et al., 2012). A lack of self-esteem may be one of the major causes of disaffection that can cause student disengagement from school (Kinder et al., 1995).

### **Research on Heritage Language Proficiency, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Esteem**

Language is one of the most important factors in the maintenance of a strong ethnic identity for all ethnic groups, particularly for minorities (Edwards, 1997; Joseph, 2004). In fact, heritage language is probably the most frequently cited contributor to ethnic identity (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Hurtado & Gurin, 1995), although a few researchers find no correlation between heritage language learning and ethnic identity (e.g., Kim & Chao, 2009; Ng, 1999). Giles and Noels explain that language serves to classify and unite people as members of a particular ethnic group (ingroup), as well as to exclude outgroup members from interacting with people who belong to the ingroup (as cited in Chuang, 2004, p. 58). The more proficient one is in his or her heritage language, the stronger ethnic identity and affiliation he or she has with the ethnic group (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Cho, 2000). As has been shown in several studies of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Mexican, French, and Indian children, those

who maintain their heritage languages and ethnic identities with immigrant parents' support have more possibilities of succeeding in school than those who assimilate to the mainstream culture (Lee, 2002; Portes, 2002).

Heritage language maintenance should be an advantage rather than a problem regarding self-esteem development (Portes, 2002). Garcia (1985) finds that there is a positive relationship between fluency in heritage language and self-esteem of 1,500 Chicano college students. In contrast, some studies reveal that English language use rather than heritage language use contributes to higher self-esteem (Rumbaut, 1994; Schnittker, 2002). Schnittker (2002) also suggests that adult Chinese immigrants who speak mostly English have higher self-esteem than those who speak primarily Chinese.

Studies examining the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem have shown inconsistency as well. Some studies report a positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem (Bradford, Burrell, & Mabry, 2004; Lee, 2005; Phinney, 1992). Other studies demonstrate no association between ethnic identity and self-esteem (Hovey, Kim, & Seligman, 2006; Rumbaut, 1994; Schnittker, 2002).

There are a great number of studies on heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem. However, the majority of participants in these studies are adolescents and college students. Relevant research that involves children, especially those who go to heritage language schools, is scarce. In addition, in the existing studies the relationships among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem show mixed results. These inconsistencies show there is room for such research to be done with different populations (e.g., research on early adolescents and children) to offer more evidence.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study explored three research questions: (1) What is the relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity?; (2) Is there any connection between heritage language proficiency and self-esteem?; and (3) How does ethnic identity associate with self-esteem? From these questions, three hypotheses were devised. The first hypothesis stated that there is a positive relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity. The second hypothesis stated that the relationship between heritage language proficiency and self-esteem is positive. The last hypothesis stated that ethnic identity and self-esteem are positively correlated with each other.

### **Selection of Study Participants**

Using convenience sampling, the researcher contacted five Chinese schools in a metropolitan city in the Midwestern U.S. for permission to study their students. Three schools agreed to participate, two with K-10 students and another with K-8. A total of 83 students from the three CLSs, who met the following criteria, were invited to participate in the study: (1) students must be American born and enrolled in a Chinese language school between grade levels four through eight, and (2) at least one of the children's parents is a Mandarin Chinese-speaking immigrant from greater China (i.e., Mainland China or Taiwan) or other countries in Southeast Asia. Although one immigrant parent per family was recruited to participant as well, students were the main participants targeted in the current study.

For recruitment purposes, the researcher distributed to students a set of forms in both English and Chinese. The packet of forms included the adult consent form, a parental permission form, and a child's assent form. Parents had to sign the consent form and permission letter to demonstrate their agreement to participate and inform the researcher that they would allow their child or children to be in the study. Students also had to sign the assent

letter if they decided to participate in the study. The participation of parents was limited to one immigrant parent per family, regardless of whether one child or multiple children in the family were participating in the current study. As a result, 63 students (29 boys and 34 girls) and 56 parents (seven families had multiple children in this study) participated. Student participants' ages ranged from eight to 14 years ( $M = 11.19$ ,  $SD = 1.545$ ). The rationale for selecting this age group was in accordance with several research findings, indicating that children's ethnic categorization abilities are developed no earlier than the age of six (Clark & Clark, 1947; Ng, 1999; Wright & Taylor, 1995). Moreover, it is not until about the age of eight that children can construct a sense of their self-esteem (Harter, 2006, pp. 145-147).

### **Instruments**

In this survey study, data were collected from two sources: the Parents' Demographic Questionnaire (PDQ, to be completed by the parents) and the Children's Self-Perception of Chinese Language Learning Survey (to be completed by the students). The Children's Self-Perception of Chinese Language Learning Survey consisted of a Demographic Questionnaire, the Self-Evaluated Chinese Language Fluency Questionnaire (CLFQ), the 12-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Roberts et al., 1999), and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1989). The purpose of the PDQ was to obtain general information on parents' background and their cultural orientation. The questionnaire primarily included closed-ended questions, such as birthplace, time of residency in the U.S., highest education obtained, language use at home, and a multiple-choice question asking parents the reasons they send their children to the Chinese language schools.

The Demographic Questionnaire was comprised of several questions to elicit students' general information, such as sex, age, and the period he or she had been studying Chinese in the CLS. The language fluency items on the CLFQ were modified from Kim and Chao's (2009) by the researcher, namely the word 'language' in the original was replaced by the word 'Chinese.' Items of this measure were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all well) to 5 (extremely well). The mean item scores were used as the summary scores. The higher scores demonstrated a higher proficiency in Chinese.

In the current study, the two items "How well do you understand Chinese?" and "How well do you speak Chinese?" showed a strong relationship of  $R = .77$  ( $p < .001$ ). The researcher combined these two items (by averaging together) to create a subscale, understanding/speaking item, to represent students' conversational skills for further analysis. The understanding/speaking item and the reading/writing item (viewed as a subscale as well) revealed a correlation of  $R = .48$  ( $p < .001$ ). It demonstrated that understanding/speaking and reading/writing represented distinct aspects of language proficiency for the Chinese sample. Overall, participants' scores on the CLFQ had a mean of 3.20 ( $SD = .68$ ) and a Cronbach's alpha of .79.

The 12-item MEIM (Roberts et al., 1999) scale is used as a global assessment of ethnic identity and was applied in the current study. By deleting two items, which are difficult to interpret, this instrument is a revised version of Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure. Items of this measure were rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) in this study. The higher mean scores indicated higher ethnic identity. The internal consistency of the MEIM in this study was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of .89 ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = .53$ ).

The one-dimensional RSE scale includes 10 items: five positively worded items and five negatively worded items (reverse scale). After reverse coding the negatively worded items, a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) was used to calculate scores

for all items. The higher mean scores indicated higher self-esteem. The RSE measure had a mean of 3.23 ( $SD = .46$ ) and a high reliability ( $\alpha = .84$ ) in the current study.

### Procedures and Analysis Plan

The researcher collected the data over six weeks during spring 2013. On the first Sunday, the researcher went to one school and explained to the children that the study was to explore their heritage language learning experience. The researcher then distributed a set of surveys in both English and Chinese to students to take home. The children brought the PDQ home for their parents to complete. All questionnaires were completed at home, and the children were required to put the completed documents into an envelope and return them to the researcher. One week later, a follow up letter was given to the children by the researcher. The opportunity for returning surveys was closed after three weeks. The same process was applied at all three schools. The collected data were analyzed after all surveys were collected.

This is a correlational study, looking only for relationships among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem. Therefore, a one-tailed Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied. There were three hypotheses in this research to reflect three research questions. The researcher expected a positive correlation between heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity, heritage language proficiency and self-esteem, and ethnic identity and self-esteem.

### Results

A sample of 63 fourth to eighth grade students and 56 parents served as the participants in this study. The student participants had been in the Chinese language schools for a mean of 6.26 years ranging from one to 10 years old. The data revealed that there were several prominent reasons why parents send their children to the Chinese language schools. Among these reasons, the top five answers were to learn and maintain Chinese, to increase future career opportunities, to learn Chinese culture, to form ethnic identity, and to make friends with Chinese children and families.

A one-tailed Pearson's correlation was performed to assess all three hypotheses. The test of the relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity showed the correlation was statistically significant,  $r = .316$ ,  $p = .006$  (see Table 1). The result supported the first hypothesis. In addition, the correlation analyses revealed a positive correlation between subscale understanding/speaking and ethnic identity ( $r = .261$ ,  $p = .019$ ) and between subscale reading/writing and ethnic identity ( $r = .282$ ,  $p = .012$ ).

The correlation between Chinese language proficiency and self-esteem was also positive and significant ( $r = .255$ ,  $p = .022$ ) (see Table 1), supporting the second research hypothesis. A positive relationship also existed between the subscale reading/writing and self-esteem ( $r = .259$ ,  $p = .020$ ). However, there was no connection between the subscale understanding/speaking and self-esteem ( $r = .181$ ,  $p = .077$ ).

Examination of the correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem was positive and significant as well ( $r = .240$ ,  $p = .029$ ), supporting the last research hypothesis (see Table 1). In other words, as the mean scores of ethnic identity increased, so did the mean scores of self-esteem, and vice versa. In addition, the participants in this study showed lower mean scores of literacy skills ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = .764$ ) than the mean scores of conversational skills ( $M = 3.516$ ,  $SD = .818$ ).

Table 1: *Summary of Intercorrelations for Scores on the Understanding/Speaking and Reading/Writing Subscales, and the Chinese Language Proficiency, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Esteem Scales*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Understanding/ Speaking	—	0.480 **	0.870 **	0.261 *	0.181
2. Reading/Writing	0.480 **	—	0.850 **	0.282 *	0.259 *
3. Chinese Language Proficiency	0.870 **	0.850 **	—	0.316 *	0.255 *
4. Ethnic Identity	0.261 *	0.282 *	0.316 *	—	0.240 *
5. Self-Esteem	0.181	0.259 *	0.255 *	0.240 *	—

Note: \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (one-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (one-tailed).

N: 63

## Discussion

### Chinese Heritage Language Proficiency and Ethnic Identity

Phinney (1990) argues that identity development is especially difficult for those ethnic and racial minority groups who, on the one hand, need to preserve their cultural values and, on the other hand, feel a need to belong to the host culture. In such circumstances, heritage language usage becomes an important process to maintain a strong ethnic identity (Pease-Alvarez, 2002). The tests of the relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency (including the tests of understanding/speaking and reading/writing abilities) and ethnic identity in this study revealed that Chinese language proficiency was positively related to ethnic identity. The findings matched the majority of existing studies on ethnic identity: the more proficient one is in his or her heritage language, the stronger ethnic identity and affiliation he or she has with the ethnic group (Oh & Fuligni, 2010). The evidence of the positive relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity also indicated the validity of the 12-item MEIM on measuring language proficiency for the children of Chinese immigrants.

### Chinese Heritage Language Proficiency and Self-Esteem

The findings demonstrated that both the overall Chinese language proficiency and the reading/writing abilities showed a correlation with self-esteem. These results added to the existing literature on self-esteem (Altschul, Bybee, & Oyserman, 2008; Lee, 2008; Portes, 2002) by providing evidence that heritage language fluency and self-esteem were positively significant, which, furthermore, indicated the validity of the RSE on measuring language proficiency. At the same time, the positive relationship between heritage language proficiency and self-esteem contradicted some existing studies, which show no relationship between these two variables (Rambault, 1994; Schnittker, 2002).

### Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem

Previous studies exploring the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem have shown inconsistency. In this study, the result supported the findings of Allen et al. (1997), Lee (2008), Lee (2005), and Phinney (1992) that ethnic identity is positively related to self-esteem. As Phinney (1990) has argued, “Ethnic identity is central to the psychological functioning of members of ethnic and racial minority groups” (p. 499). A study examining ethnic and American identity as predictors of self-esteem among American-born high school students, including Latinos, African Americans, and Whites, showed that ethnic identity is a significant predictor of self-esteem for these three groups of students. However, only with White students

was American identity a strong predictor of self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). This implies that ethnic identity is especially important to psychological functioning for children of immigrants and racial minority groups.

### **Additional Findings in the Present Study**

The positive relationship between subscale reading/writing and ethnic identity and no relationship between subscale understanding/speaking and ethnic identity echoed Imbens-Bailey's (1997) research findings on 66 Armenian-American children (aged eight to 15 years) to the effect that children's level of literacy skills significantly predicts ethnic identity more than oral proficiency. In addition, other research suggests that higher literacy abilities in the heritage language may increase self-esteem (Yearwood, 2008) and is supported by the current study as well. However, the participants' lower mean scores of literacy skills than the mean scores of conversational skills in this study also suggests that participants' reading/writing abilities were not as good as their understanding/speaking abilities. Why are literacy skills difficult to master? Because the structure of Chinese is different from that of English, the second-generation Chinese-American children are faced with the salient challenges of maintaining their heritage language (Kim & Chao, 2009). Chinese characters are based on pictographs rather than alphabets (e.g., “日出” [Rì chū] in Chinese characters, meaning “sunrise” in English.). The composition of the Chinese characters makes reading and writing abilities more difficult to develop. Moreover, the Chinese-American children have fewer opportunities to learn their heritage language than do their counterparts born in countries where Chinese is the native language (Kim & Chao, 2009). The students' poor literacy skills, that is how to improve students' reading and writing abilities, are a primary concern in Chinese language schools.

Several studies on second-generation children of immigrants support the conclusion that those who maintain their heritage languages and ethnic identities have a greater possibility of succeeding in school than those who assimilate into mainstream culture (Lee, 2002; Portes, 2002). Children who have higher self-esteem are better adjusted, more successful in school, and have closer relationships with their parents (Alves-Martins et al., 2002). With the suggestions stated in the existing studies, it was very important to find that there were positive relationships among Chinese language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem in second-generation children of the Chinese immigrants.

### **Conclusion**

Although the small sample size limits the ability to generalize the research results to a larger population and that a self-reported survey might cause potential response biases, the study does have implications for parents, K-12 schools, and policymakers.

### **Implications for the Chinese Language Schools and Parents**

In this research, parents reported that the reasons they sent their child to a Chinese language school were mainly to learn and maintain Chinese, increase future career opportunities, learn Chinese culture, form ethnic identity, and make friends with Chinese children and families. For these parents and their children, the Chinese language schools were not only places to learn their heritage language and culture and develop identity, but also places to build social networks. The findings suggest that Chinese language schools performed irreplaceable functions that cannot be found in the home and mainstream schools.

Another implication for the Chinese language schools to consider is that students reported lower mean scores on literacy skills than on conversational skills. It is not surprising that

students' oral skills are usually better than literacy skills in language learning. However, CLSs should put effort into investigating what causes students' weak literacy skills and find a remedy. Fluency in understanding and speaking abilities is not enough to maintain a heritage language; reading and writing skills must be reinforced as well. Therefore, more professional development regarding methods to improve their students' Chinese reading and writing skills will be helpful for teachers in Chinese language schools. Schools can arrange periodic meetings for teachers to share their teaching experience or to brainstorm how to help students' progress. In addition, school administrators, teachers, and parents should work together to examine whether the textbooks provide more focus on conversation than on literacy, whether the classroom practice emphasizes listening and speaking skills too much, and whether there are few, if any, chances to practice reading and writing at home. If so, Chinese language schools need to adjust the content of the curriculum, teachers' teaching in the classroom, and homework assigned to students to make sure that both conversational skills and literacy skills are emphasized in Chinese language learning. If the problem is that students have no motivation to learn, due to their busy schedules or other factors, that is another serious issue to be explored.

### **Implications for the K-12 Educators and Policymakers**

With more and more children of immigrants going to public schools, educators should be aware of and accept the diversity, as well as allow and encourage languages other than English to be spoken in the school, especially when students need to use their heritage languages to help them study in the school. Creating an environment for language minority students to speak their heritage languages could be an idea for schools to consider.

Immigrants who speak a language other than English are increasing. When they immigrate to the U.S., they bring in their native languages, which are precious linguistic resources. Polinsky and Kagan (2007) suggested that heritage language speakers are a severely underutilized national resource. With proper instruction, they are likely to achieve near-native language proficiency, which meets the need for the corporate and government employees who represent our nation to work with other countries that have political and economical ties with the U.S. The loss of these heritage languages will be an enormous waste of resources. Policymakers should rethink the importance of the maintenance of heritage languages and bilingual education and realize that bilingual programs can benefit not only the English language learners but also the U.S. as a whole. If it is a budget issue that causes the reduction of bilingual programs, policymakers can look for other possibilities. For example, collaboration with heritage language schools is one option to consider. If public schools collaborate with the heritage language schools, they can, on the one hand, help train the teachers in heritage language schools to improve teaching quality, and on the other hand, borrow resources from heritage language schools to improve bilingual programs in mainstream schools.

### **Implications for Future Research**

To identify the important factors common for heritage language learners in the U.S., enlarging the sample size, extending the sample diversity based on the participants' socioeconomic status, and including the examination of other ethnic groups is encouraged. Secondly, the present study focused only on second-generation children. Future research is needed that incorporates first generation and later generations to compare possible differences among generations in terms of heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem to explore whether there is a fairly consistent decline in the later generations on heritage language proficiency and how, if at all, it affects the relationships between ethnic identity and

self-esteem. Finally, this study gained only a general idea of second-generation Chinese-Americans' Chinese language learning and touched the surface of the interaction of Chinese language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem. In-depth, qualitative investigation regarding how students strengthen their heritage language ability, how students develop their ethnic identity and self-esteem, what the developmental trajectories are, how heritage language proficiency connects to the development of both ethnic identity and self-esteem, and how heritage language proficiency affects students' academic performance are suggested for future research.

Language plays an important role in linking with the past and with national origins; it is an indispensable tool for communication (Joseph, 2004). With the trend toward globalization and the continual change of the ethnic composition of the U.S. population, English is not necessarily the only language spoken in the home. In fact, the population of school-age children (aged 5-17) who spoke a language other than English at home rose from 4.7 million to 11.2 million, which grew 138.84% between 1980 and 2009 (The Condition of Education, 2011). Based on this phenomenon, it appears that heritage languages are crucial for the children of immigrants to communicate with their parents. The present study adds to the existing literature by showing that Chinese language proficiency is positively related to ethnic identity and to self-esteem, and ethnic identity is connected to self-esteem. The researcher hopes the results of this study can shed some light on the importance of maintaining heritage languages, justifying such educational reforms, and correcting the existing problems.

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