

Taiwan's Indigenous Languages

Reading Worksheet — Level F | tahricteaches.com

Long before Mandarin became the dominant language of Taiwan, the island's mountains and coastlines echoed with dozens of distinct tongues spoken by its **indigenous** peoples. Taiwan is home to sixteen officially recognized Austronesian-speaking tribes, including the Atayal, Amis, and Paiwan, whose languages are linguistically unrelated to Chinese. Remarkably, many linguists consider Taiwan the likely homeland of the entire Austronesian language family, which today stretches from Madagascar to Easter Island.

Despite this rich linguistic heritage, centuries of **colonization** dramatically reshaped the island's language landscape. Under Japanese rule, and later through policies favoring Han Chinese settlers, indigenous communities faced sustained pressure toward **assimilation**. Children were often punished for speaking their native tongue in school, while Mandarin was promoted as the sole language of education, government, and public life, pushing indigenous languages toward the margins of everyday communication.

Today, the consequences of that history are stark. Several tongues are classified as severely **endangered**, with only a handful of elderly speakers remaining fluent in certain dialects. Younger generations, raised primarily in Mandarin-speaking environments, often understand fragments of their ancestral language without being able to hold a full conversation. Indigenous communities, already marginalized within Taiwanese society, frequently lack the institutional resources needed to reverse this decline on their own.

In response, the government and grassroots organizations have launched ambitious **revitalization** initiatives. Immersion preschools, dedicated television and radio channels, and university-level linguistics programs now aim to rebuild fluency among younger speakers. Some tribes have developed written scripts for previously oral languages, while community elders are being recorded and enlisted as teachers, transferring vocabulary and pronunciation that might otherwise vanish within a generation.

Ultimately, the fight to preserve Taiwan's indigenous languages concerns more than vocabulary and grammar; it involves identity, history, and a community's right to narrate its own story. Each language carries unique ways of describing kinship, nature, and ritual that cannot be fully translated. Whether these efforts succeed will determine if Taiwan's linguistic heritage survives as a living tradition rather than merely a historical footnote.

A. Vocabulary

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. indigenous ____ | a. to keep something safe from harm, loss, or disappearance |
| 2. endangered ____ | b. traditions, language, and beliefs passed down through generations |
| 3. revitalization ____ | c. form of a language spoken in a particular region or by a particular group |
| 4. colonization ____ | d. pushed to the edges of society with limited power or influence |
| 5. assimilation ____ | e. act of settling among and establishing control over the people of an area |
| 6. dialect ____ | f. process of adopting the customs, language, or identity of a dominant culture |
| 7. fluent ____ | g. able to speak or write a language smoothly and accurately |
| 8. heritage ____ | h. originating naturally in a particular place; native |
| 9. marginalized ____ | i. at serious risk of disappearing or dying out |
| 10. preserve ____ | j. process of giving new energy or strength to something that was declining |

B. True or False

- | | |
|--|---|
| ___ 1. Taiwan is considered by many linguists to be the likely origin point of the | ___ 2. Taiwan officially recognizes only three indigenous tribes. |
|--|---|

Austronesian language family.

- 3. Indigenous children were once punished for speaking their native language in school.
- 4. All of Taiwan's indigenous languages currently have millions of fluent speakers.
- 5. Both Japanese colonial rule and later Han Chinese-dominated policies contributed to the decline of indigenous languages.
- 6. Some indigenous languages in Taiwan now have dedicated television and radio programming.
- 7. Younger generations of indigenous Taiwanese are generally more fluent in their ancestral languages than their grandparents.
- 8. Community elders are being recorded to help pass on vocabulary and pronunciation.
- 9. Written scripts have been developed for some previously oral indigenous languages.
- 10. The passage claims that indigenous languages can be perfectly translated into Mandarin without any loss of meaning.

C. Fill in the Blanks

Word Bank: indigenous, endangered, assimilation, heritage, preserve, dialect, fluent, marginalized

1. Many linguists believe Taiwan is the ancestral homeland of the _____ Austronesian-speaking peoples.
2. Several of Taiwan's tribal languages are now considered severely _____, with very few remaining speakers.
3. Colonial-era policies pushed indigenous communities toward _____ into the dominant culture.
4. Immersion schools and community programs aim to _____ indigenous languages for future generations.
5. Language is a core part of a community's cultural _____, connecting people to their ancestors.



D. Comprehension Questions

1. Why do linguists consider Taiwan significant to the study of the Austronesian language family?
2. What historical factors contributed to the decline of Taiwan's indigenous languages?
3. What methods are being used today to revitalize endangered indigenous languages in Taiwan?

E. Discussion Questions

1. Why might preserving a minority language matter to a society even if most people no longer speak it fluently?
2. What role do you think media and technology, such as TV shows, apps, and social platforms, should play in language revitalization efforts?

Answer Key

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A. Vocabulary: 1-h, 2-i, 3-j, 4-e, 5-f, 6-c, 7-g, 8-b, 9-d, 10-a

B. True/False: 1-T, 2-F, 3-T, 4-F, 5-T, 6-T, 7-F, 8-T, 9-T, 10-F

C. Fill Blanks: 1-indigenous, 2-endangered, 3-assimilation, 4-preserve, 5-heritage

D. Comprehension:

1. Taiwan is widely believed to be the original homeland from which Austronesian languages spread to places as far away as Madagascar and Easter Island.
2. Japanese colonial rule and later Han Chinese-dominated policies promoted Mandarin and punished the use of indigenous languages, pushing communities toward assimilation.
3. Immersion preschools, dedicated media programming, university linguistics courses, and recordings of elder speakers are being used to rebuild fluency among younger generations.

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