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Indigenous Language Education in Taiwan

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# Indigenous Language Education in Taiwan

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## 1. The Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan

The ancestors of Taiwan's indigenous people were already living in Taiwan around six thousand years ago. The indigenous people of Taiwan belong to the Austronesian or the Malayopolynesian, the South Island tribe (The Association of Native Peoples' Education in Taiwan 1999). According to several prominent linguists (e.g., H. A. Kern, Paul Li, and Robert Brust), and anthropologists Peter Bellwood and Barbara Theil, Taiwan is believed to be the Austronesian homeland.

Historically, there have been over twenty indigenous groups, including the "mountain" groups and the "plain" groups, who have made Taiwan their home.<sup>1</sup> Only the following twelve groups (including ten "mountain" groups and two "plain" groups) are recognized by the government: the Amis, the Atayal, the Pawan, the Bunun, the Rukai, the Puyuma, the Tsou, the Saisiyat, the Tao, the Thao, the Kavalan, and the Truku. The population of the indigenous people in Taiwan is reported to be 459,218, representing approximately 2% of the total population of Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> Each indigenous group in Taiwan has its own distinct language variety, some of which are not mutually comprehensible among or within the groups.

The indigenous peoples of Taiwan did not traditionally have writing systems, and therefore, the speakers of these languages continued to pass on their socio-cultural knowledge and traditions by oral means up until the Dutch era (1624-1662). Most indigenous Taiwanese people live in the mountain areas of Taiwan and Lanyu Island. They continue to maintain a subsistence lifestyle based on hunting, agriculture, and/or fishing. The foreign colonizers (including the Dutch, the Spanish, the Chinese, and the Japanese) ruled the indigenous people of Taiwan for over three hundred and eighty years. These colonizers were known to

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<sup>1</sup> The plain group (also called the Pingpu group) refers to the indigenous people of Taiwan who live in the plain areas of Taiwan. This larger group is composed of the following nine groups: the Ketagalan, the Kavalan, the Taokas, the Pazch, the Papura, the Babuza, the Hoanya, the Thao, and the Siraya groups. Due to close contact with the Han people (a non-indigenous people), the plain indigenes have assimilated into Han communities. Most of them have thus lost their languages, cultures, and customs. However, the Thao and the Kavalan groups were recognized by the government in 2001 and 2002, and some other groups are still seeking recognition.

<sup>2</sup> from the Council of Indigenous Peoples, Executive Yuan, available at <http://www.apc.gov.tw>

kill the indigenous people, burn their tribal villages, and force them to move, thus robbing them of their rich lands and mountain resources. The living space and resources of the indigenous people decreased as the colonizers sought to enlarge their territories. Political, economical, educational, and societal barriers continue to marginalize Taiwan's indigenous population (Tai 2001, Pawan 2002). The world of the indigenous people in Taiwan was destroyed, occupied, and assimilated during colonization.

## **2. Language Loss in Taiwan**

The languages of Taiwan are disappearing completely from use. According to Li (1994), of the original twenty ethnic languages of Taiwan, half have disappeared and the remaining half are endangered. The Council of Indigenous Peoples (1998) indicates that 40.12% of the indigenous respondents speak their native language at home. Several researchers (Hsieh 1998, Lai 1995, Lu 1996, Song 1995, Wang 1999, Wang and Pu 1995) find that, among the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, language loss is evident among those who are 50 years of age and younger, and most notably among individuals, residing in urban areas, who are twenty years of age and younger. A telephone survey conducted in 1999 by the United Daily Newspaper found that only 9% of the indigenous children in Taiwan are fluent speakers of indigenous languages. These researchers (ibid) conclude that the majority of young urban Taiwanese children, from preschool to junior high school, cannot speak their native languages and prefer to speak Mandarin Chinese, which is the official language of Taiwan. Because children do not understand the indigenous languages used by many grandparents, a pattern of language loss has clearly contributed to the weakening of intergenerational language learning. In Taiwan, language loss in the indigenous communities is a serious problem.

## **3. Language Policies in Taiwan's History**

Taiwan was ruled by the Dutch, the Spanish, the Japanese, and the Chinese for over three hundred and eighty years. According to Naqang (1995), these colonial governments used education to achieve the goals of their religion, politics, economics, and assimilation. "The Dutch missionaries used the Romanized Siraya language, which was spoken by the southwestern Plain indigenous groups, to teach and convert them to Christianity through textbooks and translated testaments" (Gao 2005:13). In the Japanese era, the colonial government pervasively educated the indigenous people under assimilationist policies for its political purpose of armed control, robbing the mountain resources, and occupying the land of the indigenous people. In the era of the Kuomintang (KMT; the nationalist party), the KMT implemented an assimilation policy to ensure its political stability and this required the Taiwanese people to speak Mandarin and provided punishment for speaking their native languages in school. In addition, it required that the Taiwanese be educated using Chinese-centered materials that did not recognize nor understand the Taiwanese languages and cultures. Thus, the colonial education and the assimilation policies forced Taiwan's indigenous

people to give up their traditional social and economic systems and to survive in the mainstream society that the Chinese structured, to become sorrowful and dissociated citizens without competitive capabilities. The KMT not only hastened the destruction of the indigenous people, but also helped to destroy their minority status (410 Educational Reform Affiliation 1996).

#### **4. Current Situations of Indigenous Language Education in Taiwan**

Indigenous language instruction in Taiwan began its experiment at Wulai Junior High and Elementary School in Taipei County in 1990. By 1996, under the “Localized Instruction Activity”, indigenous language instruction was partially implemented in some elementary and junior high schools, and began to be a required course for elementary students and an elective course for junior high school students in 2001. The indigenous elementary schools in Taiwan used indigenous schoolteachers to provide indigenous language instruction (Chen 1999, Chen 2001, the Education and Culture Committee of the Control Yuan 2003, Hsieh 1998, Kao 2002, Lai 1995, Liu 2003, Lu 1996, Song 1995, Wang 1999, Wang and Pu 1995). They began to hire certified teachers who obtained indigenous language proficiency certificates and training certificates from 2001. The Education and Culture Committee of the Control Yuan (2003) indicated that 60.8% of teachers in indigenous language classes are these certified teachers. If schools still lack schoolteachers and certified teachers, some schools hire missionaries, elders, parents, and other local people to teach. In addition, indigenous schools may use teacher-, local people-, or expert-developed materials (e.g., textbooks, videotapes, CDs, DVDs, and website resources) to teach about the indigenous languages. The Education and Culture Committee of the Control Yuan (2003) indicates that the Ministry of Education (MOE) asked the Indigenous Language Education and Culture Center of the National Chengchi University to edit 39 indigenous language textbooks for elementary school students from 2002 to 2005.

The content of these teaching materials mainly includes elements of language and culture that may focus on conversation, vocabulary, pronunciation practice, grammar practice, tone practice, oral practice, supplementary materials, cultural components, real-life photos, traditional customs, stories, legends, traditional and children’s songs, and history (Ministry of Education 1996, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Pingtung County Government 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Wenle Elementary School; Wulai Elementary and Junior High School 1993, 1994, 1995). In addition, the Wulai Junior High School and Elementary School developed an instructional VCD to teach about the Atayal spelling system in 2000. The Tenggong Elementary School made another instructional VCD to teach about Atayal children’s songs, idioms, and games in 2001 (Chen 2001).

Moreover, the teachers may collect some related cultural and ethnic information, such as traditional and children’s songs, as well as folktales, to make the curriculum more interesting and culturally relevant. The teaching content in this study includes family, numbers, body parts, animals, the sky, food, living tools, native plants, names, the name of the tribal village, and songs. Teachers Camak

and Hayung in this study also incorporate other subject matter such as art, language arts (Mandarin), music, natural science, and physical education into the curriculum. Moreover, in order to promote the students' motivation to learn, the curriculum may include pictures (drawing), photos, flashcards, musical CD, field trips, storytelling, and traditional songs and children's songs and games to make the instruction more meaningful, interesting, and vivid. Liu (2003) indicates that to evaluate students' progress in learning the indigenous languages, each school takes turns conducting native language speech contests, native language singing competitions, vocabulary contests, and listening tests. In addition, a Bunun school establishes a choir for students to learn traditional Bunun songs (ibid). Some Bunun schools even make a weekly "Bunun Day" so that everyone must speak Bunun on that day except the regular classes. The Kaohsiung's Bureau of Education asks two elementary schools to build online Bunun language databases for students to learn their heritage language online. Some tribal schools even conduct indigenous language class in the tribal village in the evenings. For example, the Pucunug Elementary School is used to teach the indigenous people about the Paiwan's culture, history, and customs on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. This school also teaches other curricula, such as international pronunciation, parent education, and technology (Camak's interview).

Community and parent involvement are two key components of Taiwan's indigenous language program, yet interaction between the community and the school may vary from location to location. Each indigenous town or school routinely hosts an "Instruction Observation Day" for teachers, parents, community members, and experts to display how each school implements the native language instruction and to provide a forum for sharing their experiences with each other (Camak's interview, Liu 2003). Some tribal communities host cultural events and some conduct education for parents and community members so that these groups may have more contact with one another. Moreover, Liu (2003) indicates that the tribal college in the tribal village also teaches an indigenous language class. Furthermore, the town of Wulai conducted an "Indigenous Teacher's Workshop for Designing Localized Materials for Five Counties" (Song 1995). Liu (2003) demonstrates that three Bunkun villages have a "research and editing group for the Bunkun language material". This group routinely discusses the content of the material. They have the material taught in several schools and revise it after teaching. In addition, Song (1995) indicates that parents in Wulai may even help by editing the teaching materials, teaching the language, serving as consultants in language contests, or by donating traditional utensils and costumes for the school museum.

Government support plays an important role in indigenous language instruction in Taiwan. The majority of funds for indigenous language instruction are provided under the "Developing and Improving Taiwanese Indigenous Education for the Five-Year Plan" and an "Education Priority Area" plan. On April 31, 1993, the Provincial Bureau of Education allocated two hundred thousands dollars for indigenous language instruction (Chen 1995). According to Song (1995), the Wulai junior high and elementary school received twenty thousand dollars for

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native language instruction each year. Other schools also obtained funding from the Bureau of Education, County government, the Council of Indigenous Peoples, Executive Yuan, and the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 2001, native language teaching became a required course in elementary and junior high school. The MOE provides funds for hiring teachers and developing textbooks, and the Council of Indigenous Peoples provides funds for conducting an annual accreditation of indigenous language proficiency and related training classes. It also funds indigenous language-related projects for individuals, associations, and schools. Additionally, Nantou County held a yearly “indigenous language contest” to evaluate the effectiveness of indigenous language instruction in its elementary, junior high, and high schools (Liu 2003). From July 2001, the Indigenous Peoples Commission of Taipei City government began to implement an “indigenous language nest” to teach 11 indigenous languages for two hours per week in Taipei city. It also held indigenous language teacher training camps, edited indigenous language textbooks, hosted indigenous cultural events, and made indigenous language and culture education available on radio (Indigenous Peoples Commission of Taipei city government 2003).

Although indigenous language instruction has been implemented for 4 to 15 years in Taiwan, there are several issues surrounding it. First, within communities, although tribal members get involved in the school and community events, they may only use the native language in certain ceremonies and other gatherings. Second, some parents do not recognize the importance of speaking their native language because they think it is not useful in mainstream society. That is, they do not teach their children the mother tongue because they think it is not helpful to their children. Additionally, some parents cannot teach the mother tongue because they do not speak it fluently. Third, inconsistent funding causes several crucial projects and/or programs to be terminated and this negatively affects further program development. Fourth, unsatisfactory teachers may cause students to lose interest in learning because of inconsistent teaching methods and content. If the non-indigenous teachers are not familiar with such specific linguistic and cultural groups, it makes the teaching and learning even less effective. Fifth, there are insufficient indigenous language and culture materials. There are not enough good texts written in the indigenous languages. Liu (2003) indicates that those materials do not appropriately suit the students’ levels. The Education and Culture Committee of the Control Yuan (2003) states that those materials are too difficult to teach. Sixth, insufficient instructional time is a major problem with respect to implementing indigenous language instruction in Taiwan. The instructional time officially is forty minutes per week. However, if there is a public event or examination happening at the same time, indigenous language instruction must be cancelled. Seventh, indigenous language teachers indicate that there is a lack of opportunities for teacher training on indigenous language instruction that will help them improve their professional skills in native language instruction (Wang 2002). Eighth, the burdens of both learning and teaching the indigenous language present another difficulty. In addition to learning Mandarin, the indigenous language, and

English, the students must also study for entrance examinations.

Also, consider the burden from the teachers' perspective. They are currently responsible for implementing new instruction under Taiwan's nine-year compulsory education and they assume a share of administrative tasks within their schools. In addition, if there are not enough English teachers, they might also need to teach English. Finally, indigenous students can earn an additional score on their entrance exams by passing an indigenous language proficiency test, and there is thus pressure to gain a certain level of indigenous language proficiency. The former director of the Council of Indigenous Peoples, Yuhani, announced this idea for indigenous language education. He felt that parents did not have confidence in the native language because such knowledge was not useful for entrance examinations, and thus wanted to use "gaining higher scores for the entrance examination" to promote his idea. He also communicated that the native language is the primary identification of an indigenous person. However, his ideas were a source of controversy.

As a final issue, Kao (2002), Liu (2003), and Wang (2002) indicate that although native language instruction is required and has been implemented in 1126 classes (The Education and Culture Committee of the Control Yuan 2003), 39% of schools have not implemented it ([www.nhctc.edu.tw/~aboec/89](http://www.nhctc.edu.tw/~aboec/89)). In addition to these problems, the Education and Culture Committee of the Control Yuan (2003) states that people do not take indigenous language instruction seriously, and the lack of indigenous language instruction researchers poses yet another difficulty.

## **5. Conclusion**

Taiwan is a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural society. At least fifteen ethnic groups and languages remain in Taiwan. Taiwan was ruled by the Dutch, the Spanish, the Japanese, and the Chinese for over 380 years. These colonizers all used education to achieve their goals of religion, politics, economics, and assimilation. However, after Martial law was lifted in 1987, speaking native languages was no longer prohibited. The Indigenous Right Advocate Association and other associations began to have a societal movement to fight for their rights including language rights. Indigenous language instruction was finally implemented at the Wulai junior high and elementary school in 1990, and it became a required elective course in 2001.

However, there are still many problems related to its implementation that need to be solved, and I offer the following six recommendations: 1. Language renewal should start from the home and the community. 2. Language immersion day-care centers, preschools, and kindergarten must be implemented. 3. Teachers must evaluate their teaching to meet the needs and the interests of the students. 4. A well-organized teacher-training program needs to be developed. 5. A specialized unit needs to be established in the government for the affairs of native language promotion and advocacy. 6. The indigenous people need to have self-determination in their children's schooling. If efforts can be made to complete these tasks, Taiwan's indigenous languages will survive.

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**REPORT 14**

**SURVEY OF CALIFORNIA AND  
OTHER INDIAN LANGUAGES**

***Language is Life***

***PROCEEDINGS OF THE 11<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
STABILIZING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES CONFERENCE***

**June 10-13, 2004**

**University of California at Berkeley**

**Wesley Y. Leonard and Stelómethet Ethel B. Gardner, Editors**

**Andrew Garrett and Leanne Hinton, Series Editors**

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