

# The Study of Hokkien with a Comparison of the Current Hokkien Situation in Taiwan and the Philippines

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## Abstract

This study draws on the history of Hokkien and introduces the spreading of Hokkien worldwide. The current situation of Hokkien educational delivery at the family level, school level, and government level in Taiwan and the Philippines is stated. Comparing education service delivery in Taiwan and the Philippines, the author gives recommendations on the preservation of Hokkien in Taiwan on the three levels mentioned above.

**Keywords:** Hokkien, education delivery, indigenous language, family, school, government, education policy

## 1. Introduction of Hokkien

Hokkien, which is also known as Southern Min (闽南话), is one of the most significant Chinese fang yan (方言) spoken in southern China, including Xiamen, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou, and also Taiwan (Ding, 2015). The origin of Hokkien can be traced back to the city Quanzhou—a city in Fujian province where the Hoklo people who spoke Hokkien first appeared in the Tang Dynasty according to the earliest record of Hokkien (Gungwu, 1985). The advantage of Fujian being located in the coastal area in southeast China allowed them to trade and establish connections with people from different regions and countries (Ding, 2015). The ocean-going culture of the Hoklo people and the latter Fujian people permit the wide distribution of the Hokkien language in China and Southeast Asia today (Ding, 2015). Now people can find Hokkien spoken in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand (Ding, 2015). According to Chappell, “In total, there are claimed to be 52.5 million speakers for all the Min dialects in China and Taiwan, and over sixty-two million if we include speakers in Southeast Asia (Chappell, 2009, p. 231).”

Some pronunciations and rhythms in Hokkien are varied by place but still share a fairly similar understanding among people who speak it (Ding, 2015). Hokkien is also famous for its characteristic of having two pronunciations for many Chinese characters, known as literary and colloquial readings. Literary reading is similar to the pronunciation of Mandarin, and it is more used in formal contexts, while colloquial reading is used in everyday Hokkien conversation, which is more informal (Ding, 2015). For example “three readings are indicated for the character 馬 ‘horse’: /be531, /ma3/ and mãs3/ (Ding, 2015, p.7).” The other example of Taiwanese Hokkien is “the character 共 has kã as its colloquial pronunciation but kiōng as its literary or reading pronunciation in Taiwanese Hokkien (Chappell, 2009, p.232).”

The major areas where people speak Hokkien in China now are Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Zhangzhou (Ding, 2015). However, because of the strong emphasis on promoting Putonghua, also known as Mandarin, as the official language of China in the 21st century, there is a huge decline in the use of Hokkien in mainland China. Especially in Xiamen. With both the National Language Movement and the growth of immigrants from other parts of China, Xiamen experienced a dramatic decline in people speaking Hokkien in public (Ding, 2015). Many people in Xiamen now speak Mandarin as their primary language, and there has been a shift towards using Mandarin in public life, including in educational institutions (Ding, 2015). This phenomenon is often referred to

as “Putonghua-first” or “Putonghua-only” in Xiamen, reflecting the dominance of Mandarin in the city’s linguistic landscape. A similar trend of promoting Mandarin instead of speaking Hokkien is also observed in the city Quanzhou and Zhangzhou, which used to be the two oldest countries to contain dialects of Hokkien spoken in Fujian Province (Ding, 2015).

In Malaysia and Singapore, Hokkien used to be spoken by many people. However, due to the promotion of Malay and English as the official languages in the two places, the usage of Hokkien has also declined (Puah & Ting, 2015; Lim et al., 2016). Hokkien seems to remain more favored by the older generation in Singapore (Lim et al., 2016). In Indonesia and the Philippines, Hokkien is spoken by smaller communities, particularly in coastal regions with historical ties to Hokkien-speaking regions of China and also immigrants who immigrated from China (Wilkinson, 2018).

Luckily, in both China and oversea countries, some people still speak Hokkien and try to preserve the culture. In this paper, I will focus on Hokkien in Taiwan and Hokkien in the Philippines to analyze their service delivery in preserving Hokkien.

## **2. An Analysis of Current Access to Educational Services of Hokkien in Taiwan**

The Hokkien language used to be one of the most widely spoken Fangyan (方言) in Taiwan, with a significant number of people using it as their primary language or as a second language (Paxton, 2022). However, because of the implementation of Mandarin Chinese as the official language, Mandarin Chinese has been promoted as the national language of Taiwan, and many people have been encouraged to use it instead of their local dialects (Paxton, 2022). This has led to a decline in the use of Hokkien among younger generations, who are more likely to speak Mandarin Chinese as their primary language. Currently, there have been some efforts to preserve the Hokkien language in Taiwan. In this part, readers will see the efforts to promote Hokkien in Taiwan from the government level, school level, and side actors level.

In 2018, the National Languages Development Act in Taiwan promotes the use of local languages, which includes Hokkien. This act aims to promote the preservation, revitalization, and development of the natural languages of Taiwan’s various ethnic groups, including Hokkien, Hakka, and indigenous languages, as well as Taiwan Sign Language (Ministry of Culture-Performance Venues & Architectural Heritage, 2018). Under this act, the government is required to hold regular conferences on national language development, prioritize efforts to revitalize and pass on threatened languages, establish a survey mechanism and database for national languages, protect preschool language learning, plan courses and resources for language education at all levels, protect language communication rights, and provide grants for promoting national languages (Ministry of Culture-Performance Venues & Architectural Heritage, 2018). The act also provides for the establishment of language learning centers, the development of language teaching materials, and the training of language teachers, among other measures, to support the preservation and promotion of these languages. Under the impact, the Ministry of Education has developed a standardized Hokkien curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Taiwan (International Conference on When East Meets West, 2014).

During the period from 2008 to 2009, the Education Bureau in Taiwan released a set of 700 Hokkien characters to promote literacy in the language (Chen & Chen, 2018). This was an important step in preserving and promoting the use of Hokkien, especially among younger generations. Suggests by Chen and Chen (2018) Hokkien language lessons are provided for primary school (4th – 6th grade) students in schools in Taiwan, and they must take these lessons as part of their Mother Tongue education. In 2023, Hokkien will be included in the language curriculum of many primary and secondary schools in Taiwan, where students are taught to read, write, and speak the language.

However, even though schools offer Hokkien classes, textbooks in Hokkien are only provided during Hokkien classes, and there is no standardized homework or exam required as with other mandatory subjects. The lack of textbooks in the daily curriculum and standardized assessment for Hokkien may result in students having less time to learn and practice Hokkien, which could potentially lower their efficiency in acquiring the language, especially under the impact that mainstream education still promotes Mandarin as the national language. According to Reid, while younger generations in Taiwan are being exposed to Hokkien in the classroom, the context of these lessons is often limited to learning songs or basic interactions. As a result, students are not equipped with the necessary language skills for daily life or formal and technical situations. Reid argues that if the focus remains on the primarily spoken language without providing the necessary training in writing or more formal speech, these languages will not gain the same level of respect as more standardized forms of communication (Paxton, 2022). According to the 2010 census data, there was a decrease of only 2.8% in the usage of Hokkien at home among individuals born between 1946 and 1985. However, among individuals born between 1986 and 2004, there was a significant drop in usage of over 13% (Paxton, 2022). This leads to the rising concern about the efficiency of the implementation of this curriculum. Nevertheless, on the bright side, some schools are also promoting the use and appreciation of Hokkien by organizing extracurricular activities and

events such as speech contests, drama performances, and cultural festivals (Chen & Chen, 2018).

From the level of the side actors, there are some community organizations and grassroots initiatives have been established to promote the use and preservation of Hokkien (Chen & Chen, 2018). Hokkien-language media outlets, such as newspapers, radio stations, and TV programs, have been established to cater to the Hokkien-speaking community and promote the language and culture. Taiwan's entertainment industry has produced many talented artists who have made significant contributions to the Hokkien music and film scene (Chen & Chen, 2018). Pop songs and music attracts young people's attention which makes more people learn Hokkien.

### **3. A Comparison of Education Delivery of Hokkien in Taiwan and the Philippines**

The Hokkien language is spoken and spread by the Chinese community from the Fujian area across the Philippines, particularly in major urban centers such as Metro Manila, Metro Cebu, and Metro Davao, where a significant population of ethnic Chinese resides (Social: Philippine Hokkien 2023). Before China became a prominent regional power in the late 1990s, the use of Hokkien was considered outdated and undesirable. However, with China's recent political and economic ascent, speaking Hokkien has become trendier (Tsai, 2017). As a result, there is a growing demand for instructors who can teach Hokkien and Mandarin fluently (Social: Philippine Hokkien 2023). Many young Chinese parents are also choosing to use Hokkien to communicate with their children at home. Nevertheless, the current situation of Hokkien preservation in the Philippines is still quite challenging (Tsai, 2017). In this part, I will analyze Hokkien service delivery in the Philippines at the school level and family levels.

While there is an increasing demand for Hokkien language education among the Fujianese community, the number of Hokkien speakers in the Philippines is decreasing. Many younger generations of Chinese Filipinos are opting to use English, Filipino, or other regional languages as their primary language, rather than Hokkien (Tsai, 2017). Additionally, some Chinese Filipino schools have shifted to using Mandarin as the language of instruction for all subjects, which may contribute to the decline in Hokkien usage among students.

Compared with Taiwan where Hokkien classes are offered in many primary schools as mandatory, only a small portion of Chinese Filipino primary schools in the Philippines offer Hokkien curriculums (Social: Philippine Hokkien 2023). Chinese Filipino primary and secondary schools have a standard curriculum prescribed by the Department of Education, but they also offer additional Chinese subjects, which are only delivered in Mandarin. These Chinese subjects include Chinese Grammar (華語, huáyǔ), Chinese Composition (綜合, zònghé), and Chinese Mathematics (數學, shùxué). Some schools may also provide other subjects like Chinese calligraphy (毛筆, máobǐ), history, geography, and culture resides (Social: Philippine Hokkien 2023). Since all Chinese subjects are taught in Mandarin Chinese, students are usually required to use Mandarin exclusively during these classes. Some schools may prohibit the use of English, Filipino, or Hokkien during these classes (Social: Philippine Hokkien 2023). However, because of the increasing number of Fujian people who want their children to learn Hokkien, currently, Ateneo de Manila University provides Hokkien 1 and Hokkien 2 as optional courses under their Chinese Studies Program (Social: Philippine Hokkien 2023). The reason behind the difference between Hokkien in mainstream education service delivery in Taiwan and the Philippines might be due to the number of people who speak Hokkien in these two regions. While in Taiwan Hokkien is an indigenous language, in the Philippines, Hokkien is considered an immigrant language brought by immigrants from China.

At the family level, the Philippines Hokkien has been able to survive until now due to the strong support of the ethnic Chinese community, who see the dialect as an important part of their identity (Chan-Yap, 1976). A lot of immigrant parents from Fujian are willing to speak Hokkien with their children at home, which allows their children the space to practice and speak Hokkien (Tsai, 2017). However, the lack of legal protection for the dialect suggests that its preservation is not guaranteed in the long run. To ensure its survival and vitality, it would be beneficial to incorporate the dialect into the education system to pass on its legacy to the younger generation.

To sum up, Hokkien preservation in the Philippines is not receiving enough attention from educational policymakers compared to Taiwan. This may be due to the fact that Hokkien is not an indigenous language in the Philippines, and only a small number of people use it as their daily language. While there are efforts from individuals to teach Hokkien through social media, it may not be efficient enough for new immigrants from Fujian to learn Hokkien in the Philippines. Despite the positive attitudes towards Hokkien from families, the lack of Hokkien in mainstream education may hinder its preservation. Therefore, it is important for policymakers in Chinese Filipino primary and secondary schools to consider the preservation and promotion of Hokkien and incorporate it more widely into the school curriculum.

### **4. Recommendations on Hokkien Preservation in Taiwan**

The preservation of Hokkien in Taiwan, compared with the situation of Hokkien preservation in the Philippines, is more efficient. However, there is still space for improvement of language curriculums of Hokkien in Taiwan

given the fact of the significant drop in usage of Hokkien from 1986 to 2004 (Paxton, 2022). In this part, I will give recommendations at the government level, school level, and family level for the preservation of Hokkien.

At the government level, the Taiwan government should pass a written policy in supporting Hokkien in education. Now even though the government requires primary schools to have Hokkien classes almost weekly, it is still not enough for the student to master Hokkien. According to Kosonen & Benson (2021) when implementing the policy from above to the side or below, the government should be specific about the implementation and plan, otherwise, the policy might cause negative effects on the students. This suggests that the education policymakers should design the Hokkien curriculum more specifically, and set up standard guidance and assessment for schools to follow. For instance, how many hours should students take Hokkien class, how many hours should students speak Hokkien and what is the standard for passing the Hokkien exam?

The policy planning approach suggested by Hornberger (2006) can be used in designing the policy. The policy approach, also known as status planning, is concerned with the social and political aspects of language use and aims to promote one language over others as the official language or language of wider communication. This approach typically emphasizes the use of standard language and focuses on issues such as language rights, language education, and language policy (Hornberger, 2006). This suggests the government could involve measures such as promoting the teaching of Hokkien in schools, supporting the use of Hokkien in public communication and media, and protecting the language's status and rights. Aside from Hokkien implementation in schools, the government can also develop policies that encourage the use of Hokkien in public and official settings, such as signage and announcements in public transportation systems. Additionally, the government can promote the use of Hokkien in media and cultural events, such as television shows, movies, and festivals.

At the school level, preserving Hokkien at school level requires a multi-faceted approach that includes the use of students' first language as a bridge, immersion programs, student activities, and the recruitment of qualified Hokkien teachers.

One effective way of promoting the Hokkien language in schools is by using students' first language, Mandarin, as a bridge. Mandarin is the official language of Taiwan and most students are fluent in the language. Therefore, using Mandarin as the medium of instruction can help students better understand the concepts being taught in Hokkien. This approach not only makes it easier for students to learn but also ensures that their first language is respected, which can increase their motivation to learn a new language (Cummins, 2009). Also, the schools can design Hokkien immersion programs that allow students to read, speak and write in Hokkien during the winter or summer vacations. Some interesting activities can be cultural events and activities that promote Hokkien cultures, such as music, dance, traditional arts, and storytelling. These events not only foster a sense of community among students but also encourage them to take pride in their cultural heritage. Lastly, it is also very important for schools to offer well-trained Hokkien teachers who can speak fluent Hokkien because this can help students develop their Hokkien literacy and increase their motivation to learn the language (Chen & Chen, 2018). Additionally, having qualified Hokkien teachers is essential to ensure that students are receiving quality instruction and can achieve the desired level of proficiency. Schools can set up programs for teachers to learn Hokkien and infuse Hokkien into their daily classes. In addition, schools can also recruit qualified Hokkien teachers from outside the school or collaborate with other institutions to provide qualified teachers to ensure students receive the best possible education.

Family plays a crucial role in promoting a language such as Hokkien. Research has shown that the usage of language at home can positively predict the proficiency of children's language skills, and that time spent on reading and writing literacy with children is positively related to their language skills (Morita-Mullaney, 2021). Therefore, if parents in Taiwan want to promote Hokkien, they can use Hokkien as the primary language at home when communicating with their children. This can provide children with regular exposure to the language and help them develop their listening and speaking skills. In addition, teaching children to read and write in Hokkien at home can also be beneficial and produce positive effects on their Hokkien learning process.

The participation of fluent elder speakers is also crucial in preserving the dialect. When parents are not able to participate in promoting Hokkien, elderly family members who are fluent in Hokkien can serve as role models and mentors for younger generations, passing on not just the language but also cultural values and traditions. Spending time with grandparents or other elder family members who speak Hokkien can provide children with a more solid language exposure and help them to develop a deeper appreciation for the language and its cultural significance. Taking children to watch the Hokkien opera or listen to the Hokkien music can also arise children's interests on Hokkien.

In conclusion, at the government level, there should be explicit policies or guidance published by the government and policymakers on promoting Hokkien. Also, at the school level, it is essential to allow the students to have more time in immersing in learning Hokkien while providing high-quality teachers in speaking Hokkien. Finally, at the family level, parents or elder speakers of Hokkien should have a positive attitude toward

the language and show their willingness to guide and teach their children to learn the language. Overall, the promotion and preservation of Hokkien require efforts at all levels, from government policies to school curricula to family attitudes and practices. By working together, Hokkien can be continued to thrive and be passed on to future generations.

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