

Taiwanese Hakka teachers' views and experience on Heritage Language Instruction and Education

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to explore the significant experiences of a group of Hakka language teachers' views on and experiences with heritage language education and instruction in Taiwan. As a case study, ten Hakka heritage language teachers currently involved in Hakka language programs in elementary schools in Taiwan were recruited as participants. The data from the participants' narratives were analyzed and coded, and the themes that emerged were interpreted and explored in depth. The research findings indicate that teachers need to put great emphasis on motivating students to learn their mother tongue, that the heritage language program reinforces the value of Hakka culture and Hakka identity and that parents and schools play influential roles in maintaining and revitalizing Taiwan's heritage languages. By gaining insights into these teachers' experiences, the results of this study provide important implications for current language revitalization and maintenance efforts in Taiwan.

Keywords:

Heritage language, Language learning, Language maintenance, Language revitalization.

Introduction

The residents of Taiwan speak three main languages-Mandarin, Southern Min, and Hakka--as well as a number of aboriginal languages. Since the 1940s, Mandarin has been Taiwan's official language. During the "Mandarin Movement" that prevailed for 50 years, children usually were not allowed to speak their mother tongue at school. Recently, though, in an evolving political environment and influenced by an advocacy movement, Taiwan's language education policy has begun to change.

Since 2001, a new educational reform termed "the heritage language program" has been implemented in Taiwanese elementary schools. As the heritage language teachers play a crucial role in this language-acquisition planning process, understanding heritage language teachers' views on their current instruction provides insights into the realities of the everyday situations they face. This study's purpose is to profoundly explore Hakka teachers' views related to heritage language instruction and learning, as well as factors which teachers consider to impact their native language instruction. Thus, the following research question was addressed: What factors do heritage language education teachers consider as affecting or encouraging their heritage language instruction?

Perspectives

The implementation of heritage language instruction in Taiwanese elementary schools falls within the field of language maintenance and revitalization; it is also one kind of language planning. The major perspective for this study was drawn from Joshua A. Fishman's RLS (Reversing Language Shift) theory. Fishman (1991) states that to achieve intergenerational linguistic continuity and societal bilingualism, the language must be fostered in as many domains of individual and social life as are acceptable and feasible. According to Fishman, the most critical domain where efforts to stabilize or restore language should be concentrated is the home/neighborhood/community. That is where intergenerational mother tongue transmission occurs.

As the core of language maintenance/revitalization activity in schools involves second language teaching, this study also drew upon methodological perspectives. Hinton (2001) indicates that most of the literature on second-language teaching methods can be applied to endangered languages. But Hinton stresses that teaching endangered languages has important differences from teaching foreign languages. Firstly, resources including pedagogical materials, teacher sources, and teachers' expertise may be slim for teaching an endangered language. Secondly, while students of a world language study it in order to read literature in that language or communicate with native speakers, the goals in teaching an endangered language are much larger and the stakes much higher. The language has ceased being the language of communication, so not only must people learn to speak it, but communicative functions of the language must be recreated in order for it to be used again. Hinton suggests that although the classroom is usually the site of learning, for a language to be revitalized it must also leave the classroom and be brought back as the language of communication within the community. Hinton suggests that the goal, then, is RLS (Reversing Language Shift).

Modes of Inquiry

This research employed qualitative study in order to deeply explore teachers' views about heritage language education and instruction. This study fell within the interpretivist paradigm. The basic assumptions guiding this paradigm are that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the "complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). The aim of inquiry in this study is, therefore, "*understanding* and *reconstruction* of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold" (Carr & Kemmis, quoted in Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 211, emphasis in original), with regard to current heritage language education implementation.

Narrative inquiry was employed in this study to present the participants' perspectives of past and current experiences. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), "Narratives are data collectively speaking to when, how and why an event or a process occurred." For this study, narratives by teachers in the interviews represent a powerful source of data and were important for analyzing and understanding the teachers' views.

Data Sources

Data for this qualitative study was collected from interviews with ten heritage language teachers involved in heritage language instruction in elementary schools in Taiwan. The participants were all from the Hakka-speaking group, a minority group with 15% of the nation's population. There were two main reasons for choosing the Hakka group. As a native Hakka speaker, the researcher was in a good position to have a better understanding of the situations described in the interviews. Also, the Hakka group is the largest minority group in Taiwan, belonging neither to the major population (Southern Min) nor the least numerous populations, the 12 tribes of aboriginal peoples.

Currently teachers who serve as heritage language teachers come from two different sources. One is from current elementary school teachers. According to the Ministry of Education (2000), any current elementary school teachers who are interested in teaching heritage languages can attend a 36-hour workshop which is focused on gaining teaching credentials in heritage languages. The workshop is held either by the Ministry of Education or the local city government. After attending the workshop, teachers can gain teacher certification in heritage languages. Thus, they can teach heritage languages in their schools. The other source is from the general public. Anyone who is interested in teaching heritage languages in elementary schools can take an examination to determine their qualifications to teach heritage language. Either the Ministry of Education or the local government holds the examination. After passing the national exam and getting heritage language teacher certification, individuals can take the local heritage language teacher exams required by the elementary school, which needs heritage language teachers. After passing the exam, they can become involved in heritage language instruction in that school. This kind of teacher is called a "heritage language support teacher."

Of the ten participants, three were male and seven were female. The participants ranged in age from their 40s to their 60s, and they had from 1 to 4 years of experience in teaching heritage language. Eight of the teachers were heritage language support teachers, and two were elementary school teachers who also taught Hakka in their schools. Each of the ten participants had a certification to

teach Hakka. The elementary schools where the participants taught were located in three different cities in northern Taiwan. Table 1 is a summary of the ten teachers' profiles including gender, age, years of teaching Hakka, schools' location, numbers of schools involved in Hakka instruction, number of Hakka classes, class size in each class, previous major and degree.

Table 1: *Participants' profiles*

Teacher	Gender	Age	Years of teaching Hakka	Number of schools involved in Hakka instruction	Number of Hakka classes	Class size in each class	School locations	Previous major	Previous degree
Alan	Male	60s	3	3	9	28~35 students	Y		Senior high school
Betty	Female	40s	3.5	5	31	10~35 students	Y	Japanese	Vocation high school
Charles	Male	60s	3	1	5	20~30 students	Y	Business	Bachelor
Doris	Female	50s	2	2	10	12~25 students	X	Chinese	Bachelor
Elizabeth	Female	40s	3	3	16	8~31 students	X	Chinese	Master
Flora	Female	40s	4	2	16	15~20 students	X	Japanese	Bachelor
Greg	Male	50s	4	1	3	3~5 students	X	Engineering	Master
Helen	Female	40s	1	1	4	20 students	Z	Business	Vocation high school
Ivy	Female	50s	4	1	1	30 students	X	Math	Bachelor
Joan	Female	50s	3	1	3	27~35 students	X	Art Education	Bachelor

Each participant was interviewed at least 3 times, with each interview lasting about 90 minutes. The field notes and verbatim transcripts from the interviews provided primary data for the study. The data analysis was done by means of the constant comparative method, in which the researcher continually and recursively reviews and check the data, allowing themes and a core phenomenon to emerge naturally from the categories.

Results and Discussion

Encouraging Factors in Teaching and Students' Learning

Themes that emerged as factors encouraging these Hakka teachers' heritage language teaching and views included affirming the status of the Hakka language, bringing the heritage language to new learners, and enhancing Hakka identity and preserving culture.

Affirming the status of the Hakka language

The implementation of the heritage language program has contributed to promoting the status of the heritage language. These teacher-participants were encouraged to hear Hakka spoken in elementary school. Even though the students spoke just a few words, the status of this heritage language appeared to be growing. The affirmation of students' linguistic rights to the heritage language was being put into practice in elementary schools. For example, Joan expressed that sometimes while walking on the school grounds; some children would greet her in Hakka, such as "sien sang ho" (Good day, Teacher!). Joan was pleased, even though it was just a very simple greeting in Hakka.

After so many years of teaching, finally I heard children say 'sien sang ho' (Good day, Teacher!) on the school grounds. Just this very simple sentence made me feel so excited! (She smiles) It shows that children affirm the status of the Hakka language. The seeds that we plant are gradually growing up! (Joan, personal interview, June 10, 2006).

The additional activities that some schools held for the heritage language also contributed to awakening people's consciousness about the importance of learning their own mother tongues. This corresponds to Fishman's (1990, p. 17) concept of "ideological clarification," which is an essential precursor to RLS. Fishman conceives of this stage as consisting of "consciousness heightening and reformation".

Some school's additional implementing activities were also helpful in attracting students of different ethnic groups to learn and understand the heritage languages on this island. Students had opportunities for contact and exposure to each ethnic group's languages, which could contribute to enhancing the positive identity of languages spoken by the minority. This consequence supports Dorian (1987), who argued that community and school support of a threatened language can mitigate the negative attitudes towards the language and its speakers. These attitudes typically accompany language decline, and have been internalized by speakers and potential speakers of the language. These participants felt encouraged that the heritage language was no longer regarded as a low-class language. The heritage language was seen to exist naturally and normally in the elementary school. Hence, the linguistic right of each ethnic group's language was being affirmed in elementary school.

Bringing the heritage language to new learners

The composition of the Hakka class included Hakka children and non-Hakka children. Most participants in this study expressed pleasure that children of other ethnic groups also came to Hakka class to learn. For instance, Doris recounted another encouraging experience. She remembered instructing a Southern Min boy to participate in a Hakka speech contest, in which he won a good prize. The judges of the contest were very impressed that a Southern Min child could perform so well in a Hakka speech contest. Doris felt very proud of him (Doris, personal interview field notes, June 16, 2006).

This variety of learners contributes to a broader use of the Hakka language, introducing it to new users. This concurs with King's (2001) view that introducing the language to new speakers is also an important aspect of language revitalization efforts. Further, the variety contributes to the knowledge and understanding of different ethnic groups in Taiwan.

Enhancing Hakka identity and preserving culture

Enhancing Hakka children's identification with their language and group was another encouraging influence of the native language program in elementary schools. The participants in this study were pleased that some Hakka students in their classes were showing some degree of identification with the Hakka language and group. These participants were encouraged by feeling that Hakka children's identity was strengthened after they learned their own native language. For example, Betty's students went to observe weather phenomena that Betty had told them about the year before. This showed that the students had positive feelings toward the Hakka proverbs, which are an important part of Hakka culture. Doris valued her interaction with one little boy who showed his passion for Hakka and talked with Doris in Hakka after class. The boy could positively express that he was a Hakka. Some children were proud of being Hakka people, and did not feel ashamed about speaking their language. Experiences like these led some participants in this study to feel very much encouraged. This phenomenon is as Jacobs (1998, p. 122) indicated: "When children are allowed to learn their native languages, they gain pride and confidence in cultural identity, have an increased sense of self-esteem, and gain security in knowing their heritage and culture". Also, learning one's ancestral language is essential to positive cultural identity development (Fishman, 1991; Stiles, 1997; Wong-Fillmore, 1986).

Frustrating Factors in Teaching and Students' Learning

With regard to the factors that frustrated these Hakka teachers, themes that emerged included low student motivation to learn, minimal family cooperation, and limited school cooperation.

Students' motivation to learn was not high

Most of the participants found that their students' low motivation to learn was the major frustration they encountered in their Hakka instruction. The students often found it difficult to focus while in the Hakka class. They usually came from different classes and even different grades. Classroom management was a challenge for most participants in this study, including both classroom teachers and Hakka language support teachers.

In these participants' experience, some students took a perfunctory attitude toward the Hakka class. Several factors caused this phenomenon. First, the heritage language was not a main subject for tests, and so students did not pay as close attention to learning. Second, as this Hakka class was an elective, some students regarded it as a time for relaxing. These students came to the class to pass the time or to socialize with other children. Some students were consistently late for their Hakka class, and some had poor attendance. As Flora explained,

They (students) usually are late for class by 20 or 30 minutes on purpose! But there are just 40 minutes in a class. They told me that they needed to do the cleaning work, or because it is raining outside; something like that (Flora, personal interview, June 15, 2006).

Some of the study participants reported that occasionally there were poorly behaved students who were dismissed from their original homeroom teachers and sent to the Hakka class. Although the Hakka teachers expressed that they tried hard to improve their classroom management skills, they complained that the challenge of classroom management was a frustration. Most students had more respect for their own homeroom teachers. The participants thought students did not care about what the Hakka language teachers said in class. As a result, there were often discipline problems in the Hakka classes. Although these teachers greatly valued the 40 minutes per week available for students' to learn Hakka, they usually needed to take about 10 minutes per class to deal with students' discipline problems. Most participants in this study voiced that these discipline issues contributed to students' limited learning outcomes. Joan voiced her frustration:

My frustration mostly comes from students' discipline problems. Some are just like gang members. They damaged the desks and chairs! Children do not care about this class. Most of them usually select Southern Min; but very often, students who have bad behavior come to Hakka class. Maybe they think Hakka classes will be the most relaxing! (Joan, personal interview, June 10, 2006).

The participants were also frustrated about some students' low motivation to learn. The students' attitudes came from their surroundings and the greater environment, which included the school, current homeroom teachers, and students' parents' attitudes toward learning Hakka. It was generally believed, in this larger community, that the Hakka class was not an important subject like Mandarin, English, Science, Math, and other academic subjects. The homeroom teachers and parents of upper-grade-level students, especially, might affect their learning willingness in the heritage language. In order for the school to truly play a significant role in this language maintenance and revitalization process, it is necessary for the whole school to emphasize the importance and value of learning native languages. Classroom teachers also need to have supportive attitudes toward their students' learning heritage languages, no matter which heritage language their students select.

Family cooperation was minimal

Families' unsupportive attitudes toward their children's learning the heritage language were another frustration for these Hakka teachers. Some students did not continue learning Hakka, because of their parents' influence. These students' parents wanted them to learn the majority-group language Southern Min, considering Hakka not a useful language in society. The parents in general did not have great willingness to practice speaking the heritage language with their children at home, through lack of time or interest. Most parents paid more attention to their children's other subjects more directly related to preparing for their children's future high school entrance examinations. As Flora expressed,

Very often, students shared that their mothers said, 'this (Hakka) is not important!' Some students also told me, 'My mother said, no need to bring the Hakka textbook home! Just leave it in the school! Tell your Hakka teacher not to give you any homework!' This is what my students told me (bitter laughter). (Flora, personal interview, June 15, 2006).

The Hakka teachers found that their students often forgot what they had learned in the class a week earlier. Most of the participants expressed that they usually needed to spend a lot of time reviewing what students had learned in the previous class. Also, they perceived that their students lacked the ability to conduct daily conversation in Hakka. These teachers thought that the main problem was the families' failure to actively practice speaking Hakka with their children at home. Most participants thought that the families' unsupportive attitudes and perceptions toward native language education was the weakest aspect in the implementation of the heritage language program.

Fishman's (1991) Reversing Language Shift (RLS) theory held that revitalizing the language needs to return to the home and the community. Family plays an important role in the process of revitalizing and maintaining the language by fostering a supportive attitude. In his comparison of four successful indigenous programs (Cree Way in Quebec, Hualapai in Arizona, Te Kohanga Reo in New Zealand, and Punana Leo in Hawaii), Stiles (1997) also concluded that successful programs need community support and parental involvement. The most important element for these programs is the support of the parents in the home. Reyhner (1988) emphasized how crucial it is that environments both inside and outside of school be provided where a student can use the newly acquired language skills. Students must also have environments where they can use the language they are learning in conversation.

The participants in this study found that the learning effect was limited. The families' unsupportive attitudes toward their children's learning Hakka (not helping children practice the language they learn at school, being derisive of their children's attempts) was frustrating for these teachers. In some cases, teachers did not even dare give any homework to their students. The students lacked an environment to practice what they learned in the Hakka class, and they had no exposure to hearing the language spoken. In general, most parents thought that Hakka was not as important or useful in society as the other languages their children studied, Mandarin and English. Mandarin was for examinations and communicating with other people; English was an international language. As for the heritage language, it did not seem relevant for their children's education and future. Among the heritage languages offered, Southern Min was perceived to be more important than Hakka, because Southern Min was the dominant language group in Taiwan. The participants considered awakening parents' awareness of their own ethnic group's language as the most challenging issue in revitalizing and maintaining Hakka.

Some schools' cooperation was limited

The participants in this study expressed that some schools' attention to practical detail in implementing the native language program was not sufficient. These details included the scheduling time and classroom availability for the native language classes, and classroom teachers' attitudes toward students' learning Hakka. Some schools scheduled Hakka classes during morning study time or naptime, and some schools did not have classrooms for the Hakka classes. These factors affected the Hakka teachers' instruction and the students' learning mood, as well as contributing to poor student attendance.

Classroom teachers' attitude toward students' learning Hakka was a frustrating factor for most participants in this study. For instance, some classroom teachers forced students who behaved disruptively out of their classrooms and sent them to Hakka classes instead. These students usually then caused discipline problems in Hakka class. For example, Flora noted that some classroom teachers dismissed students who behaved disruptively and sent them to Hakka classes. Spending time dealing with the discipline problems caused Flora great difficulties. Those students usually had a particular attitude: "I came to this Hakka class because my teacher didn't like me. He/she didn't want me to stay in the original classroom" (Flora, personal interview, June 15, 2006). Flora was extremely frustrated.

The various frustrations experienced by these participants while working in their schools suggest that low-level decisions to support higher-level ones are also crucial in successful implementation of maintaining/revitalizing the native languages. The decisions and attitudes of school personnel, including the principal, teachers, and administrators, play a bridging role which connects the government policy concerning implementation of the heritage language to the real front line of students learning the language. As Cooper (1989, p. 160) stated, "The entire process of formulating and implementing is best regarded as a spiral process, beginning at the highest level of authority and, ideally, descending in widening circles through the ranks of practitioners who can support or resist putting the policy into effect". Other studies assert that any school innovation, in order to be successful, must include a wide range of school staff, and must permeate and be supported by the school culture (Perez, 2004).

Since the implementation of the heritage language program in Taiwanese elementary schools is a top-down language planning activity, the schools' cooperation, involving practical details related to implementation of the heritage language program, has a critical influence on the success of the whole language planning process. In this study, the findings suggest that each school had a different policy and attitude regarding the implementation of the heritage language program. Although the government has a policy to implement the heritage language program in elementary schools, the real implementing situation in each school varies drastically. Therefore, how to implement heritage language instruction well, and how to work together among these stake holders (school administrators, classroom teachers, and language support teachers) remains a serious issue.

Conclusion

This study was focused on exploring the views of a group of ten Hakka language teachers who worked in the north of Taiwan, not including teachers who teach Southern Min and aboriginal languages. Therefore, the findings are not expected to be applicable to or representative of all heritage language teachers on this island. However, the researcher provided the detailed descriptions of data in context in order to aid readers who would like to transfer the findings to similar contexts.

From this study it is clear that the implementation of the heritage language program has created both positive effects for the Hakka language in Taiwan and some challenges in its implementation. The great dedication and devotion to Hakka teaching by the teachers in this study is most admirable. It is also meaningful to know that the heritage language program provides a chance to transmit the cultural heritage and language to the next generation. Meanwhile, the implementation of the heritage language program also provides opportunities to engender in the young generation a tolerant attitude toward different ethnic groups' language and culture.

The findings have also helped in formulating suggestions to heritage language educators and researchers to encourage successful heritage language learning for elementary school students in Taiwan. First, attention should be paid to improving the attitudes of school administrators and classroom teachers toward implementing a heritage language program. As can be seen from the research findings, the elementary school has influential power in developing students' attitudes toward different languages and ethnic groups' people. Meanwhile, the research findings also show that the classroom teachers' attitudes frustrated the participants in their teaching. Although the Ministry of Education announced that each public elementary school must open heritage languages classes for students, the research findings show that the real situation of each school was one of less than full cooperation in terms of putting the program into practice. It seems that, in reality, some schools may not have a supportive attitude toward the implementation of the heritage language program. Although reducing the gap between the intention of the governmental policy and its practice in the schools is a huge project that requires constant vigilance, each elementary school needs to work hard to help cultivate an environment that facilitates students' learning the heritage languages. For instance, the educational authorities could organize regular workshops or seminars to give classroom teachers a better understanding and awareness of the heritage languages in Taiwan, and to cultivate appropriate attitudes toward students' learning the heritage languages.

Second, the family's cooperation and parents' attitudes toward their children's learning the heritage language need to be improved. In Fishman's (1991) RLS theory, the most critical domain where efforts to stabilize or restore language should be concentrated is the home, neighborhood, and community. Fishman stresses that the vitality of a language lies in informal interactions in the home and community. Based on the research findings of this study, the family's cooperation was still weak. Overall, parents did not have a very supportive attitude toward their children's learning the Hakka language. Hornberger and King (1997) pointed out that the contribution of any school-based initiative to the long-term vitality of a language must be evaluated in the light of the criterion of intergenerational transmission. They argue that the duty and responsibility of revitalizing a language must not be left solely upon the shoulders of the school, and they further suggest the necessity of educating parents' awareness of speaking their mother tongues with their children at home.

Third, attention should be paid to increasing the public's awareness of the importance of having the young generation learn heritage languages. The findings indicate that unsupportive attitudes, whether of parents or classroom teachers or school administrators, result from the focus the society in general places on testing and on pragmatic thinking. That is, the heritage languages, especially the minority

languages (Hakka and aboriginal languages), are generally deemed not useful for preparing for the children's future. The government could help by educating the public about the importance of the heritage languages, perhaps by employing the power of the mass media to advocate the importance of maintaining and revitalizing the heritage languages on this island. In addition, governments can also require competence in a selected language as a prerequisite for civil service employment. In countries where the civil service is one of the few ways to advance economically and socially, this can be a significant motivating factor. Stipulating the language that governments use for legislative debate and the language in which laws are written and government documents are issued is another means that can be used to promote a selected language or language variety (Fasold, 1984).

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