

Understanding Heritage Language Teachers' Beliefs A Case Study from Taiwan

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Abstract

Despite the increasing number of heritage language learners grows worldwide, little attention has been given to teachers and their beliefs. This qualitative case study investigated two elementary school heritage language teachers' beliefs about heritage language education and their ways to implement instructions in Taiwan. Cross-case analysis indicated that the teachers demonstrated strong motivation and dedication to heritage language and culture preservation. Teaching heritage language also fostered them to reconnect heritages and construct a caring relationship with students. Compared to core courses such as Mandarin and math, heritage language class involved more dynamic knowledge construction and teacher-student interaction. Besides standardized tests, the teachers utilized multiple methods to evaluate students' learning achievement. Despite textbooks were provided for the teachers recent years, quality heritage education was still hard to construct due to limited time and insufficient resources. The teachers further articulated their lack of accountability in determining the existence of class when situating powerless positions in schools. The teachers expected mainstream teachers, parents, and the society as a whole to rethink the value of culture and language varieties to enhance students' academic, social, and emotional development. Several implications were provided to facilitate heritage language teachers to create a better learning environment for students from diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: *Heritage language teachers, Teachers' beliefs, Taiwan*

Introduction

The term heritage language has come to prominence worldwide. This term first emerged in Canada in 1977 with the inception of Ontario Heritage Language Programs. In the United States, the First Heritage Language in America conference was held in California in 1999 to address the vital role of language maintenance. In Taiwan, the Ministry of Education announced the implementation of heritage language education from the 2001 academic year.

In heritage language class, students learn not only through textbooks but also through literacy activities created by teachers. Heritage language teachers' perspectives toward teaching are important since what teachers think and say can empower or disempower heritage language students (Nel, 1992). Numerous of researchers have advocated that, to empower minority cultures, one must employ appropriate instructional practices to ensure that students receive high quality education. That is, teachers view students' languages and cultures as resources to reinforce the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Recent research emphasizes that teaching is a thinking activity and teachers are people who construct their personal ways of teaching (Borg, 2003). As Bartolomé (1994) pointed out, "Teaching strategies are neither designed nor implemented in a vacuum. Design, selection, and use of particular teaching approaches and strategies arise from perceptions about learning and learners" (p. 180). Thus, teachers' beliefs are an essential factor to influence their practices.

Language Movement in Taiwan

There are four main languages spoken by residences in Taiwan, including Mandarin, Southern Min, Hakka, and Aboriginal languages. Mandarin has been the official language since 1940s. Because “Mandarin Movement” has been promoted for over fifty years, students have been prohibited to speak their mother languages. With the change of political policy and the importance of language maintenance, more people in Taiwan start to emphasize heritage language revitalization. Kramsch (1993) stated that language is a central vehicle for transmitting and creating culture, and is a significant feature of cultural identity in its own right.

To better connect language and culture, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan decided to integrate heritage language class into the curriculum from 2001. Elementary school students are required to take one heritage language class per week, including Southern Min, Hakka, or Aboriginal languages. According to the Elementary School and Competency Indicators of Grade 1-9 Curriculum Standard, the goal of heritage language education is to develop cultural understanding and language maintenance. Further, it expects students to construct cultural identity and enhance multicultural awareness through language learning.

Of the three heritage languages, Southern Min and Hakka are languages which originally come from Mainland China. Most students take Southern Min class since a large number of people still use it to communicate with each other, especially in southern Taiwan. Compared to Southern Min, Hakka language speakers gradually decrease since it is not widely used in the larger society. As for Aboriginal language, it consists of languages from 14 different native Taiwanese tribes. These languages also rapidly diminish because most native Taiwanese move to cities and lose opportunities to speak their heritage languages.

Heritage Language Teachers’ Beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs are implicit assumptions about student learning, teachers’ roles, subject-matter knowledge, and curriculum (Thompson, 1992). Examining these beliefs is important since teachers’ beliefs guide classroom practices and influence students’ perceptions of themselves (Decuir-Gunby, Taliaferro, & Greenfield, 2010). Although teachers attempt to implement beliefs in class, the complexity of sociocultural and institutional factors such as school contexts and economic and political policies constrain their practices.

Numerous researchers (Feuerverger, 1997; Liu, 2006; Yamauchi, Ceppi, & Lau-Smith, 2000) have investigated heritage language teachers’ beliefs. Liu (2006) found that heritage language teachers believed bilingual teaching credential facilitated their instruction. Other studies (Feuerverger, 1997; Yamauchi, et al., 2000) suggested that heritage language teachers demonstrated more cultural awareness in teaching heritage languages than other subject matter. The teachers also expanded their teaching strategies to be more substantively inclusive of student cultures. However, teachers in Feuerverger’s (1997) study did not view themselves as “legitimate” teachers because they had limited communication with mainstream teachers.

Although the awareness of language enhances, relatively few studies have investigated heritage language teachers in Asian countries. Taking Taiwan as an example, the existing research focused on heritage language teachers was conducted as quantitative methods (Lin, 2008) or examined only Southern Min language (Wu, 2005). Thus, this study employed qualitative research and chose Hakka and Aboriginal languages as the focus to deeply explore heritage language teachers’ beliefs. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What do the teachers believe about heritage language education?
2. How do the teachers describe their instructional practices?

Method

This study was conducted as a qualitative case study. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative inquiry seeks to reflect a phenomenological perspective that people construct in a particular situ-

ation. Thus, it helps to examine heritage language teachers' beliefs about their instruction and heritage language education. Rather than focusing on a universal truth, case study researchers are interested in understanding the uniqueness of specific participants (Stake, 1995). Therefore, the case study provides an in-depth exploration of heritage language teachers' beliefs and an opportunity to investigate their real-lived experiences. Compared to a single-case study, the multiple-case approach employed in this study is considered more compelling and robust (Stake, 1995). The interview method was utilized as the primary source to investigate participants' behaviors, feelings, and interpretations of the world (Merriam, 1998).

Participants

To construct purposeful sampling, I selected "information-rich" cases and took teachers' backgrounds into consideration: their teaching experience, professional commitment to the heritage language education, and teaching efficacy. The teachers chosen have taught heritage languages for at least five years, have participated in professional training, and have earned "excellent teacher" award before. Two heritage language teachers, Mrs. C and Mrs. L (pseudonyms) participated in this study. Mrs. C was raised in a Hakka family and had taught Hakka language for seven years. Among 14 Aboriginal languages, Mrs. L has taught Amis for ten years. Mrs. C and Mrs. L served as heritage language teachers in four elementary schools and were hired as a part-time teacher.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted in one semester in 2009. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, researcher journals, and teachers' artifacts. First, I conducted semi-structured interviews individually with each participant approximately 60-90 minutes. Questions related to the research questions were prompted to investigate teachers' beliefs, for example, how do you perceive your instruction? and what difficulty do you encounter? All interviews were undertaken in Mandarin as a convenience to the teachers. Second, I recorded my reflections in a researcher journal after finishing each interview. Teachers' artifacts such as lesson plans and literacy materials were included to build the trustworthiness of this study. Data analysis was an ongoing process using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After collecting all the data, I transcribed and manually coded the interviews. According to Miles and Huberman (1984), by comparing cases, the researcher can establish the generality of a finding. Thus, I used a cross-case analysis to identify similarities among the teachers. Finally, the patterns, themes, and comparisons across the interviews, researcher's journals, and teachers' artifacts led me to the findings in this paper.

Results

Four themes emerged through data analysis: (1) heritage language teaching is not only a job but also a mission and caring; (2) heritage language curriculum should be rich and relevant to students; (3) heritage language learning is fun, interactive, and culturally relevant; and (4) support and struggle.

Theme One: Heritage language teaching is not only a job but also a mission and caring

Becoming heritage language teachers helped Mrs. C and Mrs. L recognized the importance of preserving heritage languages and cultures. Despite a variety of difficulties, the teachers dedicated to heritage language education and sought to pass heritage languages and cultures on to next generations.

Tough Beginning

Mrs. C and Mrs. L were the first group of teachers receiving the heritage language teacher certification. Various difficulties emerged. Mrs. L stated: "At the beginning, there is no curriculum designed for Aboriginal language class. So I borrow lesson plans that I designed previously" (Interview, Mrs. L, 10-14). According to Mrs. L, although the Ministry of Education provided heritage language class for students, no standard curriculum was prepared for teachers. Mrs. C indicated that teaching only one class in different schools took her a lot of effort. She expressed: "It is really hard at the beginning. Sometimes I have to spend one and half hours to arrive at a school only for an hour class. Obviously, the salary cannot balance traffic fee. However, I have never wanted to give up" (Interview, Mrs. C, 5-7). Although Mrs. C perceived that the part-time position and low payment could not sustain her living, a strong sense of mission motivated her to keep teaching Hakka language.

At the initial stage of heritage language education, the teachers took the most responsibility for the curriculum design. Despite the difficulty, they still demonstrated strong commitment to serve as heritage language teachers. Their dedication showed that heritage language education not only opened a space for students to learn languages but also enhanced teachers' cultural awareness.

Personal Reason and Mission

The teachers had different reasons to become heritage language teachers. Mrs. C expressed: "The heritage language conference that I attended initiated my memory. I start to retrospect what I did when I was young" (Interview, Mrs. C, 6-10). Reconnecting childhood memory was the major reason for Mrs. C to be a heritage language teacher. She further stated her teaching goal:

Transmit culture. To tell students about history and slams that previous generations transmit to us. The goal is to encourage students to know that there is still a course called "Hakka" besides math or Mandarin.

Mrs. C further concerned about "Standard Mandarin" awareness operated in most public schools. Thus, her mission involved not only maintaining Hakka heritages for Hakka students but also introducing these values to the larger groups of students. She said: "I want more people to understand and value Hakka language and culture" (Interview, Mrs. C, 20).

Mrs. L became as a heritage language teacher because of family members' encouragement. She stated: "I am not good at speaking my heritage language at the beginning, but my family members encourage me to get this job. They teach me how to say the words and sentences. So I also learn when I teach" (Interview, Mrs. L, 25-30). Family support was the primary reason to motivate Mrs. L being as a heritage language teacher. As for the goal of heritage language teaching, she stated, "To provide more opportunity for students to speak Aboriginal language is my goal. Although speaking heritage languages is allowed, students do not have chance to speak" (Interview, Mrs. L, 41-42). Mrs. L perceived that opportunity to speak Aboriginal languages still lacks in the larger society. She believed that it was critical to strengthen school function and construct learning environment for students.

These two teachers possessed different purposes to serve as heritage language teachers. Their strong missions to preserve, transmit, and revitalize heritage languages and cultures demonstrated that schools are not only the contexts for student learning but also the terrains for student empowerment.

Teacher-Student Relationship

The teachers viewed students as their extended family members or friends. Mrs. C indicated: "We have good relationship with each other. Even though I only have one class with them, students are always excited to see me. I view all my students as my kids" (Interview, Mrs. C, 33-35). Although Mrs. C did not spend much time with her students, she still emphasized building harmonious relationship. Mrs. L not only viewed herself as a teacher but also a mom and a friend. She noted:

Some of my students' families do not have sufficient economic income, so I have to play the role as a mom. When they have some emotional feelings regarding familial issues, they come to chat with me. We are like friends as well because we sometimes meet with each other during weekends (Interview, Mrs. L, 50-57).

Mrs. L recognized the influence of family environment on students' learning achievement. She believed that her responsibility included facilitating students' academic and emotional development. The analysis showed the teachers constructed closed and caring relationship with students. They not only emphasized students' language competence but also took students' personal and familial backgrounds into consideration.

Theme Two: Heritage language curriculum should be rich and relevant to students

Mrs. C and Mrs. L indicated that the curriculum became more organized in recent years since the Ministry of Education published textbooks for teachers to follow. The teachers also integrated multiple resources to enrich the curriculum. However, they suggested the need of improving textbooks to meet students' language use.

Textbooks and Supplementary Literacy Materials

The teachers primarily followed textbooks. Mrs. C stated: "The textbook is still the major source. Compared to the first few years, the design of the textbooks becomes better now" (Interview, Mrs. C, 70-72). Mrs. L also relied on textbooks, noting: "I follow the textbook designed by National Chengchi Uni-

versity, which contained 12 levels of Aboriginal language learning” (Interview, Mrs. L, 60-64). Clearly, the teachers saw textbooks as the core in designing the curriculum.

The teachers also included supplementary materials in the curriculum. Mrs. L noted: “I usually involve a lot of pictures and on-line resources to help students understand better. I also learn how to make Aboriginal songs myself” (Interview, Mrs. L, 97-100). Mrs. C expressed, “Like this year, I introduce Hakka food through a song. Students learn how to say the words and understand Hakka culture by singing it. Hakka language cartoons also engage students” (Interview, Mrs. C, 80-82). The teachers incorporated multimodal literacies to broaden the ways of learning heritage languages. They also made supplementary materials themselves to introduce cultural knowledge.

As the quality of textbooks improved, these teachers began to rely on textbooks to implement their instruction. The incorporation of various teaching resources and literacy materials created multiple ways of learning experiences for students.

Textbook Improvement

Although the teachers relied on textbooks to prepare the curriculum, they expressed the need of revising textbooks. “I think every textbook has its own pros and cons,” Mrs. C stated, “but I think the current textbooks should integrate more cultural literature such as slams and songs” (Interview, Mrs. C, 112-114). For Mrs. C, the content of textbooks lacked the involvement of cultural literature. Mrs. L focused on the connection of students’ lived experiences:

I think the textbook should connect students’ lived experiences rather than introduce past life. For example, teaching students how to say “I want to eat hamburger or fried rice” in Aboriginal language. I think this learning is more meaningful. In fact, I want to make the textbook by myself, but I do not have time. I hope that Aboriginal teachers can make the textbooks together in the future.

From Mrs. L’s perspective, the textbooks should be more relevant to students. She further suggested that self-designed textbooks would be the best curriculum; however, limited time and resources constrained the possibility of implementing her idea. The teachers provided multiple literacy materials and supporting resources to enrich the curriculum. They further suggested that textbooks should be improved to help students apply their learning in daily lives.

Theme Three: Heritage language learning is joyful and culturally relevant

Mrs. C and Mrs. L emphasized joyful learning atmosphere in class. Compared to other subject matter such as math and Mandarin, heritage language classes involved more review and mutual communication. The teachers also integrated funds of knowledge and cultural resources to enrich learning.

Learning Process: Review and Fun

Since each class only took 40 minutes a week, the teachers stressed “repetition” in their instructions. Mrs. C explained: “It is easy for students to forget what they have learned. I usually first help students review what we learned. If students show their understanding, I will teach a new lesson” (Interview, Mrs. C, 130-133). Mrs. C saw review as the primary way to maintain students’ language proficiency. Mrs. L noted: “In class, half of time is spent on reviewing or repeating previous learning. Because few hours are provided in every class, it took a long time to finish a lesson” (Interview, 06/16/09, 90-92). Mrs. L focused on the connection between students’ prior learning and new knowledge. She also indicated that limited time constrained the effectiveness of completing a lesson. Despite insufficient time, the teachers used various strategies to motivate students. Mrs. C stated:

We basically play, share, and interact with each other. Students view Hakka language as an interesting course because we have a lot of hands-on activities. Assessment is more like asking them to do some performance rather than focusing on standardized tests. The most important thing is to let kids have fun (Interview, Mrs. C, 130-134).

Mrs. C saw joyful learning environment as the top priority in language learning. Rather than setting rigorous criteria, Mrs. C encouraged students to demonstrate their understanding through performance. Mrs. L also stressed the enjoyable experience to increase students’ engagement:

I use dolls to play different roles to initiate their motivation. I encourage students to interact with me either in Mandarin or Aboriginal language. This interaction fostered them to engage in learning and classroom discussion (Interview, Mrs. L, 140-143).

Mrs. L enhanced students’ interest in using Aboriginal language by inviting students to talk. Such strategy enabled students to demonstrate more willingness to express perspectives.

As for the way of assessing students' language abilities, Mrs. L emphasized students' communication competence in real-lived context, indicating: "I usually ask students to choose a partner to practice conversations. I evaluate individual's progress based on their communication competence" (Interview, Mrs. L, 151-153). The teachers mainly helped students reinforce their language abilities through continuous practice. The joyful learning environment fostered students to use heritage languages to interact with others. Unlike mainstream teachers, the teachers utilized multiple methods to evaluate students' learning achievement.

Heritage Culture Connection

The integration of culture was essential in language learning. To create culturally relevant learning experiences, Mrs. C focused on the connection of community resources. She believed that immersing in community activities fostered students to gain more experiences about cultural knowledge that was hard to access from textbooks:

For example, we have a cultural celebration called "Hakka Tung Blossom Festival." I encourage students to join this event outside of schools. Students experience Hakka culture by eating the food and interacting with community members. This festival represents the characteristics of Hakka culture (Interview, Mrs. C, 133-135).

Mrs. L stressed the involvement of multimodal literacies, indicating:

I usually introduce Aboriginal culture through a theater action. Students have to decide their characters and what they are going to say and present. By acting out the play, students experience Aboriginal culture and demonstrate their understanding in a lively way (Interview, Mrs. L, 150-156).

Mrs. L viewed students as active agents to construct their learning. She involved visual and motional experiences through the theater project. Such instruction helped students "feel" Aboriginal culture through multimodal literacies. Although heritage language class was not a core course, the teachers took much effort to establish lively, fun, and culturally relevant learning contexts. The interaction between the teachers and students is dynamic, which encouraged students to construct knowledge themselves.

Theme Four: Support and struggle

The teachers acknowledged support from schools and the Councils for Hakka and Aboriginal people. However, they indicated most people still lack a sense of maintaining heritage language in Taiwan.

School and Heritage Council

The teachers appreciated the support from the schools they teach. Mrs. C expressed:

When I need supplementary materials, schools are really helpful. Like this semester, I need a tool to make Hakka tea. Although it costs a lot of money, the school decides to buy it for my class. It truly facilitates my teaching (Interview, Mrs. C, 162-164).

Mrs. L also showed her acknowledgement to schools, stating:

I really appreciate the schools that I teach. When I express my needs to them, the schools try their best to help me. For example, the schools assign a classroom for me. Thus, I can decorate my own classroom and use Internet or PowerPoint (Interview, Mrs. L, 180-183).

From their perspectives, there was a close connection between school support and heritage language education. The teachers expressed appreciation of receiving assistance from schools.

Mrs. C mentioned the critical role of the Council for Hakka Affairs. She noted: "To create an authentic Hakka environment in class, using cartoon or children's literature published by the Council for Hakka Affairs is an effective way" (Interview, Mrs. C, 150-153). She further indicated that the certification promoted by Council for Hakka Affairs promoted student learning:

It is good news that the Council for Hakka Affairs starts to advocate for Hakka language certification. When students pass the test, they gain more confidence and demonstrate more interest in learning Hakka language.

Mrs. C valued the promotion of language certification, which implicitly encouraged students to continue their learning and construct self-worth in heritage language ability. According to the teachers, the collaboration among schools, teachers, and heritage councils interactively led to the development of quality heritage language education. The teachers acknowledged this assistance to facilitate their instruction and enhance students' involvement.

Language Loss

Although heritage language education was cultivated in recent years, the teachers were still aware of the heritage language loss. Mrs. C explained: "I am worried about that heritage language class will be the first one to be cancelled if schools don't have funding" (Interview, Mrs. C, 210-213). She further stated how the larger society viewed heritage language education:

Most students still choose Southern Min. Even homeroom teachers encourage students to choose Southern Min. I sometimes suggest schools to play Hakka language songs in the morning. However, the schools play English or Southern Min songs but not Hakka ones. I had an experience that when I held a Hakka language and culture activity in schools, some parents did not allow their kids to join it.

Her statement showed that the majority of mainstream teachers had not noticed the importance of heritage language maintenance. Parents' negative attitudes also influenced schools' decision. Schools primarily followed parents' opinions to determine the implementation of heritage language education.

Mrs. L showed her concern about life-long learning opportunity:

I am worried about if students would like to continue learning heritage language since class is provided only until middle schools. Some of my students have already become high school students and state that there is no Aboriginal class opened in high schools (Interview, Mrs. L, 210-217).

Here, Mrs. L advocated for the establishment of continuous learning contexts. She noted that the Ministry of Education should provide heritage language classes in high schools to maintain students' language abilities. While parents, mainstream teachers, and schools encourage students to learn more powerful language, the ability of "subculture" languages is not highly valued. The teachers expected to have improvement in future heritage language education to prevent language loss.

Discussion

Mrs. L's and Mrs. C's experiences as heritage languages teachers provide insights into the limitations that are governed by the dominant culture. Overall, the teachers demonstrated high motivation in teaching heritage languages. The involvement of lived experiences in class also suggests that the teachers not only focus on language teaching but also elicit "hidden curriculum" to construct cultural knowledge. Compared to mainstream teachers, the teachers appeared to demonstrate more cultural identity and missions in serving as heritage language teachers.

This study illustrated how the teachers provided created joyful learning environment with the involvement of mutual communication and interaction. Cultural values, which are emphasized in heritage language classes, foster students to enhance their cultural identity and multicultural awareness. The "caring" relationship and "safe" environment developed by the teachers also facilitates students to feel comfortable to share emotional and psychological feelings. Thus, heritage language classes become a space involving cognitive, social, and cultural development.

The analysis also showed that schools decisions are consistent with heritage language development. Although the schools provided instructional support, they were more likely to bring heritage language classes to an end when parents expressed disagreement in learning heritage languages. The imbalance power relationship among schools, parents, and teachers decreases the teachers' leadership positions. To deconstruct deficient thinking toward heritage language learning, the teachers hoped not only the schools but the society as a whole need to reexamine the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity involved in schools, homes, and communities.

The teachers expected that more heritage language teachers and heritage councils could cooperate to design the quality curriculum to meet students' daily use. Furthermore, the teachers proposed the idea of prolonged learning in high schools to maintain students' language proficiency. With close connection among educational policy, schools, and teachers, the teachers hoped to eliminate the phenomenon of language loss.

Implications and conclusions

This study suggests three implications for practices. First, as limited time and teaching resources provided in heritage language classes, educational policy makers need to distribute ample funding for heritage language education. The policy makers should understand what teachers really need and work with teachers to construct quality heritage language education. The appropriate curriculum and continuous learning opportunity are also the foci to be provided. Second, heritage language teachers and their accountability need to be empowered in schools. Although the teachers expressed a strong motivation to maintain heritage languages and culture, their accountability for students' opportunities to learn obviously received little attention. Thus, communication between heritage language and mainstream teachers is necessary to revitalize heritage language education. Finally, the notion of heritage preservation needed to be emphasized in teacher education. As students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds increase rapidly, teacher education institutions should provide sufficient courses to gain pre-service and in-service teachers' professional knowledge about cultural teaching and multicultural education.

While most schools and parents emphasize global perspectives in Taiwan, this study highlights the importance of reflecting heritage languages and cultures that deeply influence students' social and identity development. The voices from the two teachers raise issues about the linguistic capital and power intertwined in schools. As Weis (2003) points out, the most powerful voices of teachers can be heard "from within the very centers of structured silence" (p. 69). Future research should include more marginalized teachers to hear their voices, if we are sincere about our commitment to a democratic public sphere (Dimitriadis & Carlson, 2003). By understanding marginalized teachers, it helps policy-makers, mainstream teachers, and parents rethink the purpose of education, the importance of language maintenance, and the impact of cultural collaboration.

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