

A survey of the Current Language Environment of Infants and Young Children in the Ethnic Region of Southeast Guizhou Province Supportive

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Abstract

Background: The language environment in early childhood profoundly affects children's life trajectory, educational level, cognitive outcome, mental health, and, in particular, a child's language development. Language as a tool for understanding the world can, in turn, affect a child's cognitive and brain development, acquisition of learning skills, and even interpersonal relationships and mental health, thus having an important impact on the lifelong development of young children. The family language environment is important for the lifelong development of young children. Therefore, it is necessary to create a good family language environment for infants and young children to lay a good foundation for both language skills and psychological.

Subjects and Methods: This study aims to explore the current situation of the language environment in the homes of young children in ethnic areas, identify the problems in the language environment in the homes of ethnic areas, and put forward targeted suggestions to improve the language environment in the homes of young children and promote their development in various aspects such as language and psychological well-being. This study adopted the snowball method in a non-random sample, selecting 677 parents of infants and young children aged 0-3 in the counties, townships, and rural areas of Tianzhu County, Liping County, and Congjiang

County, where there are many ethnic minorities living in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture of Guizhou Province. A total of 654 parents participated in the questionnaire.

Results: The home language environment is generally average in the region, but the home reading environment is poor in all areas. The family language environment is characterized by insufficient family cultural resources, with a scarcity of resources and a neglect of children's interests. This may lead to children feeling anxious and depressed as their psychological needs are not met. There is an uneven level of quality in family communication environments, with a significant decrease in the quality of family communication environments with a significant decrease in the quality of family communication environments in counties, townships, and towns; and a lack of attention paid by parents to the construction of a language environment for young children in the family reading environment, as well as significant urban-rural differences.

Conclusions: Parents of young children create a Mandarin language environment and improve their language quality; balance family language resources to promote educational equality; increase the frequency of parent-child reading. Addressing children's anxiety and psychological needs, such as self-esteem and sensitivity. Respect the interests of young children and improve the quality of parent-child reading; change parents' views on the language to increase the frequency and quality of parent-child reading.

Key words: Home language environment; Race region; Infant; Mental health

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1. INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have found that parental education and differences in the words used by fathers can significantly predict children’s language development (Pancsofar, 2006). Xiao Liu explored the home language environment of children with language delay and found that providing a good home language environment can help prevent language delay (Liu, Jin, & Shen, 2009). Ashu Wang proposed that the home language environment has an impact on the development of both the child’s mother tongue and second language (Wang and Sun, 2009). Language is a tool for understanding the world and is inextricably linked to children’s cognitive skills development. It is the foundation for developing literacy and reading later in life, determines future academic success or failure, and affects mental health. One study showed that poor children hear 30 million fewer words in the first four years of life than children from wealthy families. Language acquisition occurs through social interactions with adults (Xiao, 2020). The home language environment significantly impacts young children’s language and cognitive development, and attention should be paid to constructing the home language environment for infants and young children.

China is a unified multi-ethnic country; multi-ethnicity and multilingualism are fundamental national conditions. The Chinese Constitution protects the right to use the languages of all ethnic groups while promoting the national common language and writing system. However, the bilingual proficiency of ethnic minorities is currently an issue, as evidenced by the fact that primary school students in the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture can hear but cannot speak or write in the common language (Liu, 2015). The development of the national common language in young Tibetan children is uneven, with regional and urban-rural differences (Liu and Xue, 2020). A good language environment at home in the early years can promote children’s language acquisition and thus lay a good linguistic foundation for their learning and development. Therefore, in order to improve the language environment of families in ethnic areas, analyze the specific impact of the family language environment on the language development of young children, and thus propose targeted measures to improve the quality of the language environment of families in ethnic areas, improve the mastery of the national common language by young children in ethnic areas, improve young children’s acceptance of Chinese language teaching, and promote educational fairness.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 General Information

This study questionnaire is Zongxin Shi (Shi, 2022)’’ about children’s family language environment. This study

adopted the snowball sampling method in a non-random sample and selected 677 parents of infants and young children aged 0-3 in the counties, townships, and rural areas of Tianzhu, Liping, and Congjiang, where there are many ethnic minorities living in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture of Guizhou Province. A total of 654 parents participated in the questionnaire, of which 634 were valid questionnaires, 356 from counties, 244 from townships, and 34 from rural areas, for a recovery rate of 96.9%. Below is a descriptive statistical table of parental background information:

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of parents’ background information

Variant	Subject	N	%
Primary guardian of the child	paternity	38	5.99
	motherhood	413	65.14
	(sth. or sb) else	183	28.87
Parents’ education level	High School (Secondary and below)	431	67.98
	three-year college	62	9.78
	Undergraduate and above	142	22.24
	Dong ethnic group	406	64.04
Parent Nation	Hmong or Miao ethnic group of southwest China	106	16.72
	Han ethnic group	92	14.51
	(sth. or sb) else	33	4.73
Primary language spoken at home	Mandarin (common language)	308	45.58
	local dialect	239	37.70
	national language	87	13.72

2.2 Research Methods

This research questionnaire draws on Shi Zongxin’s “Survey Questionnaire on the Language Environment of Young Children in Families”. It is compiled based on the research objectives and the actual situation in the research area. Each question is based on a 5-point scale, and the main content of the questionnaire consists of four parts: basic family information, family cultural resources, family communication environment, and family reading situation. The internal consistency coefficient of this questionnaire is 0.848, which is higher than 0.70, indicating that the questionnaire has good internal consistency.

First, the researchers selected the three areas of Tianzhu, Congjiang, and Liping in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou Province, where there are more ethnic minorities, as the subjects of this study. Parents of infants and young children in counties, towns, and villages in these three areas were

randomly selected as the subjects of the questionnaire survey. The questionnaires were passed on using a snowball method and filled in anonymously. The parents were asked to fill in the questionnaires through the questionnaire star after obtaining their consent. The questionnaire survey results will only be used for research purposes and will not be disseminated externally.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Basic information on the language environment at home

As seen from Table 2, the family language environment is at a medium level in terms of the overall family communication environment, as well as in county, township, and rural families. However, parents in this ethnic group are at a lower level regarding family reading, with a mean score of 2 to 3 points.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for dimensions of the home language environment

	Number of questions	County seat M (SD)	Townships M (SD)	Countryside M (SD)	Synthesis M (SD)
Family communication environment	10	3.20 (0.68)	3.10 (0.71)	3.15 (0.58)	3.16 (0.69)
Reading at home	10	2.26 (0.42)	2.14 (0.38)	2.12 (0.65)	2.21 (0.21)

Note: *Differences in means are significant at 0.05.

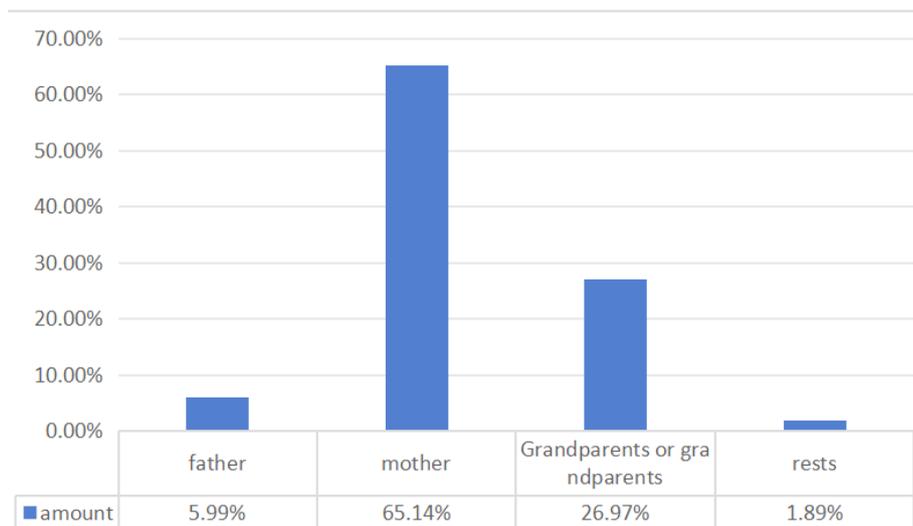


Figure 1
Description of the main guardian of the family

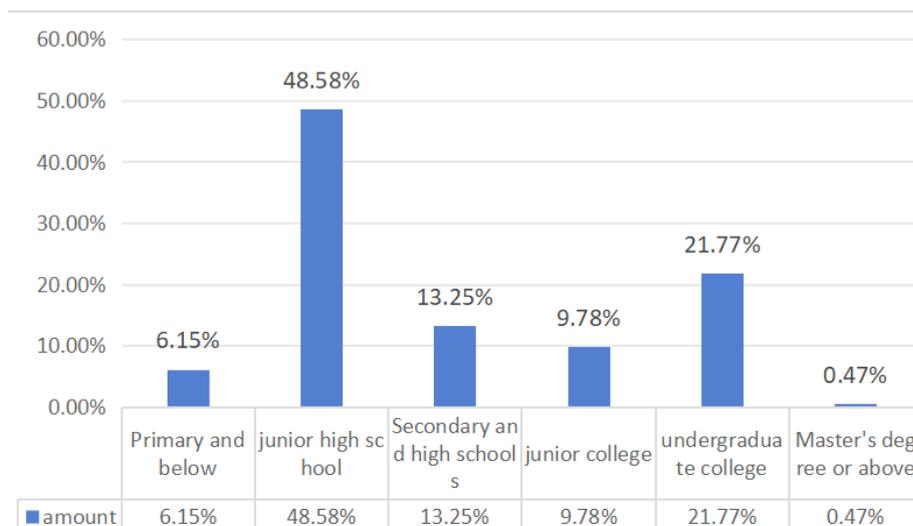


Figure 2
Descriptive chart of parental qualifications

According to the survey results of the questionnaire and the analysis in Figure 1, it can be seen that the mother is the primary caretaker of young children, accounting for 65.14%, which is close to two-thirds of the total. This indicates that the mother is the primary caretaker of young children in this area. The father accounts for a tiny proportion of only 5.99%, and the proportion of others, such as grandparents, who are the caretakers, is 38.87%, close to one-third. Previous studies have shown that the quality of parent-child interactions affects young children's language development. When fathers are the primary caregivers, a lack of communication with young children may cause delays in their language development. As shown in Figure 2, more than two-thirds of parents have a high school education (technical secondary school and below), precisely 67.98%, followed by 22.24% with a bachelor's degree or above and 9.78% with a junior college degree. There are differences in language development between children from different family backgrounds. Parents' education level, family environment, etc., affect children's language development (Bracken and Fischel, 2008). The low level of education of local parents of young children may affect the language development of young children. In terms of parental ethnicity, the number of ethnic minorities is as high as 545, accounting for as high as 83.49%. In comparison, Han people only account for 14.51%, indicating that the area is mainly populated by ethnic minorities, with nearly 90% of the population being ethnic minorities. Local ethnic minorities are overwhelmingly dominant in numeracy, so the primary ethnic language and local dialect used in the home is over half, more significant than the proportion of Mandarin used. As China is a multi-ethnic country, it advocates the development of ethnic languages while also emphasizing learning the national standard language. Therefore, families should also create a good atmosphere for using Mandarin and prepare young children linguistically well for school.

This shows that, firstly, in terms of child guardians, the region is dominated by mothers as the primary guardians; secondly, the educational level of parents of young children in the region is generally low, which may affect the construction of a good language environment at home; and thirdly, the region is dominated by ethnic minorities, and dialects and ethnic languages are spoken more often in the home.

3.2 Family cultural resource description points

The family cultural resources in this study mainly include material resources to help children develop language skills such as pronunciation, reading, and pre-writing. The development of children's language is inseparable from the support of these intermediary resources. According to the statistical results, the number of materials that can

inspire children to practice pre-writing at home is 0 to 2, which accounts for the most significant proportion of 45.9%. The most minor proportion is 6.62% for more than seven types of materials. Moreover, only 6.31% of children can use these materials daily, while 67.98% can only use these materials 1 to 2 times a week. In addition, the survey results also show that the proportion of young children with sound-producing items at home is as high as 75.2% of 0-2, which is more than two-thirds of the number of people surveyed, while the proportion of young children with sound-producing toys who use them 0-2 times is 76.66%, and only 35 children, or 5.52% of the total, can use them every day. Once again, regarding children's reading categories, the top three are storybooks, science knowledge books, and learning books (such as ancient poems). In contrast, the proportion of other categories (such as activity books) is less than 10%.

According to the survey results, firstly, there are few types of writing materials for young children at home, and they are rarely used; secondly, there is a lack of sound-producing toys, and even fewer children have sound-producing toys that they can use every day; and thirdly, when choosing reading materials, parents focus on practical books that impart knowledge, ignoring the interests of young children.

3.3 Comparison of differences in the family communication environment

This part examines the status of the language communication environment in the families of young children in ethnic areas. The language development rate, vocabulary acquisition, phonological awareness and syntactic development of different groups of children are influenced by three mediating factors: residence language environment, family language environment and parenting style (Yin, 2019). In addition, parents should create a good language environment that is conducive to creating a relaxed living atmosphere for children to meet their psychological needs. Table 3 shows that a one-way ANOVA analysis of the differences between counties, townships, and rural areas in Guizhou's ethnic minority areas found that the family communication environment in counties is significantly better than that in townships, which is significantly better than that in rural areas. The quality of the family communication environment decreases from counties to rural areas. This dimension mainly examines how parents interact with young children verbally, including the amount of time spent playing with children and how they talk to them. Further analysis of the questionnaire results found that parents scored lowest on whether they would finish their children's sentences, with the proportion of parents who often and always do so being extremely low at only 27.93%, which is only about a quarter of the total. Parents are not doing enough to communicate and guide young children.

Table 3
Comparison of cultural resources in urban, rural and village households

Test variable	Geography	Mean difference	Sig	After-the-fact comparison
Family communication environment	County - Township	0.10	0.000	County > Township **
	County - Rural	0.47	0.000	County > Rural **
	Townships - Rural	0.22	0.047	Township > Rural **

Note: *Significant difference in the mean value of 0.05

3.4 Comparison of differences in family reading

This part mainly examines the actual situation of parent reading, including the child's reading frequency, reading type, and whether they like to read books. A one-way ANOVA was used to compare the scores of parents' home language environments in urban, suburban, and rural kindergartens on the dimension of family reading situation (Table 4). The results show significant differences in family reading situations between urban and suburban areas and urban and rural areas, with urban areas significantly higher than suburban and rural areas. In contrast, the difference in scores of parents in suburban and rural areas in this dimension is insignificant. Further analysis of the questionnaire survey results found that parents in this region pay little attention to reading to young children. Less than one-tenth of the respondents paid great attention to this, while those who paid little or no attention totalled more than half at 50.04%. The most significant proportion of parents, 50.95%, read with their children 1–2 times a week, 50.95%, followed by 3–4 times a week at 23.97%, and third was rarely at 13.25%. The number of people who read with their children more than 4 times a week accounted for only 12.83%. More than half of the reading time was less than half an hour, and less than one-fifth was more than one hour.

Table 4
Comparison of reading differences between county seats, townships and rural households

Test variable	Geography	Mean difference	Sig	After-the-fact comparison
Reading at home	County - Township	0.12	0.000	County > Township **
	County - Rural	0.15	0.004	County > Rural **
	Townships - Rural	0.02	0.167	

Note: *Significant difference in the mean value of 0.05

The linguistic environment in this area is less developed regarding parent reading. Firstly, there is a clear gap in family reading between the county seat and towns and villages, with uneven development, and family reading in the county seat is better than in towns and villages. Secondly, parents do not pay enough attention to

reading to young children; family reading is characterized by a low frequency and short duration of parent-child reading together.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 Build a supportive language environment to promote children's Mandarin acquisition

Mandarin speakers performed better than bilingual speakers; the more Mandarin they used, the higher their vocabulary levels. The Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6 state that "dialects and minority regions should actively create a language environment for young children to communicate in Mandarin." "According to the results of this study, ethnic minorities in this region account for more than 80% of the population, and less than half of the families use Mandarin as their daily language. However, Mandarin is the national language of China, and it is also used as the medium of instruction and the language of communication in the classroom after entering primary school. In addition, the quality of the family language environment will also affect the language development of children and even make children nervous and anxious in language learning. Therefore, preschool children need to learn Mandarin well and have a good foundation in Mandarin. As an important place for language communication, families should pay more attention to children's acquisition of Mandarin. Therefore, to create a good Mandarin language environment for young children, high-quality home-school cooperation is needed. Kindergartens can encourage parents to communicate with their children in Mandarin at home through home-school communication. Therefore, to create a good Mandarin language environment for young children, high-quality home-school cooperation is needed. Kindergartens can encourage parents to communicate with young children in Mandarin at home through home-school communication. Second, kindergartens with non-parent guardians and guardians who do not have a good command of Mandarin should keep a record of this and compensate for this by guiding these children through multiple channels, such as purchasing sound-emitting toys and strengthening teacher-child interactions. Third, create a relaxed and enjoyable language atmosphere where parents encourage children to speak Mandarin, do not laugh at or scold children for speaking incorrectly, and do not easily interrupt children when they are speaking.

4.2 Balancing language resources in the home to promote equality in education

Given the significant differences in family cultural resources and family reading situations in counties, townships, and rural areas, these differences in family resources can affect young children's language development. It has been found that the number of

touching and using speech, books and reading, and story narration can promote the development of children's vocabulary (Zhang, 2019). The language resources of the families surveyed include reading and writing materials, time spent using them, frequency of use, etc. Regarding reading and writing materials, the number of rural families with young children is 1.3 times that of township families and 1.7 times that of rural families. Regarding reading books and playing with sound-producing toys, rural families with young children have far fewer resources than county families. There is a big gap in language education resources between urban and rural families. Therefore, to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas, investment in the resources of township kindergartens, especially materials related to pre-writing and books, must be increased. Through reading activities, township kindergartens can bring these reading resources home for learning. Second, kindergartens with high-quality development should also extend their education to township kindergartens. Through communication with local young children and parent-teacher associations to communicate and strengthen parents' awareness of the importance of pre-writing language for young children. Parents can enrich family education resources through various means, such as purchasing e-books, etc., or allowing children to practice pen control in fields and sandpits, and parents should also cultivate good reading habits in young children.

4.3 Increase the frequency and improve the quality of parent-child reading

The "Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines (Trial)" state that "children's experiences should be expanded through a variety of activities, and conditions that promote language development should be provided." Studies have shown that teaching children reading skills and methods through parent-child reading can improve children's reading efficiency and enjoyment, and improve their independent reading ability (Qiu, 2003). According to the results of this study, family reading is relatively poor, with low frequency and duration of parent-child reading, and not much emphasis is placed on it. The quality of parent-child interaction is difficult to ensure. Based on this, creating an attractive reading environment is necessary, such as arranging a warm and quiet reading area. At the same time, parents can also innovate ways of reading together, such as role-playing, quizzes, competitions, etc. On the other hand, parents must also improve their literacy through extensive learning. When communicating with young children, parents should use rich language, appropriate vocabulary, beautiful and concise expressions, etc. These forms of subtle influence can also increase the frequency of shared reading to four times a week or more. The family reading environment can be improved by using the above methods to increase the frequency and quality of interactions.

4.4 Provide a wealth of reading and writing materials to stimulate young children's interest in language learning

The Guidelines state that "children should be provided with rich and appropriate low-level reading materials," "a certain number of picture books that are in line with the age characteristics of young children and full of childlike interest should be provided," and "children's literature in different genres such as nursery rhymes, stories, and poems should be provided." Ong (2014) and others found that the home literacy environment moderately correlates with children's reading ability and significantly positively correlates with children's interest in reading (Liebeskind, 2014). The environment for developing young children's language requires a wealth of reading and writing materials. However, according to the above survey results, families in ethnic areas lack reading and writing materials and use them infrequently, which makes it difficult to stimulate young children's interest in language learning. Based on this, on the one hand, parents need to provide a wealth of reading and writing materials that are in line with the interests of young children, such as picture books, picture books, storybooks, etc., that interest young children and these materials should be regularly updated to maintain young children's interest in reading. Second, parents should strictly control young children's reading and writing materials. Parents can check online information, consult and discuss with teachers, and use other methods to strictly screen materials to prevent the tendency of primary school education. Third, parents can take young children to nature and society during holidays to experience, learn, and apply language. In terms of interactions, the family reading environment can be improved.

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