

PROMOTING HOKKIEN DIALECT AT THE WORKPLACE: A SURVEY ON NON-CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The Chinese community in Malaysia is made up of at least 6 sub-ethnic groups which are distinguished by their dialects. The main objective of this study is to identify the role of Hokkien dialect in promoting effective communication in the work place among non-Chinese communities from different social background. This study also explores the level of interest of non-Chinese communities in pursuing the dialect as well as the needs of related expertise areas that required Chinese dialects competency in the work place in Malaysia. The methodology used in this study includes interviews. Sets of questionnaires are distributed to 3 groups of informant i.e. civil servants, workplace employees and self-employed group. The significance of the study is to develop understanding at the work place as well as to strengthen ethnic relationship between Chinese and non-Chinese communities in Malaysia. It is also hoped that the study will contribute to government agencies, language planners and researchers in the field.

Keywords: Hokkien dialect, workplace inter-communication, non-Chinese communities

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1.0 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural, multilingual country with a total population of 30 billion.¹ The population consists of Malay (64%), Chinese (24%), Indian (10%) and some indigenous ethnic (5%). In the case of the ethnic Chinese languages in Malaysia, there are 6 major sub-ethnic groups whose ancestor tongues may be *Hokkien*, *Hakka*, *Cantonese*, *Teochew*, *Hailam*, or *Foochew* which can also be traced as a cultural heritage.² Despite Mandarin Chinese has been taken as a standard language so as to unite different sub-ethnic groups after Independent of the country, the Hokkien dialect reserves its status as the only dominant variety used by the Chinese in both Northern and Southern regions in Peninsular Malaysia. There are two sub-varieties found in Peninsular Malaysia namely 'Penang Hokkien' in the Northern and 'Johore Hokkien' in the Southern region.

The Hokkien dialect commonly be recognised as a 'standard language' among Chinese in the two regions for most of the formal and informal contexts. Inter-ethnic relationships are however fast gaining importance in the modern society today, the Hokkien dialect is found lack of functional use for inter-racial communication between Chinese and non-Chinese communities. Thus, this study is significant for the improvement of intercultural and inter-ethnic relations in a multilingual country like Malaysia.

The Hokkien Dialect

Dialects are simply linguistic varieties which are distinguished by their vocabulary and pronunciation.³ The Hokkien dialect, originated from the Minnan dialect (闽南话), is indeed a distinct variety in Southeast Asia or linguistically referred as Southern Min. It is one of the Southern Chinese dialects widely spoken in the Fujian Province. The origin of the Hokkien dialect was of two variants-- *Quanzhou hua* and *Zhangzhou hua*. The variants merged and eventually became known as the Amoy dialect when the Xiamen city became a popular trade centre in the 18th century. The Minnan dialects then spread all over the world with widespread Chinese migrations from late 17 to 19 centuries.⁴ However it has undergone both morphological and phonological changes when compared to the source Minnan dialect due to historical and socio-cultural factors.

Note:

1. A total population consisted of 30,333,124. Resources: Malaysia Chinese Tree web.
2. Ng Boon Sim. (2014). A Study of Distinctive words in Penang Hokkien. Journal of Quanzhou Normal University 2014. (Vol 1). Quanzhou: Quanzhou Normal University Press.
3. See Holme J., (2002:132).
4. See Zhou (2007: 1)

Intercultural Communication

Samovar et al. (2003) recommended the term ‘form of intercultural communication’ in the case of encompassing references to interracial communication, inter-ethnic communication and intra cultural communication. From their standpoint, the term ‘cross cultural communication’ is too restrictive when referring to communication between people from different cultures. According to Samovar et al. (2003), intercultural communication usually occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member from another culture. And, it is indeed a form of communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbols system are distinct enough to alter the communication event. The idea of intercultural communication correlates closely with the concept of social network which refers to the pattern of informal relationships that people engage in on a regular basis. There are two types of networks categorized by Holmes (2002), i.e. density and plexity. Density refers to members of a person’s network who are in touch with each other while plexity is a measure of a range of different types of transaction people are involve in with different individuals.⁵

■2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Given the use of dialects at varying levels of communication, this paper was conceptualized to identify the role of Hokkien dialect in promoting effective communication at the work place among non- Chinese communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Level of interest of non-Chinese communities from different social backgrounds in pursuing the Hokkien dialect is explored. Essentially, the study reports on expertise areas that require Chinese dialect competency in the workplace, Hokkien in particular.

■3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Bodman (1955), various Chinese dialects e.g. Amoy-Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin were taught in Government Schools during the British colonial period.⁶ The languages were deemed to fill a need i.e. to serve diplomats and government servants from non-Chinese group who might find it facilitative to communicate with the early Chinese settlers in Malaya.⁷ He further highlighted that the textbook ‘Spoken Amoy Hokkien’ was written upon the British government’s request and thus, two volumes of the textbook were published by the Federal Government of Malaya in 1955 and 1958 respectively with emphasis on dialectal knowledge.

Milroy (1980) explores that linguistics differences between different areas in Belfast, between different social and cultural groups, and between men and women, as well as characteristic of particular linguistic variables. The study clearly shows that ethnography approach and a close statistical study of social networks and their linguistic correlates are invaluable to the understanding of linguistic behavior, linguistics variation, language change and the maintenance and development of vernacular varieties.

Ang (1992)⁸ investigated situation of language distribution in Taiwan. He further emphasis that the popularity of Taiwanese Minnan dialect is enhanced when it was given official status in Taiwan. And now the Taiwanese recognized it as ‘language of Taiwan’ 台湾话.⁹ Ultimately, the dialect served as a communication tool over the region of Taiwan among Taiwanese from different linguistics background.

Luo (2004) introduced a spoken corpus of Taiwanese Minnan dialect namely, Taiyu (台语). The corpus has been adopted and published at the website of Ministry of Education, Taiwan in 2007¹⁰ as to enable the standardization of written Taiyu. Another great effort made by the ministry were made in training professionals in education as well as for Minnanese media industry. It is reported that the ‘Taiwanese Indigeneous Minnan dialect Programme’ was introduced in selected national primary schools in 2009 and later the programme been implemented by the government as one of the compulsory subjects at primary schools.

Lee (2012) claimed that this particular dialect had been known as the lingua franca for the Chinese in the region of Southeast Asia.¹¹ The dialect was referred by different names throughout the region. For example, the Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia named it as ‘hok kien ua’ or ‘hok kien ue’ (福建话)¹² while the Chinese in Philippines called it ‘lan lang ue’ (咱人话).¹³ Lee (2012) discussed mainly on the maintenance of Chinese dialects.

Note:

5. See Holmes J., (2002: 184)
6. Bodman N.,(1955). Spoken Amoy Hokkien. Kuala Lumpur: Federal Government of Malaya.
7. From mid- 19th century until the end of World War II, Western diplomats usually learned the Amoy Hokkien as one of the preferred in colonial states with Hokkiens in majority.
8. Ang Uijin.(1992).Taiwan yuyan zhi lu. Taipei: Sanmin Publisher
9. In the 1940s- 1950s Taiwan declared Amoy Hokkien as standard language
10. www.met.edu.tw
11. See Eileen Lee et al. (2014: 157)
12. Meaning ‘dialect of Fujian province’
13. Meaning ‘our own language’

■4.0 METHODOLOGY

Data collection tools in this study including intrusive tools I.e. interviews and questionnaires. A total of 60 sets valid questionnaires were collected from Penang, Klang Valley and Johor. The 3 groups of non- Chinese respondent consisted of 20 government servants, 20 employees from private sectors and 20 employers with more than 10 years business experiences. However not all respondents are local-

born Malaysian. Some of them were foreign workers in late 1990s and later migrated to Malaysia. Face- to-face interviews involved respondents which were selected at random in shopping mall, city councils, government office, hospitals and commercial areas.

■5.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study found that Hokkien dialect plays an important role among non- Chinese communities for networking and communication at the work place. The data shows that private sectors indicate high demand of employees with ability to speak Hokkien in their daily operations compared to government servants and self- employed group.

Communication Needs of Hokkien dialect at the Work Place

The result shows that the Hokkien dialect is strongly intervened with government agencies, corporate agencies and self- recruited businesses in Peninsular Malaysia. It shows that the dialect possesses effective communication for government servant, employees in private sectors and self- employed group. Identification of the need to use of Hokkien dialect at the work place is shown in Chart 1(a).

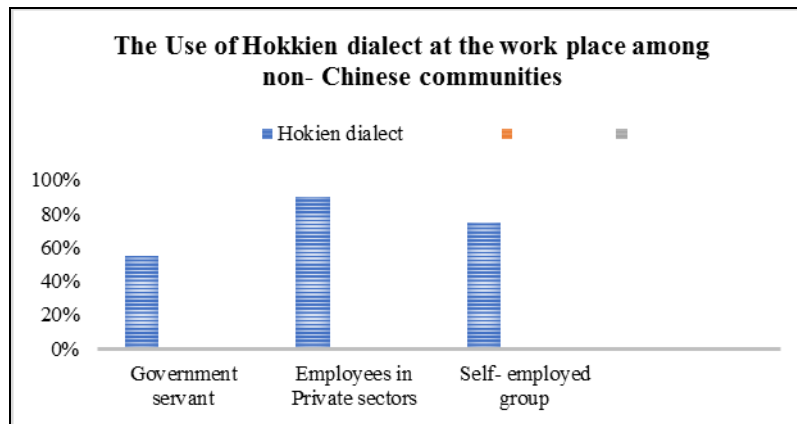


Chart 1(a): The Use of Hokkien Dialect at the Work place among Non-Chinese Communities

The study found that 55% respondents from government sectors agreed that high level of competency in Hokkien dialect enabled them to communicate effectively with the local Chinese. This is due to needs of better understanding when servicing the public from sub-urban and rural areas, especially the elderly and illiterate Chinese. For example, doctors and nurses served at Hospital Bukit Mertajam, Hospital Seberang Jaya and General Hospital in Penang often used simple Penang Hokkien to communicate to the elderly Chinese in order to obtain precise information of the symptoms as well as some other related information. As a result, effective communication leads to trust and understanding between the doctors, medical staff and the patients. Another example is the needs of competency in Hokkien dialect among police officers. It is reported that police offices in Bukit Mertajam and Parit Buntar forced to use simple Hokkien terms or phrases for investigation of criminal cases. They sometimes need to use Hokkien to communicate with the Chinese villagers during road blocks.

Therefore, this group of respondent commended that urgency in learning Hokkien is always there. Another group of the non- Chinese employees admitted that ability to use Hokkien added advantage to their career prospects. Chart 4.1 (a) shows 90% of work employees from private sectors agreed that competency in Hokkien dialect added advantage to their career prospects, perhaps to be promoted internally. Some elderly employees commended that fluency in Hokkien helps in bridging them to succeed in their career path, for instance, job promotion from sales person to sales manager and branch manager. In some companies, the non- Chinese staff who mastered in any local Chinese dialects gain higher pay compared to others. For example, a full time product specialist needs to travel to different part of Malaysia to carry out sales activities and collections of customers' feedback. Besides providing excellent services, maintaining good relationship with customers is necessarily because it will eventually leads to achievement of sales target set by the company. In some cases, the respondents admitted that competency in Hokkien dialect helps to understand their customers' needs better especially in the aspect of Chinese culture and taboos.

For self- employed group, 75% agreed that Hokkien dialect is very significant in their business network compared to Mandarin. Hence, it highlights that the dialect has strongly intervened with the business nature and socio- cultural characteristics. One of the respondent described that besides being involved in sales and marketing and distributions of pharmaceutical goods and healthcare

products, the company also involved in the distribution of third party products e.g. veterinary products and cosmetics and beauty products. Hokkien speaking staff seemingly is more preferred due to the broad range of products and an extensive distribution network in Malaysia covering high traffic outlets such as supermarkets, hypermarkets, chain health and personal care stores, clinics and hospitals and general retail traders.

Level of Interest in Pursuing Hokkien dialect by Non – Chinese Community in Malaysia

Analysis shows tendency of the 3 groups of respondent in pursuing Hokkien dialect if they were be given a chance, regardless tuition fees is involved (see Table 4 (b)).

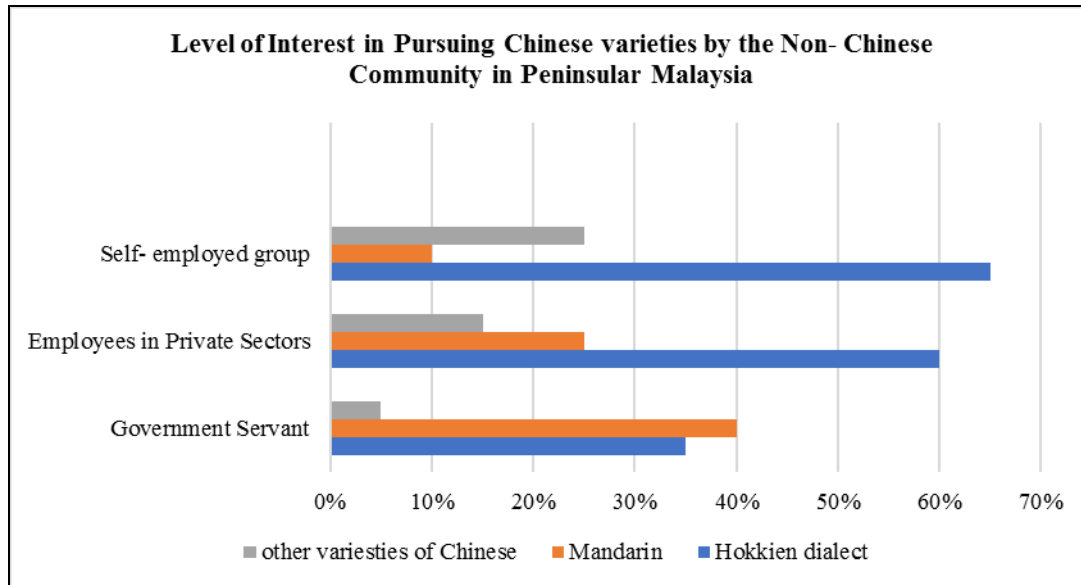


Chart 1(b): Level of Interest in Pursuing Chinese Varieties by the non- Chinese community in Malaysia

Chart 1(b) shows that among the 3 groups of respondents, government officers have the lowest tendency to learn Hokkien (35%) compared to employees from private sectors and self- employed group. This is due to the reason that most of the respondents feel comfortable using Bahasa Malaysia in official matters and they hope that status of the national language can be maintained. The survey shows that the tendency in learning Mandarin is higher compared to Chinese dialects. In contrary, self- employed group expressed highest level of interest in learning Hokkien (65%) and followed by employees from private sectors (60%). For employers, interact with key members and senior members regularly in the organization and within the business line is fairly important. Therefore, mastering in Chinese dialects, for example Hokkien, will eventually help in seeking more market information on price, projects and market development. As for employees in private sectors, they believed that by taking initiative to learn the functional use of Hokkien not only helps in developing relationship with customers, also in proposing solutions for customers and suppliers. Moreover, they wish to invest in Hokkien and to have opportunities to connect with Hokkien - speaking community. In other words, the respondents hoping to use the dialect beyond work place.

6.0 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study shows that the use of Hokkien dialect enabled respondents to connect further with different people in business settings. Intercultural communication has increasingly demanded by the market in recent years. In business setting, Chinese dialects still contributed as an important persuasive tool nowadays.

Commercial Value of Hokkien dialect at the Work place

Statistics from Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce website shows Chinese companies located in Peninsular that Chinese dialects speaking candidates always be given priority. There are 161 job vacant in the Northern region and 136 jobs in the Southern region¹⁴ while 365 vacancies in Petaling Jaya.¹⁵ Categories of vacancy including branch manager, sales clerk, product specialist, business development executive, marketing coordinator account manager, sales retail and event sales, administrative assistant, sales representative, administrative officers etc. In Malaysia, expertise in sales and marketing, hospitality, business management, commerce and finance, and most of the SMEs in manufacturing, manufacturing- related services, primary agriculture and services sectors in Malaysia require their employees and management team to have good written and verbal communication skills in English, Malay and Mandarin, while spoken Chinese dialects like Hokkien, Cantonese etc.¹⁶ be added advantage. For example, Delfi Marketing Sdn Bhd, one of the leading trading house in Malaysia that offers marketing sales and distribution services, also a listed company on Singapore since 2004, is supported by teams of sales personnel strategically positioned at branch offices all over West Malaysia and East Malaysia. The company strictly looking for applicant who can speak 3 main languages i.e. English, Malay and Mandarin plus one or two dominated local Chinese dialects due to the broad range of products and an extensive distributions network in Malaysia.

Besides, job requirement for branch manager offered by LA FARGEHOM indicates preference of Chinese speaking applicant under the company's second wish list, stated 'able to converse in Chinese language (Cantonese and Mandarin) as well as other Chinese dialects due to the existing pool of Chinese speaking customers'. The ads clearly shows that as a branch manager, he has to be involved in top-down internal communication in the organization i.e. directing and disseminating communication on objective for sales and marketing plan for effective implementation by the sales team. In addition, negotiation with customers and suppliers in order to maintain and develop new business account also fall under a branch manager's responsibilities.

Chinese dialects fluency is also reportedly important in less obvious communication centered professionals too, for instance, accounting and finance in certain companies. The online news made on 23, March 2016 regarding job recruitment by Citibank Bhd Kuala Lumpur reported that "certain banks with a large Chinese speaking customer base also prefer candidates who can converse in Mandarin as well as certain dialects. In KL, for example, those who can understand and speak Cantonese are at advantage, and within Penang, Hokkien is to go-to-dialect".¹⁷

Coexistence of Vernacular languages in Malaysia

The language situations in Malaysia bears testimony to the diversity with many Malaysians being generally bilingual or trilingual. The Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil, Hindi and other minority languages play their roles as inter and intra group communication tools in both formal and informal contexts. Of the many languages, Malay and English are commonly used as the main medium of communication across ethnic groups. Although Chinese dialects represent the identities of each Chinese sub- groups, none of them was selected as a standard language or official language for Malaysian Chinese.

In this study, it shows that the Hokkien dialect is not just a symbol of their ancestors' origin. It is primarily utilitarian rather than symbolic. It can be used for government businesses as well as corporate communications. This bilingual situation is possible as discussed by Crystal (2000: 80) that the dominant language is attractive because it facilitates outward movement from the indigenous community. He added that the dominant language is necessary because it provides people with a bridge between the two worlds— an intelligibility bridge, without which their progress would be negligible.¹⁸ Therefore, the Hokkien dialect should be co-exist with other official languages in government sectors and private sectors for their daily operations.

■7.0 CONCLUSION

According to Milroy J. (2001: 97), in multilingual countries, the government often declares a particular language to be the national language for political reasons, especially for the newly independent countries including Malaysia. Yet, the national language cannot serve all the internal and external functions. Hence, it is strongly recommended that the non- Chinese communities in Malaysia should be encouraged to learn to speak the dialect in promoting ethnic relation besides the consideration of its cultural values and commercial values. The presence of dominant language like Malay and English and the use of Hokkien should be coexist without confrontations for it is not barriers to separate the Chinese from non- Chinese communities.

14. www.pccc.org.my

15. www.officeparrats.com

16. 103 in Bayan lepas and Georgetown, 11 in Butterworth and 12 in Bukit Mertajam (Penang); 26 in kamunting and Ipoh(Perak); 136 Johor Bahru.

17. www.globelink.com.my The Latest News 23 March 2016

18. Crystal D. (2000). *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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