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Chinese teenagers' perceptions of vitality of Hokkien Chinese in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract: The study assessed Chinese teenagers' perceptions of vitality of Hokkien Chinese in Penang using the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). The survey involved 156 students aged 13–19 (100 Hokkien; 56 non-Hokkien Chinese). The results showed that the vitality of Hokkien in Penang is at EGIDS Level 6b (Threatened). The identity function of Hokkien in Penang is that of a home language, and children are the youngest generation of Hokkien speakers. The stability of the diglossic situation between Hokkien and Mandarin has been disrupted due to Mandarin encroaching into oral domains of language use, particularly the friendship and education domains. Both Hokkien and non-Hokkien teenagers have positive attitudes towards Hokkien. Chinese educational background is the only social factor that makes a significant difference in Hokkien usage among the Chinese teenagers, while gender, socio-economic status and language attitudes have no significant effect on Hokkien usage. In view of this, institutional support for Mandarin is the most important structural factor that has a clear, but adverse, impact on Hokkien usage. Hokkien cannot compete with the functions of Mandarin as a marker of Chinese identity in Malaysia, a gateway to career and business opportunities, and a global language within the Chinese diaspora.

Keywords: Chinese; Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS); Hokkien; language attitudes; language shift; vitality

1 Introduction

Hokkien is a southern Min language (闽南话), spoken in Southern Fujian, China. It is linguistically referred to as Southern Min (Ng and Chan 2016). In the seventeenth century, the Hokkien people migrated to present-day Taiwan due to economic and political reasons. Hokkien, also known as Taiyu ("Taiwan's language"; Ang [1992])

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