

# Language learning challenges of overseas students



Grace Chu-Lin Chang has completed her PhD thesis entitled “Language learning, academic achievement, and overseas experience: A sociolinguistic study of Taiwanese students in Australian higher education”. [The thesis is now available for download from Language on the Move here.](#)

In February 2011, my husband and I moved from Taiwan to Sydney to pursue our PhD studies. Excited about coming to Australia for the first time, we were keen to try out our English and immerse ourselves in the English language community, even speaking with an Australian accent. However, after a few weeks in Sydney I began to wonder where I could immerse myself in English, let alone English with an Australian accent. For one thing, most of the new people I met seemed to be from mainland China. Once they knew I was from Taiwan, they tended to speak to me in Mandarin. Due to the popularity of Taiwanese TV variety shows in China, some were keen to talk to me about the shows that they had watched, and having these fun conversations in English seemed an unlikely proposition. For another thing, when I walked from my unit to the campus, which took about 30 minutes, along the way I frequently overheard Mandarin, while seeing many Mandarin advertisements for renting and trading goods posted on the electric poles. The Mandarin language was used much more widely in Sydney than I had ever expected.

My husband was in the same situation. He was located in a research office, sharing with three other Chinese PhD students in the department. Instead of speaking English, he was speaking Mandarin most of the time. The only chance for him to speak English was with his supervisor during their one-hour weekly meeting. Another student from Taiwan also told me she was concerned about the slow improvement in her English. She had expected to acquire English quickly and easily, but she had not done so. “I don’t feel like my English is any better than it was before I came,” she confided. “There are no local students in my accounting classes. My classmates are all international students, and about 90 percent are from China.” Similar to us, she came all the way to Australia and to her surprise found herself in classes where most of her peers were Mandarin speakers

so that she spoke Chinese every day. Furthermore, she found it hard to make local Australian friends at university, despite the fact that she has a very lively and easy-going personality. Interestingly, she was not the first person I met here who told me that they wished they had local Australian friends and could experience more of Australian culture.

And it is this experience that shaped my PhD research!

This qualitative study explores the contemporary linguistic environment in Australian higher education, which has evolved as a result of globalization to accommodate a large number of incoming international students who are using English as a second language. Among them Chinese international students stand out as the largest group, which, for instance, made up 39.9 percent of all higher education enrolments in 2014. This study explores the new phenomenon of the Mandarin language predominating among languages other than English in Australian higher education. The study shows how the changing linguistic environment shapes Taiwanese international students' experiences in Australia, as a group who happen to share a common language with Chinese students but do not belong to the same cohort.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork spanning three years, this study follows the trajectories of thirty-five Taiwanese higher education students from ten universities in four different states in Australia. The study investigates in-depth how language learning intersects with their motivation to invest in overseas study, their participation in educational settings as well as in local communities, their sense of identity and belonging, and their overall study experience.

Data include one-on-one interviews, personal communications, field notes, and participants' academic writing assignments and the feedback they received.

Employing content analysis, the study finds that these Taiwanese international students chose to invest in studying in Australia in order to attain English language proficiency, internationalization, and self-fulfilment. However, when they sojourned in Australia, there was a clash between a monolingual language ideology, where English was the target language, and multilingual language realities, where Mandarin was widely used. The unexpected linguistic environment mediated their use of English despite their strong motivation to enter English-speaking networks. In addition, the Master's participants often found themselves participating peripherally in classroom and group work. For PhD participants, their candidature was often a lonely experience with little institutional or community support. As regards participants' experiences with academic writing, the study identifies gaps in institutional language support services. Furthermore, the feedback given to the research participants on their academic writing was oftentimes ineffective and did not facilitate their learning.

Besides university study, the study also presents participants' language use and settlement experiences outside university, a previously underexplored area. Domains, including church, accommodation, and romance, are examined and successful cases are presented of participants who were lucky to find a bridge to extend their social network as well as improve their language skills.

Overall, the study argues that language is a manifestation of participation, which is a dynamic and constantly changing process. The findings have implications for education providers regarding the (language) learning support required by international students.

