The Language Barrier?

Gareth Price (Essex)

Analysing English Language Education in Taiwan.

Languages in Taiwan have long been important sites for the negotiation of political identities and power relations. Since democratisation in the 1990’s, the DPP have adopted pluralistic language policies to promote minority languages previously repressed by the colonial Japanese and KMT regimes. In education, media, legal and political arenas, these policies are part of an attempt to yoke together different ethno-linguistic groups under a unified supra-ethnic Taiwanese identity. Equality remains the watchword for these policies, in order to encourage all Taiwanese to engage as stake-holders in a political project that implicitly has independence as its goal. However, this equality threatens to be undermined by the increasing importance placed on English language education (ELE).

Ostensibly, ‘local’ languages are promoted to foster an internal Taiwanese identity, while English is seen as a means to articulate this identity to an international community that does not recognise Taiwan’s sovereignty. But ELE remains concentrated in the private sector in metropolitan areas, even as it becomes an important part of University entrance exams. This could lead to a situation where affluent urbanites have disproportionate access to English and educational and employment opportunities which will further entrench their privileged socio-economic status. Attempts to widen access to ELE by placing ‘native-speaking’ teachers in public schools have been unsuccessful, partly because it is difficult to lure teachers from the lucrative private sector. In addition, ideologies which link language use with ethnicity persist, leading to a situation where qualified – and cheaper – teachers from non-Anglo nations are prohibited from obtaining work permits, and little emphasis is placed on training Taiwanese teachers of English.
This paper examines these contradictions between indigenous and English language policies using data from sociolinguistic interviews, media reports, and policy documents. I argue that, rather than being a neutral means of international communication, ELE has the potential to cleave Taiwanese society along socio-economic and even ethnic lines.