Language Environment and Educational Background of Chinese Parents in Sarawak, Malaysia: ESL or EAL?

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the language use of Chinese from different educational backgrounds to determine whether their language environment is that of an ESL (English as a Second Language) or EAL (English as an Additional Language) environment. A questionnaire survey involving 400 Chinese parents was conducted in Kuching, Sarawak, of which 239 were Chinese-educated, 81 English-educated, and 80 Malay-educated. The results show that the English-educated participants operate in an ESL environment, with a large proportion using English with their spouse, children and friends, cherishing English the most, and using it for expressing deep feelings. The Chinese-educated participants, on the other hand, mainly operate in an EAL environment, and Mandarin has both utility and affective value. The Malay-educated participants were divided in their use of Mandarin, Chinese dialects and English, and their emotional attachment to these languages. In both the Chinese- and Malay-educated groups, those who are more proficient in English function in an ESL environment whereas those who are less proficient function in an EAL environment. Since the number of Chinese attending English medium private primary schools is negligible and English is no longer the medium of instruction in public schools, the focus should be on the Chinese-educated Chinese because their number is much larger than the Malay-educated Chinese. Going by this, the results suggest that the English language environment for the Sarawak Chinese community in future would be inclined towards EAL rather than ESL because Mandarin will be their primary language, and Malay will most likely be used for interethnic communication, leaving a smaller role for English.

KEYWORDS: Chinese parents, educational background, EAL, ESL, language environment, language use

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Introduction

In Malaysia, English has the status of the second most important language, after Malay which is the national and official language. By virtue of its status as an official language, Malay is also the medium of instruction in public schools. English is taught as a subject in public schools but it is the medium of instruction of some private schools. As far as the training of teachers to teach English is concerned, the focus has been on the teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) in many Malaysian universities and colleges. Other countries like Australia and the United States use the term Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), in view of the diversity of their language students, some of which may not have much English in their language environment. For these language learners, English is more like a foreign language rather than a second language. However, as these terms are used with variations in meaning by researchers, we use Judd's (1981) classification of English language use in this paper.

In Judd's (1981) classification of English language use, there are four categories of language environments. First, English as a Second Language (ESL) is a language environment where "nonnative English speakers spend a vast majority of their time communicating in English" (Judd, 1981, p. 61). ESL speakers use English for all purposes with the possible exception of intimate communication with family and friends. They also use all four skills of English and can handle all registers. Second, the language environment for English as an Additional Language (EAL) is such that English is used in more limited ways because they rely on their primary language to fulfil a variety of communicative needs. Judd (1981) states that EAL speakers use English for formal purposes, and mainly for government, intra-country commerce and mass media. All four skills of English are needed for the political, economic and social communication. Third, English as a Language for Wider Communication (ELWC) refers to a language environment where English use is restricted to the formal communication. ELWC speakers are usually the highly educated elite and they use English mainly for reading and hardly for oral communication. Fourth, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a language environment where English serves little communicative function. The contexts in which English is used are literature and high culture, and perhaps occasionally communication with English-speaking visitors. These four categories of Judd (1981) present a continuum of English use in the language environment. More than three decades ago, Judd (1981, p. 63) had already noted that Malaysia is "in the process of switching between categories", that is, from ESL to EAL.

So far, sociolinguistic research on language use in Malaysia has proliferated but the findings have not been used to assess the current language environment to determine whether it is still an ESL environment or an EAL environment. Malaysia has retained the policy of teaching English as a Second Language since the independence from British rule in 1957 but it is uncertain whether an ESL language environment still prevails in Malaysia. In other words, there is a need to assess whether Malaysians still spend a vast majority of their time communicating in English for a variety of purposes at this point in time. The language use of the Chinese community in Malaysia can be used in a dipstick test of the prevailing language environment. In Sarawak, where English remained as the medium of instruction longer than in West Malaysia (the last cohort of English-educated at Upper Six level was in 1988 in Sarawak compared to 1982 in West Malaysia), an ESL environment is expected because there are still those with an English educational background among those in their late forties. Furthermore, since one of the distinguishing elements between ESL and EAL is the possible use of English in the family and friendship domains (Judd, 1981), examining these domains of the language environment would indicate the presence of English in relation to other languages. In this paper, we report the findings of our study which show that the language environment for the Chinese community in

Sarawak is on a continuum from ESL to EAL depending on their educational background. The findings have implications on the relevance of the language policy on teaching English as a Second Language.

Aim of the study

The study examined the language use of the Chinese in Sarawak from different educational backgrounds to determine whether their language environment is that of an ESL or EAL environment. The specific aspects examined were:

1. the influence of educational background on frequency in which English is used in relation to other languages in the family domain;
2. the influence of educational background on frequency in which English is used in relation to other languages in the friendship domain; and
3. the influence of educational background on attitudes towards English and other languages.

Educational background refers specifically to the medium of instruction in primary school. In this paper, the terms "Malay-educated", "Chinese-educated" and "English-educated" are used to refer to people who attended primary schools where Malay, Mandarin and English are used as the medium of instruction respectively.

Background on the Chinese in Sarawak and Malaysia

Chinese in Malaysia can be divided into different dialect groups, namely, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Hing Hua, Min Dong people (known as Hokchew or Foochow), Hakka and Cantonese (World Huaren Federation, 2014). In Sarawak, Foochow, Hakka and Hokkien are the three majority Chinese dialect groups. Foochow is the largest dialect group (34.5%) of the Chinese population in Sarawak, living mainly in Sibu, Sarikei and Bintangor (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). In Kuching, Hokkien is the largest Chinese dialect group (37.7%), followed by Hakka (20.4%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015; World Huaren Federation, 2014).

More often than not, these Chinese dialect groups speak their respective dialects with their acquaintances especially those who are able to speak the same dialect. Mandarin, on the other hand, is a mutual language used among Chinese from different dialect groups as this language is learnt either as a subject in school or as the medium of instruction in Malaysia (Tan, 2005). Other languages may be used for communication purposes as well depending on their level of competence of that particular language and this is related to their educational background.

In the Malaysian setting, many Chinese parents value proficiency in Mandarin but few speak of English with the same emphasis. One of the Chinese Foochow mothers in Ting and Mahadhir's (2009) study conducted in Kuching (the capital city of Sarawak) was quoted as saying "Chinese must study Mandarin, at least until Primary Six so that they can read Chinese newspapers" (p. 11.15). This mother wanted her children to study in a Chinese primary school so that they could read and write in Chinese. The usefulness attached to Mandarin supercedes that attached to Chinese dialects, for example, Hokkien (Puah & Ting, 2013), Hakka (Ting & Chang, 2008), and Foochow (Ting & Hung, 2008). However, the Chinese dialect groups value English for academic and work purposes (Ting & Sussex, 2002; Ting, 2007).

Method of the study

Participants

The participants of this study were 400 Chinese participants living in Kuching in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. They had a child in primary one at the time of the study. Table 1 shows details on demographic characteristics of participants. Of the 400 participants, 239 (or 59.8%) participants were Chinese-educated, 81 (or 20.2%) participants were English-educated and 80 (20.0%) participants were Malay-educated. The educational background of the participants refers to the medium of instruction used in primary school. More participants were female (256 or 64.0%). The participants held a range of jobs: women not in paid employment, professionals such as doctors and lecturers, clerks and office assistants, technicians, managers and business entrepreneurs, and blue collar workers such as labourers and cleaners. A majority of the Chinese participants in this study had secondary education (46.5%), followed by university education (24.0%), college education (20.7%), and primary education (8.8%).

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic variables		Freq (N=400)	%
Gender	Female	256	64.0
	Male	144	36.0
Medium of primary education	Chinese	239	59.8
	English	81	20.2
	Malay	80	20.0
Level of education	Primary	35	8.8
	Secondary	186	46.5
	College	83	20.7
	University	96	24.0

Questionnaire

The instrument used for collecting data in this study was a questionnaire. To find out whether educational background influenced frequency in which English is used in relation to other languages, a section of the questionnaire focused on the languages used in the family and friendship domains. Open-ended questions were formulated so that the participants were free to write down the languages used with their family members (spouse, parents, children) and friends (Chinese and non-Chinese).

The second section of the questionnaire focused on language attitudes to find out whether educational background influenced their feelings towards English and other languages. The two questions posed were "Which language do you cherish (love) the most in your life?" and "Which language do you use for expressing deep feelings (when you are angry, grieving, …)?"

The last section of the questionnaire elicited demographic characteristics of the participants such as age, gender, race, medium of their own primary education (i.e., Malay, Mandarin and English), qualifications and job.

The questionnaire was translated from English to Malay because two school principals requested to have the Malay version of the questionnaire. The translation was checked using back-translation by the researchers.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Permission from the state and federal education departments was sought for the study to be conducted. From the list of 151 primary schools listed in the Sarawak State Education Department website, 14 primary schools in the Kuching and Padawan districts were selected for data collection. These schools were selected as they are located in urban area and it was convenient for the first researcher to carry out the research. The list of schools, the research proposal and a copy of the questionnaire was submitted to the Ministry of Education to seek approval for conducting the study. The approval letter from the Ministry of Education was submitted to the Sarawak Education Department which then issued a letter informing the principals of the selected schools of the study.

Subsequently, appointments with the principals were made in order to obtain their permission to conduct the study and to discuss arrangements for the data collection. Some principals instructed the class teachers to distribute the questionnaires to their students who would pass them to their parents. The teachers helped to collect the questionnaires and return them to the first researcher. Two of the principals requested the first researcher to contact their students' parents herself. In the latter case, the first researcher waited in the school compound to meet the participants during lunch and after class in the afternoon. Those who agreed to participate in the study were given questionnaires. The first researcher returned to the school to collect the completed questionnaires after one or two weeks.

Generally, the participants took approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. A total of 726 questionnaires were distributed and 539 were returned but 139 were not completed, leaving 400 usable questionnaires for data analysis. For the analysis, frequencies were tabulated based on the participants' educational background (Chinese, English, Malay). Percentages were later calculated to show the proportion in which various languages were used in the family and friendship domains – in order to establish the prominence of English in their daily lives.

Results and discussion

Educational background and frequency in which English is used in relation to other languages in the family domain

Table 2 shows the language use by the Chinese participants with different educational background in the family domain with their parents, spouse and children. The results show that the educational background of the participants did not influence the language used with their parents because most of the participants (75%-81%) spoke Chinese dialects with their parents, regardless of whether they had a Chinese, English or Malay educational background. English was hardly used although a greater proportion of Chinese-educated participants (24.69%) spoke Chinese to their parents than participants with English (9.88%) and Malay educational backgrounds (18.75%).

Table 2
Frequencies of language use in the family domain based on educational backgrounds

Educational backgrounds of participants	Languages	Parents		Spouse		Children	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Participants with Chinese educational background (n=239)	Mandarin	59	24.69	139	58.40	194	81.17
	Chinese dialects	179	74.90	98	41.18	32	13.39
	English	1	0.41	1	0.42	13	5.44
	Total	239	100.0	238*	100.0	239	100.0
Participants with English educational background (n=81)	Mandarin	8	9.88	12	14.81	22	27.16
	Chinese dialects	65	80.25	49	60.49	19	23.46
	English	8	9.88	20	24.69	40	49.38
	Total	81	100.01**	81	99.99**	81	100.00
Participants with Malay educational background (n=80)	Mandarin	15	18.75	39	49.0	47	58.75
	Chinese dialects	65	81.25	36	45.0	15	18.75
	English	0	0	5	6.0	18	22.50
	Total	80	100.00	80	100.00	80	100.00

*One missing response (spouse is deceased or divorced)
**Some total percentages do not add up to exactly 100.00 due to rounding off

However, the educational background of the participants influenced the frequency in which English was used with their spouse. Table 2 shows that 24.69% of English-educated participants spoke English with their spouse, compared to 0.42% for the Chinese-educated participants and 6.25% for the Malay-educated participants. Both the Chinese- and Malay-educated participants relied on Chinese and Chinese dialects in communication with their spouse.

For communication with their children, the results also showed the influence of educational background on the preferred language. Table 2 shows that the Chinese-educated participants tended to speak Mandarin with their children (81.17%). More English-educated participants chose to speak English with their children (49.38%) compared to Mandarin (27.16%) and Chinese dialects (23.46%). Interestingly, the Malay-educated participants were like the Chinese-educated participants in favouring Mandarin (58.75%). Only 22.50% of the Malay-educated participants spoke English with their children. It is unlikely that the Malay-educated participants of Chinese descent would speak Malay with their children based on previous findings which indicated that the Chinese viewed Malay as a language of the Malay ethnic group (Ting & Nelson, 2010). The results of the present study confirmed the earlier findings.

With the change from English to Malay-medium education in the two decades following the independence of Malaysia from British rule, the last cohort of English-educated participants in Sarawak is 47 years old in the year 2016. This means that in future years, most of the Chinese parents with children in primary school would have either a Chinese- or Malay-educational background. The present results suggest that English would not feature much in parent-child communication in the future, and the main language of communication in Chinese families would be Mandarin.

Educational background and frequency in which English is used in relation to other languages in the friendship domain

Table 3 shows the language use by the Chinese participants with different educational background in the friendship domain, taking into account the ethnicity of their friends. The results show that the English-educated participants were more likely to speak English with their Chinese friends (23.75%) than the Chinese-educated (0.84%) and Malay-educated (0%) participants. For these two groups of Chinese participants, English was not their choice as they preferred to speak Mandarin, followed by Chinese dialects.

Table 3
Frequencies of language use in the friendship domain based on educational backgrounds

Educational backgrounds of participants	Languages	Chinese friends		Non-Chinese friends who can speak Chinese		Non-Chinese friends who cannot speak Chinese	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Participants with Chinese educational background (n=239)	Mandarin	180	75.31	155	64.85	2	0.84
	Chinese dialects	56	23.43	13	5.44	2	0.84
	English	2	0.84	30	12.55	67	28.03
	Malay	1	0.42	41	17.15	168	70.29
	Total	239	100.00	239	99.99**	239	100.00
Participants with English educational background (n=81)	Mandarin	24	30.00	19	23.46	0	0
	Chinese dialects	37	46.25	7	8.64	2	2.47
	English	19	23.75	45	55.55	58	71.60
	Malay	0	0	10	12.35	21	25.93
	Total	80*	100.00	81	100.00	81	100.00
Participants with Malay educational background (n=80)	Mandarin	49	61.25	36	45.00	2	2.50
	Chinese dialects	28	35.00	3	3.75	0	0
	English	3	3.75	28	35.00	43	53.75
	Malay	0	0	13	16.25	35	43.75
	Total	80	100.00	80	100.00	80	100.00

*The total is not the full number because of missing responses
**Some total percentages do not add up to exactly 100.00 due to rounding off

The Chinese-educated participants' language choice was different depending on whether their non-Chinese friends could speak Mandarin. If they could, 64.85% preferred to speak Mandarin; if not, they chose Malay (70.29%). It seemed that if their non-Chinese friends could speak Mandarin, the Chinese-educated participants regarded them like their Chinese friends and spoke Mandarin with them. In the case of non-Chinese friends who could not speak Mandarin, Malay was their first choice and English was their second choice.

For English-educated participants, English was clearly the preferred language for communication with non-Chinese friends, regardless of whether they could speak Mandarin. If they could speak Mandarin, then 23.46% of the 81 English-educated participants spoke Mandarin but if their non-Chinese friends could not speak Mandarin, they (25.93%) opted for Malay. Contrary to the results for the Chinese-educated participants, in the absence of Mandarin as an option, English was the first choice for a majority of the English-educated participants for interethnic communication.

For the Malay-educated participants, English took on a more prominent role for interethnic communication with non-Chinese friends. If their non-Chinese friends could speak Mandarin, then their preference was Mandarin (45.00%) over English (35.00%) but if their non-Chinese friends could not speak Mandarin, then their options were English (53.75%) and Malay (43.75%).

As far as interethnic communication is concerned, in future years English will be second to Malay with the phasing out of English-medium education. This is because about 28% of Chinese-educated participants and 54% of Malay-educated participants chose to speak English with their non-Chinese friends who could not speak Mandarin. However, Malay is the preferred language because about 70% of the Chinese-educated participants and 44% of the Malay-educated participants preferred to speak Malay to their non-Chinese friends who could not speak Mandarin. More than 90 per cent of Chinese nowadays who are local-born are fluent in Malay

(Lee, 1997). It is possible that the Chinese-educated Chinese speak Malay to close the distance with their non-Chinese friends (Burhanudeen, 2006). Ting and Nelson's (2010) study of 184 Chinese Foochow undergraduates in a Malaysian university in Sarawak uncovered the belief that the Chinese living in Malaysia should use Malay to integrate with other ethnic groups.

Educational background and attitudes towards English and other languages
Table 4 shows the affective value of languages based on the participants' educational backgrounds. The results showed that the educational background influenced the affective value attached to languages for the Chinese- and English-educated. The Chinese-educated cherished Mandarin the most but used both Mandarin and Chinese dialects for expressing their deep feelings. The English-educated attached the greatest affective value to English.

Table 4
Affective value of languages based on educational backgrounds

Educational backgrounds of participants	Languages	Language cherished the most		Language used for expressing deep feelings	
		Freq	%	Freq	%
Participants with Chinese educational background (n=239)	Mandarin	176	73.6	141	59.0
	Chinese dialects	31	13.0	82	34.3
	English	31	13.0	14	5.9
	Malay	1	0.4	2	0.8
	Total	239	100.0	239	100.0
Participants with English educational background (n=81)	Mandarin	13	16	12	14.8
	Chinese dialects	11	13.6	16	19.8
	English	57	70.4	53	65.4
	Malay	0	0	0	0
	Total	81	100	81	100
Participants with Malay educational background (n=80)	Mandarin	30	37.5	31	38.75
	Chinese dialects	18	22.5	24	30
	English	30	37.5	24	30.0
	Malay	2	2.5	1	1.25
	Total	80	100.0	80	100.0

In contrast, the Malay-educated did not cherish Malay the most and did not use Malay for expressing their deep feelings. They were divided in the affective value attached to Mandarin, Chinese dialects and English. Being of Chinese descent, it is natural for them to value Mandarin and Chinese dialects. Since the Chinese community does not feel comfortable using Malay with other Chinese (Ting & Nelson, 2010; Omar, 1985), some of the Malay-educated Chinese cherished English the most and used it to express their deep feelings.

The attachment of the Malay-educated participants to Mandarin, Chinese dialects and English is consistent with the earlier results on their language use in the family and friendship domains (particularly with non-Chinese friends who cannot speak Mandarin). For the Malay-educated participants, Mandarin and Chinese dialects are for family communication and since they speak mainly Mandarin with their children, in the future the Malay-educated Chinese in Sarawak will be using mainly Mandarin in family communication. For the Malay-educated participants, English and Malay serve communicative functions in the friendship domain, particularly in communication with friends from other ethnic groups. However, the functional use of Malay does not translate to affective attachment to Malay. In the future, although there will not be many who are English-educated, English will probably still have some affective value for the Malay-educated Chinese in Sarawak.

Conclusion

The study on language use of the Chinese in Sarawak showed that educational background determines their language environment. At one end of the continuum is the English-educated Chinese who operate in an ESL environment. They use English for the full range of communicative functions, including communication with family and friends. They also cherish English the most and use it for expressing deep feelings. At the other end of the continuum is the Chinese-educated Chinese who may operate in an EAL environment. They use Mandarin as the primary language of communication and have affective attachment to it. The present generation of Chinese parents in their twenties to forties may also speak Chinese dialects with their parents, spouse and Chinese friends but since most of them speak Mandarin with their children, they will most likely produce a generation of Mandarin-speaking Chinese. Among the current generation of Chinese-educated Chinese, those who are proficient in English will function in an ESL environment but those who are not proficient in English will function in an EAL environment. The Malay-educated Chinese lie in the middle of the continuum, with English playing the role of an ESL for some and EAL for others. About half of them use English with their non-Chinese friends while the other half prefer to use Malay. If their non-Chinese friends can speak Mandarin, almost half of them would turn from Malay to Mandarin but English would still be an option for about one-third of them. They are divided in their emotional attachment to Mandarin, Chinese dialects and English.

These findings on the language environment for the Chinese community in Sarawak need to be interpreted in light of the preference of the Chinese community for Chinese medium education. Lee and Ting (in press) reported statistics from the Sarawak State Education Department which show that 88% of the Chinese students are enrolled in Chinese medium primary schools and 12% are in Malay medium primary schools. Since the number of Chinese attending English medium private primary schools is negligible and English is no longer the medium of instruction in public schools, the focus should be on the Chinese-educated Chinese in the future. Going by this, the English language environment for the Chinese community in Sarawak would be inclined towards EAL rather than ESL. Since English is taught as a subject in school, it is unlikely that the English environment would switch to an ELWC environment (where English is mainly needed for reading) or an EFL environment because English still has communicative value in the society (Judd, 1981). This study shows that the educational backgrounds of individuals have a significant impact on their language use and the prevailing language environment. Language policies shape the language environment of the people. The findings suggest that among the Chinese community of Sarawak at least, the language environment may no longer be that of an ESL environment. From the perspectives of sociolinguistics, the phenomena described in this paper are interesting. But more importantly from the status of English as an International Language and the need to improve the standard of English among Malaysian users, the findings provide further insight on the needs to develop classroom pedagogy, curriculum provision and assessment suited to an EAL environment.

This study was limited to a group of Chinese parents whose children were enrolled in the schools sampled. Further studies should investigate the prevailing language environment for other ethnic groups, if possible beyond Sarawak, so that the combined findings can inform language policies and language-in-education policies of multicultural and multilingual Malaysia.

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