An Empirical Research of the Present Use of Li Language

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Abstract. In order to know the present situation of Li language used by Li college students as well as their attitude toward it, a questionnaire survey has been conducted on 174 Li students in Sanya Aviation and Tourism College. Through the survey on the frequency and proficiency of Li students using Li language in different situations and different life stages, it can be concluded that Li college students’ Li language ability is gradually weakening. And although most of them are aware of the importance to protect their native language and culture, they have no idea what to do and what should be done. In order to protect the uniqueness of Li language and culture, as well as to maintain stability of social and economic development of Li nationality, protecting and inheriting Li language is not only the responsibility of the people in Hainan island, but also an urgent task for all the Chinese people.

Introduction

As the indigenous people in Hainan Island, Li people have been settling down here for several thousand years. They have created their own language and culture, and passed them down generation by generation. However, it is a pity that Li people don’t have their own written language symbol system. In 1956, in order to make up for this shortage, the State Council entrusted each Ethnic Affairs Commission to compile “Li Written Language Program (draft).” However, due to different reasons, this program wasn’t spread [1]. “As one of the most important national characteristics, language is the carrier of national culture and the tool to convey messages inside the nationality; also, it is a crucial tool to mark the presence and to preserve the property of a nationality [2].” Whether the power of a language is strong or not is decided by the number of people using this language, by its distribution range, as well as its communicative function inside the nationality [3]. In order to see the development of Li society and economy, a survey of the present use of Li language is a direct way. Li college students, as the “pyramid” of talent reserve of Li nationality, are the hope of this minority, and their present use of Li language can effectively reflect and predict not only the development of Li Language, but also the development of Li society and economy to some extent.

Questionnaire Design

Research Participants and Survey Methods

The participants of this research are the 174 Li college students in Sanya Aviation and Tourism College. They are aging from 18 to 22, including 84 males, and 90 females. They come from different parts of Hainan Island, about 35.93\% from Sanya, 23.35\% from Baisha Li Autonomous County, 9.58\% from Qiongzhong Li and Miao Autonomous County, and the rest 31\% respectively from Lingshui, Baoting, Ledong, Changjiang, Danzhou, and Wuzhishan Mountain area. The places mentioned above cover almost all the main habitations for Li people, so the participants chosen here are typical representatives of Li people.

Questionnaire survey and personal interview have been used in this research. And SPSS19 was used to analyze the result of the survey.
Research Result and Analysis

174 Li students participated in this questionnaire survey, and 174 effective questionnaire results were gathered. The content of the questionnaire mainly include two parts: the first part aims to investigate the position and present situation of Li language among Li college students; and the second part mainly explore Li college students’ attitude toward learning and using Li language.

The Position and Present Situation of Li language Used by Li College Students. This part is mainly based on the following questions: “What is your first language?” “Which language do you use the most?” “Where do you use Li language?” “How is your proficiency of Li language?” etc.

As it is shown in Table 1, 59.2% of Li students can speak Li language, and 33.91% of the participants take Li language as their first language, and only 9.2% of Li students use Li language the most in school life. Comparatively, 98.23% of Li students can speak Mandarin and 41.95% of them take mandarin as their first language, and 78.16% of Li students speak mandarin most frequently in school life. It shows that Chinese language are very significant in Li students’ life, especially when they are in public places, and the frequency of using mandarin is much higher than that of Li language. There are mainly two reasons for it. Firstly, the great immigration of people from mainland has accelerated ethnic integration. Since the Reform and Opening up, there are 3 important immigration periods for Hainan island—Hainan separating itself from Guangdong at the end of the 1980s, the strategy of constructing Hainan as an international tourism island in 2009, the program of building Hainan Free Trade Zone in 2018. In these three periods, thousands of tourists, workers and talented people in different fields came to Hainan, which result in the great immigration of people from mainland to the island, not only greatly boosting Hainan’s economic development, but also promoting the communication between local people and the newcomers, as well as speeding up the Chinese localization of the indigenous people. Secondly, the popularization of Chinese education has greatly weakened the use of Li language. Almost no special Li language schools are established for Li students to register in, instead, the schools most Li students registered in are taking mandarin as the first teaching language, and few schools provide double language (Li language and mandarin) education. Moreover, some parents are conscious of cultivating children’s mandarin ability in their daily life in order that the latter can adapt themselves to school life quickly. Thus, children almost have little time to speak Li language even at home, which makes their native language ability weaken gradually [4].

Table 1. Languages Mastered by Li College Students.

| Items                                      | Mandarin | Li language | Hainan dialect | Other languages |
|--------------------------------------------|----------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|
| NO. Of people | Ratio %  | NO. Of people | Ratio %        | NO. Of people | Ratio %        | NO. Of people | Ratio %        |
| What is your first language?               | 73       | 59          | 33.91          | 32             | 18.39          | 10            | 5.74           |
| What language can you speak?               | 171      | 103         | 59.2           | 103            | 59.2           | 50            | 41.13          |
| What language do you use the most in school? | 136      | 16          | 9.2            | 17             | 9.77           | 5             | 2.87           |
The situation of Li language used in Li families is also probed here. According to the survey, 50% of the elder use Li language when they talk to the younger, while only 35.81% of the younger talk to the elder in Li language. And the younger are inclined to use Chinese more than the elder. All of these indicate that the influence of Chinese on the younger generation of Li nationality is greater than that on the elder, and the result is almost in consonance with the result of the survey done by Song An-qi [5]. It is mainly because in public places, such as schools, workplaces and so on, Li people usually communicate with each other in mandarin, sometimes even they go back home, it is hard for them to adapt themselves to the new language environment and switch the language code, so they keep speaking mandarin even to the family members.

As it is shown in Fig. 1, the number of Li students who have proficiently mastered Li language presents a regular downtrend in different life stages, while the number of Li students who can proficiently speak mandarin is gradually increasing. It indicates that the Chinese language environment in school education speeds up the Chinese localization of Li students, and leads to the gradual weakening of their native language.

![Figure 1. The Ratio Change of Li College Students in Language Mastery.](image)

Above all, the present use of Li language by the younger generation is not so optimistic, and it may continue to be weakened or even replaced [6] by the borrowed language, especially Chinese, if no effective measures are taken to improve it.

The Attitude of Li Nationality College Students toward Li Language. In this part, Li students’ attitude towards learning and using Li language is investigated based on the two questions: “What is the main reason for you to learn Li language?” and “Do you think it is necessary to offer Li language courses in school?”

According to the survey, 51.15% of Li students think they learn Li language in order to protect the culture and language of Li nationality. 24.71% of Li students think they have no choice but to learn Li language because it is their native language. 4.02% of Li students learn Li language because they think it is useful, and 2.3% choose it because they are fond of it. There are also 17.82% of the participants choose “I don’t know” or “I don’t care.” On the necessity of offering Li language courses in school, only 38.5% of the participants choose “necessary,” while 61.5% of them choose “not sure” or “unnecessary.”

It is obvious that Li college students’ attitude towards Li language is not so optimistic. Although more than half of them think it is necessary to inherit and protect Li language and culture, they have no idea about what they should do and what they can do, even some students’ think they should let Li language grow and die without outside interference.
Some Countermeasures on Protecting Li Language and Culture

Intensify Li Nationality College Students’ Consciousness of Protecting Native Language, and Transform this Consciousness to a Sense of National Pride

As the minority with the largest population in Hainan Island, Li nationality has a history of more than 3000 years. They have their own habits, customs, beliefs and so on. Li culture is not only the essence of Hainan culture, but also an indispensable part of Chinese culture. It is a bright pearl in the treasure house of Chinese culture [7]. According to the survey, although Li students’ Li language ability is weakening, they still have strong sense of protecting Li culture and language. The government could take full advantage of this sense, and intensify and transform this consciousness to a sense of national pride. They can offer Li language and culture courses in the schools most Li students register in; and they can encourage some Li ethnic schools to take both Li language and mandarin as teaching languages [8], and create an environment for Li students to learn and speak Li language. Moreover, the government should supply opportunities for students to use Li language to serve the public. For instance, they can offer volunteer positions for Li students in places with Li national features, such as scenic spots, pharmacies, restaurants, hotels, etc. Thus, Li students can not only take these opportunities to practice their native language, but they can use it to serve the public. And during the serving process, they can realize the importance of their double-language or multi-language advantage, which can be transformed to national pride finally.

Reinforce the Publicity of Li Culture, and Transform the Core Competitiveness of Hainan Tourism to Local Culture

Tourism industry is the primary economic resource of Hainan [9]. In order to differentiate itself from so many islands with similar geographic and climate advantages and build itself as a unique island, Hainan must take its local culture as its core competitiveness, and its tourism needs to transform from natural scenery to cultural travel. As the indigenous people in Hainan Island, Li people have their own language, national dress, belief, eating habits, wedding and funeral customs, literature and art, and they have their own characteristics in food, housing and transportation. Tourism itself is made up of a series of activities, including “food, housing, transportation, traveling, shopping and entertainment,” thus, the governmental agencies in Hainan, especially tourism administrations can make full use of the uniqueness of Li culture, and they can build a tour route specialized in seeing and feeling Li culture. Moreover, Li culture can also permeate in the existing tourist attractions related to Li nationality. The island tourism which originally take climate and geographic advantages as core competitiveness should be transformed to cultural tourism which effectively combines local culture and beautiful scenery.

Build a Li Language Corpus, and Record Both Voiced and Voiceless Materials

A language is usually learned because we have to use it. If the Li language resource aims to be spread and known by more people, a Li language corpus should be built [10]. Different materials related to Li language, including voiced videos and voiceless books, pictures, manuscripts should be gathered, and the government can provide a platform, not matter it is physical or electronic or virtual, for people to appreciate and read these materials. Only by doing these can more people have more access to know and use Li language.

Conclusion

Li nationality college students are the most active population of Li people. Although their Li language ability is weakening due to the influence of mandarin, they still have strong sense of protecting their native language and culture. The government should take full advantage of this sense, and take effective measures to protect Li language and culture, no matter it is for the protection of its cultural uniqueness or for the maintaining of its social and economic development.
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