

It's not too late to save Taiwan's languages

Written by Huang Wung-hong 黃國弘
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UNESCO has long defined Taiwan's indigenous languages, as well as Hakka and Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese) as endangered languages.

Endangered languages are defined as a language that is not used in schools and that less than 70 percent of the population use, meaning that people using such a language would no longer be able to communicate in their mother tongue during their daily activities within two or three generations.

In other words, the language could die out even if native speakers have access to a rich source of literature and media in their native language and even if new works in the language are created.

However, given an absence of practical usage, all language-related cultural relics become a matter of historical research and nostalgia.

Taiwan came under the rule of a new foreign power 50 years ago and the native languages of all the peoples in Taiwan were banned from use in schools and were diminished as local dialects or low, coarse and inferior languages.

This poisonous attitude left a dark shadow that remains in people's minds today.

These attitudes continue to spread and hurt the coming generations.

Society has created a single-language Mandarin monster; simply asking parents to teach their children their native language at home as a way of maintaining different languages is not only absurd, it is also an excuse for a government looking to shirk its responsibilities.

Although there are many non-governmental organizations that promote native languages and

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make great contributions to the study, creativity and passing on of Taiwan's languages, and although the government also has a few policies in place, regardless of how much effort language organizations exert and regardless of how many academic language research institutes the government creates, it is still not possible to guarantee that Taiwan's many languages will not die.

Now is the time to wrest back the right to use native languages in schools. Taiwanese children from all ethnic groups must be allowed to use their native language and hear it spoken in school, from elementary school onwards.

The Ministry of Education should establish a system that encourages and rewards schools, and supervise kindergarten and elementary-school teachers to gradually increase the use of local native languages — whether it be in all school activities or a single class — from greetings to complicated sentences.

The goal should be to increase the use of native languages to 50 percent or more.

When teachers begin to use different languages in school, the prejudice and toxic attitudes toward these languages will begin to disappear, and that would be the first step toward language equality.

Only if native languages are taught in schools will parents begin to teach their children their native language at home and it is the only way that all of Taiwan's native languages can continue to be passed on from generation to generation.

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Translated by Perry Svensson

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