Chinese Language Variations In Philadelphia’s Chinatown

Coming back from gym class, Ben notices a math worksheet. In addition to Singapore math, his teacher uses a system she’s borrowed from New York State - Engage NY - in which native speakers of languages other than English have accurately translated math worksheets and topics so that students can explore grade-level math without being hindered by a language barrier. I notice that Ben’s sheet has Mandarin characters and, knowing that he was placed in the Mandarin as a heritage language track, I asked, “These worksheets seem really excellent! What languages do you speak, Ben?” Fully expecting Mandarin to be included within these languages, I was really surprised when he said, “Teacher Katie, Cantonese.”

Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) was established in 2005 in Philadelphia amidst a struggle for equity for Asian American students and immigrant students of all racial and ethnic identities. FACTS’s location was intentional, and as Debbie Wei, FACTS’s first principal attests, “It was a conscious choice because of the politics of gentrification. There were two reasons: one was the politics, gentrification… we needed to be in a neighborhood where immigrants could come and feel like it’s okay to be an immigrant” (Wilson, 2015, p. 152). Therefore, FACTS has maintained a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding community since its conception, its values and missions largely impacting the neighborhood and vice versa. In particular, the history of FACTS’s neighborhood and its proximity to Chinatown has a great impact on institutionalized beliefs about and teaching of Chinese language variations. Local and broader societal history and attitudes towards languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Fuzhouhua, Hakka, and Shanghainese have influenced the educational opportunities at FACTS, specifically in terms of language learning and acquisition at the individual student-level.

Although in 1876, the Philadelphia press contested, “Chinese [immigrants] are so common a sight that no notice is taken of them...Nor can we discover that there is any distinct Chinese quarter. They seem to scatter” (Wilson, 2015, p. 15), Chinese immigrants to Philadelphia soon developed a small area on Race Street into a distinct and thriving affinity space. However, whether created with intention, as a result of overt segregationist policies and covert racist pressures, or both, enclaves based on identity and ethnicity can impact the maintenance of culture and language through community associations, schools, local businesses, and newspapers (Thom and Uyechi, 2004). Furthermore, other sociocultural factors - like growing immigration rates, concentrated settlement, the perceived cultural value of collectivity, intra-ethnic and intra-group marriage, and desire for cultural maintenance - influence which prominent Chinese language variations are maintained within the immigrant Chinese American community (Xi, 1992, p. 207). Therefore, the dynamics of linguistic diversity, language maintenance, and language shift are intimately tied within Philadelphia’s Chinatown.

The centerpiece of the Gim San Plaza, a prominent artistic feature of Chinatown, illustrates how the dominant language and demographics of Chinatown have changed drastically over time. The Cantonese name of the project Gim San refers to a “Gold Mountain” (Wilson, 2014, p. 116) that its Chinese American artist Lily Yeh felt Chinese immigrants often sought in America. Although Chinatown is home to a myriad of Asian immigrant identities and languages, the vast majority of the recent immigrants to Philadelphia have been Mandarin-speaking immigrants from Fujian (Wilson, p. 127); the influx of immigrants from Fujian heavily influenced both Mandarin’s

popularity in Chinatown and the view of Mandarin as the hierarchical domineer of Chinese immigrant languages. Although the prominence of Mandarin in Chinatown is exponentially increasing, Yeh's mural serves as a reminder of its vast language variations. As Yum contests, Chinese Americans tend to lose their home languages between the second and third generation (Yum, 2007, p. 38), and as there is an increasing number of Mandarin speakers in the Chinatown community, new immigrants to the area are considerably more likely to acquire Mandarin as it carries immense local value. Albeit unintentional, this process further depreciates other Chinese language variations within the community as immigrants often pick up Mandarin and eventually disregard their languages of origin.

According to the FACTS mission statement, FACTS teaches Mandarin to all students because "it is the language of the neighborhood." However, enormous language diversity in Chinatown and potential dissonance between this institutionalized heritage language and students' mother tongues has vast implications for student identity formation. In designating differentiated Mandarin class levels, FACTS students are assigned either as Mandarin heritage language students or as students for which Mandarin is a foreign language. However, student designation is based on ethnicity, as the common criteria for placement is whether the student identifies as Chinese (therefore assigned the HL track) or non-Chinese (assigned the FL track). Although the surrounding community has influenced Mandarin to be often perceived at the top of the Chinese language variation hierarchy (Wu, 2014, p. 27), this imposed hierarchical value has implications on student identity, as many students deemed to be HL learners maintain Cantonese or Fuzhouhua as their primary language. The HL track therefore can become an identity struggle for non-Mandarin speaking students, as they struggle to learn Mandarin whilst it is not their mother tongue and is not mutually intelligible with their home languages. As Ming-Hsuan Wu writes,

Through the linguistic lens of mutual unintelligibility, a language like Cantonese is a separate language from Mandarin … [These language varieties, often called dialects, are] better captured with "topolect" (Mair 1991), referring to language groups (Sinitic or otherwise) by topographic distribution. (Wu, 2014, p. 24)

This harsh reality appears distinctly different from FACTS's overall respect of language diversity both in and out of the classroom; multilingualism is encouraged as an invaluable source of knowledge and expertise, as home language use is maintained and all communications are sent translated into students' home languages. The STARS class maintains a wide availability of language books and vocabulary cards strewn across the classroom, allowing students to develop English as another language without sacrificing their first language(s) or identities. However, both assigning students to the HL track based on ethnicity and the dynamics of choosing Mandarin itself - as opposed to other languages spoken in the neighborhood - serves as a stark contrast to these values.

Mandarin as an imposed linguistic identity can create challenges for students' language maintenance. Unsurprisingly, the most successful students in the HL track are often those who actually speak Mandarin at home or who have exposure to other educational experiences with Mandarin (Wu, 2014, p. 31); students' true language backgrounds are crucial in their class comfortability and performance. This can influence student self-perception as they balance Mandarin as an imposed identity and critically analyze Chinese language variations in their own lives. According to a 2011 Ming-Hsuan Wu study, 76% of FACTS's HL students identified Mandarin as their least favorite class or characterized their success in the course as "mostly

guessing meaning” (Wu, 2014, p. 219). Students in the HL track additionally cite using Mandarin far less frequently than their peers in the FL track, as other Chinese language variations are often more prominent in HL learners’ homes and every-day interactions. As the primary language of instruction in the HL track is Mandarin, students of non-Mandarin speaking homes relay that they feel deep displacement in the course and feel that they are at a disadvantage (Wu, 2013, p. 27).

Chinese language variation learning and maintenance at FACTS has vast implications for students’ identities and school success. Ang proposes the idea of a classroom as a quasi-Chinese-diaspora community, cultivating a space for Chinese immigrant students to be “Chinese in [their] own way...living a de-centered Chineseness that does not have to live up to the norm of ‘the essential Chinese subject’” (Ang, 2001, p. 261). Viewing Chinese language variation classes at FACTS as Chinese diaspora communities could allow further encouragement of students’ multilingual backgrounds through a translanguaging approach and not as a strict designation as either HL or FL Mandarin learners. Furthermore, additional analysis of FACTS’s language use and maintenance would allow the teaching of language to promote both multilingualism and social change (Alim, 2010, p. 217). The founders of FACTS themselves relate that unjust treatment of minority students - undocumented or DACA students, immigrant students, langauge minnority students, students of color, among other populations - in public schools heavily influenced their values and missions when starting FACTS (Wu, 2014, p. 51); therefore, to cultivate FACTS’s values and to allow its students full reign of their blossoming identities, Mandarian teachers must continue to develop effective pedagogies that help students become language learners based on their own local contexts and backgrounds. As language variations in the Chinatown community remain extremely diverse, integrating local resources into teaching materials - for example, local menus or signage - could further provide more authentic and contextualized learning for students (Leung and Wu, 2014, 31). One must critically analyze different language variations of Chinese in the FACTS classroom and its implications on student identity and success.

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