

## Children deciding the family language in Chinese families in multiethnic Malaysia

Teresa Wai See Ong<sup>1</sup>; Su-Hie Ting<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

Corresponding author: [ongtesa@gmail.com](mailto:ongtesa@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Chinese parents fail to maintain use of their heritage languages for family communication because their children seem to wield their own power in deciding the home language. Little is known about how micro-language decisions at family level are influenced by macro-societal language use patterns and sociopolitical contexts. This study examined the influence of children's family language policy on use of heritage languages by Chinese families in multiethnic Malaysia. Data on the language practices, language ideologies, and management strategies of two families were obtained using semi-structured interviews with the mother/father. The findings show that heritage languages prevailed when the children were young. The switch to dominant languages, particularly Mandarin and English, was triggered by the medium of instruction in school. Interestingly, it was the younger children in the family who actively exerted their agency to influence their family language practice in favour of the dominant languages as the means of family communication. The findings indicated that exposure to the heritage language through the media, having grandparents as carers, and parents' frequent assertions on the value of the heritage language are not sustainable for heritage language maintenance.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiethnic society consisting of Bumiputra (Malay and indigenous people) (69.8%), Chinese (22.4%), Indian (6.8%), and Others (1%) (Department of Statistics, 2021). The census report does not spell out the small percentages of groups making up the 1%. In Malaysia, Malay is the national and official language, and it is the medium of instruction in government schools. English is taught as a second language and often acts as the de facto

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official language in the private sector. The Chinese and Indian have schools which use their ethnic language as the medium of instruction in government-aided schools, namely, Mandarin and Tamil respectively. Mandarin is the standard Chinese language with a written orthography. On the other hand, Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Foochow, Hakka, Hainan, Hokkien, and Teochew are spoken languages of the Chinese sub-groups, which are transmitted orally from one generation to another. In this paper, Chinese dialects are referred to as heritage languages.

Until present day, the Chinese are still identified by their dialectal origins but this identity may be phased out in the future because of the younger generation's inability to speak Chinese dialects and their mixed parentage (that is, parents are from different ethnic groups and/or Chinese sub-groups). There is already an emergence of a pan-Chinese identity among the younger Chinese, whereby they speak Mandarin, and identify themselves as Chinese rather than as Hokkien and other Chinese dialect groups (Ting & Teng, 2021). In the broader context, speaking Mandarin is advantageous because it allows individuals to claim membership in the Chinese community worldwide. In contrast, Chinese heritage languages only allows individuals to claim membership in the smaller Chinese dialect communities. In the past, membership in Chinese dialect groups in Malaysia was essential for survival and for business networks (Ting, 2018a). Sew (2020) stated that dialects give speakers access to cultural ideals, norms, mores, and ways of thinking that collectively contribute to the common good. However, heritage languages now have low instrumental value, compared to Mandarin (Ong & Ben Said, 2022). Younger Chinese may not appreciate the heritage value of Chinese dialects.

The present-day infiltration of Mandarin into Chinese homes began in the 1980s. Chinese leaders called for the community to abandon the use of heritage languages and adopt Mandarin (Sim, 2012) to avoid factions and stay united among the Chinese. The Chinese community set up Chinese-medium schools and propagated the Chinese culture among the younger generation (Ong, 2021). The use of Mandarin became a symbol of Chineseness and unity (Ong & Ben Said, 2022). In many Malaysian schools, a "no-dialect" rule was enforced to encourage students to master standard languages, that is, English, Malay, and Mandarin (Sim, 2012). Since 90% of Chinese children go to Chinese-medium schools, eventually Mandarin takes over as the home language (Lee & Ting, 2016). At present, heritage languages are still spoken in the home and social domains largely by the older generations (Ong, 2020a; Ong, 2020b). However, some parents have chosen to speak Mandarin as the home language while other parents who retain use of heritages languages seem unable to get their children to comply with parental language choices (Ting, 2018b).

In Malaysia, the issue is with the intergenerational transmission of the Chinese dialects because of the gravitation towards Mandarin, as the shared language of the Chinese community. However, in the United States (He, 2006; Kang, 2004), Canada (Chow, 2018; Mah, 2005), and Australia (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002; Voon & Pearson, 2011), the issue is with intergenerational transmission of Mandarin. For example, Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe's (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009) study in Philadelphia showed that the Chinese immigrant parents did not succeed despite their painstaking efforts. These findings suggest

that children wield their own power in deciding the language for family communication. Investigations into why parents fail to transmit their heritage language will reveal how micro-language decisions at family level are influenced by macro-societal language use patterns and sociopolitical contexts.

This study examines how family language policy (FLP) influences the use of heritage languages within Chinese descendant families in multiethnic Malaysia. The research questions addressed are:

1. What were the languages spoken by mother, father, and children when the children were young?
2. How did the language use pattern change when the children began schooling?
3. How does the mother/father perceive the use of heritage and dominant languages with their children?
4. What management strategies do the mother or father use to encourage their children's continuous use of heritage languages?

FLP pertains to the explicit and implicit language and literacy planning within the home domain (King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008). It is based on Spolsky's (2004) model of language policy comprising language practices, language ideology or beliefs about language and language use, and language management. A closer examination on individuals and micro community like family is needed because changes occurring within these individuals eventually lead to changes at the community level (Blommaert & Backus, 2013). The family acts as a channel bridging between individuals and communities (Schwartz & Verschik, 2013). Each family has "its own norms for language use" and "ways of speaking, acting, and believing" (p. 47) (Lanza, 2007). The loss of intergenerational transmission usually occurs within a family and therefore, the [nuclear] family unit is an important domain to investigate (Spolsky, 2012).

In FLP, language practices are usually influenced by the language ideology of parents. Parental language ideologies are influenced by their personal beliefs and experiences of learning and using a language (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016), which may be transmitted to children and subsequently influence their language development. Parental language ideologies are also influenced by state policies. In Malaysia, the importance placed on the national and official language, Malay, creates the belief that its mastery is crucial for children's success in the school system and particularly if they wish to enrol in public universities and seek employment in the civil service. Parents who have such an ideology may strive to make their children master Malay by enrolling them in tuition classes. On the other hand, other parents may decide that they do not wish to undertake language management in this manner but alternatively intervene to ensure that their children master English or Mandarin for different instrumental gains, such as studying and working in English- or Chinese-speaking countries. There is also the situation of parents who do not have a clear FLP as they let the situation to dictate the language practices in their home and they may not have well-defined beliefs about language and language use.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study involved two Chinese families from large Chinese dialect groups in Peninsular Malaysia (Cantonese) and Sarawak, East Malaysia (Foochow). Table 1 shows that Mia is a Cantonese aged 45 from Penang (Peninsular Malaysia) while Rick aged 53 is a Foochow from East Malaysia. Both come from the middle socio-economic group based on their occupations (accountant and company director respectively).

Table 1: Participants' demographic background

Participants	Mia	Rick
Age	45	53
Occupation	Accountant	Company director
Highest education level	Degree	Secondary school
Number of children	3:	4:
	Jason – age 15	Sarah – age 32
	Fred – age 12	Sharon – age 25
	Lily – age 8	Samantha – age 23
		Sean –18
Heritage language	Cantonese	Foochow
Additional languages	English, Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay	Mandarin, Hokkien, English, Malay, Hakka, Teochew

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Mia and Rick to obtain data on language use in the home domain, perceived value of heritage and dominant languages, and strategies to encourage heritage language use. Consent was obtained from both participants before the interviews commenced. The interviews were conducted in English. Mia and Rick also discussed examples that were not stated in the interview guide. By having such additional discussions, an open exchange of input was obtained. The audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed based on the three components of FLP (Spolsky, 2004).

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several findings related to the topic researched are as follows.

### Past family language policies

Past family language practices refer to languages spoken by the parents and their children when the children were young, and it is important to know this because it sets the foundation for family language practices later in life.

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Interactions within Mia's family can be described as consistent, straight-forward, and follow a clear pattern of the one-parent-one-language strategy. Mother, Mia, spoke Cantonese to her three children while her husband spoke Penang Hokkien, a variety that differs from other Hokkien varieties in intonation, vocabulary, and grammatical structure (Ong & Ben Said, 2020). In most circumstances, the children addressed their mother in Cantonese and their father in Penang Hokkien.

The children mostly spoke Cantonese among themselves. When they did not know or when they could not find the right word for a specific thing, they code-switched to Penang Hokkien. According to Mia, her husband and herself rarely code-switched because they would like to "keep their heritage languages as pure as possible". They usually spoke Penang Hokkien to each other because it was the "lingua franca of Penang":

"I regard Penang Hokkien as an intangible heritage and cultural asset of Penang that is distinct from Hokkiens spoken elsewhere. As it gives that unique feature of Penang, it is important to continue speaking it as a language unique to the northern part of Malaysia for our own cultural identity. Indirectly, speaking it also gives the state an identity." (Mia)

Mia also felt that Penang Hokkien represents her matrimonial identity because her husband is a Hokkien. Moreover, speaking Penang Hokkien strengthened her sense of belonging to her hometown, Penang.

For Rick's family, the interactions between himself, his wife, and his children can be described as a "salad bowl" because they mixed several languages (Hokkien, English, and Mandarin). Nevertheless, they mostly used Hokkien because it was the dominant Chinese dialect in Kuching where they were living at the time of the interview. Rick grew up in Sibul where Foochow was the main language of communication. Foochow was Rick's heritage language because Rick was of Foochow origin. After marriage, Rick moved to Kuching. As Kuching is a Hokkien-speaking city as far as the Chinese community was concerned, Rick switched from Foochow to Hokkien, and subsequently used Hokkien with his wife and children. Rick's wife spoke Teochew as her heritage language because she originated from the Teochew community in Singapore. Nevertheless, she did not use Teochew with the family, instead she spoke Hokkien due to environmental influence.

Rick's eldest daughter, Sarah, was brought up by Rick's in-laws in Singapore for some years, and thus, she could also speak Teochew. Among the children, the interactions were mostly conducted in Hokkien and English because Sarah's siblings were looked after by their Foochow paternal grandparents (and not by their Teochew maternal grandparents). When asked the reasons for his choice of languages, Rick stated:

"With the children, [I speak] a bit of English, a bit of Mandarin and a bit of Hokkien. I don't really know why but we are used to these languages and it is the Kuching's way of speaking. Sometimes, we also mix some Foochow in [our conversations]." (Rick)

Summing up, the past family language practices show that Mia's children adopted Cantonese and Hokkien for use among themselves, a language used by Mia and her husband

respectively. However, Rick's children spoke Hokkien and English among themselves, although Rick and his wife spoke only Hokkien with each other.

### **Present-day family language policies**

This section reports on how the pattern of interactions within the two families changed when their children began schooling.

For Mia's family, it is interesting that the language practices of the eldest son did not change when he began schooling but the practices changed for his younger siblings. Although Mia's eldest son, Jason, went to a Chinese-medium primary school, he continued to speak Cantonese and Penang Hokkien at home. However, the situation changed when her second son, Fred, started his primary school. As he went to a Chinese-medium school, he started speaking Mandarin to Jason at home. Due to Fred's influence, Jason gradually switched to Mandarin. When Lily began schooling, she was also influenced to speak Mandarin with her brothers because Mandarin was the medium of instruction in school. As the children grew older and got used to speaking Mandarin, they completely switched in most domains, suggesting how they actively exerted their agency to use Mandarin as their main language of communication.

Despite language shift occurring among her children at home, Mia mentioned that she persisted in speaking Cantonese to the children and insisted that they reply in Cantonese. Mia's remark shows that she exerted strong discipline and perseverance to implement a strict strategy to develop her children's use of her heritage language, Cantonese. Nevertheless, Mia admitted that at times, she was tired and gave in when her children chose to reply in Mandarin. As for Mia's husband, he followed the children to completely switch to Mandarin. Mia complained that his "heritage language [would] be lost soon". In the case of Mia's husband, he can be described as choosing the 'flexible language strategy' to please his children.

In Rick's family, the pattern of interactions also changed, similar to Mia's family. When Rick's children grew up, his family gradually shifted to mostly English and Mandarin. The use of Hokkien among his children declined over time. Sarah, Rick's eldest daughter, spent her childhood and teenage years in Singapore with her maternal grandparents, and she went on to pursue a law degree in England. Sarah initially spoke Teochew, Hokkien, and English, and maintained the use of these languages with her parents who lived in Kuching. However, with her siblings and friends, English reigned. Sarah shifted to English because of the environment she was in. She went to an English-medium school in Singapore, and English is the primary language in Singapore. Unlike Sarah, the rest of her siblings lived in Kuching. Sharon and Samantha were looked after by Rick's wife, assisted by Rick's mother. This situation influenced Sharon and Samantha to continue using a mix of languages (Hokkien, Mandarin, and English) and they even picked up some basic Foochow from Rick's mother. However, after she passed away, Sharon and Samantha returned to speaking Hokkien, Mandarin, and English. As they began schooling, they slowly switched to speaking more English and

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Mandarin and less Hokkien with their parents and other people because they were educated in Chinese-medium schools. Both Sharon and Samantha had their own ideas of what languages they preferred to speak and their parents went along with their children's FLP.

Rick's family experienced another big change when Rick's son, Sean, went to school. As Sean did not enjoy learning Mandarin during his kindergarten days, Rick placed him in an English-medium school. When he returned home from school, he mostly spoke English to his siblings and parents. Consequently, Rick's family had to shift to use predominantly English with occasional use a mix of Hokkien and Mandarin. Rick claimed that this practice continues until the present day. Rick appeared to be in tune with his children's feelings towards English, a dominant language, as he highlighted their personalities in the interview. His language management strategy can be described as "highly tolerant" towards their language development as they grew up. Rick also regarded the "predominant monolingualism and occasional multilingualism" practice as "normal" to avoid unnecessary family conflicts.

### **Parents' perceptions of heritage and dominant languages**

The findings showed that both parents attributed a different kind of value to heritage languages and dominant languages, that is an identity marker and a means to educational excellence and career prospects respectively.

When asked about her perception towards her persistent and continuous use of heritage language (Cantonese) with her children, Mia reasoned that "Cantonese is [her] mother tongue and [she is] of Cantonese origin". Note that Mia referred to her heritage and first language as "mother tongue". Mia's reasoning indicates that she has a strong emotional affiliation with her heritage language and ethnic identity:

"When you speak your mother tongue, you know your ethnic group. When friends ask about your village, you can tell where your village is in China. Some children don't know where their ancestral villages are. This is something very important, children should know where their ancestors came from in China and it is easily traced back through their mother tongues." (Mia)

Mia's explanation indicates that speaking one's heritage language can reflect one's identity as a member of the respective ethnic group and hometown, which gives both themselves and their ancestral hometown an identity.

Despite Mia being keen on her children continuing to speak their heritage language, she did not vehemently object to her children shifting to dominant languages such as Mandarin because proficiency in a lingua franca of the Chinese diaspora opens doors to job opportunities:

"Nowadays, youngsters learn Mandarin and don't speak Penang Hokkien. So, replacing them (heritage languages) with Mandarin is a new dynamic in this generation. There is currently huge internal migration and movement of people in China where people from different provinces are crossing borders for job opportunities. Because they don't speak the same mother tongue, Mandarin is used as a lingua franca for communication." (Mia)

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Mia's extract highlights Mandarin as the common language for communication purposes, which supports Zhou and Wang's (2017) statement on the rising status of Mandarin in the present contemporary era.

In Rick's case, he did not emphasise passing on his heritage language to his children because the Foochow-speaking community was small in Kuching when his children were growing up:

"Foochow makes one feel closer. But when you live in Kuching, you must know how to speak Hokkien. Now, it seems that Foochow is becoming very popular because Kuching has a lot of Foochow people, unlike before 1970s when I first came. We couldn't speak Foochow in the market or coffee shop. The Foochow's population was small at that time and we all came from Sibü. We didn't have many chances to speak Foochow and that was why my children faced problems." (Rick)

As Rick's children were not surrounded by Foochow people in Hokkien-dominated Kuching, they picked up Hokkien instead of Foochow. Although they do not use much Hokkien at present, they still have the basic proficiency to start a conversation when needed. Thus, Hokkien can be considered as Rick's children's de facto heritage language although they are of Foochow origin. When asked whether Rick had any regrets on not speaking Foochow to his children, he replied:

"I don't really feel regret but I hope that they do understand Foochow and speak at least a little bit like where are you from? There are advantages for them if they can speak Foochow. They will become closer to the elderly or someone who comes out from other places but [their] origin is Foochow." (Rick)

Despite not having regrets, Rick hoped that his children would know that their origin and "real" heritage language is Foochow.

As mentioned earlier, Rick's FLP changed to predominant English as the children grew up. Rick did not perceive such changes negatively because of the instrumental value:

"English is important for career and we can see that the English educated people are doing better than those Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore. They have better prospects. They are more successful than those Mandarin educated. I am Mandarin educated but I try to learn English because it is widely used, especially other ethnicities like Malay, they don't speak Mandarin, they speak English. So, English is for higher education or any other working fields." (Rick)

Rick felt that English is the gateway to opportunities in higher education and private sector.

### **Management strategies taken by parents**

The results on management strategies show that Mia implemented more active intervention to encourage her children to continue speaking Cantonese compared to Rick who only occasionally inserted some Foochow words into their home conversations.

As described earlier, Mia continued to speak Cantonese to her children even though the children had shifted to Mandarin. When asked about her management strategies, Mia said that she used the entertainment media:



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"I always listen to Radio Malaysia in Cantonese when driving. The podcast is about a person telling stories, old Chinese stories. I make sure I turn on the radio so that my children can listen together. I also enjoy watching Cantonese dramas and movies from Hong Kong with my family on weekends." (Mia)

Prior to the current influence of South Korean pop culture, the Canton pop culture from Hong Kong played a huge role, from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, in influencing the Overseas Chinese communities' entertainment, which resulted in Cantonese being a popular heritage language to learn during those days (Chow, 2007). Despite the change of sovereignty in 1997 that led to a decline in the popularity of the Cantonese entertainment, one of the broadcasting television networks in Malaysia, All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator (ASTRO), continues to air daily Cantonese movies, news, and talk shows from Hong Kong. Drawing on her own experience, Mia described her ultimate strategy for intergenerational transmission of Cantonese:

"I don't have formal education in Cantonese. In order to grab a language, you need to speak it. Otherwise, though you can learn as much as you can but you don't speak it, it'll eventually die off. So it is important to talk to them in that language." (Mia)

It is clear from Mia's description that her attitude towards her children's development of Cantonese is to continuously create opportunities to ensure the youngsters speak the language.

As for Rick's family, after his second (Sharon) and third (Samantha) daughters grew up, they still occasionally used Foochow with him:

"We do use it [Foochow] sometimes because they [second and third daughters] know a lot of languages which we use daily. We are used to English to describe something. Sometimes we do speak [Foochow], we put in a bit here and there, sometimes even Japanese too. We use Foochow but not to full usage." (Rick)

Although Rick inserted some Foochow words into their daily conversations, his daughters did not reply much in Foochow but he had gotten used to it and the whole family is comfortable with it. Rick's "flexible language strategy" allows his children to wield power in choosing the home language. Rick did not assert use of Foochow so as not to make his children feel "more emotionally distant from [their parents] and (...) less likely to engage in discussions with them" (p. 473) (Tseng & Fuligni, 2000).

Despite the situation in Rick's family, Rick recommended a strategy for heritage language maintenance to young parents:

"If they [young parents] can, try to create an environment to let them [young children] speak Foochow. If they [young children] cannot communicate with you and ask what is this and that, we have to tell them in Foochow so they will learn." (Rick)

Rick's recommended strategy is to prepare his children in case they need to use their heritage language later in their adulthood. A comparison of the two families indicates that mothers (Mia) may have more active implementation of heritage language maintenance

strategies than fathers (Rick), but we acknowledge the limitation of our study on the small sample size.

### FLP in the two families

Tables 2 and 3 show the languages used by the two families. In Mia’s family, it is clear that only the eldest child retained continued use of the heritage language with his parents but the two younger children had shifted to speaking only Mandarin (Table 2). In Rick’s family, the children shifted away from their heritage languages (Hokkien and Teochew) towards English and Mandarin and when it comes to their youngest son, he was speaking only English with his family (Table 3). While both Mia and Rick have strong beliefs in the value of their heritage languages, this did not get passed on to their children. It seems that regardless of the management strategies taken by the parents (Mia being strict and Rick being flexible), the children ended up losing the use of their heritage languages. Dominant languages (Mandarin and English) took over the children’s present-day language practices.

Table 2: Languages used by Mia’s family and the dropping of their heritage languages by their children

Home languages	Cantonese	Hokkien	Mandarin
Mother	/	/	/
Father		/	/
Child 1	/	/	/
Child 2			/
Child 3			/

Note: The shaded boxes show the heritage languages. Ticks show the use of the language(s) in family communication.

Table 3: Languages used by Rick’s family and the dropping of their heritage languages by their children

Home languages	Foochow	Hokkien	Teochew	Mandarin	English
Mother		/	/	/	/
Father	/	/		/	/
Child 1		/	/		/
Child 2	-/-	-/-		/	/
Child 3	-/-	-/-		/	/
Child 4					/

Note: The shaded boxes show the heritage languages. Ticks show the use of the language(s) in family communication. The strikeouts show minimal use.

This study demonstrated that both Chinese parents, Mia and Rick, are powerless to enact a FLP that can sustain their children's continuous use of heritage languages well into adulthood. Both parents actively used heritage languages with their children when they were young. Mia's family persisted with a strict one-parent-one-language policy to promote the use of Penang Hokkien and Cantonese, but to little avail. Rick's family practised a 'flexible language strategy' policy of allowing their children to shift them away from speaking Foochow, Hokkien, and Teochew towards speaking Mandarin and English. The language practice in Rick's family supports De Houwer's (2013) concept of Harmonious Bilingual Development, whereby parents pay more attention to their children's emotional development in order to improve language contact within multilingual families. De Houwer (2005) adds that negative attitudes towards bilingualism or any additional languages give rise to conflictual bilingual development. In Rick's case, positive attitudes towards both heritage and dominant languages were seen, which encouraged the development of his children's multilingualism. Whether there is active language management or strong language ideology or beliefs in favour of the heritage language and its use, the outcome on the children's language practices is the same – Mandarin and/or English replace the heritage language as a language for family communication. Language shift is presently a common phenomenon happening within the younger generation of Chinese in Malaysia (Ong & Troyer, 2022; Ting & Ting, 2021).

Parental agency has been given emphasis in FLP, but the present study highlights the agency exerted by the children in changing the family language practices. Interestingly, it was the younger children in the family who actively exerted greater agency in changing the FLP. The well-intentioned parents might have started out wanting to speak heritage languages with their children, but when the latter persisted in speaking Mandarin, the parents gave in. In the present study, Mia was seen as practising the "move-on" strategy, which means that the adult does not intervene and instead allows the conversation to take its course (Lanza, 1997). Furthermore, it is the younger children in the family who appear to dictate the shift away from heritage to dominant languages. Their language beliefs, which were influenced by educational politics, changed their FLP. Lee and Ting (2016) reported the phenomenon of school languages taking over as the language for family communication. Parents are somewhat powerless to stem the tide of change despite their intention to pass on the heritage language. Additionally, the parents do not wish to deprive their children of the benefits derived from being competent in English due to strong competition for jobs (Hashim, 2020).

The children in the two families studied wielded power in determining the FLP. These adolescents and young adults can be described as practising "creative juggling" with "available linguistic resources in order to express [their] experience of in-betweenness" (p. 59) (Milani & Jonsson, 2012). During the shifting process, the language practices of both families is seen as generating a new, fresh, and modernised FLP. The changes from the early childhood years to school/young adulthood years reflect "a fluid and holistic phenomenon" (p. 174) (Wilson, 2020), which allow the multilingual children to create their own sense of identity that differs from their parents.

However, seen in the multilingual context, both families formed a hybrid space to appreciate multilingualism while leaving space for their children to develop their own linguistic identity. Family members were occasionally using heritage languages alongside dominant languages after the children had shifted to using Mandarin and/or English in their schooling years.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The study showed that Chinese parents failed to maintain their heritage language as the home language because their children exerted agency in making the micro-language decisions at the family level. Their children, knowingly or unknowingly, were influenced by macro-societal language use patterns prevailing in the school environment, in the form of the medium of instruction. Their choice of Mandarin and English were affirmed by the broader sociopolitical context, whereby mastery of these standard languages provide the gateway to educational and career opportunities.

In the context of heritage language maintenance, the situation is dismal because heritage languages will no longer be significant representations of ethnic identity. The children do not seem to affirm appreciation of their Chinese dialectal identities. They are not “active citizens” within the Cantonese and Hokkien communities in Penang, or the Foochow and Hokkien communities in Sarawak, despite the foundation built during the fundamental years of their children’s childhood. It also seems that parents are incapable of getting their children to comply with their FLP. Their children, out of their volition, abandoned their heritage language. They may not be necessarily aware of the broader historical, sociopolitical and economic contexts, but they wielded power in causing their parents to switch to using standard languages as the home language.

Our findings suggested that parents backgrounded their desire for the continued use and importance of their heritage language to create a healthy and happy sense of multilingual growing-up experiences for their children. The limitations of this study are the small sample size of two families, and the reliance on interview data. Future research should focus on the role of school friends and teachers in influencing the children’s language practices, which results in constant re-shaping of the FLP. Understanding the realm of influence in the lives of the children will provide insights into the societal forces which compel the children to abandon their parent’s FLP.

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