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Investigating Language Shift Among Chinese Indonesian Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of language shift among Chinese Indonesian students in Taiwan, focusing on their Mandarin Chinese language proficiency and language preferences. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through language tests and questionnaires. The participants comprised 118 Chinese Indonesian university students in Taiwan. Fishman's (1964) theory of language shift and his (1972) theory of language use domains provide the theoretical framework for this research. The findings indicate that a language shift is occurring among Chinese Indonesian students, with 49% of participants no longer using Mandarin Chinese and only 10% actively using it. Their proficiency in Mandarin Chinese varies, ranging from beginner to intermediate and advanced levels. These results suggest that language shift is more likely to occur in migrant minority groups, especially when the host community or dominant society exerts significant influence on the minority group. As a result, the vitality of Mandarin Chinese is being challenged among Chinese Indonesians in Taiwan. The study recommends that minority language speakers and researchers take proactive measures to preserve their native languages.

Keywords: Language shift, Mandarin Chinese language, Chinese Indonesian, Migrant minorities

Introduction

Describing one of the foreign migrant communities in Indonesia, the Chinese Indonesians, whose population exceeds 2.8 million or makes up 1.2% of the Indonesian population (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2011), can be associated with the words controversial, complex, and unique. Chinese Indonesian community is foreign-born, local born, or new immigrants of Chinese from Mainland China in Indonesia (Tan, 2008). Wang (1976) stated that Chinese Indonesians are the most complicated ethnic Chinese community in Southeast Asia due to their complex relations with local native groups and their government. Having arrived in Indonesia in the 16th-17th centuries, the cultural differences they brought from their homeland created stereotypes among native Indonesians (Coppel, 1994). This issue escalated during the New Order regime period (1967-1998).

During the era of Indonesia's second president, Soeharto, known for his New Order regime, several controversial regulations were imposed on Chinese Indonesians. Suryadinata (1997) described how these contentious policies included banning Chinese names, the celebration of Chinese New Year or other Chinese traditions, the use of Mandarin Chinese language, the standard and official form of Chinese (Trumble, 2007), which all of these affected their identity. This was fueled by the entry of communist ideology and the communist party, which threatened Indonesia, leading the locals to blame Chinese Indonesians as the carriers of communist ideology. This ultimately caused riots and attacks on

the Chinese by the locals (Coppel & Coppel, 1983). The tension peaked in 1998 during the monetary crisis and reformational era in Indonesia, when a massive number of native Indonesians attacked Chinese Indonesians physically and mentally, robbing their belongings, shop items, house equipment, and targeting them (Wibowo, 2001).

Even though reconciliation steps taken by the third president, B.J. Habibie, allowed Chinese Indonesians to reclaim their identity (names, language, and culture) after the 1998 riots, and although subsequent presidents did more to restore the rights of discriminated Chinese, the after-effects deeply impacted the following generations of Chinese Indonesians. This was evidenced by Bilven, Nyúl, and Kende's (2022) research, which showed that Chinese Indonesians have a higher degree of exclusive victimhood, a weaker national identity, and higher prejudice against native Indonesians.

The weaker national identity felt by Chinese Indonesians may undeniably affect their language use, as proposed by Fishman (1999). Although the concepts of language and ethnic identity are seldom considered identical, they are somewhat interconnected. Furthermore, Oetomo (1988) explained that Chinese Peranakan (mixed-blood Chinese Indonesians) had already shifted their language to Indonesian in the private domain since the nineteenth century, while the Chinese Totok (pure Chinese Indonesians) still maintained their language, though this requires further investigation. Therefore, considering the past political riots and their after-effects, Chinese Indonesians are suspected of starting to shift their ethnic language from Mandarin Chinese to Indonesian, the lingua franca and official language in Indonesia.

A language shift is a sociolinguistic phenomenon frequently observed in migrant communities, especially among younger generations. Ravindranath (2010) explains that a language shift involves a language community slowly abandoning one of the two languages in social settings in preference to the other. Fishman (1972a) further adds that this commonly occurs among the youth of a minority linguistic community, who choose to speak the dominant majority language rather than their parent's native tongue. Consequently, the language shift typically takes place among the second generation or younger.

The language shift phenomenon is deeply connected to the language identity of Chinese Indonesians. Considering the post-anti-Chinese riots period, Chinese Indonesians face a dilemma between national identity and citizenship in the process of Indonesian nation-building (Mubah & Anabarja, 2020). Furthermore, ethnic Chinese Indonesians continue to experience social pressure when their identity and belonging are widely questioned in public (Aizawa, 2011). There should be efforts to reclaim the language identity of Chinese Indonesians. Thus, to encourage Chinese Indonesians to reclaim their mother language, a study to investigate the language shift among them needs to be conducted.

In order to gain better insights from the representative Chinese Indonesian community, this study will focus on Chinese Indonesian students currently studying in Taiwan. According to the Ministry of Education (2023), there are approximately 16,000 Indonesian students presently pursuing studies in Taiwan, making them the second-largest group of international students in Taiwan. Among these students, Chinese Indonesian students are predominant. They come from various regions in Indonesia and are young adults. This means that they are currently the youngest young adult generation and would be the perfect source of information to observe the language shift.

Several studies have explored Chinese Indonesians language shift, however, they are very few, not representing the whole country and lack of methods. For example, Yuliana and Yanti (2023) discovered that young Chinese Indonesians in Jakarta are shifting from their Chinese languages/dialects, such as Hakka, Teochew, and Hokkien (CHL), to a mix of English and Indonesian. Their study employed descriptive statistics and thematic analysis through a case study among 100 young Chinese Indonesians in Jakarta, focusing specifically on Indonesia's former capital city, Jakarta. However, the study did not assess participants' language proficiency and the participants' origin is from the same city.

Meanwhile, Sari et al. (2019) investigated three Indonesian ethnic groups, including Chinese Indonesians. Through mediation models which involved a questionnaire, picture naming test (PNT), and affective well-being, their study of 100 young Chinese Indonesians (Mean Age SD = 13.13) revealed a gradual shift from their ethnic language to Indonesian, the lingua franca. Her study is limited to Chinese Indonesian teenagers who reside mainly in the Central Java province.

In addition to the similar study, Dewi, Sumarsih, and Pulungan (2017) investigated language shift and maintenance among four Chinese Indonesian families involved in intermarriage, using the Interactive Model to analyze participants' utterances. They found six factors affecting language shift and

language maintenance which are bilingualism, migration, economics, environment, demographics, and attitude. Following that, they claimed that it occurred due to two languages existence in interethnic marriage. This qualitative study, however, did not explore participants' language attitudes or proficiency.

Additionally, Putri and Setiawan (2014) found that the three Chinese families in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, have shifted towards using English. Through questionnaires and interviews, they learned that the families favor English as their primary language due to factors such as modernization, communication, education, prospects, and perceived language habits. Chinese parents consider English prestigious, encouraging their children to use it extensively, even at home. This study only relied on questionnaire and interview methods only, without testing their language proficiency or observing, and limited participants

Previous studies have focused less on language shifts among Chinese Indonesians, often omitting assessments of Mandarin Chinese proficiency among them and neglecting the representation of young adult generations across Indonesia's diverse regions. Many studies have primarily investigated language attitudes and contributing factors. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by proposing these three research questions, namely: (1) What are Chinese Indonesian students' Mandarin Chinese language proficiency? (2) To what extent does the language shift occur among Chinese Indonesian students? This study gap particularly relies on Mandarin Chinese language proficiency, which provides participants' Mandarin Chinese language test results.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. It aims to assess participants' language proficiency percentages, gauge language preference tendencies to calculate shift percentages, and elucidate the factors influencing language shift. According to Gorman and Johnson (2013), sociolinguistic researchers with extensive datasets often utilize descriptive statistics in quantitative methods to highlight specific, meaningful properties of the data. Meanwhile, Wray, Trott, and Bloomer (1998) emphasize that qualitative methods are essential for describing and analyzing social phenomena related to language. Therefore, a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach is well-suited for conducting comprehensive sociolinguistic research, including the current study. This study employs a case study method to provide a detailed understanding of the language shift among Chinese Indonesian students in Taiwan. Stake (1995) defines a case study as a method that explores the complexity and uniqueness of individual cases in research.

Participants

The participants of this study are 118 Chinese Indonesian university students in Taiwan. They were chosen through the snowball sampling method, as targeting key information and expanding the sample size is beneficial (Varkevisser et al., 2003). The participants were either purely Chinese descendants (Chinese Totok) or mixed-race Chinese (Chinese Peranakan). Their residence in Indonesia is varied, representing major regions of the country. A consent form is provided to participants before data collection begins. The questionnaire asks for their background information, such as gender, age, type of Chinese Indonesian ethnicity (pure blood or mixed-race), current level of degree in university, university name, origin in Indonesia, living duration in Taiwan, and duration of studying Mandarin Chinese. Table 1 explains the details of the participants' demographic.

Tabel 1 Participants' demographic

Gender	Male	42,4%
	Female	57,6%
Age (SD= 4.04)	< 20 years old	11,0%
	20-25 years old	61,9%
	26-30 years old	21,2%
	30> years old	5,9%
Chinese Ethnicity	Chinese Totok (pure descendants)	29,7%
	Chinese Peranakan (mixed-race)	61,9%

	Uncertain/Unknown	8,5%
Current level of degree in university	Undergraduate	44,9%
	Master	44,9%
	Doctoral	10,2%
City of University	Taipei	70,3%
	Keelung	5,1%
	Taoyuan	1,7%
	Hsinchu	5,1%
	Taichung	0,8%
	Tainan	12,7%
	Kinmen	0,8%
Origin in Indonesia	Jawa Island	68,6%
	Sumatra Island	16,9%
	Borneo Island	7,6%
	Sulawesi Island	3,4%
	Bali Island	2,5%
	Unknown	0,8%
Living duration in Taiwan	<1 year	15,3%
	1-3 years	50,8%
	3-5 years	26,3%
	5> years	5,1%
	Unknown	2,5%
Mandarin Chinese learning duration	Never learn	8,5%
	<1 year	15,3%
	1-3 years	35,6%
	3-5 years	14,4%
	5> years	19,5%
	Since childhood	6,8%

The data presented in table 1 indicate that the gender distribution of the participants is nearly balanced. A significant majority (61.9%) of the participants are aged between 20 and 25, categorizing them as young adults. According to the Chinese ethnicity questionnaire, most participants identify as Chinese Peranakan or of mixed Chinese descent. In terms of educational background, the participants are predominantly undergraduate and master's students, with an equal number in each category, and only 10% of them are doctoral students. The majority of participants are studying at universities in Taipei (70.3%), while 12.7% are students from universities in Tainan, in the southern part of Taiwan.

The participants predominantly come from Java Island (68.6%), Indonesia's most densely populated island (Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, 2023), with 17% originating from Sumatra Island, and the remainder coming from other large islands in Indonesia (Borneo, Sulawesi, and Bali). However, a small number of participants preferred not to disclose their origin. Most participants have resided in Taiwan for one to three years (50.8%), with 26% having lived there for three to five years. The duration of learning Mandarin Chinese among participants is quite varied: most have been studying the language for one to three years, while approximately 20% have been learning it for over five years. The remainder have been studying for less than one year.

Instruments

The instruments of this study incorporate a language test to answer the first research question, questionnaires to answer the second research question, and interviews to answer the third research question. These instruments were chosen because interviews and questionnaires are ideal for conducting sociolinguistic studies, which examine language in real-world contexts (Schilling, 2013). Each participant will be asked to take a language test and complete the questionnaire presented in an online format. Subsequently, they will be interviewed face-to-face. A detailed description of the steps taken in the study is presented below:

1. Language Test

A language proficiency test precedes the questionnaire section. Its purpose is to assess the Mandarin Chinese language skills of the participants across six domains. There are two options that participants can provide their Mandarin Chinese Language proficiency. First, before filling out the sociolinguistics questionnaire, participants were asked about their experience taking any Mandarin Chinese language test (for example, Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language (TOCFL) or Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (HSK) test). If they had taken one, they could proceed to the main questionnaire and mention the results. .

Accordingly, those who had not taken the test were asked to complete Mandarin Chinese language test from Mandarin Training Center of National Taiwan Normal University's (NTNU) free Mandarin test, available at http://www.mtc.ntnu.edu.tw/eng/free_mandarin_test.htm. This traditional Mandarin Chinese test offers three quiz levels: basic (20 questions), intermediate (30 questions), and advanced (50 questions). Participants can select the level that corresponds to their current proficiency. They will be able to view their final test score upon completion. After completing this step, all participants' Mandarin Chinese language proficiency test results are grouped and classified according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

2. Sociolinguistics questionnaire

The sociolinguistics questionnaire is adapted from Dweik and Al-Refa'i (2015) and Putri, Dallyono, and Imperiani (2020). The questionnaires are shared online in Google Forms and consist of 30 items. The Cronbach Alpha for the questionnaire used in this study is above 0.9, which is considered to be very high and reliable. The total items of this questionnaire are 30. Each questionnaire is divided into nine sections. The first section addresses research ethics, where participants provide their consent to participate. The second section gathers participants' background information, which include. The remaining six sections contain questions categorized into Holmes' (2013) six domains of language use: community, home, self-expression, neighborhood, school, and public places. Each domain includes questions on two different topics based on the level of seriousness: a light topic (e.g., daily life) and a serious topic (e.g., family issues). The questions are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating the frequency of using Mandarin Chinese and/or other languages. The scales are: (1) for only Chinese; (2) for mostly Chinese, (3) for both Chinese and other language(s); (4) for mostly other language(s); and (5) for only other language(s). Table 2 presents an example of the questionnaire.

Table 2 Example of Sociolinguistics Questionnaire

Scale 1 = only Chinese; 2 = mostly Chinese, 3 = Chinese and other language, 4 = mostly other language; 5 = only other language
School Domain
Setting: School Topic: Regulations.
When talking about new regulations at school/university, what language do you use when talking to:
1. Indonesian students
2. International students
3. Local (Taiwanese) students
4. Teachers/Staffs

These domains of language use define the language selections made by participants for both topics. The aim is to uncover any variations in language choices between the two contrasting subjects. Each topic is designed based on the specific domains and their intended audience. While most domains feature two audiences, the home and school domains each have four audiences, and the self-expression domain includes just one audience.

Result and Discussion

Chinese Indonesian students' Mandarin Chinese proficiency

In addition to gathering language use statistics across six domains, a language test was conducted to assess Chinese Indonesian students' proficiency in Mandarin. The results of this language test—whether participants had taken the TOCFL, HSK, or NTNU Mandarin language exams—were standardized to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels. Diagram 1 illustrates the distribution of Mandarin proficiency levels among participants according to CEFR categories.

Diagram 1 Mandarin Chinese language proficiency

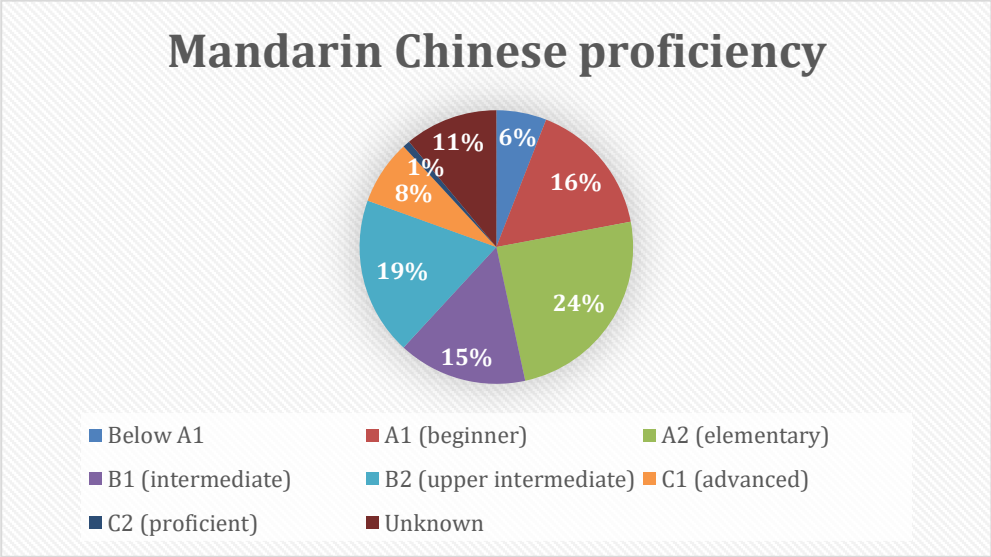


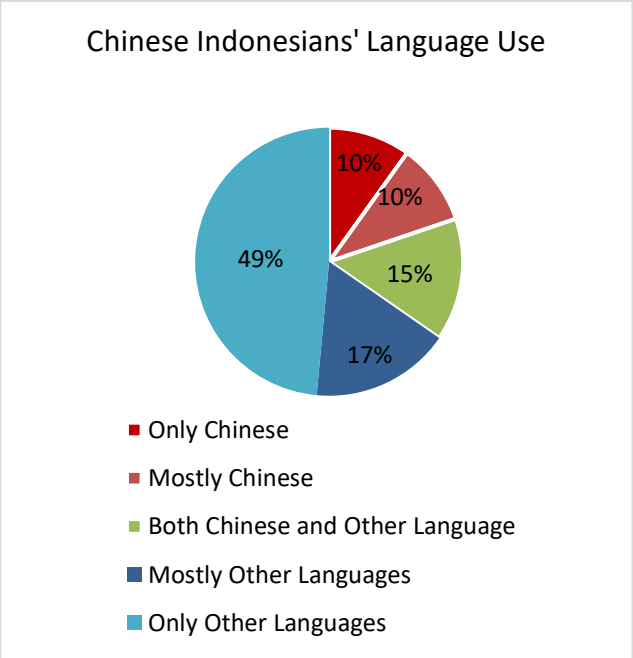
Diagram 1 reveals a wide range of Mandarin proficiency among Chinese Indonesian students. Most participants are at the A2 (elementary) level, though other students demonstrate beginner, intermediate, or upper-intermediate proficiency. Only one participant has achieved full proficiency, while 8% have reached an advanced level of Mandarin. Approximately 6% fall below A1 level, and 11% of participants' proficiency levels could not be assessed due to lack of response or unwillingness to participate.

This range of Mandarin proficiency suggests that Chinese Indonesian students in Taiwan are still progressing in their language learning, consistent with their primary purpose in coming to Taiwan—to study. Although proficiency varies, it does not significantly impact their choices regarding Mandarin usage across the six domains.

The occurrence of language shift among Chinese Indonesian students

The study results indicate that Chinese Indonesian students commonly use languages other than Mandarin in their daily lives. A shift in language use has been observed among these students, with data collected from six domains—community, home, self-expression, neighborhood, school, and public places—presented in Diagram 2.

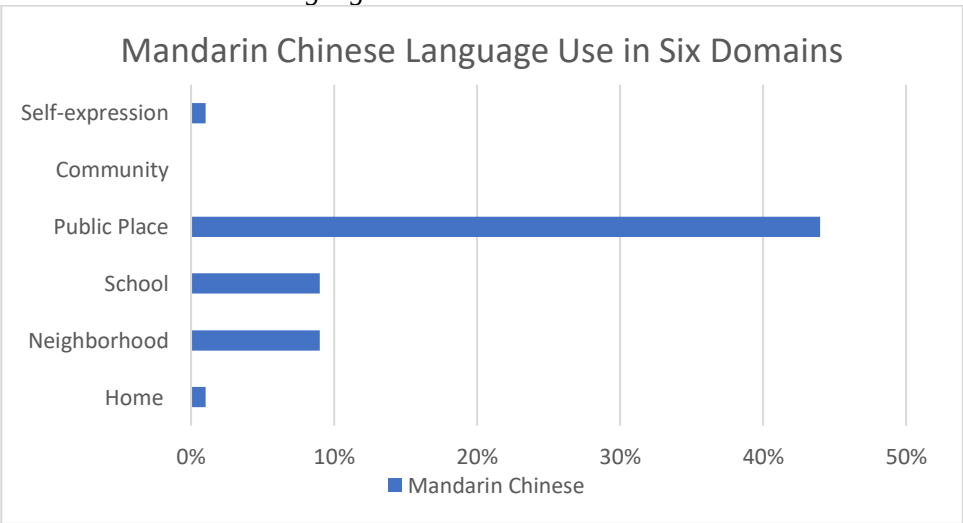
Diagram 2 The Language Use of Chinese Indonesian



Data in Diagram 2 were calculated from the mean language usage across six domains, incorporating two topics in each domain with two to four conversational partners. Findings show that Chinese Indonesian students frequently use languages other than Mandarin in daily interactions, with a significant 49% using other languages regularly, compared to just 10% using Mandarin exclusively. Meanwhile, 15% of participants report using both Mandarin and other languages. The significant contrast—49% versus 10%—further illustrates that Chinese Indonesian students predominantly use other languages for everyday communication, marking a clear shift from Mandarin to alternative languages.

Mandarin use remains limited except in public spaces, as shown in Diagram 3, which highlights Mandarin usage across six domains.

Diagram 3 Mandarin Chinese language use



As shown in the bar diagram 3, nearly half of Chinese Indonesian students (44%) use Mandarin primarily in public settings. Only about nine percent use Mandarin within school and neighborhood contexts, while even fewer use it at home or for self-expression. Notably, none of the participants report using Mandarin within their own Chinese Indonesian community. This distribution suggests that Mandarin usage among participants is relatively low, with students using it primarily when interacting

with native Mandarin speakers. Consequently, Mandarin appears to have a diminished presence within the Chinese Indonesian community.

The limited use of Mandarin among younger generations, as seen in Diagrams 2 and 3, reflects a broader language shift from ethnic languages to other languages. Holmes (2013) explains that language shifts among minority migrant communities typically reach completion by the third generation, beginning with the first generation, progressing through the second, and solidifying in the third. This study's findings align with Holmes' perspective, which suggests that second-generation migrants experience language attrition, while third-generation migrants often face complete language loss. Notably, the Chinese Indonesian students involved in this study are predominantly from the fourth or later generations of Chinese migrants.

Fishman (1972a) further argues that language shift is likely when younger members of a minority community favor the dominant majority language over their ancestral language. As previously illustrated in Diagram 4.1, most Chinese Indonesian students prefer using other languages across various settings, including family, neighborhood, school, community, and personal expression. This usage trend aligns with Fishman's (1964) observation that language shifts often occur in response to frequent intergroup contact, where the majority language becomes dominant. Therefore, Chinese Indonesian students are progressively shifting from Mandarin to other languages.

Haugen's (1953) stages of bilingualism can be used to measure the extent of this language shift, as shown in Figure 1.

A > Ab > AB > aB > B

*Figure **1** Stages of Bilingualism to Language Shift*

Where:
A = mother tongue (first language)
Ab = speakers are almost capable of bilinguals.
AB = speakers are competent in bilinguals.
aB = speakers are better at using majority's language
B = the completion of language shift

According to the proficiency data in Diagram 1 and language usage data in Diagram 2, Chinese Indonesian students are positioned at stage aB, as most are more proficient in the majority language than in Mandarin.

Other studies using similar methodologies have observed comparable language shift patterns. For example, studies reveal language shift phenomena among both migrant communities (such as Assyrians in Jordan) and non-migrant communities (such as the Indonesian Wotunese, Mandailingnese, and Javanese). In accordance with this study, previous research has demonstrated that language shift occurs within communities when the tendency to use the ethnic language is low (Masruddin, 2013; Dweik & Al-Refa'i, 2015; Marpaung & Firdaus, 2017; Ulfa, Isda, & Purwati, 2018).

Similarly, Chinese Indonesian communities are also known to shift from their ethnic language to other languages. This trend has been documented in various studies showing that these communities often adopt languages like English or Indonesian over Mandarin (Yuliana & Yanti, 2023; Sari, Chasiotis, & Vijver, 2019; Dewi, Sumarsih, & Pulungan, 2017; Putri & Setiawan, 2014). However, different from previous studies, this study managed to gain a more accurate and representative data source, further strengthened by assessing participants' Mandarin Chinese language proficiency.

The overall language choice in six domains

It appears that a language shift has taken place among Chinese Indonesian students in Taiwan. Specifically, participants tend to replace Mandarin Chinese with other languages in domains such as neighborhood, school, public spaces, and self-expression. This observation aligns with Fishman's (1972b) theory, which emphasizes the importance of domains in shaping language choices, as well as with Fasold's (1984) explanation that language shift occurs when speakers begin to favor one language in domains and functions previously reserved for another, along with changes in the number of speakers of each language. This trend reflects a pattern where Chinese Indonesians frequently opt for languages other than Mandarin.

Moreover, language shift is described as a gradual transition in habitual language use from one language to another (Weirench, 1968; Ravindranath, 2010; Mesthrie et al., 2009), supporting the observation that Chinese Indonesians often rely on alternative languages in their daily interactions. Only about 15% of the participants favor using both languages, while roughly 20% consistently use Mandarin. This shift suggests that younger generations of Chinese Indonesians, living within a society where the majority language differs from their ethnic language, experience changes in their linguistic practices. This finding parallels Dweik and Al-Refa'i's (2015) study, which observed similar domain language use among Assyrian migrants in Jordan.

In general, Chinese Indonesian students predominantly use other languages across all six domains. The absence of Mandarin as the primary language in their homes significantly influences their language choices in other domains, even if they possess some proficiency in Mandarin.

Conclusion

This research explores the phenomenon of language shift among Chinese Indonesian students in Taiwan. Findings suggest that these students are experiencing a shift away from Mandarin, as they predominantly use other languages in various contexts, reserving Mandarin primarily for interactions with native Mandarin speakers. Additionally, the study reveals insights into their Mandarin proficiency. Although some Chinese Indonesian students have achieved intermediate or advanced levels, they still prefer to use other languages in daily communication.

The limited use of Mandarin among Chinese Indonesian students, regardless of their range in Mandarin proficiency, appears to contribute to this language shift. Overall, the results indicate that language shift among migrant minorities tends to progress more rapidly when the community resides within a larger majority society that exerts greater linguistic influence. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of considering policies aimed at preserving minority languages.

That said, this research has several limitations and areas for improvement. First, the sample size may represent only about 10% of all Chinese Indonesian students currently studying in Taiwan, largely due to networking challenges. Future research could benefit from including a larger and more diverse participant pool, encompassing students in Taiwan, those studying abroad, and younger generations of Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia. Second, assessing Mandarin proficiency in students who had not previously taken an official language test was challenging, as some participants were unresponsive or unwilling to participate, especially if they lacked Mandarin skills. Future studies might aim to include participants who have completed an official language test or offer a simple, reliable language assessment for greater inclusivity.

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