Mother Tongue and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Independent Chinese Secondary School Students in Malaysia

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss some language issues and the relation to ethnic identity among the Malaysian Chinese secondary school students who are undergoing their mother tongue education. By setting the context of mother tongue, this paper reveals the pattern of students’ language usage in various situations, language proficiency, language preference and their perspectives on language. Findings show the relationship between students’ ethnic identity and their preference towards Chinese language, as well as their perspectives on the language. Both of the factors also significantly predict ethnic identity of the same group of respondents. This study offers implications for the Chinese schools, educators, and parents regarding the passing down of the mother tongue and identity while concurrently embracing the diversity in a multi-ethnic society.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Ethnic Identity, Independent Chinese Secondary School Students, Malaysian Chinese, Chinese Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue refers to a child’s primary or first language, the language that is used by a child’s first career in the home, the language learned in the home from older family members; the language one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language one knows best and the language one uses most.¹ Language plays a role in one’s identity when the cognition and feelings of the inner self are making sense through the expression of words. Mother tongue connects ethnic identity best when the language is used to identify the particular ethnic members, by making sense of the ethnic distinctiveness through the language. The language itself becomes the symbolic of the ethnic group’s validity and place the world.²

2. MOTHER TONGUE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Built on social identity theory, ethnolinguistic identity theory asserted that language plays the central role in the events of intergroup relations.³ Language is a significant marker to draw the social categorizations where people identify with the ethnolinguistic group and subsequently form the in group and outgroup ethnic boundary. Based on this reasoning, mother tongue, by its nature, is the most relevant language to take action in ethnic categorization that leads to the process of social groupings. A social group provides a definition of self in terms of the defining characteristics of the group.⁴ Therefore, an ethnic group makes use of the mother tongue, a character that represents their collective entity. A mother tongue manages to perpetuate well when ethnic group members continue to learn and practice the language. The education in mother tongue, at its professional means, offers the well-planned strategies for the learning of language in its written and spoken form.

The maintenance of mother tongue is identified as one of the contributing factors to ethnic identity. The learning of language does not merely an ability of communication, but of expression of thoughts, values, morality and perceptions which built on the foundation of culture and ethnic contents. Ethnicity is linked to language, whether indexically, implementationally or symbolically.⁵

3. MALAYSIAN CHINESE AND MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

Malaysian Chinese constituted 24.6% of the total population in the country, together with the majority Malays of 67.4%, Indians of 7.3% and other ethnics of 0.7%.⁶ Being the largest minority ethnic group, Chinese in Malaysia managed to set up a consummate system of mother tongue education at various stages,
from the elementary to tertiary. At elementary and primary school level, Chinese schools have emerged as the parents’ top choice. Statistic showed that more than 90% Chinese parents enrolled their children in Chinese vernacular primary schools in the recent years. Therefore, the usage of Chinese language is prevalent among the young Malaysian Chinese of whom majority undergo 6 years of mother tongue education.

Mother tongue education is inseparable from Malaysian Chinese community because it is regarded an ethnic affair, a business that every member should engage. Chinese community, especially the educationists believe in the provision of mother tongue education for identity and cultural maintenance. The education via mother tongue is able to safeguard the transmission of the language itself, and the values and tradition carried by the language at the same time. As a result, they can retain their use of language and identity as distinctive compare to others. Conversely, if mother tongue education does not persist, there won’t be any teaching and learning of Chinese language and the ethnic essence from and within. As Renou commented that the vanishing of a certain language is an irreversible loss of part of a particular ethnic tradition. From this point of view, Chinese education is important to assure the existence and continuity of Malaysian Chinese ethnic identity.

The education through Chinese language as a medium of instruction at secondary level continues only in independent Chinese secondary schools (ICSS). ICSS are privately owned by Chinese community with self-supporting administration. The existence of ICSS is a result of the enactment of government educational policy in the 1960s. All secondary schools were required to employ Malay as the instructional language thereafter the enactment of 1961 Education Act. Under this Act, Chinese secondary schools which insisted not to change their Chinese instructional language were separated from the mainstream to become ICSS. ICSS adopt Chinese language as the main medium of instruction for all academic subjects while Malay and English are taught as language subjects.

There are a total of 60 ICSS in the country today, offering an education in mother tongue to Malaysian Chinese. All the ICSS come together under United Chinese School Committee’s Association (UCSCA) with the same system, syllabus and examination in order to provide a better educational quality. ICSS cater the need of Malaysian Chinese to learn the mother tongue and through the language itself. The environment of these schools are highly ethnically homogenous, from the management level, teachers and students. Due to the limited seats, only a small minority of 10% (~75,000 in year 2013) Chinese students, manage to enroll in ICSS. Nonetheless, the number of students enroll in ICSS have been constantly increased since the recent years.

According to the report from UCSCA, the total enrolment of the students in ICSS was 63,765 in year 2010, increased by 5% to 66,968 in year 2011, then an increase of 4.9% to 70,266 in year 2012, and increased by 8% to 75,923 in year 2013.

The continuity of mother tongue education provides a platform for the continuous learning of the language systematically. In this case, ICSS serve this goal well and meaningfully by ensuring the transmission of knowledge and culture in Chinese language. ICSS context is able to present substantive evident for the research focus to bring about the relationship between mother tongue and ethnic identity of Malaysian Chinese secondary school students. The research is able to contribute to a revision of ICSS mother tongue education in better quality and special directed to the issue of Chinese language, culture and identity. Besides, in understanding the relationship between the two encourages the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity nationally in the long run.

4. RESEARCH FOCUS

A number of research findings have shown that language, mother tongue in particular, is statistically related to ethnic identity of the respective ethnic group. Among these language factors are language usage, language proficiency, language preference and the belief about the validity of language. Nonetheless, most of these studies were conducted in the West where the education system and the migration community is different from place to place. In addition, the ethnic language in most studies refers to heritage language which carries the meaning of the place of origins where their older generation came from, not as mother tongue.

It is challenging for the ethnic minority to keep their mother tongue in a mainstream education where the learning of minority language is lack of incentive. The similar point of view exist in Malaysian Chinese community that by preserving Chinese language, their ethnic identity can be retained. The notion that Chinese language as a symbol of ethnic identity is deep rooted but yet lacks of empirical findings. Therefore, this study attempts to bring mother tongue and ethnic identity together in Malaysia independent Chinese secondary school context where students undergo their mother tongue education. The research objectives focus on the real language practice in students’ everyday life and their concerns on the importance of Chinese language. The research objectives are as the following:

1. To find out whether there is a significant correlation between language factors (Chinese language usage in various situations, proficiency and preference), and secondary school students’ ethnic identity.
2. To find out what are the Malaysian Chinese secondary school students’ perspectives on Chinese language.
3. To find out whether there is a significant correlation between secondary school students’ perspectives on Chinese language and their ethnic identity.
4. To examine whether language factors are significant predictors to secondary school students’ ethnic identity.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Respondents

Respondents in this research are upper secondary school students who are studying in ICSS. Of the 106 participants, 42.5% are males and 57.5% are females. In terms of academic major, 50.9% and 48.1% are studying in science and art class respectively.

5.2. Measurement

5.2.1. Ethnic Identity

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) is adapted to measure ethnic identity. The scale consists of 14 items to assess three dimensions of ethnic identity: affirmation and belonging, achievement, including exploration and commitment, and ethnic behaviours. Example of items under the affirmation and belonging dimension is: I am happy that I am a member of Malaysian.
Chinese ethnic group. For achievement, example of items are: I have often discussed about my Chinese background with other Malaysian Chinese in order to learn more about it (exploration) and I have a clear sense of my Chinese background and what it means to me (commitment). Example of items to assess behaviours is: I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly Chinese people. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scales (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). The scale is accepted for Cronbach’s alpha reliability at 0.86 and means score for total items is 47.93 ± SD 7.20. Cronbach’s alpha more than 0.80 is accepted as good internal consistency.  

5.2.2. Language Usage in Various Situations

Six items rated on 5-point scale (1-never to 5-all the time) to identify students’ spoken language. These items assess the frequency of using the mother tongue in school with teachers and friends, at home with family members and public venues such as religious venue, shopping mall and night market with general public. All of these places and situations are common, usual and even habitual in students’ day-to-day life.

5.2.3. Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is assessed by 4 items indicating the mother tongue proficiency in reading, writing, writing and understanding on 5-point scale (1-very weak to 5-very good).

5.2.4. Language Preference

Five items indicating mother tongue preference about learning ethnic culture, literature, Chinese values and traditions are rated on 5-point scale (1-never to 5-all the time).

5.2.5. Perspectives on Chinese Language

Students’ beliefs on Chinese language are rated on 5-point scale (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). Items include the importance and the status of Chinese language.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1. Relationship Between Language Factors and Ethnic Identity

There is no correlation between Chinese language usage in various situations and ethnic identity, as well as Chinese language proficiency and ethnic identity. However, Pearson correlation shows that there is a significant correlation between Chinese language preference and students’ ethnic identity, $r = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$. Students might not realize the significance of Chinese language in their identity when they have the opportunity to learn and converse well in the language. The usage and fluency in Chinese language is usual for ICSS students who receive the education in mother tongue. The results might imply a hidden ethnolinguistic identity that when students are given options, their preference for Chinese language identifies with their ethnic identity. In any situations when people’s ethnolinguistic identity is activated and they become aware of their ethnic validity and cultural norms, this leads to ethnic affirmation.

6.2. Students’ Perspectives on Chinese Language

ICSS students’ perspectives on the usefulness and importance Chinese language yield a high acknowledgement to the language in their lives. The highest point among the items falls on their beliefs that mother tongue is important to maintain their ethnic culture and persistent to learn the language even though it is difficult. This is not surprising as one of main mission of the ICSS establishment is to safeguard and transmit the profound ethnic culture. The respondents’ views provide further support for Chen wherein ICSS students agreed that ICSS is successful as an institution to inculcate Chinese culture.

6.3. Relationship Between Students’ Perspectives on Chinese Language and Ethnic Identity

Pearson correlation was conducted and the result shows that there is a significant correlation between students’ perspectives on Chinese language and their ethnic identity, $r = 0.286$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ at the 0.01 significant level. Further analysis shows significant correlation between students’ perspectives on Chinese language and affirmation and belonging and ethnic identity achievement but not ethnic behaviours. The result denotes a positive relationship between Chinese language and their membership as a Chinese, cognitively and affectively.

6.4. Predictors to Students’ Ethnic Identity

Chinese language factors and their perspectives on Chinese language significantly predicted ICSS students’ ethnic identity, $F(4, 101) = 3.923$, $p = 0.005 < 0.05$. These factors together
contribute 13.4% of the students’ ethnic identity. Apart from that, Chinese language preference and perspectives on Chinese language are significant predictors to students’ ethnic identity, with students’ perspectives the main predictor.

The result shows the relationship between language and ethnic identity a step forward in which ICSS students’ ethnic identity is predicted not by the daily dialogue, but higher order of consideration. The preference of using Chinese language more frequent and their perspectives on Chinese language indicate strong positive attitudes towards their own mother tongue. The reasons behind can be drawn from the socio-historical background of ICSS and Chinese education as a case which has been marginalized from the mainstream and of cultural resilience in the country.24, 25 When a person’s language is threatened, rather than submit to the dominant group, the ethnic person forms unions of resistance with others of the same ethnicity to seek to undo the threat.2 It is perhaps the case when ICSS students understand the how the forefathers fought and insisted to build an education in mother tongue.

7. CONCLUSION

The current study is meaningful to provide statistically empirical findings for the relationship between Malaysian Chinese ethnic identity and Chinese language. Focusing on ICSS, the Chinese students have the experiences of primary and secondary mother tongue education. The research objectives were answered to confirm the link between mother tongue language and ethnic identity of Malaysian Chinese secondary school students. The conclusion can be drawn from the findings that Chinese language, at certain dimensions, represents ethnic identity of students who are studying in ICSS. The case in ICSS indicated that not all the language factors were related to ethnic identity. The fluency and usage of Chinese language were prevalent among the students as they grew up in a fairly ethnic homogenous school environment. Yet the preference in Chinese language over ethnic related practices and beliefs on mother tongue predicted students’ ethnic identity. These language factors regardless of those daily language practice or opinions about language might be linked to the society social factors in the country, for instance the state policy, political influences, ethnic relations and so on.

Furthermore, the findings also indicated that students’ beliefs on Chinese language did not necessary related to all the dimensions of ethnic identity. Although cognitively and affectively related, ethnic identity did not link with the perspectives on Chinese language for the aspect of ethnic behaviours. ICSS students’ views on Chinese language might not express by their observable actions as Malaysian Chinese. Further studies should compare the perspectives on the language issues among Malaysian Chinese students from different mode the education and how these issues relate to their ethnic identity. The study has implications for the policy makers, educators and parents in the country in dealing with the complicated language policy and ethnic issues. Chinese schools should take the balance in promoting ethnic language and culture while embracing the diversity in the country.

References and Notes

22. UCSCA, Information of the Board Member of Chinese Primary School (Chinese language), United Chinese School Committees’ Association (2013).

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Table IV. Multiple linear regression of all the indices on students’ ethnic identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language factors (n = 106)</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives on Chinese language</td>
<td>0.243</td>
<td>2.407</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese language preference</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>2.244</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese language usage in various situations</td>
<td>−0.167</td>
<td>−1.867</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese language proficiency</td>
<td>−0.049</td>
<td>−0.518</td>
<td>0.606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple regression analysis</td>
<td>0.367</td>
<td>3.243</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modify standard error</td>
<td>6.875</td>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Significant at 0.05 level.