The Language Barrier?
Analysing English Education in Taiwan
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Introduction
Under the Japanese and guomindang (KMT) regimes, Taiwan’s sociolinguistic situation was shaped by language policies that saw a monolingual and culturally homogenous population as a pre-requisite for, respectively, a subordinate colony or a unified nation state. Though these policies marginalised Taiwanese, Hakka, and the aboriginal languages, they failed to annihilate them. These languages were powerful tropes for the construction of identities that were invoked in order to resist domination, and they remained important political currencies in the democratic era since the lifting of Martial Law in 1987. The cautiously pro-independence Democratic People’s Party (DPP) of President Chen Shui Bian has put much emphasis on making reparations for ethnic strife by promoting previously repressed ethno-linguistic identities in the name of a supra-ethnic ‘New Taiwanese’ identity that underpins any future claim to independence.

However, linguistic and ethnic equality as a model for national unity is undermined by the potential for English to be used as a socio-economic resource. While English remains concentrated in the private sector in Taiwan, there is an iniquitous distribution of linguistic and social capital. Thus, English threatens to force societal divisions where multilingual policies seek to amalgamate them. Ethnic equality is a societal impossibility while economic advantage remains predicated on language ability.

This paper aims to implicate micro-level language practices – such as hiring firing of language teachers – within wider macro-structural contexts, pointing to a situation where language planning policy at the national level reverberates at the global level. Ultimately, we are left in a situation where supra-national language theories – such as theories of linguistic ecology, linguistic imperialism, and language rights – fail to traverse these tensions, and where the distinction between the global and the local is eroded.
The Politics of Internationalisation: English in Taiwan

Promoting ‘local’ languages and cultures has a degree of importance for Taiwan’s national identity, in that linguistic equality – or at least linguistic pluralism – contributes to social cohesion. Reifying indigenous languages at the institutional level encourages the polity to engage with a shared history and has the effect of promoting national unity but, as ‘legitimating symbols’ of a proto-nation state in an era of globalisation, pluri-lingual policies which promote local languages are, on their own, not enough. (Heller, 1999:338)

Given Taiwan’s anachronistic position in the geopolitical arena, articulating a supra-ethnic Taiwanese identity to the outside world in order that it may confer legitimacy on Taiwan is an equally important political project that shapes Taiwan’s sociolinguistic situation in the contemporary era. Certainly, few members of the international community would be able to understand pleas for conferring independence or international recognition on Taiwan in the Taiwanese, Hakka or aboriginal languages, even if they were willing to listen. Instead, the economic and political systems in which Taiwan seeks legitimacy and visibility are conducted in English – the language of the ‘global panopticon.’ (Pennycook, 1995:49)

The unified ‘supra-ethnic’ Taiwanese identity which is being forged in at least nominally inclusive language policies at the national level needs to be articulated at the international level in the language of global communication. Thus, English is seen as a means to ‘connect Taiwan with the world,’ raising its lowly global status in the hope of gaining international diplomatic recognition.

Alongside the political project of independence exist the economic realities of a world that communicates in English. As Taiwan is a major global exporter of manufactured goods, even the most fervently pro-KMT businesspeople use English to sell their wares in a global market. Whether pro-independence or pro-unification, whether for political or economic reasons, the utility of English is recognised by many in Taiwan.

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In 2002, Chen Shui-Bian even tentatively suggested that English should be Taiwan’s second official language. There is a historical precedent in this idea that conforms to his political stance of ethnic and linguistic equality in the name of national unification. English has historically been implemented — under certain political circumstances — in countries such as India in order to level the ethno-linguistic playing field by using an alien language as a medium of communication to avoid granting advantages to any one dominant ethno-linguistic group.

Yet Chen Shui-Bian’s stated rationale for this proposal was that English had given Hong Kong and Singapore an economic ‘competitive edge’ in Asia. In this analysis he had neglected the fact that these countries retained English as a legacy from what were often rather brutal episodes of colonialism by the UK, an odd position for a politician leading his people out of the ravages of a colonial past. 3

The proposal was shelved amidst a cacophony of protest by politicians on both sides. KMT stalwart and Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-Jeou denounced the plan as being both ‘unnecessary, and at the present time impossible,’ given the standard of English of government officials and English education on the island as a whole. The DPP Minister of Education, while conceding that it was a position ‘under consideration,’ and couching his thoughts in diplomatic language, also disagreed with Chen. He did, however, point out that: ‘English is the language that connects Taiwan to the outside world, and it is important to learn it well.’ 4

The ideological function of education thus reflects the emphasis on ‘learning English well’ by making English an integral part of the education system. Language education in Taiwan is traversed with the tensions between cultural nationalism and the processes of globalisation. 5 English in Taiwan has become part of the formidable University entrance exams, acting as a gatekeeper to higher education and employment prospects. To pass the exams and vault the gate, Taiwanese students spend long hours in private after-school buxibans or ‘cram schools.’

3 See Pennycook, (1998) for Hong Kong; Bokhorst-Heng, (1999); Fraser Gupta (1992) for Singapore.
4 All quotes on this page are from the Taipei Times, Tuesday, Apr 02, 2002, p1 The idea was welcomed wholeheartedly by Premier Yu Shyi Kun in April 2002. However, six months later, the Premier was flummoxed during a legislative session in Taiwan’s parliament when addressed in English by a fellow lawmaker, echoing the efforts of KMT lawmakers to use ‘Taiwanese in public life. ’Foreign languages’ were henceforth banned in the legislature. (Taipei Times, Saturday, Sep 28, 2002, p3.)
The existence of the *buxiban* system reflects the inherent problems in the Taiwanese education process. The GIO acknowledges that critics see the system as requiring students to ‘memorise by rote vast amounts of pedantic trivia, to be regurgitated onto exam papers and forgotten,’ and that this is the main impetus for educational reform.\(^6\)

From a sociological perspective, English thus contributes to social exclusion in Taiwanese society on both ethnic and socio-economic grounds. Those that have a University education and thus decent employment – and historically, they belong to the elite mainlander groups in disproportionate numbers compared to ethnic Taiwanese, Hakka or Aboriginal groups – are the ones who can afford to send their children to private classes. The children who attend these private classes are more likely to get into University and gain decent employment, and thus be able to in the future send their own children to such private schools, completing the cycle and entrenching their privileged socio-economic status. Thus, though primarily seen as a language of ‘international communication,’ though one which is implemented at the national level of language planning, (Chen and Chu, 1999)\(^7\). English in the context of Taiwan does not perform the role of levelling the ethno-linguistic playing field as a neutral and alien language: rather, it gives a ‘competitive edge’ to certain groups at the national, if not international, level. It is thus a question for further research to what extent English, by advantaging certain groups, can undermine attempts to foster a supra-ethnic Taiwanese identity.

The engagement with English – in political, economic and cultural arenas – has created a huge demand for English language education. As described, private language schools have mushroomed across the island, particularly in the capital, Taipei, and other metropolitan centres. These serve numerous functions in addition to simply teaching English. Kindergartens and after-school classes for younger children bridge a gap between the part-time hours of public education and the long hours worked by Taiwanese office employees, providing an alternative – and not necessarily a cheaper one – to Filipino and Thai ‘A-mas’ or nannies. Cram schools provide high-school students with the requisite knowledge to be

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regurgitated verbatim onto University entrance exam papers, though they rarely turn out students with any degree of proficiency in using the language.

I would argue that those with access to English in Taiwan constitute what Sonntag (1995) calls an ‘emergent elite.’8 They have the resources to afford access to private English language education, and therefore can pass the English language component of the formidable University entrance exams. With a University education, they gain access to better-paid jobs and, in turn, will be the ones who can afford to send their children to English language schools, completing the cycle and entrenching their privileged socio-economic status. This economic argument has further ramifications given Taiwan’s isolated geographical position. In a situation where Taiwan aims for increased visibility on the world stage and retention of its global superiority in export trade and international finance, and where English is the dominant language of international diplomacy and economics, the political and financial elite will be required to speak English.

Through commodification, English language is no longer a marker of ethnic identity, a symbol of the unified nation, or merely a useful tool; but, instead, an socio-economic weapon to acquire and wield. Yet, in spite of this splitting of language and ethnicity in the context of the dominance of an international language, accent and ethnicity remain fused when it comes to the hiring of English teachers globally.

The Abstraction of the ‘Native Speaker’ – Ethnicity and Ideology in Taiwan’s ELT Industry
Taiwan’s sociological and geopolitical situation makes for a useful macro-level illumination of the international dominance of the English language and its capacity to cleave nationally based societies along socio-economic and ethnic lines. However, examination of the micro-level practices of English language – in particular ethnocentric hiring practices – provides a more effective commentary on the links between ethnicity and ‘standard’ language that pervade social discourse.

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Many of the adverts for teaching positions in Taiwan stipulate the requirement of a ‘native speaker.’ This is something of an arbitrary category, based upon citizenship of or tertiary education in an English speaking country. On this basis alone, the definition is problematic. Being a citizen of a country or having an education in a country which has English as a national language does not qualify one as even a competent user of that language and still less a teacher of it. It is on this basis that Ferguson (1982:vii) comments:

The whole mystique of the native speaker and the mother tongue should be quietly dropped from the linguist’s set of professional myths about language.\(^9\)

We might add that this mystique also needs to be dropped from – or at least critically examined as a discursive formation in – the myths of language subscribed to by wider society. Though linguists view the terms ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native speaker’ in a more critical light, the terms continue to be used in the context of hiring practices for foreign teachers in both the private and public educational sectors in Taiwan.

In an educational context, then, Rampton (1995: 336-7) argues:

   The idea of being a native speaker of a language and having it as your mother tongue tends to imply [that] a particular language is inherited, either through genetic endowment or through birth into the social group stereotypically associated with it [and] being a native speaker involves the comprehensive grasp of a language.\(^{10}\)

The principle ramification of this is that the native speaker is believed to possess expertise in a language on the basis of somewhat nefarious reasons. Rampton points out that concepts on which the native speaker myth is based, ‘spuriously emphasise the biological at the expense of the social.’ (1990: 98)\(^{11}\)

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Further, Naysmith (1986/7)\textsuperscript{12} as well as Kubota (2002)\textsuperscript{13} note that despite efforts by concerned sociolinguists to ‘expand the circle’ (Kachru, 1986)\textsuperscript{14} of countries which supply ‘native-speaking’ teachers, the US and the UK remain at the centre of the ELT industry. In Taiwan, this certainly seems to be the case, though a North American rather than British accent is considered the ‘standard’ for English language tuition.

The preference for North American accents and the persistence of the myth of the native speaker are evident in adverts for teaching jobs. I analysed 100 adverts from www.tealit.com, a website that caters to the expatriate teaching community living in Taiwan, posted in a two-week period in May 2004. TEALIT is an acronym for Teaching English and Living in Taiwan and as well as being a forum for job adverts, hosts discussions on topics such as teaching methods and living in Taiwan.

Of 100 adverts, ‘native speaker’ was stipulated as a requirement for 45 positions. One advert stipulated the more puzzling requirement of ‘native North American staff,’ while mentioning the ‘clarity’ of their students’ accents twice, a concept which implies L2 competence is measured by proximity of L2 accent to that of an L1 ‘native-speaker.’ A North American accent was required by 14 positions, compared to a British accent for just one position. A ‘North American or British’ accent occurred once. Another advert specified the even vaguer requirement of a ‘Western accent.’

A similar situation is found in newspaper adverts. For example:

\begin{quote}
Immediate Kaohsiung opening for native-English speaking (North American) children’s teacher

(27 hours per week.) Experienced with Bachelor of Education preferred. Please call Jxxx

@ xxxxxxx for interview.
\end{quote}

Data that demonstrates this preference can be found in personal accounts on internet discussion forums. An indignant British teacher mentions ‘Then she asked me if I could


\textsuperscript{13} Kubota, (2002) Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Naysmith, J.H. (1986/7) ‘English as Imperialism’ \textit{Language Issues} ½: pp 3-5
speak like an American.' Further, a British informant (p.c) at the end of a job interview was floored by the interviewer’s closing comments: ‘You can change your accent to make it more American, right?’

The ‘linguistic’ reasons for preferring North American speakers do not stand up to much scrutiny. One of the more valid arguments is that the ‘KK’ system of phonics is used in public schools and that this pronunciation system is based on a ‘North American’ accent, but this can be countered with some elementary sociolinguistic observations on dialectology and language contact. Firstly, the ‘North American’ accent is not a homogenous variety (cf. Lippi-Green, 1997), and while its varieties share some phonological features that distinguish it from e.g. Australian English, even non-linguists are unlikely to believe that speakers from Arizona, Vancouver and Brooklyn are speaking with the same accent.16

Secondly, given that the notion of a standard accent is a somewhat arbitrary concept, it seems questionable as to what effect the accent of instruction has on learning such a standard. As Gupta (1991) has demonstrated with Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), transfer of grammatical and phonological features from L1 into L2 is the basis by which creolised varieties of English emerge.17 Therefore, Taiwanese and/or Mandarin grammar and pronunciation is likely to influence Taiwanese speakers’ English as much as – if not more than - the accent in which they are taught. Further, pragmatic transfer between L1 and L2 will also distinguish an emergent variety of English, leading to the eventual possibility that Taiwanese English speakers will develop a distinct creole language which may be called Taiwan English or China English, depending on the prevalent global political situation and attitudes towards language and identity. (Quirk, 1990;18 Kirkpatrick, 200219) The influence of L1 on L2 can be seen in the emergence of other creolised varieties of English such as Indian and Filipino Englishes, a legacy of language contact in colonial contexts. (See Kachru, 1986 for India,20 Tollefson, 1991, for the Philippines.21).

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In 2003, a controversy emerged over the idea of bringing teachers from the Philippines and India into public schools in the southern rural areas. The rationale of the plan was unashamedly clear: Indian and Filipino teachers were willing to work for half the wages of ‘teachers’ from ‘inner-circle’ nations. Years of corruption and unregulated growth of foreign language schools and their control by local elites had lead to an astronomic rise in fees and, concomitantly, inner-circle nations’ “teachers”’ salaries.

The Democratic People’s Party government, (DPP) who were elected on a pro-independence platform, faced pressure from their main voter base in the south to redress the balance of access to educational resources. The success of their political strategy was based on a vision of a society that encouraged ethnolinguistic and cultural pluralism in the name of a unified – and independent - Taiwan. The rural south had not only had restricted access to English, due the concentration of private sector language schools in metropolitan areas, but for many years had had their own languages - such as Hakka, Taiwanese and Austronesian languages - repressed by the Japanese and Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regimes. While the introduction of the nine-year vernacular curriculum in schools and a relaxation of the draconian rules on indigenous language broadcasting alleviated some of the cultural tensions between dominant and subordinate linguistic groups, the perceived economic necessity of English meant that it too became a component of national language planning strategies. (Hsiau, 2001;22 Chen and Chu, 199923)

However, the plan to employ Indian and Filipino teachers was quietly shelved, ostensibly on the basis of accent and a concern that English should be taught by ‘native speakers’. Director of the Ministry of Education’s Department of Elementary Education Wu Tsai-shung said:

The Ministry Of Education (MOE) would only consider teachers whose native language is English to teach in elementary schools. Teachers from the Philippines and India are not native English speakers and their mother tongues are other languages.

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The MOE so far only considers hiring teachers from the US, Canada, the UK and Australia.24

Both India and the Philippines have used English as the medium of instruction in education and in wider society for many years. (Tollefson, 199125; Kachru 198626) Further, the varieties of English that have formed in these countries are a result of language contact, in a colonial context, between English and local languages. There are two clear implications here. Firstly, contrary to the MOE’s assertion, there are many people from both countries who do meet the criteria of ‘native speaker’ (assuming that a ‘native speaker’ is not merely an abstraction) through being bilingual in or being educated in English. Secondly, under the proposal, only qualified teachers would be eligible to apply anyway, pointing to a situation where accent and nationality take precedence over teaching expertise.

Instead of Filipino or Indian teachers in schools, the rural Southern populations have been taught English by college students through a US aid agency, the King Carr Foundation. This situation has raised the ire of people on all sides of the debate. Development theorists have questioned why one of the world’s richest economies is benefiting from aid that could not only be diverted to more needy regions, but also could be avoided altogether were the Taiwanese government to introduce a more coherent English language education policy. In addition, the King Carr’s overtly Christian doctrine has lead some to wonder whether this is a return to the unholy alliance of missionary work and English teaching which was a hallmark of early colonial adventures. Taiwanese teachers, already facing a shortage of jobs, feel already threatened by paid foreign teachers, are understandably indignant at the prospect of unpaid volunteers undertaking teaching work. And overseas teachers, who have to negotiate Taiwan’s Kafka-esque work permit situation only after completing a four year degree course, are equally annoyed at the presence of volunteers teaching without work permits and without yet finishing their degrees.

I would argue that that Taiwanese Government policy prefers non-qualified speakers of a variety of English deemed as more prestigious over qualified teachers who speak a less

prestigious variety. The myth of the native speaker is a widely held perception that dominates policy and practice at an institutional level. Ethnographic evidence—such as blonde-haired and blue-eyed female and North American-accented ‘teachers’ who have gained work permits with ‘degrees’ that were made on Photoshop—bears out this argument.

This kind of policy at institutional level, I believe, reinforces the myth of the native speaker in wider social discourse in two key ways. Both are based on economics, and demonstrate the commodification of language (Heller, 1999\(^{27}\)) and the existence of the ‘linguistic market place.’ (Bourdieu, 1991\(^{28}\)). Firstly, the fact that the granting of work permits depends on meeting the requirement of holding either a degree or a passport from a particular nation, means that in the private sector of the ESL industry, regardless of their own attitudes towards accent and language, school managers are forced to hire teachers from the inner circle nations.\(^{29}\) Secondly, institutional approval of a particular language variety signals acceptability of this notion to the wider polity, thus creating an economic demand for a specific accent by consumers of private education. However, this said, I believe that ideologies—of race, of gender, of language—persist through re-circulation. The ideological relationship between institutional practice and public perception is complex: it is a relationship of mutual reinforcement rather than of cause-and-effect.

To wit, once the acceptability of discrimination is ingrained in the wider social body, it is difficult to change these attitudes simply by altering institutional practices and structures. For example, though segregation policies were abandoned in the US following the civil rights movement, racism remains pervasive in US society. In the UK too, legislation protects discrimination yet racism is still evident in public and media discourse.

There are two reasons why I use the example of race here. On the surface, it seems clear that measures to combat racial and sexual discrimination—such as shifts in institutional policies and practices, as well as legislation—are more advanced than those which confront linguistic discrimination, even if racism remains a problem for society.

\(^{26}\) Kachru, B. (1986) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Heller (1999) Ibid.
Scratching deeper, however, it seems that, as markers of identity, race and language are closely related, and as that so little attention is paid to linguistic discrimination in Taiwan as elsewhere; tacit institutional approval of linguistic discrimination could contribute to the persistence of racial and sexual discrimination in society.

Attitudes towards language are shaped by attitudes towards race and ethnicity. Rampton observes that the ‘myth of the native speaker’ is a concept that is based on biological rather than social – or even linguistic – reasons. Ethnographic evidence suggests that a Caucasian teacher is held in higher regard in Taiwan than a black or Asian teacher, and, combined with evidence of the persistence of the native speaker myth, begs an important question: is government policy based on ‘non-nativeness’ of Indian and Filipino accents, but on their skin colour? In fieldwork notes from Spring 2003, I noted the following:

C is a head teacher of a branch of a private language school in Taipei. Her staff report that two returned Chinese teachers seem to have been spirited away. I ask her, over a works dinner to which I was invited about this. Rather than take her foreign staff to a Taiwanese style restaurant (or even one of the numerous South East Asian restaurants in the city) she has decided to go for a Western-style restaurant. Her foreign staff are all Caucasian, three from the US, one from Canada, and one from the UK. I ask her whether she would employ a black or overseas born or educated Chinese teacher. She replies that ‘a Chinese teacher, that would be OK’ though parents of her students prefer ‘white people.’ This is despite reports from her staff that her two Chinese teachers left due to pressure from parents for being the wrong colour. However, on the question of black teachers she is less conciliatory. ‘No way,’ she says. ‘No. Parents would not accept that.’

This is one example from my ongoing research, and it is not atypical of hiring practices in Taiwan. Adverts on internet forums and newspapers still specify Caucasians. There have recently, since this initial research was conducted, been moves by schools to advertise that

29 The legal situation has, in fact, eased slightly in that visas and other relevant documentation are now handled by the Ministry of Labour Affairs, who are not as concerned as Wu about accents, though they remain committed to the policy of hiring only applicants who hold
overseas born Chinese are ‘acceptable.’ Though this is laudable, in that ethnicity seems to be a less important factor in hiring decisions, it nevertheless points to a situation whereby, at least in the past, schools have actively discriminated against people of specific ethnicities. The fact that schools are at pains to point out that overseas born Chinese are acceptable suggest that they recognise that these people have felt excluded and faced discrimination in the past. It is a question for further research as to why this shift is occurring. A more cynical conclusion might see this based on economic reasons, such as a shortage of overseas teachers or the fact that overseas born, if national, Taiwanese may be willing to work for local salaries. A more optimistic conclusion may point to a strengthening of Taiwanese identity that means it feels less reliant on overseas knowledge and aid.

That accent and ethnicity are so closely intertwined has been demonstrated since Labov (1969) showed that AAVE is governed by grammatical rules and features equally as complex as the mythical Standard American English. This complexity is often overlooked in educational contexts, where AAVE speakers are characterised as lazy, stupid, or culturally deficient. This is exactly the same kind of myth which purportedly legitimated colonial intervention in the name of ‘civilisation’ (see Bhaba, 1986; Said, 1978) and the situation is the same in the US and in the UK, where non-standard varieties are stigmatised in institutional contexts. (See Rampton, 1995; Lippi-Green, 1997; Rickford, 1997)

Further studies have shown that assumptions about accent are related to ethnicity, and that they are usually wrong. Rubin and Smith (1990), for example, demonstrated this is an experiment in which students at a US university were played a recording of a lecture. They were also shown a photograph of someone who was, they were told, the person giving the lecture. Though they all heard the same lecture, they were shown photographs of people with differing ethnicities. The degree to which the students attributed a ‘strong’ accent to the

passport or a degree from one of the ‘inner circle’ English speaking countries.

recording was directly related to the ethnicity of the person in the photograph: when students were shown a picture of an Asian lecturer, the recording was rated as having a stronger accent than when a Caucasian teacher was shown. This suggests that the reasons underpinning the native speaker myth have less to do with linguistics than to do with ethnicity: as Rampton (1990:98) describes, the native speaker myth 'spuriously emphasises the biological at the expense of the social.'

Taiwan openly practices a system of apartheid where social role is structured by discourses on ethnicity, nation, and language: white immigrants from English speaking nations are teachers of English, non-white immigrants from English speaking nations are not. In addition to newspaper adverts that specify teachers of a certain ethnicity, adverts also appear offering rewards for the capture or information on the whereabouts of Filipino nannies who have absconded. This is reminiscent of the pre-abolitionist, slave-owning South of America, and the fact that Filipino nannies are in effect indentured servants, the similarities are striking. The reasons for this are complex, but based on ethnographic research in Taiwan and examining the wider geopolitical situation, I surmise the following:

1) A programme of colonialism by the British instigated the spread of English language, which itself was based on racist ideas and a belief in white supremacy.

2) The dominance of the United States as a superpower in the Post-World War II era has lead to the cementing of English as the *de facto* language of international communication. US influence is particularly strong in Taiwan given the island’s historical function as a military base for its anti-Communist forays in Asia, as well as US military and financial support for Taiwan against the Communists in Mainland China, and the US position as Taiwan’s main arms supplier. The US legacy of slavery and of segregation remains dominant in the ideologies it spreads abroad.

3) The link between ethnicity and language was used to justify repression in Taiwan under the KMT and Japanese regimes. In the contemporary era, though pluri-lingual policies now

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hold sway, they are nevertheless based around a nationalist discourse that links linguistic equality with ethnic equality. Thus, as I have demonstrated, language policy, whether directed to the promotion of local or foreign languages, remains structured around the same belief that ethnic, national and linguistic identity are somehow fixed and essentialised.

The link between a white ethnicity and English not only dictates hiring practices, but hiring practices also reinforce that link. If white teachers are hired to teach English language, then learners of English will learn to relate English to a white face. This is particularly true for very young learners of English.

Ethnocentric hiring of English teachers thus provides a new wave of migration that further polarises ethno-linguistic identity in the contemporary era. However, where war and colonialism have historically shifted Taiwan’s sociolinguistic situation, globalisation processes are now the driving forces behind change.

**Conclusion: Language Right, Linguistic Imperialism, and Language Ecology: Implications from the Taiwanese Context.**

Theories of linguistic imperialism (cf. Phillipson 199238, Skuttnab-Kangas39 2000) broadly see local languages and identities threatened by ‘killer languages’ such as English, and the resultant cultural homogenisation that occur as English spreads through wider globalisation practices. Linguistic ecology sees the maintenance of these languages as necessary for the preservation of cultural diversity, and the ‘language rights’ movement sees the right to mother tongue education as a means to achieve this. In many ways, current indigenous language policies seem to be based on these notions. It is recognised that the ‘killer languages’ of Mandarin and Japanese have adversely affected the vitality of these languages. Linguistic ecology is not only an equitable of making reparations for previous repression of minority languages, but also performs a politically useful function of encouraging all groups on the island to see themselves as part of a unified supra-ethnic ‘New Taiwanese’ identity that allows minority cultures to live in co-existence. The ‘nine-year vernacular curriculum,’ provides the legal and practical basis for mother-tongue language education at elementary school level.

37 Rampton, B. (1990) Ibid.
Though it is debatable how effective this is in practice – whether, for example, indigenous languages are allocated resources comparable to Taiwanese – this is nevertheless a broadly positive move.

However, the linguistic imperialism and language ecology arguments do not effectively explain the tensions between indigenous languages and English in Taiwan. It is not clear, for example, that contact with English is causing minority groups to ‘lose’ their languages and cultures. Rather, given that English is concentrated in the private sector in metropolitan areas, these groups risk socio-economic marginalisation through lack of access to a language that plays an important ‘gatekeeper’ function in higher education and business. Thus, it is paradoxically, lack of contact with English that could threaten these languages and cultures.

Without access to a language that is implicated in social mobility, members of these cultures could become resentful of their marginalisation, and there is thus a danger that they will come to see vernacular education as a limit on their advancement. The presence of English and its prestige status is certainly threatening to local languages and cultures, but not through direct contact, as most linguistic imperialism theories seem to suggest. Rather, an iniquitous government policy which allows English education to be concentrated in the private sector and where ethnicity and nationality, rather than expertise, determines who is qualified to teach it, while at the same time requiring proficiency in it to reach University and even proposing it as an official language, is responsible for a threat to social cohesion. The mantra that linguistic equality equals ethnic equality, which characterises government policy on local languages, seems misplaced where ethnic and socio-economic discrimination is openly practised through a foreign language.

The English language situation in Taiwan makes for an interesting take on the language rights question. As well as a right to mother-tongue language education, is there not a case for proposing access to English as a right? This raises questions about whether a collective right to language can be enshrined in universal human rights declarations which focus on individual rights; and therefore whether universalist and international conceptions of language rights are useful in discussions of particularist national contexts.