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Heritage and identity: Ethnic minority students from South Asia in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the language attitudes, language practices and identity construction of a group of ethnic minority students in a secondary school in Hong Kong. Drawing on data from focus group and individual interviews, this research shows that the ethnic minority students negotiate and contest their heritage identity by utilizing their heritage and the experiences and knowledge they have gained in the host context. In addition, the students construct a counter-discourse to resist the lower social status of their heritage languages and minority identity by maintaining their heritage language, by promoting the dominant status of English and by devaluing the local language; however, these steps may limit their linguistic choices and lead to discrimination against other languages. This paper implies that school administrators and policy makers had better seek to establish a more supportive environment for language learning by immigrant students, and that the students themselves can utilize their multicultural and multilingual backgrounds to empower themselves in the host context and enjoy more equal opportunities.

1. Introduction

Globalization has fostered rapid and wide-spread population mobility, both between and within national borders. As such, a growing body of research has examined first language (L1) maintenance and identity construction among both international and internal migrants. Most of these studies have focused either on language choice, code-switching and identity formation among international immigrants in a range of Western contexts (*e.g.*, Francis, Archer, & Mau, 2009; Song, 2010; Williams, 2008; Zhou & Kim, 2006; Zhou & Li, 2003), or on micro-variations of linguistic forms among internal migrants (*e.g.*, Dong, 2009; Dong & Blommaert, 2009). Given the growing number of ethnic minority students from South Asia studying in Hong Kong, it is meaningful to investigate how these students construct their identity and maintain their heritage language proficiency in that linguistically diverse setting. Such an investigation would enhance and enrich knowledge of South Asian minority students' educational experiences and socialization processes, and enable us to identify their diverse learning needs. It would also contribute to our understanding of ethnic minority students' educational experiences in other contexts throughout the world. This inquiry is part of a larger study that will examine language learning attitudes, social network establishment and identity construction among minority students. It will suggest ways in which linguistic and cultural resources in multilingual schools could be transformed by and for the students.

A number of studies have discussed the complex and fluid linguistic and socio-cultural situation in Hong Kong (*e.g.*, Bolton & Lim, 2000; Davison & Lai, 2007; Li, 2009). As indicated in these studies, Cantonese is the dominant language, and

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the one commonly used by and among indigenous Hong Kong Chinese people on most political, social and cultural occasions. English possesses a great deal of both symbolic and actual value, the former as an indicator of Hong Kong's international image and the latter as an important asset to individuals' career development and upward social mobility. After Hong Kong was restored to Chinese control in 1997, the role of China's national language (Putonghua) and the balance between Chinese and English in the school curriculum became a topic of heated discussion (Kirkpatrick & Chau, 2008). Despite this, Putonghua is still regarded in Hong Kong as a somewhat peripheral language, symbolic of a less urban and less sophisticated identity (Gu & Tong, 2012).

Current policy stipulates that Hong Kong education should produce citizens who are trilingual (in Cantonese, Putonghua and English) and biliterate in Chinese (Cantonese for the spoken form and Modern Standard Chinese for the written form) and English. This has implicitly marginalized the heritage languages of ethnic minority students, the majority of whom are from India, Pakistan, Philippines, Nepal and Thailand. In recent years, the number of these non-Chinese Asian ethnic minority students studying in Hong Kong has grown. Between 2001 and 2006, the number of ethnic minority students under 15 years of age (and thus legally required to attend school) increased from 11,204 to 13,472; in 2007, that number more than doubled, with 28,722 ethnic minority full-time students enrolled in Hong Kong schools or educational institutions (Census and Statistics Department, 2007).

Many of these ethnic minority students have difficulty learning Chinese (Cantonese for the spoken form and Modern Standard Chinese for the written form) (Ku, Chan, & Sandhu, 2005); heritage languages and, sometimes, English are the languages most often used in their homes, and the students have limited parental involvement when learning Chinese. Prior to 2005, there were only two primary schools and two secondary schools in the public education sector in which English was the medium of instruction and Chinese was not a required subject. Many ethnic minority students were excluded from Hong Kong schools (Loper, 2004), or were otherwise restricted in terms of school choices and educational and career opportunities.

Public concern about these students' education led the government to introduce, in 2005, a policy to integrate mainstream and ethnic minority schools and to include ethnic minority students in a centralized allocation system (Ku et al., 2005). The new integration system was not well-supported by parents of ethnic minority students, however, and 80% of those surveyed did not want their children to attend Chinese-speaking schools due to linguistic and cultural concerns (Heung, 2006). Ethnic minority students attending mainstream schools experienced great difficulty learning Chinese as a subject, comprehending other subjects in which Chinese was the medium of instruction, and keeping pace with the native curriculum (Ku et al., 2005). In most mainstream Chinese-speaking primary schools, Chinese as a second language is not offered as a curriculum choice. Roughly 10 secondary schools allow students to skip Chinese, instead offering French as an optional second language; seven of these are prestigious government-aided schools where competition for spaces from local students is fierce.

2. Research on immigrant students

It is widely accepted that immigrant students bring linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity to local schools in the host contexts; however, researchers argue that this linguistic heritage and cultural knowledge is largely ignored, and that the students themselves are seen as problematic (He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu, 2008; Hue, 2010; Martin, 2010; Rassool, 1999). In contexts where monolingual ideologies of English are influential, immigrant students experience difficulties using and studying in English (Cummins, 1989, 2000, 2001); moreover, language barriers and acculturation processes exacerbate their academic, emotional and social development challenges and limit their access to programs (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clemwell, 2000; Rutter, 1994).

An increasing body of research, including studies on school practice (Cheminais, 2001; Dentier & Hafner, 1997; Phillion, 2002), families and communities (Hue, 2008), and educational policy (Nieto, 2000; Salili & Hoosain, 2001) explore how immigrant students could be better supported at different levels. Other studies have examined the impact of language, language ideologies, culture and identity on immigrant students' educational experiences in host regions (He, 2003; He et al., 2008; Toohey, 2000) and the interaction between immigrant students, host contexts and new education systems; Francis et al. (2009), for example, focusing on a group of immigrant Chinese pupils' discursive construction of the purposes and benefits of learning heritage language in a complementary UK school, explore how students' heritage language and their country of origin's culture are constructed as identity.

Other researchers (*e.g.*, Blackledge & Creese, 2008; Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Li, 2011; Li & Wu, 2009) studying multilingualism in complementary schools in the UK have discovered that immigrant children manipulate their multilingual proficiency at constructing new identities to contest not only the heritage identity imposed on them, but also 'One Language Only' or 'One Language at a Time' policies and 'separate bilingualism' (Creese & Blackledge, 2011) in complementary schools. Li and Wu (2009) have found that Chinese-English bilingual immigrant students creatively utilize code-switching to push back or break down the boundaries between the traditional and the original in their language use.

In addition, other studies have indicated that teachers' language ideologies and attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity influence immigrant children's language practices and identity formation, and that teachers' negative attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity can disempower bilingual immigrant children at school (*e.g.*, Baker, 1996; Cincotta-Segi, 2011; Cummins, 2000; Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011). According to Gkaintartzi and Tsokalidou (2011), for example, teachers in a mainstream Greek school advocate diversity at a theoretical level, but categorize their Albanian immigrant