

A Survey on Attitudes towards Dialect Teaching in Chinese Kindergartens

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Abstract—The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes towards dialect teaching in Chinese kindergartens among kindergarten teachers, administrators and parents. This study used multi-case study approach and Kindergarten Q, Kindergarten P and Kindergarten S in Shanghai were identified to be the cases. The results suggest there is unanimous agreement among kindergarten teachers, principals and parents that dialect teaching in Chinese kindergartens is worth trying. However, they insist that the kindergarten must teach Putonghua and accept dialects.

Keywords—attitudes; dialect teaching; kindergarten

I. INTRODUCTION

As Edwards stated, “language shift often reflects a pragmatic desire for social and vocational mobility, an improved standard of living, and a personal cost-benefit analysis”[1]. This is evident with language extinction in China.

With the successful promotion of Putonghua in China, the increase of migration to urban areas, the drive for better education, and the force of employment in China, young people are increasingly not using their own minority languages or local dialects in public spheres, which often applies to their private spheres as well. Some minority languages and local dialects are facing a crisis. There are 56 minority nationalities, and some minority languages are on the decline. For instance, the people of the Hui nationality only speak Chinese instead of their minority language because of long-term intermingling with the Han majority. Chinese has become the main language used for communication by the Hui people. The Manchu had their own language in the past, but now they speak only Putonghua. Today only about 100 individuals are able to understand the Manchu minority language. The Oroqen nationality, the Hezhe nationality, and the Ewenki nationality have very small populations; their minority languages have been marginalized and put into danger. Nowadays, only people over age 60 in the Hezhe ethnic group use the Hezhe minority language[2].

Similarly, some local dialects in China are facing the threat of extinction to various degrees, such as the Fuzhou dialect, the Kejia dialect, the Suzhou dialect, and Shanghaiese. For example, the Wu family group (Shanghaiese belongs to the Wu family group) is in the worst condition and is expected to be the first to be wiped out if no action is taken to preserve it.

In recent years, the Chinese government realized the importance of preserving local dialects and is beginning to make efforts to preserve the dialects. One strategy is to implement dialect teaching in the kindergartens. In order to better implement dialect teaching in the kindergartens, there is a need to make an examination regarding the attitudes towards dialect teaching among kindergarten teachers, administrators and parents. Thus, the purpose of this study is to document the attitudes of kindergarten teachers, principals and parents towards dialect teaching in Chinese kindergartens.

Relative to the literature, the attitudes of teachers, administrators and parents were examined respectively. Regarding the attitudes of teachers, Hagen (1980) made a study in Belgium, examining teachers' attitudes towards dialects. The teachers' attitudes were mainly about linguistic insecurity, reported linguistic shortcomings, upward evaluation of their own language variants, and tolerance towards their own and their pupils' language use. In Denmark, most teachers held positive attitudes towards dialects. Nyberg (1980) conducted a questionnaire on attitudes towards classical dialects among teachers all over Denmark. The results showed that teachers had positive attitudes towards dialects. They even stressed the necessity of creating a secure atmosphere at school so that children dared to speak their dialects. They also agreed on the necessity of learning a standard language.

“Functional bidialectalism” was encouraged in West Germany, aiming at the children learning both dialect and the standard language at school and using them in appropriate situations. However, dialect teaching seldom existed in the curriculum[3]. De Craen & Humblet (1989) advocated that language variation would be not only accepted, but also would be used as a tool for language teaching.

In this study, a theme I expected to emerge was that kindergarten teachers, like the teachers in the literature, would be tolerant and holds a positive attitude towards dialects. A theme relative to attitudes of administrators I expected to emerge was that administrators would hold similar attitudes towards dialects in classrooms as the administrators in Belgium did. A theme relative to attitudes of parents was expected to emerge. Parents were expected to share the same attitudes towards dialects as the parents in Belgium.

II. METHODS

Case study seemed to be the best choice for making a holistic study. In order to reveal the attitudes of kindergarten teachers, principals and parents towards dialect teaching in Chinese kindergartens, I employed multi-cases approach to conduct the study. Shanghai is an immigration city in China, and Shanghainese teaching in Shanghai kindergartens is facing more challenges. Thus, the conclusion is applicable to dialect teaching in the kindergartens in other areas in China. Thus, Kindergarten Qing, Kindergarten Peng and Kindergarten Spring in Shanghai were identified to be the cases. Information about the attitudes of kindergarten teachers, principals and parents mainly comes from interviews and observations in these kindergartens.

III. SAMPLING SELECTION PROCEDURE

Maximum variation sampling means to pick those cases which represent various cases on dimensions of interest. Maximum variation sampling strategy aims at getting the main themes that are shared by all variations [4]. Shanghai public kindergartens have implemented Shanghainese teaching on a trial basis since September 2013. Kindergarten Qing (a demonstration one), Kindergarten Peng (a first-level one), and Kindergarten Spring (a second-level one) were identified to be cases. Within the three cases, six kindergarten teachers (two from each kindergarten), three principals (one from each kindergarten) and six parents (two from each kindergarten), were identified as respondents. In total, there are 15 respondents in my study.

IV. RESULTS

Across the three kindergartens, six kindergarten teachers and three principals are all native Shanghainese. Regarding parents, there is a greater number of native Shanghainese children in Kindergarten Qing. In contrast, Kindergarten Peng and Kindergarten Spring have much lower numbers of native Shanghainese children (Figure1). Nateness makes a difference regarding the attitudes of parents towards Shanghai teaching in Shanghai kindergartens.

Due to the different positions they hold, the kindergarten teachers, principals and parents all take different attitudes towards the teaching of Shanghainese. In general, kindergarten teachers, principals and parents are tolerant and positive towards Shanghainese teaching across the three kindergartens. However, there are some subtle differences amongst them regarding their attitudes on Shanghainese teaching. I made a comparison between them and found themes regarding the attitudes of kindergarten teachers, principals and parents towards Shanghainese teaching in Shanghai kindergartens. These appear in the following chart (Figure2).

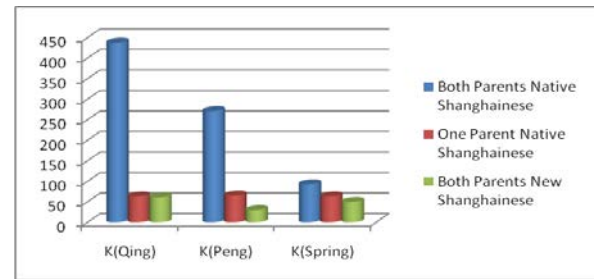


Fig. 1. Comparison of dialect background of parents in three kindergartens

Respondents \ School	Kindergarten Qing	Kindergarten Peng	Kindergarten Spring
Kindergarten teachers	Tolerant but independent on individual's initiatives	Tolerant but lack of motivation	Tolerant but unenthusiastic
Principal	Unnecessary but worth trying	Positive and worth trying	Confused but worth trying
Parents	Positive but some unenthusiastic	Enthusiastic but unclear about the purpose	Positive but lack of knowledge about the teaching of Shanghainese

Fig. 2. Attitudes towards dialect teaching in three kindergartens

A. Kindergarten Teachers: Tolerant

Kindergarten teachers' attitudes play a paramount role in implementing Shanghainese teaching. In general, the kindergarten teachers are tolerant towards Shanghainese teaching in their classrooms. Shanghainese is their local dialect and they would like to teach the children some Shanghainese.

However, the kindergarten teachers in Kindergarten Qing are evidenced to be equipped with a stronger awareness of Shanghainese teaching, but Shanghainese teaching is entirely dependent on individual teacher's initiatives. The kindergarten teachers may not behave in the same way as they think they behave in their classes.

From my observations and what teachers said in their interviews, the kindergarten teachers in Kindergarten Peng seemed to have a lack of initiative and motivation and those in Kindergarten Spring seemed unenthusiastic towards Shanghainese teaching. For example, in Kindergarten Qing, as Principal Wen asserted,

Some teachers were aware of creating a situation for better Shanghainese teaching, such as playing the film *A Spring River Flowing East*, which is helpful for Shanghainese teaching in the class, but some teachers were not.

The kindergarten teachers reported that they were positive towards Shanghainese teaching. However, they were not enthusiastic or motivated to implement Shanghainese teaching in kindergarten.

In Kindergarten Peng, Principal Mei encouraged the kindergarten teachers to speak more Shanghainese with the children in their classes. However, the amount of speaking Shanghainese was dependent on individual teachers. The teachers did not initiate daily use of Shanghainese frequently in the classroom. As Teacher Xu explained:

I want to speak more Shanghainese. However, Putonghua has been the instructional media in the class for so many years and it's very hard for me to make a change, even though I am aware of the importance of speaking Shanghainese.

In addition, the kindergarten teachers had never tried to teach daily use of Shanghainese in the classroom. For the kindergarten teachers, Shanghainese teaching involves teaching the ballads in Shanghainese.

In Kindergarten Spring, the kindergarten teachers argued that teaching the children some Shanghainese was important and they were happy to see more and more children start to speak Shanghainese. As Teacher Guo in Kindergarten Spring stated:

Children get to know Shanghainese is the language spoken by the people who are living there. The children, particularly the New Shanghainese children, develop an intimate feeling for Shanghai. Shanghainese is a part of Shanghai culture. The children get to know Shanghai culture, the customs in Shanghai and the history of Shanghai by learning Shanghainese. Shanghai culture will be passed down from generation to generation. In fact, Shanghainese is full of fun and charm. Besides, children are curious about everything. It's easy to stimulate children's interests in learning Shanghainese.

However, the Kindergarten Spring teachers are not motivated enough to implement Shanghainese teaching. Shanghainese teaching is entirely dependent on individual teachers initiatives. The kindergarten teachers agreed in principle with Shanghainese teaching in the kindergarten, but in practice they did not generate enthusiasm in Shanghainese. Thus, Shanghainese teaching is extremely limited.

To summarize the kindergarten teachers' attitudes across three kindergartens: they are tolerant towards Shanghainese teaching, but they need motivation and to be equipped with a stronger awareness of how to teach Shanghainese in the kindergarten. Although teachers may appear to have a positive attitude towards Shanghainese teaching (at least say that they do), this does not necessarily reflect the way that they behave in the classroom.

B. Principals: Worth Trying

In general, the principals expressed some confusion about Shanghainese teaching in Shanghai kindergartens. All of them argued that children should learn Putonghua. However, despite their reservations, they held the opinion that Shanghainese teaching is worth trying.

The principals may have some doubts or questions about Shanghainese teaching, but they are nevertheless making efforts to implement Shanghainese teaching and regard it as worth trying. Principal Wen, is an influential and powerful leader in Kindergarten Qing. She shared with me her understanding of Shanghainese teaching:

I was deeply impressed by a gatekeeper when I was a small child. No matter what time, the gatekeeper was dressed up with a suit and a tie. When the tie was color faded, he would

use a pen to color it. It was not a matter of vanity, but a good attitude towards life.

Laokela refers to those upper-class gentlemen in Old Shanghai who were born into aristocratic families. The word *kela* came from "class." In the 1960s, *Lao* was added to mean senior. The principal, Wen, argued that the gatekeeper had something in common with *laokela*.

She then added:

It's not very necessary to implement the teaching of Shanghainese in the kindergarten. However, kindergarten is only a short time in the children's lives, if they look back when they are grown up, they may remember something like Shanghai culture. In the process of the teaching of Shanghainese, the children are expected to experience Shanghai culture and the unique Shanghai spirit—an open, liberal, graceful and dynamic spirit, which is the good aspect of the teaching of Shanghainese.

Principal Mei in Kindergarten Peng is a native Shanghainese and much more enthusiastic towards Shanghainese teaching. She shared a story about her son. She was frightened to see that her eight-year-old son speaks Putonghua so much better than Shanghainese. He was almost unable to speak Shanghainese. So she started to speak more and more Shanghainese at home.

Though there are some difficulties, Shanghainese teaching is still worth trying, she argued:

The children were expected to love speaking Shanghainese, gain pleasure when speaking Shanghainese and love Shanghai itself; thus, children should not be measured only by how well they can speak Shanghainese. In the process of learning Shanghainese, children were forming a good study habit. Learning Shanghainese requires persistence too, and it is a matter of study quality.

Principal Mo in Kindergarten Spring is also a native Shanghainese. She admitted to being confused about the purpose of Shanghainese teaching in Shanghai kindergartens:

Is Shanghainese teaching only for children to learn another dialect or just to pass down Shanghai culture? Will Shanghainese teaching be against a global world? Maybe it's not necessary to implement Shanghainese teaching in the kindergarten, because children get education from different sources, such as TV, radio, books and contact with people. Shanghainese teaching may be more effective if we try for different ways.

Despite their reservations, the principals advocated that Shanghainese teaching is worth trying. Principal Wen in Kindergarten Qing advocated:

Children get to know the history and development of Shanghai. In this way, Shanghai spirit and Shanghai culture are internalized in them. Unconsciously they love Shanghai, and love China. It is a very specific patriotism education, but very practical. Children first love the people around them, then love the place they live, and finally love the country where they were born.

To conclude, the principals have some confusion about Shanghainese teaching in Shanghai kindergartens. They are unclear about the purpose for Shanghainese teaching. However, despite their reservations, principals advocate that Shanghainese teaching is still worth the effort.

C. Parents: Positive

Across the three kindergartens, the great majority of parents are positive towards Shanghainese teaching and the prevailing feeling is a positive one. While some New Shanghainese parents frown on Shanghainese teaching, it is because they are afraid that their children will not understand the teacher in the class and they also regard Shanghainese as useless.

Comparatively speaking, the parents are much more involved at Kindergarten Qing than the other two kindergartens.

To clarify this, in Kindergarten Qing, grandparents were invited to tell stories in Shanghainese, parents were invited to perform Huju, and other parents participated in activities related to Shanghainese teaching in the classroom. Five parents every day were doing voluntary work in the morning to help the children with washing their hands. During such times, the parents were free to communicate with the children in Shanghainese. Kindergarten Peng mainly involved the parents in Shanghainese teaching through the PTO. The PTO once collected some ballads in Shanghainese for the kindergarten. Parents were also invited to participate in some activities related to the teaching of Shanghainese. However, there was no parents' voluntary work, storytelling, or performing. So far, Kindergarten Spring has not involved the parents in the teaching of Shanghainese.

Accordingly, the parents have a stronger awareness of Shanghainese teaching and are also involved in Shanghainese teaching, but the parents are not clear enough about the purpose for teaching it. As the New Shanghainese parent, Zhou, stated:

I am very happy to see my daughter sing some ballads in Shanghainese at home. When she is playing on the playground, she understands Shanghainese and can make more friends. She is a translator for us sometimes when we go outside. She appears to be more confident. I am very happy to see that. However, I want to know more about Shanghainese teaching in the kindergarten. Sometimes, I am confused. For example, the parents in Kindergarten Spring appeared to have little knowledge of ways of being involved in Shanghainese teaching.

In contrast, the parents in Kindergarten Peng are more enthusiastic towards Shanghainese teaching because the New Shanghainese parents are more open and eager to fit into Shanghai city. They hope their children will become a part of Shanghai and proud of being Shanghainese. Even some native Shanghainese hold a similar opinion about Shanghainese teaching. The native Shanghainese parent, Xue, stated:

I have two children. I only spoke Putonghua at home with the older one before he went to school. I was afraid that he couldn't understand Putonghua at school. However, my older child is speaking a pidgin Shanghainese now. For the second child, I started to speak only Shanghainese to her. She can speak Shanghainese pretty well. I don't think it is

necessary to worry about children's study at school. It's easy for children to adapt to the environment.

In Kindergarten Spring, the majority of parents are positive towards Shanghainese teaching in Shanghai kindergartens. However, some parents, especially New Shanghainese parents, are not enthusiastic towards Shanghainese teaching because they either have concerns about their children's other studies in the kindergartens or they regard Shanghainese as useless.

To conclude, the great majority of parents were positive towards the teaching of Shanghainese. However, some parents, especially New Shanghainese parents, were negative towards Shanghainese. They either regarded learning Shanghainese as useless or as a waste of time.

V. CONCLUSION

Due to a lack of communication between the kindergarten teachers, the principals and the parents regarding Shanghainese teaching in the kindergarten, Shanghainese teaching is not as successful as they expected. Relative to the literature, the following conclusions are drawn:

First, Shanghai kindergarten teachers did not share the same attitudes of linguistic insecurity, reported linguistic shortcomings, or upward evaluation of their own language variants as the teachers had in Belgium, but similarly, Shanghai kindergarten teachers were as tolerant towards dialects in classrooms as the teachers in Belgium were. However, they were observed not speaking dialects often in classrooms.

Second, kindergarten teachers need to be equipped with motivations stronger awareness of using dialects more often, and awareness of how to teach dialects in the kindergarten.

Third, to a certain extent, the principals shared similar attitudes that children should learn Putonghua at schools. At the same time, the principals believed that dialect teaching was worth trying.

Fourth, more parents (and even grandparents) should be involved in dialect teaching in Chinese kindergartens.

There is unanimous agreement among kindergarten teachers, principals and parents that schools should teach children Putonghua. However, children should not be taught Putonghua at the expense of Shanghainese, nor at the expense of their feelings of identity or security. To the delight of those of us who advocate for the preservation of threatened dialects and languages, kindergarten teachers, principals and parents are positive towards dialect teaching and regard it as worth trying.

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