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MOTHERS AND MOTHER TONGUE: THEIR ROLE IN PROMOTING FOOCHOW TO THEIR CHILDREN

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Abstract

Research in settings where the Foochow population is small relative to other ethnic groups has indicated a shift away from Foochow towards Mandarin and English and the question raised is whether the same phenomenon is happening in Foochow-dominant settings. The study examined whether Foochow mothers promote use of the mother tongue by their children in Foochow-dominant towns in Sarawak. Interview data were collected from 30 participants from seven families, of which 14 were mothers. The results showed that the children's language use was in the hands of the mother more than the father although some Foochow mothers allowed the family situation to dictate the children's first language. Others took on a more active role in deciding the language(s) their children should learn, some going with and others going against the tide of social change. The demographic profiles of the families were examined to find out the factors influencing Foochow mothers to promote or demote their ethnic language in the family.

Introduction

The family is usually the last bastion of ethnic language use as the low language is usually dominant in private domains and high language in formal domains. In the family, mothers usually have more control over the choice of language for family communication (David & Ibisam, 2000; Kow, 2003; Mukherjee, 2003), giving rise to the notion that children speak the 'mother tongue'. However, research has shown that mothers are choosing not to speak their ethnic language to their children in favour of widely spoken languages and standard languages. The factors causing shift away from the ethnic language include intermarriage (David, 2000; Ting & Campbell, 2007), children's education (e.g. Ting & Chang, 2008; Ting & Jawing, 2008) and national language policy (Gupta & Yeok, 1995; Li, Saravanan & Ng, 1997; Morita, 2003). The odds against the intergenerational transmission of the ethnic language include factors such as association of backwardness with the ethnic language (Bonner, 2001), low instrumental value of ethnic language (Detaramani & Lock, 2003), distant family relations (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002) and separation of language and ethnic identity (Naji & David, 2003).