

Save local languages from the KMT

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Tuesday, 07 October 2014 08:05

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) has again shown its ignorance of and disrespect — if not contempt — for local cultures by making local language studies an elective — rather than mandatory as it promised — course in junior high schools.

Although former minister of education Chiang Wei-ling (蔣經國) had made the promise during a legislative meeting, a curriculum committee meeting yesterday rejected the idea, listing the classes as optional and to be offered only when students request them.

Minister of Education Wu Se-hwa (吳思華) defended the committee's decision, saying it was in line with the ministry's objective of reducing the number of required courses. Moreover, by making local languages an elective, students have more freedom in course selection, he said.

While what Wu said may sound reasonable, there is so much more at stake, considering that local languages — be it Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese), Hakka, or Aboriginal languages — are rapidly declining, and are in very disadvantaged positions to different degrees.

It is cruel but true that when a language is considered “not useful” or “not important,” students would be less likely to learn it. The situation is worse if the language is prejudicially viewed as “vulgar” or “uncultured.”

This is the challenge facing local language learners.

Most young people cannot speak local languages, which their families might speak fluently, as they are accustomed to speaking Mandarin among their peers. Many of them have also stopped speaking local languages at home, except when talking to their grandparents, who might not have a good command of Mandarin. Examples of young people not being able to communicate well with their grandparents because of the language barrier is not uncommon.

It is worrisome that many parents who speak local languages fluently talk to their children in Mandarin, which means that the next generation might not be able to understand local

languages as well.

A language lost means a culture lost.

The nation's Aboriginal languages are the most at risk. Indeed, many Aboriginal activists and researchers are, despite their efforts, unable to clearly explain certain elements of their culture to non-Aborigines because there is nobody to interpret certain terms and phrases.

The same problem has been observed in Hoklo, which is also declining, although not as rapidly.

For example, there are some affixes to Hoklo names, such as to, that often appear in names of places along rivers and are often preceded by numbers. Goh-to (Wudu District, 烏都) in Taipei, Keelung's Lak-to (Lioudu Borough, 里口) and Chhit-to (Cidu District, 赤土), and Si-to (Sihdu, 四都) in New Taipei City are some, but nobody seems to be able to accurately explain what to means.

Although Taiwan has been ruled by many foreign regimes, local languages and cultures have suffered the most under the KMT regime. During the White Terror era, it not only prohibited speaking in local languages at schools, but also labeled local languages as being of a lower status, vulgar and uncultured.

Although many activists, politicians and government officials have tried to turn the tide after Martial Law was lifted in 1987, their efforts seem to have only slowed the decline, not stopped it, let alone turned it around.

Normally, teaching and preserving the native tongue is a family's job, but since the problem was created by the government, it is the government's responsibility to put extra efforts into saving local cultures by protecting their languages.

Affirmative action is required on local languages and cultures.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2014/10/07](#)