

# Persian language use and maintenance in New Zealand's Iranian diaspora

*Khadij Gharibi* examines immigrant parents' beliefs and practices in passing on their heritage language to their children

*Child: Mummy! Mummy! I want that toy.*

*Mother: No honey, you've got lots of toys.*

*Father: I will buy you that if you are nice to granny.*

*Father (in Persian): Excuse me sir, how much is this?*

I was listening to this conversation between a young girl and her Iranian parents in a shopping mall in Shiraz, Iran. They had come to Iran to visit their families, and the young girl could not communicate in Persian. The parents also seemed to have no problem about speaking English to their daughter.

Repeated encounters with young children unable to speak Persian coming to visit relatives in Iran with their parents made me wonder why these Iranian parents did not try to help their children acquire Persian, especially if they wanted them to be able to communicate with their grandparents and other relatives. This pushed me to start research on 'heritage language acquisition and maintenance', in particular on the impact of parental attitudes on Persian acquisition, maintenance and use in New Zealand for Iranian children.

New Zealand has been a destination for Iranian immigrants and refugees.

The New Zealand 2013 census estimated the number of Iranians in the country (informally known as Persian-Kiwis) to be just over 3,000 (less than 1 per cent of the population of New Zealand). However, it is believed that actually around 8,000 Iranian immigrants – with permanent or temporary visas – live in some capacity in New Zealand.

As part of my doctoral research, I examined Iranian parents' attitudes towards their children's heritage language acquisition and maintenance. The participants in my research consisted of 24 parents (mostly mothers) who had been living in New Zealand for between 1 and 30 years, and their 30 Persian-English bilingual children.

My findings reveal that Iranian immigrants in New Zealand have positive beliefs towards their culture and minority language, as well as strong intentions to pass on the heritage language to their children. All the parents believed that it is their responsibility to help their children acquire and preserve proficiency in the heritage language by using it at home. Cultural identity, communication with the extended family, and advantages of bilingualism were the reasons that parents gave for this belief.

Persian is used in all the families as one of the main languages of the home, but the amount of heritage language use differs between and within the families. The majority of the parents use the heritage language as the main language of the home to communicate with their children. Some families specifically have a heritage language-only policy. Where a Persian-only policy has



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been internalised by the children, the children speak in the heritage language with their parents and even with their siblings in the presence of their parents. In other cases, parents have no explicit language policy but have to use Persian as the language of parenting because of their low level of proficiency in English. Their children are aware of their parents' low English proficiency and choose to use their heritage language conversing with them.

There were also parents who believed that their children need to use the majority language in the family context and they give them this sense of freedom to choose the language for communication with family members. In these families, the heritage speakers generally have lower proficiency in Persian as a result of less opportunity to practise it.

Although the Iranian immigrants spend more time with their friends from the home country, it seems that this does not provide the heritage speakers with many opportunities to practise Persian, since the children reportedly converse in English with their co-ethnic peers. Visiting the home country has a fast positive impact on children's Persian proficiency. However, as soon as they return to New Zealand, they usually start to lose the proficiency they developed during their visit.

The majority of the parents faced challenges with family language use when the children started school, because the children tended to use English at home as they did at school with their peers. But an interesting finding of the study was the impact of teachers on heritage language maintenance. The parents stated that they were advised by their children's teachers to keep

using Persian at home, in order to raise their children bilingually. This clearly shows that bilingualism seems to be valued in New Zealand education and society, and highlights the role school teachers can play in promoting heritage language use in immigrant families. It should be mentioned that this is not common, since parents often get told the opposite by teachers, health practitioners etc.

Although parents stated that they would like to pass on the heritage language to their children, they have not always made strong efforts to help their children acquire it. Despite their positive beliefs, parents might not be able to practise regular heritage language use with their

children because of their busy schedules or children's resistance. In addition, parents' language beliefs may change during the course of raising their children. Even if they believe they should use their ethnic language at home, they may not continue to do so when their children adopt the habit of using the dominant language

after they start schooling, especially if the parents do not have enough time and energy to invest in their family language use.

The UK has been one of the most popular destinations for Iranian immigrants and refugees. As a British Academy Newton International Fellow, I aim to reveal how this UK community invests in their children's heritage language development, in the context of a bigger population of Iranians (compared to New Zealand) and with Persian-language schools available, but possibly in the face of a more negative attitude within society towards raising children bilingually. ■

**Bilingualism seems to be valued in New Zealand education and society.**

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Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, where the author conducted her research.