

How Culture Affects on English Language Learners' (ELL's) Outcomes, with Chinese and Middle Eastern Immigrant Students

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Abstract

Immigrant English Language Learners' (ELL's) differ according to culture, and therefore may face different challenges, stereotypes, etc. Chinese and Middle Eastern immigrant ELL's face challenges in the following main areas: linguistics, culture and academy. However, other factors such as stereotypes of immigrant students also challenge them in English literacy acquisition. In addition, students from different types of immigrant families may be confronted with different challenges. Accordingly, the main question of this paper is "What are immigrant English language learners' main challenges related to English literacy acquisition?" Sub-questions include "What challenges do ELL students from different immigrant cultures face?" and "What methods help students from immigrant families with English literacy development?" This paper explores past research on these questions as well as educational implications. This comparison study highlights the Chinese and Middle Eastern cultures as two examples to how culture affects ELL outcomes, cultural differences in parental knowledge and education, and socioeconomic issues. This qualitative study uses in-depth interviews with two Middle Eastern and two Chinese students. The results show the challenges that these students face. The paper concludes with recommendations on how schools and teachers can better respond to the needs of Immigrant EEL students from different cultures.

Keywords: Culture, English Language Learners', Chinese and Middle Eastern immigrants

Stereotypes leading to challenges

With the rapid increase in Chinese immigrants in Canada as well as the United States, students from immigrant Chinese families are becoming a significant segment of the North American school population. Contemporary public perceptions of Chinese and other Asian students are based on reports of these students' high test scores and academic success in comparison with other minority groups, such as African and Hispanic students in the United States, and Aboriginal students in Canada (Li, 2003). As a result, immigrant Chinese learners are often stereotyped as high achievers who are "joyfully" initiated into North American life and English literacy practices and overlooked in literacy research (Li, 2004, p. 31). According to Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006), as with any stereotyping, Chinese students often encounter the bias perpetuated by the "myth of the model minority."

Many Americans mistakenly assume that all Chinese students come to their country with special academic skills and acumen. However, according to Li (2003, 2004), and Lee (1996), this stereotype is dangerous because it promotes invisibility and disguises the social realities of many other children from different families and socio-cultural contexts. As Li (2003) indicates, we are prevented from unraveling the social realities of those who face problems in educational system as well as the problems many Chinese children face in and out of school (e.g., sociocultural barriers, language differences, and poverty). Li (2003) further indicates that the school failure of some immigrant Chinese students suggests that these children, while bearing the negative impact of model minority stereotypes, also face different sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical challenges. Thus, Lee (1996) and Li (2002, 2003) suggest researchers pay more attention to individual and differential achievement, especially for the under-achieving Chinese students within this population.

According to Fu (2003), lacking the content knowledge needed for American education, many Chinese immigrant students have limited English proficiency, no parental support at home for their school work, and need to make tremendous adjustments emotionally, socially, culturally, and academically in their new lives in America. These are all the main challenges that stereotypes bring to Chinese immigrant students in English-speaking countries.

Middle Eastern Students Stereotypes and Challenges

The increased internationalization of education has an important impact on the Middle Eastern immigrant students learning outcome (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). In "Taking Terrorism into the Classroom," Linda Fuller questions the relationship between international terrorism, media and learning. She notes that terrorism has dominated the media, with increasing emphasis since 9/11. A teacher herself, Fuller uses role playing in the classroom to explore the new stereotypes of Middle Eastern people and the challenges that Middle Eastern students face in American schools. She noted that after this exercises, students became more open with each other, and were able to see how the media had influenced their past assumptions about students from other cultures (Fuller, 1991).

Arab Americans in U.S. schools represent more than 20 countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa. They share many similarities with other immigrant groups seeking to establish an ethnic identity in a heterogeneous country, but they also face additional challenges. These result especially from negative stereotyping; racism and discrimination; widespread misinformation about their history and culture; and, for the majority who are Muslim, the need to find ways to practice their religion in a predominantly Judeo-Christian country (Jackson, 1995)

The previous quote reveals race, religion, and culture discrimination towards immigrant Middle Eastern students (Earnest, Joyce, Mori, & Silvagni, 2010). These negative stereotypes affect on the students achievements and self esteem in the American schools. Thus, in order to better understand these differences it is recommended to know about these students' culture and history.

Literacy, Culture and Schooling

Challenges Related to Culture Differences

Literacy is grounded in specific cultural values (Li, 2003). Li indicates that immigrant Chinese students' literacy and life ways, embedded in heritage cultural values, are not congruent with the school culture which confirms that cultural discontinuity explains, in part, widespread minority school failure. As Packard (2001) indicates, children from immigrant Chinese families experience an intergenerational, intercultural gap with parents in terms of language and traditions. In Li's study (2003), the immigrant Chinese student participants' conception of what it means to be literate was rooted in the traditional Chinese philosophy that emphasizes the ability to read classic literature. This belief was different from the Canadian school practice of using children's picture books to help foster their children's interest in reading.

A study by Zhang, Ollila and Harvey (1998) adopts a socio-cultural perspective which defines literacy in cultural terms and views children as becoming literate within the cultures of their communities and their families. They point out that cultural background is an essential aspect of personal identity that interacts with the education one receives in a certain society, because values advocated in the Canadian education system may not be consistent with Chinese cultural and educational values. Immigrant Chinese parents in Canada may transmit messages about expectations and educational success to their children which differ from the messages these children receive in school. Thus, the literacy development and schooling of immigrant children should be examined within the socio-cultural context of Canada and the context of the home culture in which the parents and students were raised.

Differences in Education

Differences in education between an English-speaking country such as the U.S. and China bring another challenge to Chinese immigrant English Language Learners. Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006) indicate three educational differences in learning styles, teacher/student-centered teaching, and explicit/implicit learning. First, comparing with English-speaking learners, Chinese learners require a large number of facts to be committed to memory (Li, 2002). This difference reflects the unique characteristics of Asian cultural concepts of literacy acquisition. Second, Chinese students are accustomed to teacher-centered classrooms in their home country. By contrast, teachers in the U.S. are more student-centered with teacher-student and student-student interactions being the norm. Third, by citing a saying "Master 300 *Tang* (Tang Dynasty) poems, and you become a poet yourself," they also indicate implicit learning used by Chinese speaking students. Similarly, Zhang, Ollila, and Harvey (1998) indicate that a main difference between Chinese and Canadian education is, that traditionally, in Chinese schools, content and curriculum are often standardized across the nation. In Canada, teachers provide guidance only; learning is open and at the initiative of individual students. This difference also leads to challenges for immigrant Chinese students.

In recent years, researchers have concluded that minority students' school failure may be the result of the mismatch between learners' primary discourse of home and the secondary discourse of school, including differences in language, literacy beliefs, and interactional patterns (Li, 2003). As familiarity with school literacy discourse is the mark of school success, students from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds have to learn a different set of conventions of literacy practices and often experience difficulties with schooling (Li, 2003).

In addition, challenges may also come from school teachers' misunderstanding or ignorance to the needs of Chinese immigrant student's home language, literacy level, schooling history, and cultural background when designing and implementing instruction. Grant and Wong (2003) point out that "the mainstream literacy professionals have often failed to accept their role of helping language-minority learners develop skills in English reading" (p. 392). According to Li (2001, 2003) and Packard (2001), home literacy practice is important factors contributing to their early school success or failure; however, children from immigrant Chinese families face literacy shock due to the home-school mismatch. Li (2001) further indicated that although some scholars have given empirical attention to the cultural and linguistic differences between home and school language uses, research on contemporary children's home literacy lives is fairly recent.

Middle Eastern educational system

Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) describe the unique characteristics of the educational environment in the Middle East. For example, teachers in public Middle Eastern schools tend to use direct lecturing illustrating concepts and reading from textbooks. Moreover, assessment relies almost entirely on examinations, and the Middle Eastern education system as a whole is an examination-oriented system, dependent on memorizing facts and not on applying concepts. This is in sharp contrast with pedagogic and assessment systems in Western countries such as the United States or United Kingdom, which tend to focus on interactive education and assignments that bring up more complex practical problems. School-age students in the Middle East are expected to regard teachers as an absolute authority and to work hard to meet performance standards. They are not encouraged to learn about issues unless they directly affect their curriculum, and are assigned solo rather than team activities (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). Therefore, Middle Eastern immigrant students often struggle with the problem-solving and communication skills required in Western schools. Although similarities in teaching and learning styles between the Middle Eastern countries are expected because they share the same culture, language, religion, life style, and behavior, differences can also be found. These differences mainly are due to the socioeconomic status of the country (Azizoglu, Junghans, Barutchu, Grewther, 2011; Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010).

Cultural differences in the family also affect immigrant students' adjustment to Western schools (Irfaeya, Maxwell, Kramer, 2008). For example, the Middle Eastern mothers may experience some language barriers that prevent them from helping their children with homework, mobility barriers that prevent them from going to libraries or educational centers without male relative to accompany them, and barriers due to differences between cultural teaching strategies that they have learned and those used in Western schools. Research shows that parental involvement in children's schooling can affect performance (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010), so these cultural barriers rooted in family customs can affect Middle Eastern students' success.

In this study two Middle Eastern and two Chinese students were interviewed and their responses were as follows:

"The teaching style is different...we find here the computer-based assessment. The assessments are regularly and not only at the end of the semester. This is one of the big differences" (Jordanian immigrant male student).

"It is clear that the teaching and learning system is easier here compared to the education system back in the country. It's much easier to study, we have different options to choose and this gives more chances in our education" (Lebanese immigrant male student).

"I found that, pronouncing words and writing essays are the most difficult parts in learning English" (Chinese immigrant male Student).

"In specific cases, I cannot follow up with the teacher, it is hard to concentrate and pick up the words" (Chinese immigrant male student).

The interviews show that the participants from different cultural backgrounds face difficulties in understanding and participating in effective discussions. For example, the Middle Eastern immigrant students face difficulties in the teaching styles as for the Chinese immigrant students' main concern is writing, pronouncing, concentrating and participating in discussions.

How language differences affect thought processes

Seeing the differences between English language and Chinese language, teachers should understand that "when one learns a new language, she/he does not only have to learn different vocabulary and grammar but also has to reconstruct her/his thinking order and adjust to new language patterns" (Fu, 2003, p. 135). However, many teachers are not aware of the difference between these two languages. According to Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006), Chinese students often use their understanding of how Chinese is formed to construct English words, phrases, and sentences. As a result, English-speaking teachers frequently have great difficulty grading Chinese-speaking students' papers.

Challenges faced by different types of immigrant families in English literacy acquisition?

As Li (2001) indicated, even within one ethnic group, there are many different lived realities and literacy contexts that shape qualitatively different literacy experiences. According to Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006), and Qian and Pan (2006), immigrant Chinese students tend to fall into two groups: students whose parents are graduate students at universities in the community, and students whose parents immigrated to the United States for better economic opportunities.

The studies of Fu (2003), and Wan (2000) documented experiences of children from middle-class Chinese homes and school children living in Chinese communities. These children of university students usually perform very well in both mainstream and ELL classes. Li (2001) indicates that the studies focus on successful, middle-class Chinese children from well-educated families, though providing insights into Chinese children's learning experiences in a cross-cultural context, contribute to the stereotypes of Asian children as high achievers and Asian families as model minorities who are active supporters of children's reading and writing practices. Li (2001) cites the following studies related to middle-class Chinese children: Townsend and Fu (1998) described the joyful initiation into American literacy of a Chinese boy from an academic family; Wan (2000) explored the home storybook experience of a Chinese girl, Yuan, who was from a well-educated, middle-class family. Jiang (1997) reported the early bilingual practices of a Chinese boy, Ty, whose father was pursuing a Ph.D. at university in the United States. However, the study of Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006) examines how different socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, and political factors of cross-cultural living have contributed to their difficulties with schooling and debunks the destructive myth of the "model minority."

Literacy Materials

As Zhang, Ollila, & Harvey (1998) indicate, children from non-mainstream cultures may come from families rich in literacy materials; non-mainstream parents believe they can encourage their child's literacy development by directing home activities conducive to learning. Unfortunately, for children from low-income immigrant families, the first challenge comes from living in a home with limited printed materials. According to Qian and Pan (2006), home life plays an important role in helping young children become literate; however, in low-income immigrant Chinese families, this role in young children's literacy acquisition is very limited. Younger children occasionally learn English words from watching TV or from their older siblings, as illustrated by the following vignette (Qian & Pan, 2006). Their study was strongly framed in social aspects, focusing on the physical, cultural and economic contexts related to literacy acquisition of a young girl from a low-income immigrant Chinese family. According to Qian and Pan (2006), children from low-income Chinese immigrant families whose parents or guardians do not speak English face more challenges than their peers in their way of becoming literate in English, particularly in acquiring Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Family Literacy

Packard (2001) cites Morrow's (1995) definition of family literacy that refers to literacy activities that take place in formal programs and the literacy activities used by families and communities in more informal, everyday situations. One important aspect of family literacy is the intergenerational exchange that takes place as family members help to foster one another's literacy development (Palmer, Chen, Chang, & Leclere, 2006). According to them, immigrant Chinese students from families seeking academic pursuits are more likely to get family literacy support than those from families trying for economic betterment. Zhang, Ollila, and Harvey's (1998) study examines a relationship between the parents' education level and the average age that the child was first read to and claimed that parental education level and average age of the child were significantly related, which suggests that parents with higher levels of education are likely to read to their children at an earlier age.

As Li (2003) indicate, "model minority" parents with advanced college degrees and sufficient English ability often assign homework themselves to their children even if Western schools do not, those Chinese parents of lower social statuses do not feel they have ability to teach their children school concepts due to limited language and/or content knowledge.

Li (2001) indicates that children from low-income immigrant Chinese families are more likely to encounter school-home discontinuities. To overcome these discontinuities between school literacy and home literacy, Li (2001) further indicated that children from low-income Chinese families need special help to make the transition from their familiar world of home into the unfamiliar world of school. It is also necessary to situate the children in their particular socio-cultural and socio-economic circumstances and understand them in relation to these contexts. These children need more culturally relevant, communicative interaction with sufficient -peer-scaffolded oral literacy activities in early grades as well as more one-on-one child and adult learning situations.

However, Packard (2001) suggests that parents from immigrant families can contribute strongly to their children's cultural identity development and indicates a two-way support system characterizing the literacy interactions of many immigrant families. Packard (2001) also emphasizes that children can be a valuable resource to facilitate their parents' learning, especially when the parents' first language is not English.

Socioeconomic Factors and School Performance

Li (2003) addresses that individual family characteristics had a great impact on the children's school performance and further indicates that negative social reception, isolation from their ethnic and immediate communities, and the socioeconomic context of their schools place students from low-income immigrant Chinese families in a vulnerable position of downward assimilation rather than upward mobility. These factors stand in sharp contrast to those associated with the success stories of many immigrant Chinese students from middle-class families. Research on immigration and assimilation also demonstrates that a strong ethnic community can provide immigrant families with varied social networks and access to a range of moral, cultural, material, and educational resources that are generally not available through official channels (Li, 2003). The lack of an immediate ethnic network and collective community effort diminished the social resources available to the Liu family to support their children's education. Furthermore, the children did not have the opportunity to benefit from ethnic peer encouragement and support as many middle-class immigrant Chinese students do. Moreover, Li (2003) also finds that students from low-status immigrant Chinese families are more likely to be excluded by English as Second Language Programs or even be assigned to special needs programs.

Useful Teaching Methods for Immigrant Students

As Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006) indicated, multiple solutions must be sought to address the educational needs of immigrant Chinese students, thus ensuring their success in the U.S. schools in the following areas beyond the classroom: administrative support, professional development, curriculum, textbooks, media, and other literacy materials, home-school connections and community support.

Packard (2001) emphasizes the importance of choosing culturally relevant text to promote reciprocity in family literacy practices, and that having literature-based discussions with adult ESL learners in order to bridge the gap between school-literacy and home-literacy.

According to Lam (2009), and Kim and Chao (2009), we should expand our vision of how young people of diverse backgrounds are engaging with new media technologies. This will contribute to the design of pedagogies that leverage the linguistic and semiotic resources of these young people to make literacy education not only more relevant to the experiences of transnational and multilingual youth but more relevant to a globalized future that many youth will be living in.

Qian and Pan (2006) indicate that Chinese students from low-income immigrant families need to have more opportunities to talk about things that require more decontextualized language, such as recounting what happened the previous day or retelling a story from a book they read or the teacher shared with them. In addition, public institutions share important social responsibilities of providing these young children with equal access to print and opportunities that lead to their success in becoming literate. By showing the fallacy of the model minority myth and revealing tremendous difficulties with schooling the immigrant Chinese children experience, Li (2003) suggest that each family or child must be understood in their specific social, cultural, and political contexts.

By informing educators and policy makers of problems that are specific to children whom the schools are failing, we can work toward solutions as well as explanations of minority student failure. Li (2003) also indicates that policymakers also can learn that if English literacy is the "ticket" to academic success in North America, it is essential to recognize that some minority children who are born in North America may not possess this ticket, and require English as Second Language (ESL) support.

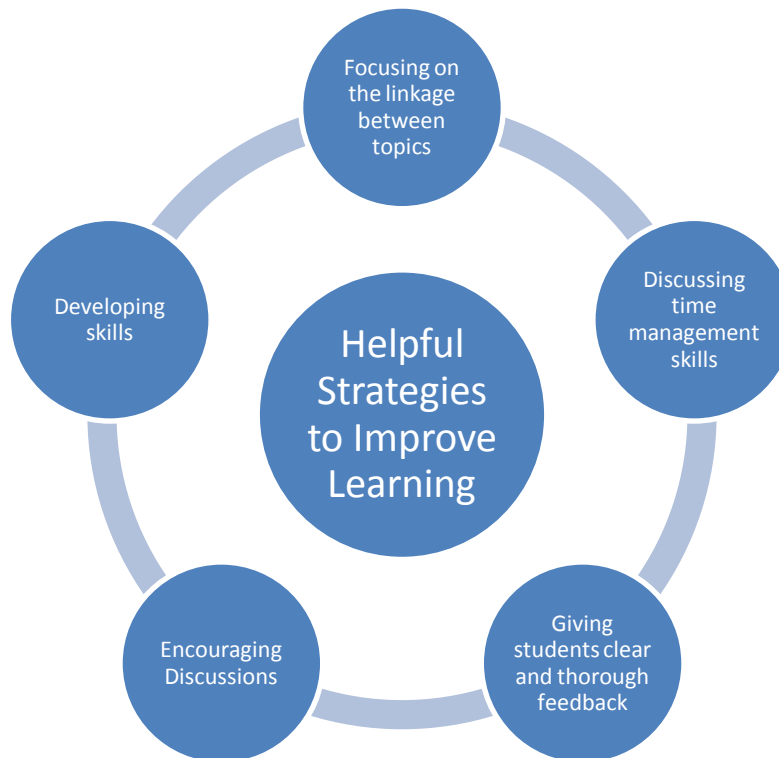
Selecting Teaching Tools in Educational Programs

Teachers can mitigate these problems by choosing effective teaching tools that maximize immigrant ELL students' learning according to cultural differences. These tools can include lecture notes and handout packages, class debates, videotaped role-plays, live case studies, experimental learning, cooperative testing, course web site and online discussion. Teachers can also pay attention to how an ELL students' culture may influence their learning style (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010).

Morrison, Sweeney, and Heffernan (2003), argue that students' preferences for specific types of pedagogy are related by their learning styles. They identified four learning styles: the sensate, visual, sequential, and active styles. Bonner, 1999 and Karns, 2005, added that the choice of teaching tools should primarily be based on the type of learning objective.

The following graph depicts helpful strategies to improve the learning of Middle Eastern immigrant students.

Graph 1: Helpful Strategies to Middle Eastern students



Helpful Teaching Attitudes and Strategies for Immigrant Students

Cooperation with Students' Parents

To better understand minority children's school performances, educators need to know their early literacy experiences in their daily living at home before formal schooling (Li, 2001). According to Qian and Pan (2006), young children from low-income immigrant families and poor neighborhood have to rely on public institutions for resources they need. In order to address the needs of these children, educators should collaborate with public schools and community centers to develop effective programs and instructional strategies that incorporate current understanding of early literacy development and challenge which children from low-income immigrant families face. Additionally, teachers should purposefully and routinely select books to share with the children and engage them in meaningful discussions or instructional activities.

Purposeful and explicit teaching of reading and writing skills should be integrated in early literacy programs. Moreover, teachers need to find better ways to help these children to develop their ability to understand and use decontextualized language so that they can catch up to their peers in academic subject areas.

For the students whose parents are able to provide help with their English literacy acquisition, Packard (2001) emphasizes the importance of family literacy programs that share reading experiences between adolescent children and their immigrant parents and that use culturally relevant texts. The study of Li (2003) also demonstrates the importance of parental involvement. Li (2003) indicates that establishing partnerships with schools and educators, so that their children's educational needs can be better communicated and understood, may enable educators to act more effectively as cultural brokers for their children. This requires that immigrant families become involved in their children's education not only at home, but also in the school setting. For the well-educated immigrant parents, spending time with children at home while working on homework, supervising their television viewing, and exposing them to different literacy activities such as libraries and museums, are helpful. At school, parents can serve as volunteers, participate in school activities, and meet more frequently with teachers. This kind of active involvement, though admittedly difficult for families of low-social status, will help fight the political forces and school practices that have such a profound and negative impact on immigrant children's educational experiences. For students from low-income immigrant families in which parents cannot read to them, Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006) indicate that audio books, as a good method to overcome the difficulty of limited home literacy, help those students to practice English at home.

Recognizing Educational, Language, and Cultural Differences

As Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006) indicate, the teacher's respect for the uniqueness of Chinese learners is a necessity for students to adjust optimally to their new American culture, to further their education at a solid pace, and to allow their new identity to merge more easily with their new lives in the United States. According to Dong (1999), in dealing with non-native students, teachers need information about students' native literacy learning in order to tailor their instruction. If teachers, especially mainstream classroom teachers, build up some knowledge of second language acquisition, they will learn methods to help the ELL students develop their second language and content area knowledge at the same time.

Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere (2006) further indicate some specific methods from the teacher's perspective to help immigrant Chinese students with literacy acquisition. For example, teachers need to understand the differences between Chinese language and English language and how those differences interfere with the learning of English (Palmer, Chen, Chang, and Leclere, 2006). They should also learn contrastive analysis (language differences) for the two languages, encourage the development of the student's first language (L1), and directly teach the positive transfers from L1 to L2 (second language), develop the Chinese student's reading, writing, listening and speaking strategies for English, utilize cooperative learning groups, and solicit support beyond the classroom. In literacy transition, Fu (2003) notes that if teachers let Chinese students express themselves and present their ideas in Chinese, students have opportunities to continue the development of their thinking.

From the cultural perspective, the study of Zhang, Ollila, and Harvey (1998) offers a new way to approach literacy research, by adopting a broader view of literacy acquisition, which may help educators understand the cultural factors involved in literacy acquisition and schooling for non-mainstream, immigrant Chinese children. Instruction for learners at all age-levels needs to reflect the cultural context of literacy acquisition and knowledge of differences among cultures help teachers gain a broader perspective on the influence of cultural background and its effects in the school context.

Method

For the purpose of this study a qualitative approach was chosen. The researchers interviewed four elementary middle class immigrant students: Two Chinese-speaking immigrants and two Middle Eastern Arabic-speaking immigrants. The results were analyzed and the students' responses indicated similarities and differences in the stereotypes and literacy challenges.

Findings

This research points out the stereotypes and challenges that Chinese and Middle Eastern students' face in the American schools. Readers can examine the immigrants' cultural values and histories enabling them to better understand cultural differences and choosing best teaching strategies.

In this research four immigrant students were interviewed.

Data are illustrated in the following tables.

Table 1: Stereotypes.

Table 2: Challenges

Table 1: Stereotypes

	<u>Chinese students</u>	<u>Middle Eastern students</u>
<u>Differences</u>	“Model minority”	Terrorism
<u>Similarity</u>	Lack of communication	

Table 2: Challenges

	<u>Chinese School System</u>	<u>Middle Eastern School System</u>	<u>American School System</u>
<u>Similarities</u>	Language differences		
	Cultural differences		
	Teaching challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-centered • Memorization • Exam-oriented • Individual tasks 		Student-centered And Problem solving
<u>Differences</u>	Implicit teaching	Curriculum-based teaching	

Conclusions and Implications

In summary, although students from immigrant Chinese family are often falsely stereotyped as model minorities, they face various challenges related to English literacy acquisition in English-speaking countries. In general, they face linguistic, cultural and academic challenges. For students from different types of immigrant Chinese families, their challenges vary from one group to another. Children from low-income Chinese immigrant families whose parents do not speak English face more challenges than their middle-class immigrant Chinese peers in the way of becoming literate in English. The students whose parents immigrate to the United States for better economic opportunities and have lower socioeconomic status, compared to the students whose parents are graduate students at one of the universities in the community are more likely to provide home literacy support, good learning environment and sufficient literacy materials. However, the literacy development of those students from low-income immigrant Chinese families heavily relies on school education, as they can get limited parental support at home.

Middle Eastern students share many similarities with other immigrant groups seeking to establish an ethnic identity in a heterogeneous country, but they also face additional challenges such as: culture, race and religion negative stereotypes.

Accordingly, this research review will not only help researchers and educators understand the challenges of immigrant Chinese/Middle Eastern students but also help us explore methods to help students from different types of immigrant families with literacy acquisition. Multiple solutions are addressed, including administrative support, professional development, curriculum, textbooks, media, and other literacy materials, home-school connections and community support. Beyond these aspects, teachers as direct instructors can also provide help in various ways such as understanding immigrant Chinese/Middle Eastern students' native languages and cultures, broadly cooperating with students' parents, using technology to facilitate their literacy acquisition, and provide bilingual or transitional instruction.

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