

Taiwanese language teaching and development in the United Kingdom

Dr Meili Fang¹

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

fm2@soas.ac.uk

CONFERENCE NAME: Taiwan Studies: British Perspectives

Introduction: Taiwanese in the UK

This paper describes some of the processes in setting up the first Taiwanese language course in the UK, and briefly introduces the Endangered Languages Project at SOAS.

Taiwanese as a language is not very well known in the UK and the first and only teaching program is taught in the Department of China and Inner Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.² However, there are interesting developments in the UK in two areas associated with Taiwanese. Firstly, there is increased interest in contemporary Taiwan society, as shown by the new Taiwan Studies Programme established in 1999 at SOAS, which emphasises contemporary issues in Taiwan. Second, in the UK as in many other countries, there is an explosion of interest in the Mandarin Chinese language as a result of China's increasing prominence. Both of these developments could potentially provide contexts for the expansion of teaching Taiwanese language; however at the moment Taiwanese language teaching remains in the shadow of both of them.

Nevertheless, the process of setting up the course and its resources has raised many valuable issues regarding the status of Taiwanese, its linguistics, literacy, and appropriate teaching methodologies. Our approach to teaching Taiwanese as a foreign language in a UK context may offer some useful thoughts about Taiwanese language education within Taiwan.

Taiwanese at SOAS

Establishment

Background

At SOAS, Taiwanese language is usually referred to as Hokkien. The Hokkien course was introduced primarily as a language option in conjunction with the new MA Taiwan Studies programme. Our Head of Department, Dr Bernhard Fuehrer, wrote:

I am convinced that Taiwan Studies programmes without this language option are ... lacking an important aspect of this field

¹ I would like to thank Bernhard Fuehrer and Andrew Simpson of SOAS for the information they have provided about the background of Taiwanese teaching in the UK and initiating the Hokkien course at SOAS.

² In the past, the SOAS Language Centre has occasionally provided Taiwanese courses on demand, but only on a one to one basis.

The Hokkien course was thus set up as a pilot course in 2004 within the Department of the Languages and Cultures of China and Inner Asia. Our department is the natural place for the course because it is the only one in the UK that teaches, in addition to Modern Mandarin and Classical Chinese, the regional languages Cantonese and now Taiwanese (Hokkien). The initial aims of the course were to provide a more rounded Taiwan Studies course, as well as to develop resources, teaching capacity, and enrolment numbers so that the course could grow into a full Hokkien course at all levels. It was also opened to students other than MA Taiwan Studies to increase numbers and make it more viable.

Administrative and financial issues

We still have a small number of students, and SOAS courses with less than five students need to attract additional funding. The course preparation and delivery has been made possible by some additional SOAS-based funding as well as funds from the Taiwan Representative Office in London who generously responded to our application for support.

It is difficult to find teachers of Taiwanese who are qualified and experienced native speakers of the language. It seems that previously, the Taiwanese government had a program which funded teachers to work overseas in institutions that applied to teach Taiwanese (e.g. a course was established at Harvard University). However, this system seems to have ended about 2 years ago.

Although we have enough keen students to teach the pilot courses, it has not been possible to attract a larger number so far. Further below, I describe a possible reason as the type of motivation that students have for studying Hokkien. In addition, we have to live with some restrictions on course entry. It seems that these conditions were applied in order to satisfy the faculty rules at the time the course was proposed and to reflect conditions of entry to other courses, such as Cantonese;³ however, they may not be fully appropriate to the linguistic realities of Taiwanese:

- Taiwanese students cannot enter the course (despite the fact that many don't speak Taiwanese)
- students need to have at least one year's study of Chinese (despite the course's aims to be independent of Mandarin)
- perhaps due to some other local arrangements, some students may not be encouraged to enter the course

Linguistic problems

Other difficulties relate to the linguistic situation. While Taiwanese pronunciation is particularly difficult for foreigners, the description of the pronunciation system is not yet agreed. There is no clear agreement about the phonetic description, there are several regional dialects with lexical variation, and there are many non-consistent writing systems. Even the language naming is confusing, since it is known variously as Taiwanese, Hokkien, Minnan, Southern Min, or Holo.

Resource creation required choices at every step. For example, developing a textbook has been a complex task because:

³ For example, students of Cantonese are felt to be "fast tracked" if they are already familiar with features of Mandarin, such as tone (Andrew Simpson, pc).

- we have chosen, for linguistic and pedagogical reasons, to use a Roman writing system, which has little existing resources, so all materials had to be created from scratch
- there is virtually no literature in Hokkien using a Roman writing system
- there are a few dictionaries; however, they are missing many words and frequently have different spellings
- there are significant dialect differences in Taiwan, and, in the absence of a standard authoritative dictionary, it can be difficult to decide the best spelling

Orthography

While there are moves to introduce a new orthography for Taiwanese within Taiwan, in the past it has typically been written using Chinese characters. However, Chinese orthography is not effective for Taiwanese. On the one hand, Taiwanese written with Chinese characters is not very readable for many traditional native-speaking Taiwanese, who received no literacy education for Taiwanese. On the other hand, neither is it readable for other Taiwanese people who speak limited or no Taiwanese language.

Chinese characters may even be a threat to the Taiwanese language:

- losing characteristic sound of Taiwanese when expressed in Chinese characters; Taiwanese has sounds and tones that do not even exist in Mandarin. This observation is not new, for example Klöter (2006:7) describes complaints early last century against attempts to “adjust the spoken language to fit literature”
- chaotic use of Chinese characters to express different Taiwanese dialects, which is very confusing to learners!

As is well known, there are a variety of competing orthographies for Taiwanese, none of which is widely used. I compared several systems, including IPA and p^heh-o^he-j^hi (Missionary Romanisation). We decided to use p^heh-o^he-j^hi because it is:

- easy to read
- easy to write
- has one sound for one character, a “transparent” orthography that is good for foreign learners

As you probably know, the topic of orthography has been controversial in Taiwan and has been associated with political developments. It seems that p^heh-o^he-j^hi has recently become more accepted and has achieved some official recognition in Taiwan. It is also now reasonably well technically supported, and integrated into Unicode (International Character set for computers).

There are still problems, because p^heh-o^he-j^hi is not easy to read for either native Taiwanese or learners; it takes extra effort to write, for example identification of a suitable font and input method, and various dictionaries do not agree on spelling.

We decided not only to use p^heh-o^he-j^hi, but also to avoid Chinese characters, for several reasons:

- to avoid the linguistic problems that arise when Chinese characters are used to write Taiwanese
- to make it clear that it is a course book for Taiwanese for foreigners, i.e. knowledge of Mandarin is not required

- to emphasise that Taiwanese is a language in its own right, not an auxiliary to Mandarin

In addition to creating a new course and materials, we are also considering how our language teaching methodology could make a contribution to teaching Taiwanese domestically. For example, we distinguish carefully between mother tongue and foreign language teaching methods. All too often, Chinese language courses in the UK use mother-tongue teaching methodologies to teach foreign learners. On the other hand, in Taiwan, as the acquisition of Taiwanese as a first language in Taiwan declines, foreign-language or second-language approaches may prove more effective. For example, if Taiwanese language education was more clearly distinguished from Mandarin, students may not have such a fear of Roman-based orthographies.⁴ Foreign teaching environments such as we have at SOAS are a good place where Taiwanese language resource creation can grow “unpolluted” (e.g. by dependence on Chinese characters).

Preparing for the first pilot

When I first joined SOAS to teach the Hokkien program, course preparation was at the stage of selecting the textbook *Taiwanese Book 1* (Maryknoll 1984). Although old and unattractive, it was one of the few texts readily available and it had the merit of using a Romanised orthography.

Funding support for developing the course came from a new centre at SOAS and UCL, the Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning – Languages of the Wider World, a new centre at SOAS (<http://www.lww-cetl.ac.uk/>). LWW-CETL is a joint activity of SOAS and University College, aimed at reinforcing our strengths in language teaching, bringing together language teaching activities across the Language Centre and Faculties, and creating new resources for teaching.

I prepared various other resources– course design, curriculum, a revised description of the Taiwanese tone system, and an evaluation of the proposed textbook. I was able to draw on my previous experience teaching Taiwanese at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and in particular a number of more modern sources prepared by TUFS’ Professor Higuchi Yasushi (Higuchi 1992).

First course 2005

The course began in 2005 with three students. The Maryknoll book was not easy to teach from, and the students found many points of dissatisfaction with it. These problems included:

- the pronunciation section was inadequate
- conversational materials were old-fashioned, out of date, and not practical
- excessive and arbitrary vocabulary in each lesson
- some parts coloured by its Missionary origins; which the students found distracting

Fortunately quite a lot of other materials had already been prepared – lessons, exercises, and listening materials, and we began using these more. This material formed the core of the textbook we later developed.

⁴ Ideally, both Taiwanese and Mandarin would be taught from primary school level as truly bilingual programs.

It is worth mentioning that there is a link between this course and progressive teaching methodology. For some time I have been using what I call a “Performance Approach” to language teaching and learning. This approach, which I also used in teaching Mandarin at the University of Tsukuba in Japan, is based on ensuring regular language production by students and maximising the “value” of that language production. In conventional teaching, what students produce typically has little actual use or value, except e.g. for assessment. As teachers, we usually rely on the *deferred value* of our efforts, such as when students go on to further study, or interact with speakers of the language. However, a Performance Approach aims to find ways to make language learning activities meaningful and valued in classroom settings. In particular, they do this by connecting to the social and theatrical context of the classroom, rather than attempting (as in typical communicative approaches) to merely simulate real-world events that can only really happen *elsewhere*. The approach includes the use of drama; for example, students plan, write and perform a short original drama and the performance of it is a major part of the assessment. I have also introduced this approach for the teaching/revitalisation of the endangered language Karaim, spoken in Lithuania (Csató and Fang 2006, Csató and Nathan, in press). A small project to document this approach using the Hokkien class as an example was also funded (£2650) by CETL.

Second course 2006

The major change for the second course in 2006 was that we went into it with a draft textbook *Elementary Spoken Hokkien – a modern textbook* (authors Meili Fang and Bernhard Fuehrer). The textbook was developed in the summer, drawing on materials prepared for the first course, and funded (about £7,500) by CETL. It has a carefully designed and progressive curriculum, content, and activities.

We had hoped to trial the first draft textbook in a Summer Intensive Course but the course was not well advertised and there were not enough students for the course to run. Nevertheless, we used the extra time to revise and expand the text and to create an accompanying CD of the listening materials.

There are two major features of *Elementary Spoken Hokkien*. First, it is specifically designed for learners of Taiwanese as a foreign language (many other Chinese texts and courses are over-influenced by mother-tongue teaching methodology). Secondly, it uses *only* peh-ōē-jī, and does not include Chinese characters.

The students

What kind of students do we have? There have been a small number of students so it is not possible to make any strong generalisations. But there seem to be some interesting patterns.

Firstly, their backgrounds are varied, which is characteristic of the student population in UK and especially at SOAS. Of 7 students, only two have been from the UK; one was from France, one from USA, one from Japan, one from Canada (with Hong Kong heritage) and one from China. However, most of them have previously studied Mandarin.

It is easier to make generalisations about their motivations for studying Taiwanese. Almost all of them have either lived in Taiwan, visited Taiwan, or have Taiwanese partners or special friends. In written statements about why they want to study Taiwanese, they consistently say that they want to communicate more deeply with Taiwanese people and culture. For example:

- “my experience will be enriched, by even a basic knowledge of Taiwanese, as Mandarin will only take you so far, especially outside the major cities”
- “[my goal is] to be able to comfortably converse in Taiwanese and to read and translate the poetry and fiction”
- “[I was] recommended the aesthetic beauty of Taiwanese over the convenience of Mandarin”

It seems that not only do these students want to go beyond Mandarin, but also that they feel they have discovered a “hidden” or previously unknown language, some kind of secret key to open communication with real Taiwanese people and culture.

These students therefore have an overwhelmingly *integrative* motivation for learning Taiwanese. For them, the Taiwanese language is associated with a specific place and people, to which they feel identification and affection. Taiwanese is not seen as an instrument for trade, travel, or education. While this conclusion might seem heart-warming, and helps adjust the teaching program to the students, it suggests that more needs to be done to attract a wider range of students.

A teacher’s background

Unfortunately, there are few people who have been teaching Taiwanese as a foreign language. Before teaching at SOAS, I was a Foreign Professor at the Language Centre of University of Tsukuba in Japan, where I taught Chinese. At the same time, Professor Higuchi at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies asked me to teach Taiwanese there (as “Express Chinese Seminar in Hokkien”), which I did for about 3 years.

I also taught in Taiwan, as assistant professor of Japanese at Fu Jen University in Taipei. At that time I first started applying my interest in language teaching methodology, which occupied a large part of my undergraduate and postgraduate study. I am interested in using modern methods and technologies, for example we do a lot of teaching through drama with some use of video etc.

Another aspect which I find helps with language teaching is my research on comparative linguistics, mostly Japanese and Chinese, although recently I have also been looking at comparative grammar of Mandarin and Taiwanese. Such comparative work is especially useful in teaching Hokkien because most of the students are learning or have learnt Chinese. More importantly, a teacher’s command of grammatical analysis allows him/her to provide students with a deeper understanding of the language, and to answer all their difficult questions!

I believe that language teachers should have a full range of skills from use of innovative methodology to firm understanding of the language’s sound, grammar, semantic and pragmatic systems in order to provide a complete and flexible language education.

Taiwan, Taiwanese and Endangered languages

Another language perspective, also very active at SOAS, is language endangerment and language survival. It is believed that about half of the world’s 6000 languages are not likely to survive another 100 years due to globalisation, and social, economic, technological and political changes. It is already visibly happening fast enough around us.

Few people would go as far as to say that the Taiwanese language is endangered – at least for now. It is still being learnt as a first language by many children, and is

spoken in other communities and diasporas in south-east Asia. But it is surely not totally safe. Living here at home, you may feel comfortable – Taiwanese is always available (even increasingly available) on TV, and perhaps when you call your older relatives. But living away, as I have done most of my life, I become more aware of a decline every time I come back to Taiwan; I see that children of my Taipei friends have little competence in the language, and are embarrassed to speak what they know, that parts of the language are disappearing, such as those that relate to passing farming practices, and that the local dialects of Taiwanese, if not already declining, will be threatened by efforts to strengthen the language nationally.

At SOAS we host the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, currently the world's largest and most comprehensive project devoted to the problem of language endangerment (<http://www.hrelp.org>). The project grants about £1,000,000 annually to researchers via their host institutions to document endangered languages throughout the world.

Language endangerment is relevant to Taiwan in several ways. Firstly, it is worth remembering that even languages with very large populations can decline – for example, Irish Gaelic declined as a result of British colonialism and then collapsed when the great potato famine of the mid 19th century killed a large number of the remaining speakers. Similar patterns are occurring today in various parts of the world. In Taiwan, although there are important advances in the recognition and use of Taiwanese, there is still the possibility of political or economic pressure, or of “bottom up” language decline, as ordinary people speak it less and less every day in the home.

We certainly do know that there are many endangered languages in Taiwan and in its region. The most important are the languages indigenous to this land, of which about a dozen are still spoken but are seriously endangered. The region of south and southeast Asia, including PNG, has more languages than anywhere else on earth, and around half of them are endangered.

The Rausing Project at SOAS is funding one group of Taiwanese researchers but we would like to see many more. One team from Providence University is documenting and assisting in revitalising a language of the Philippines:

Digital Archiving Yami Language Documentation

Professor Der-Hwa Victoria Rau, Providence University, Taiwan

Project Details:

Major Documentation Project. Duration: 2005-2007. £40,600

Project Summary:

The goal of this project is to prepare digital archive materials, with a team from Providence University in Taiwan, to document the Yami language and facilitate preservation and dissemination of the Yami materials collected since 1994 by the principal applicant and her Yami language consultant. In addition to digitally archiving the 20 narratives, reference grammar, trilingual dictionary with 2000 entries, and multimedia pedagogical materials, the principal applicant will also collaborate with the local consultants to document daily conversations, business transactions and festivals/ceremonies.

<http://yamiproject.cs.pu.edu.tw/yami/>

Table 1 shows HRELP funding by continent. You can see that £870,000 of work on endangered Asian languages has been funded (you can also see that Africa has been rather neglected). However, Table 2 shows that only a minority of that research has been administered or hosted from Asian institutions, or indeed been conducted by Asian researchers. There is therefore a great opportunity for Taiwanese language researchers to increase participation, and I have been asked to encourage you to consider applying for grants and to let others know about the programme.

Table 1: HRELP Funding and languages by continent 2003-6

	Africa	Asia	Latin America	North America	Australia-Pacific	Europe	Total
grants	8	25	22	10	20	0	86
budget £	267,309	870,311	746,339	355,048	999,301		3,242,793
languages	8	40	29	11	25		114
researchers	8	37	34	11	34		125

Table 2: HRELP Funding: host institutions and languages by continent 2003-6

	Africa	Asia	Latin America	North America	Australia-Pacific	Europe	Total
No. of grants	9	25	22	10	20	0	86
No. of host institutions	1	6	8	28	13	30	86
Budget by area	271794	870311	746339	355048	999301	0	3242793
Budget by host institution	5460	280383	271193	907661	892748	885348	3242793
No. of languages	9	40	29	11	25	0	114
No. of researchers	9	37	34	11	34	0	125

Conclusion

I have discussed a number of points raised by the teaching of Taiwanese in UK, and some of its context. I'd like to conclude by summing up some points of action for increasing teaching of Taiwanese both in Taiwan and overseas.

- there may be opportunities following the increase of interest in Chinese, but currently, student motivations for studying Taiwanese are quite distinct

- there may be opportunities for *heritage learners* – increasing number of Taiwanese and Chinese overseas who are becoming more aware of the loss of their heritage, and seek to regain it through language study
- courses need to appeal to a wider range of motivation, and need to be well advertised
- more support from the Taiwanese government would assist, not only through funding but also in helping to raise the profile of Taiwan and its culture, economy etc.
- further progress on developing an autonomous Taiwanese language teaching tradition, with orthography, and body of literature, and accessible official sources for systems of writing, spelling, pronunciation, grammar etc.
- fruitful academic exchanges between UK and Taiwan universities, such as in external funding of Taiwanese scholars for language research in their own region

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