

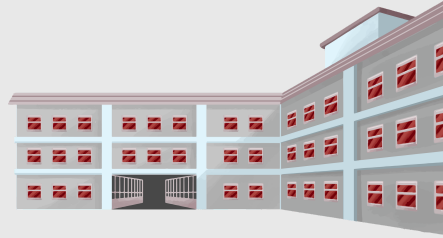
Investigating Perceptions About Language in Lower Elementary Students: An Ethnographic Inquiry

Sian Li, Amy Kerr, and Ashia Payne

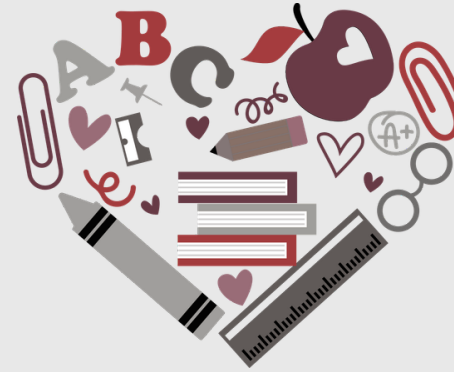
Beijing City International School

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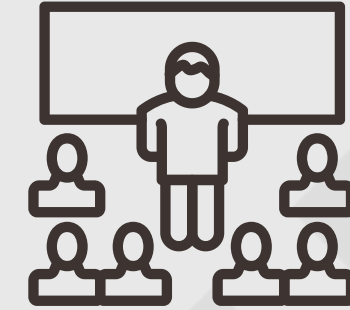
Who Are We?



Beijing City International School
(BCIS)



Elementary School
Section



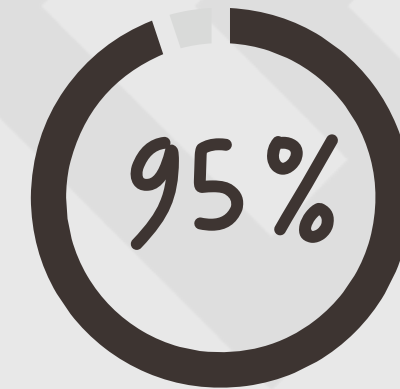
Many students receive
EAL classes.



Beijing, China



IB PYP
Curriculum



Chinese is the home
language of 95% of our
students

**What are the perceptions of students in Grades 1–3
regarding their use of languages in EAL class?**

Translanguaging

Originally, the term translanguaging was coined by Cen Williams to describe a pedagogical practice where students alternate languages for input and output (Kleyn & García, 2019; Wei, 2018).

Translanguaging has now been expanded by Ofelia García to describe a dynamic process where learners use their one full linguistic repertoire for meaning-making, rather than there being separate language systems within the brain (Kleyn & García, 2019; Wei, 2018). This challenges the concept of code-switching, which assumes that multilinguals alternate between language ‘codes.’ Translanguaging emphasizes the fluidity of language use.

Kleyn and García (2019) distinguished between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ forms of translanguaging. Weak translanguaging uses students’ home languages only as a temporary scaffold to access English, whereas strong translanguaging is a transformative, critical pedagogy that challenges linguistic hierarchies. For young learners in English-medium international schools, understanding translanguaging as a normal, expert practice, not a deficit, is essential for shaping positive perceptions of their own language use.

Learners' Language Practices and Identity

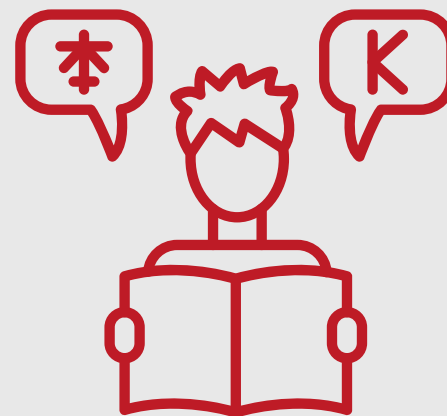
Guo and Gao (2023) found that, even without English instruction, 29% of Chinese preschoolers spontaneously used English letters or words, and 100% had English names used at school or home. Regarding identity, the adoption of English names can signal positive feelings toward English and integration into the school's linguistic culture. However, it may also have negative consequences: children may feel that English is overpowering their Chinese identity, or they may comply without understanding why they need an English name, leading to a passive, potentially alienating experience.

Seltzer (2019) shows that older students strategically choose which language practices to display, sometimes opting for what they feel are the most prestigious languages. This tension between voluntary identification and institutional pressure is critical for understanding young learners' perceptions. García and Menken (2015) argue that schools must cultivate a “multilingual ecology” which includes signage, announcements and classroom materials reflecting all students' languages.

Unplanned Translanguaging

Wei (2018) argues that unplanned, creative mixing of languages is natural. In English-medium international schools, such unplanned translanguaging is inevitable among younger students, who are still learning their languages and need to choose which language they feel more comfortable in to communicate. Young students' perception of this practice, whether they view it as helpful, confusing, or 'wrong,' remains understudied. This research project wants to help bridge this gap.

Guo and Gao's (2023) finding that children spontaneously mix languages suggests that unplanned translanguaging emerges organically, yet school policies may implicitly discourage it, potentially leading children to develop negative self-perceptions. In many international schools, translanguaging is tolerated only as a bridge to English, which may lead children to view their Chinese as inferior.



Metacognitive Awareness in Young Learners

Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to reflect on the form and function of language. It develops in early childhood, is enhanced by early bilingualism and has a bidirectional relationship with additional language achievement (Roehr-Brackin, 2024).

Young learners are able to reliably self-report on their language use when given appropriate visual aids (Roehr-Brackin, 2024). However, McIntyre et al. (1997), found that language learners with anxiety about their L2 are more likely to have negative feelings towards that language and underestimate their performance. Suzukida (2024) demonstrated that when young learners listen to their own speech recordings, lower-proficiency learners overestimate and higher-proficiency learners underestimate their performance.

Young learners' responses may be a result of their competence and their confidence, emotions, and perceptions of classroom norms.

Research Gap

No study has specifically examined young (Grades 1 to 3) Chinese learners' perceptions of their language use in an English-medium international school in China. While existing research documents translanguaging practices (Wei, 2018; Kleyn & García, 2019) and identity tensions around English names (Guo & Gao, 2023), the voice of the young child, particularly how they feel about using both English and Chinese, is largely absent. This study addresses that gap by using developmentally appropriate methods to surface children's own perspectives on their language use.



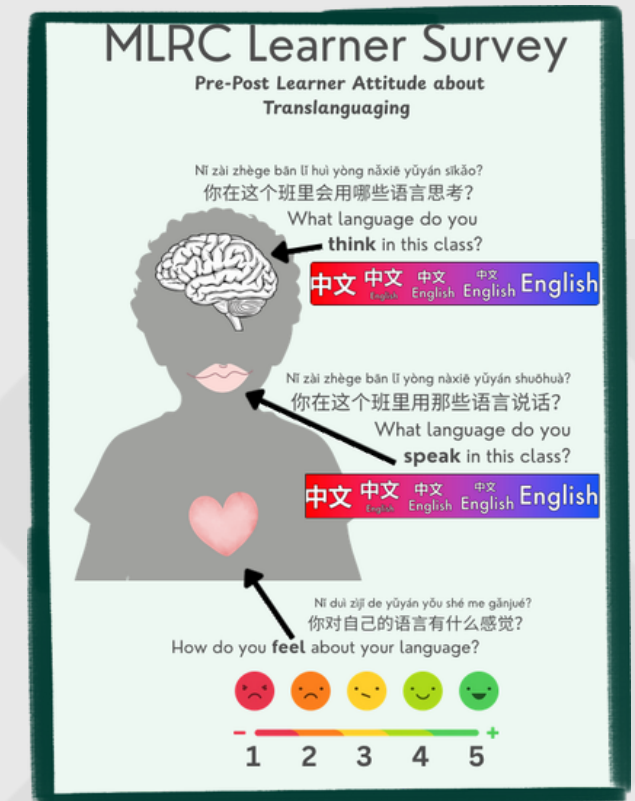
We chose a mixed-method design, with Grades 1-3 Chinese-speaking students who are in EAL classes:

- Quantitative data - language survey with G1-3 students
- Qualitative data - language profile activity for Grade 2 students

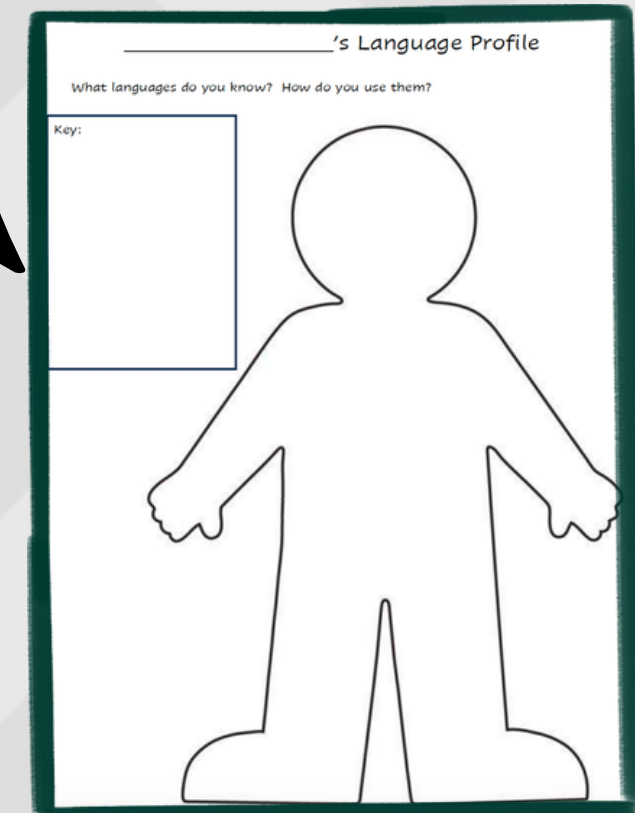
Grades 1-3 EAL teachers surveyed their own students, individually.

For analysis, audio recordings were taken of the language survey and photos were taken of the language profile activity.

To analyze the data, we chose thematic analysis by reviewing the data together to take notes on what themes and anomalies occurred.



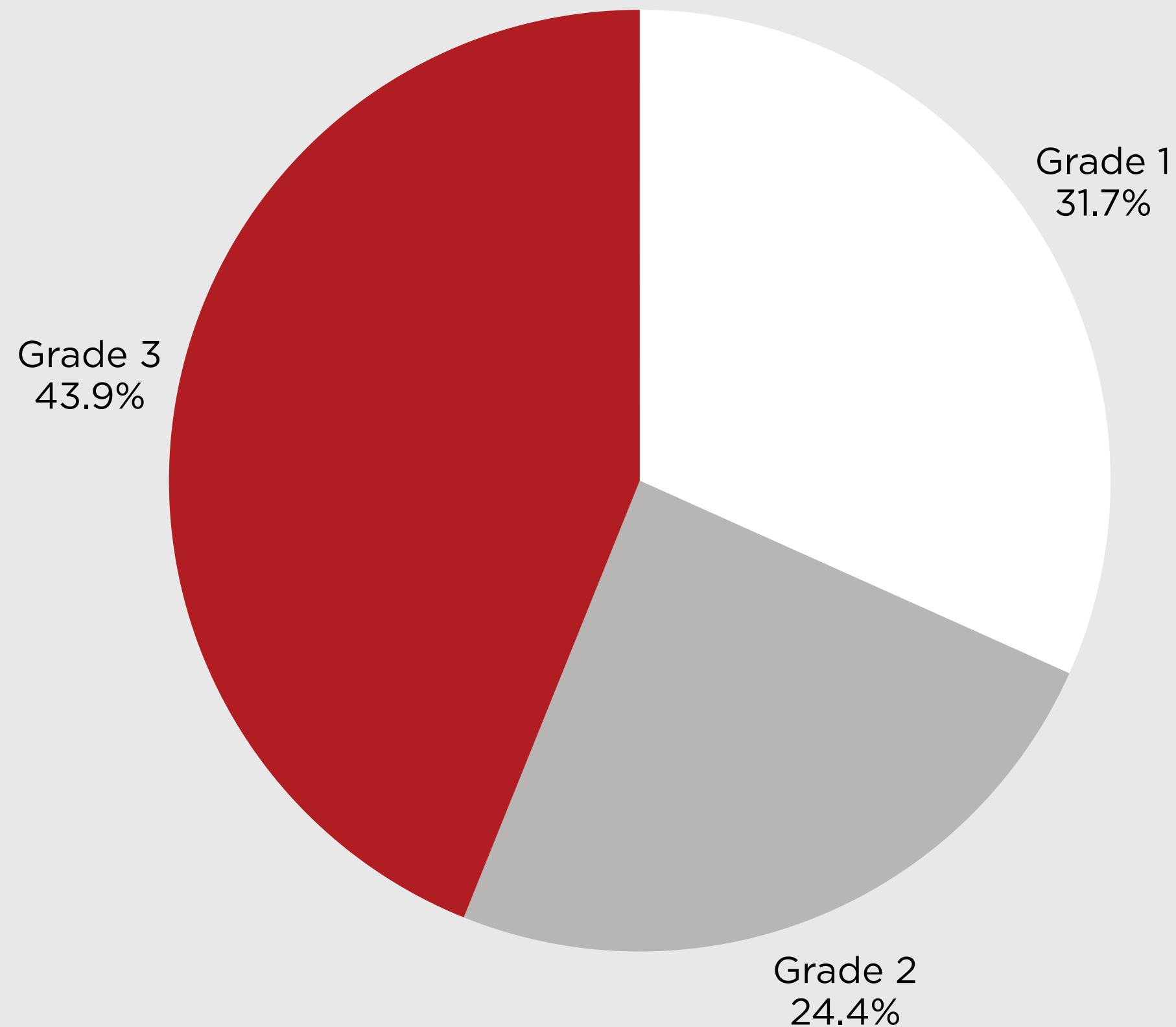
The MLRC Learner Survey form is titled "MLRC Learner Survey" and "Pre-Post Learner Attitude about Translanguaging". It features a silhouette of a person with a brain, a heart, and a mouth. The brain section asks "Ni zài zhègè bān lǐ yòng nǎxiē yǔyán sīkǎo?" (What language do you think in this class?) with a scale from 1 (sad) to 5 (happy) and options for Chinese (中文) and English (English). The heart section asks "Ni zài zhègè bān lǐ yòng nǎxiē yǔyán shuōhuà?" (What language do you speak in this class?) with the same scale and options. The mouth section asks "Nǐ duì zìjǐ de yǔyán yǒu shé me gǎnjué?" (How do you feel about your language?) with the same scale and options.



The 's Language Profile form is titled "'s Language Profile" and "What languages do you know? How do you use them?". It features a large outline of a person's body for drawing or writing. There is a "Key:" box on the left side.

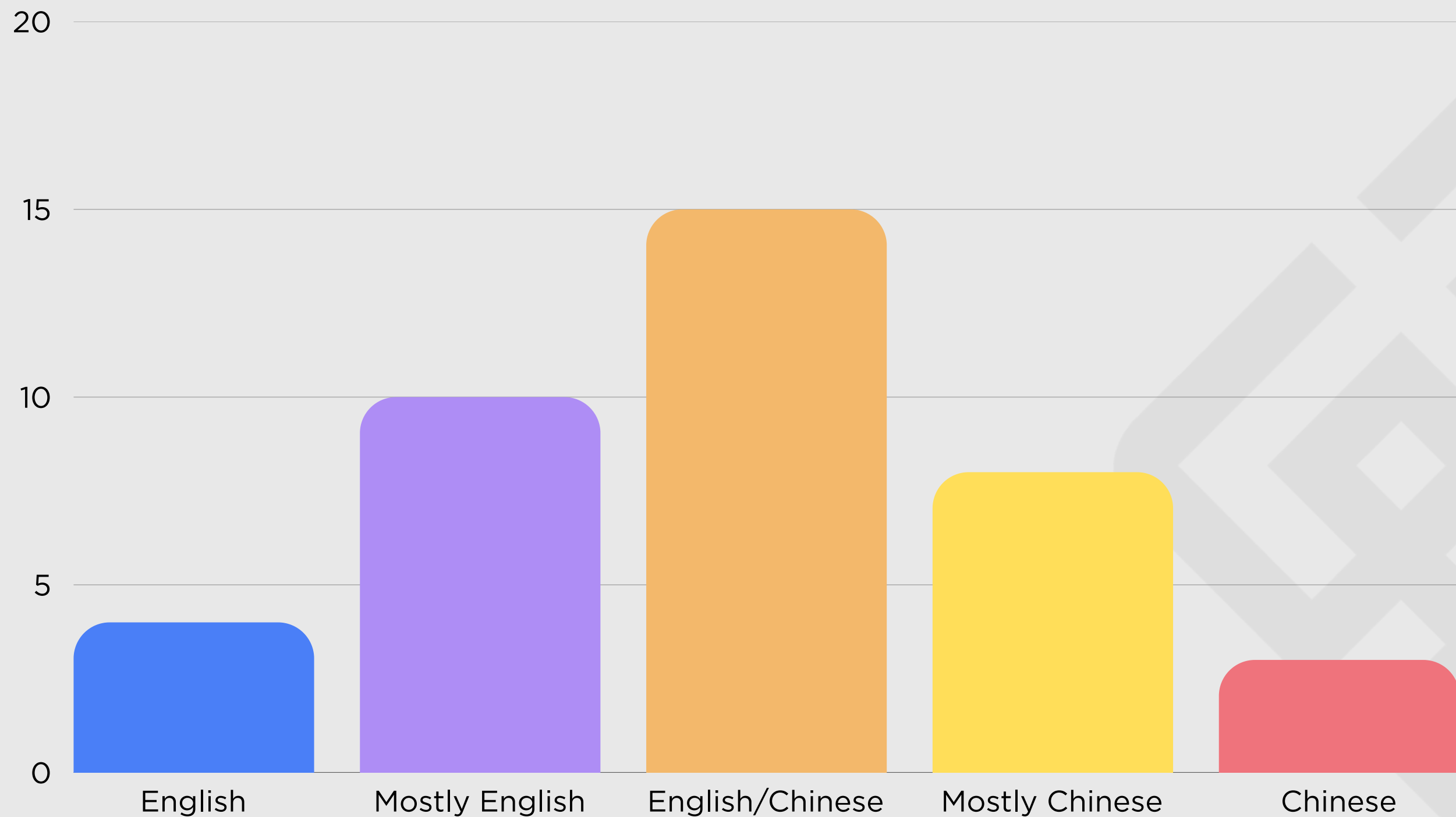


Word Cloud of Data Analysis Notes

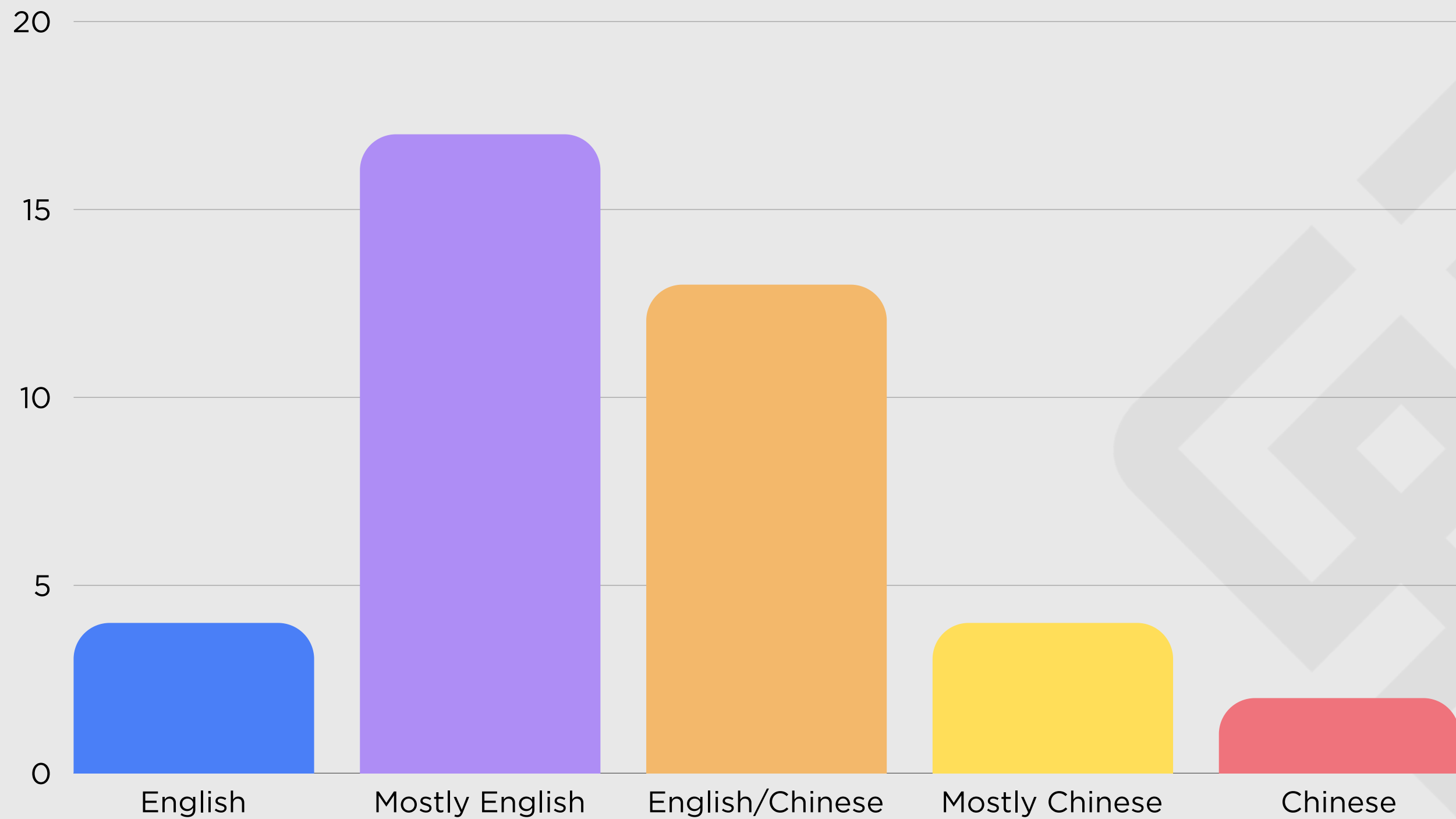


- 41 responses
- 41 survey interviews with students from G1-3 (13 from G1, 10 from G2, 18 from G3)
- 9 language profile activities from G2 students

What language do you *think* in this class?

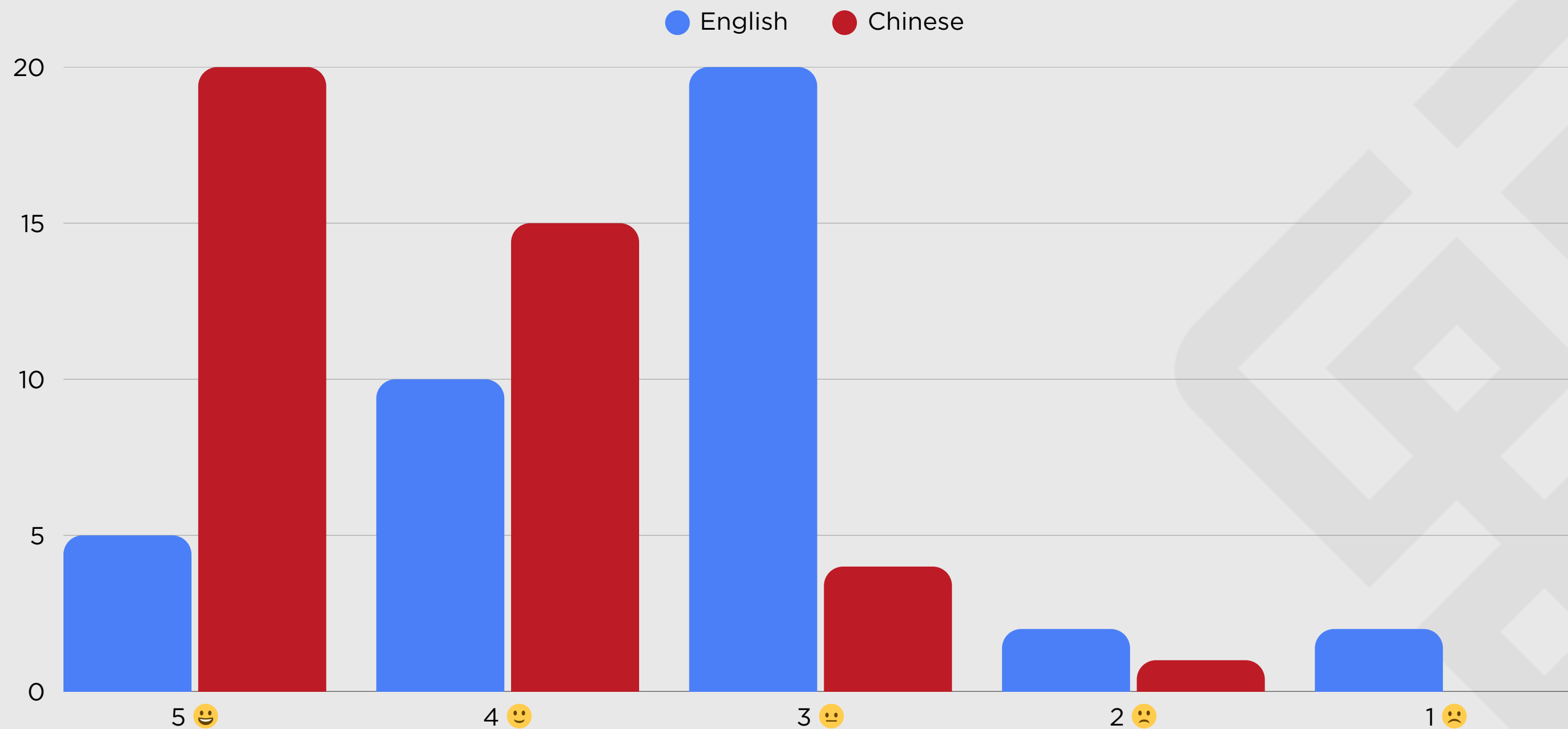


What language do you *speak* in this class?



Survey Findings: Question 2 Language and Speaking

How do you *feel* about your language (English / Chinese)?



Survey Findings: Question 3 Feeling about Language for English Comparison Chart

Sample Responses Grade 3: Feelings About Language

How do you feel about your Chinese language?"

这是说吗? Are say? 这是说吗? 不是写或者其他的?

"Yes, just talk to me."

"Why do you feel this?"

"Three for English - because I think English I want to say more things and Chinese is just said 1,2,3,4 and English is (made a sound) so many."

Why? Ok soso? May I ask why?
为什么?"

Because...because English is... I don't know English."

Sample Responses Grade 3: Feelings About Language

“Why do you feel this for English?”

“My English is not good.”

“May I ask why?”

“Some English I’m not know it.”

“Why for english?”

“...you speak English and it's
beautifully.”

Sample Responses Grade 3: Feelings About Language

“Did you say something about the playground?”

“playground I say Chinese and at class I say English.”

“Which language do you speak at school? In the playground, homeroom, etc.”

“Maybe 50/50 because in class you need to speak English and maybe you can use Chinese at recess.”

“What language do you speak at school?”

“25% of Chinese and 85% of English”

Sample Responses Grade 1: Feelings About Language

“Can you tell me more?”

“Because in EAL speak Chinese (*teacher's name*) cannot understand and we cannot learn more English.”

“I like Chinese because I am Chinese people. Chinese is my mother language.”

Sample Responses Grade 1: Feelings About Language

“How do you feel about your language?”

“Good! Really good! It’s this - 3.”

”About what?”

“About language.”

All the language or part of your language?”

“part”

“Which part?”

“How about your Chinese?”

“Good because I’m China people.”

Sample Responses Grade 1: Feelings About Language

“What language do you speak in this class with me?”

“Is don't know the things is English, is the know it's Chinese.”

1.“你说4关于社么语言？ When it's a lot of English and a little Chinese. How do you feel about all English?”

3.“那如果是 all Chinese how do you feel?”

2.“It's so hard.”

4.“little bit easy”

2.“关于什么语言？ ...”

4.“hard words?”

1.“还行吧！ ”

3.“关于那些有一点难的。。。那些 coconut...”

Sample Responses Grade 1: Feelings About Language

“How do you feel about your language?”

“以为我在班里不这么说。”

“But this is about your feeling not talking.”

“3.”

“4 for what language?”

“4 for half half. And I all English and little bit Chinese I feel 3. Because it's hard.”

Language Profile Activity

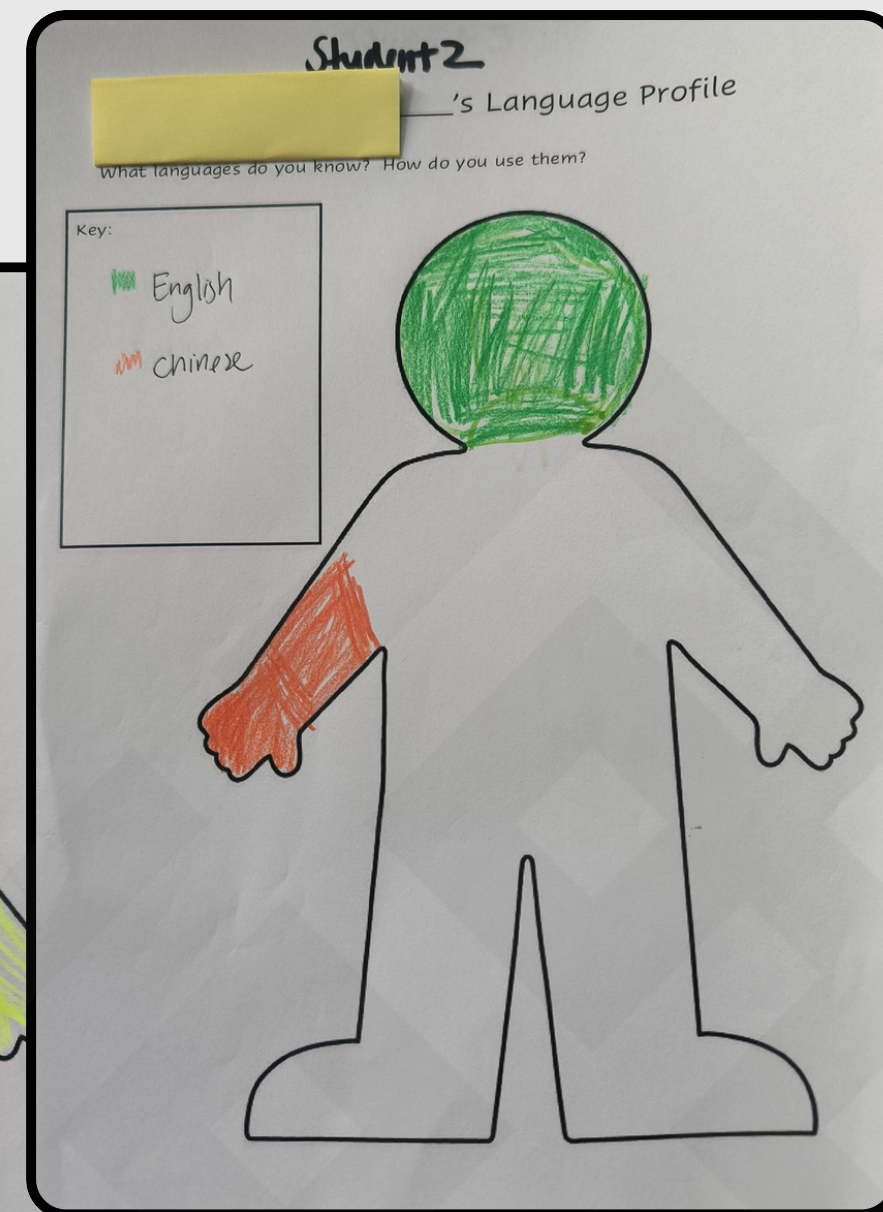
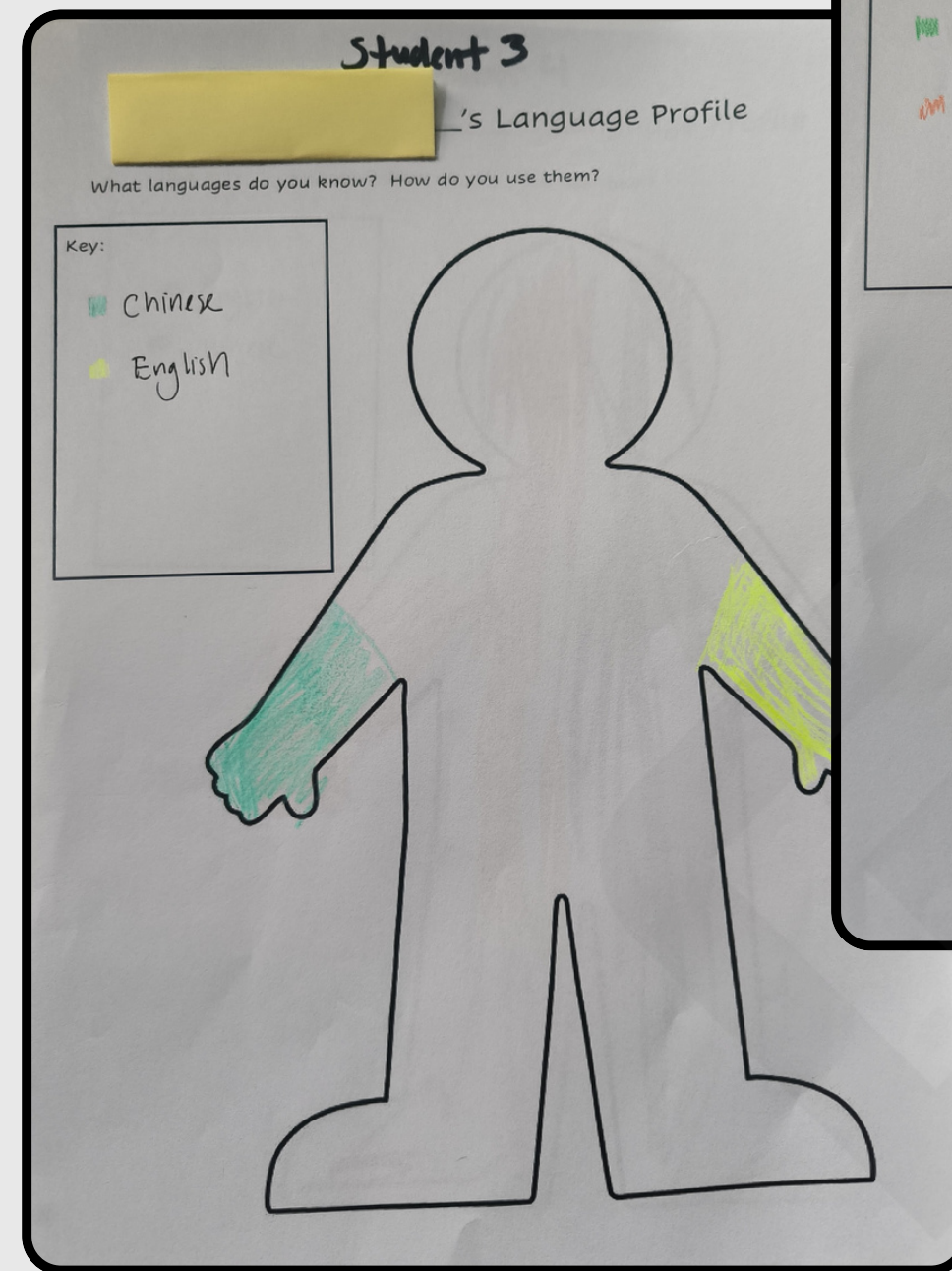
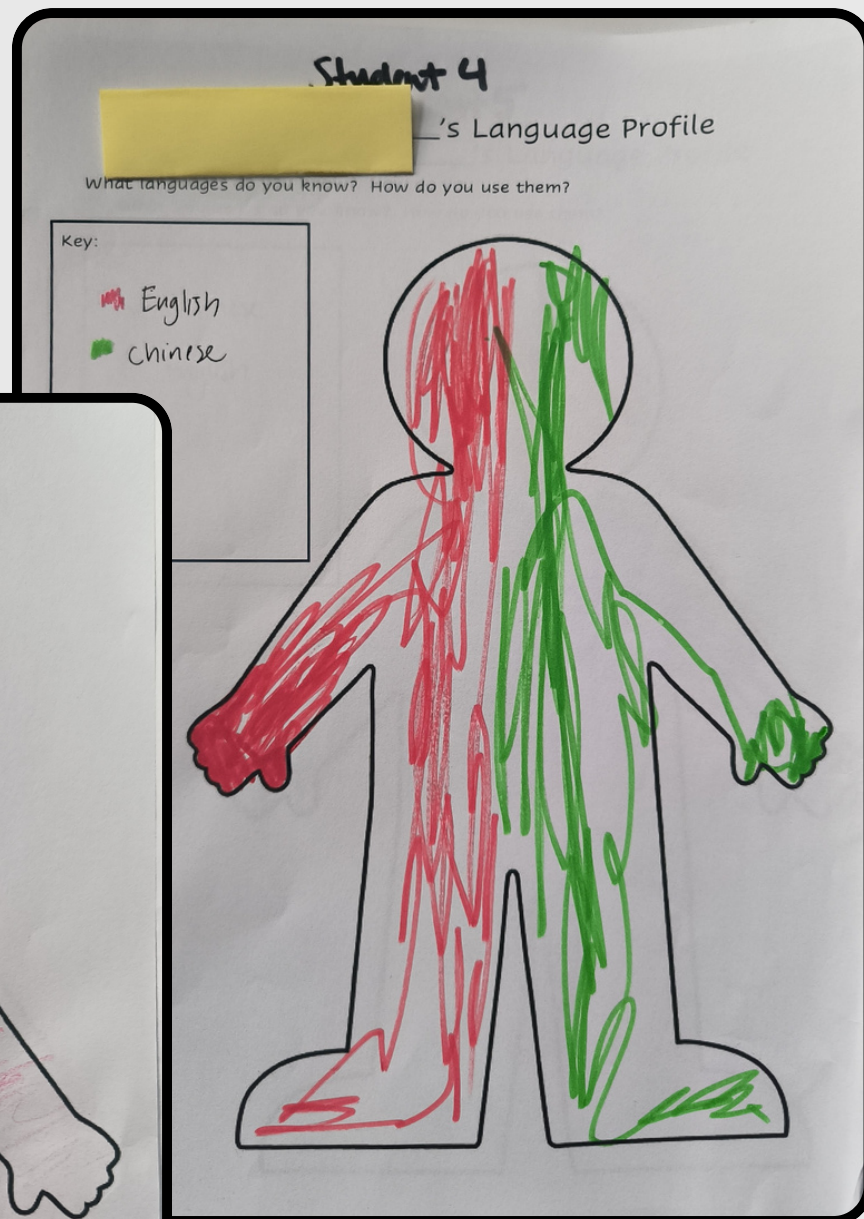
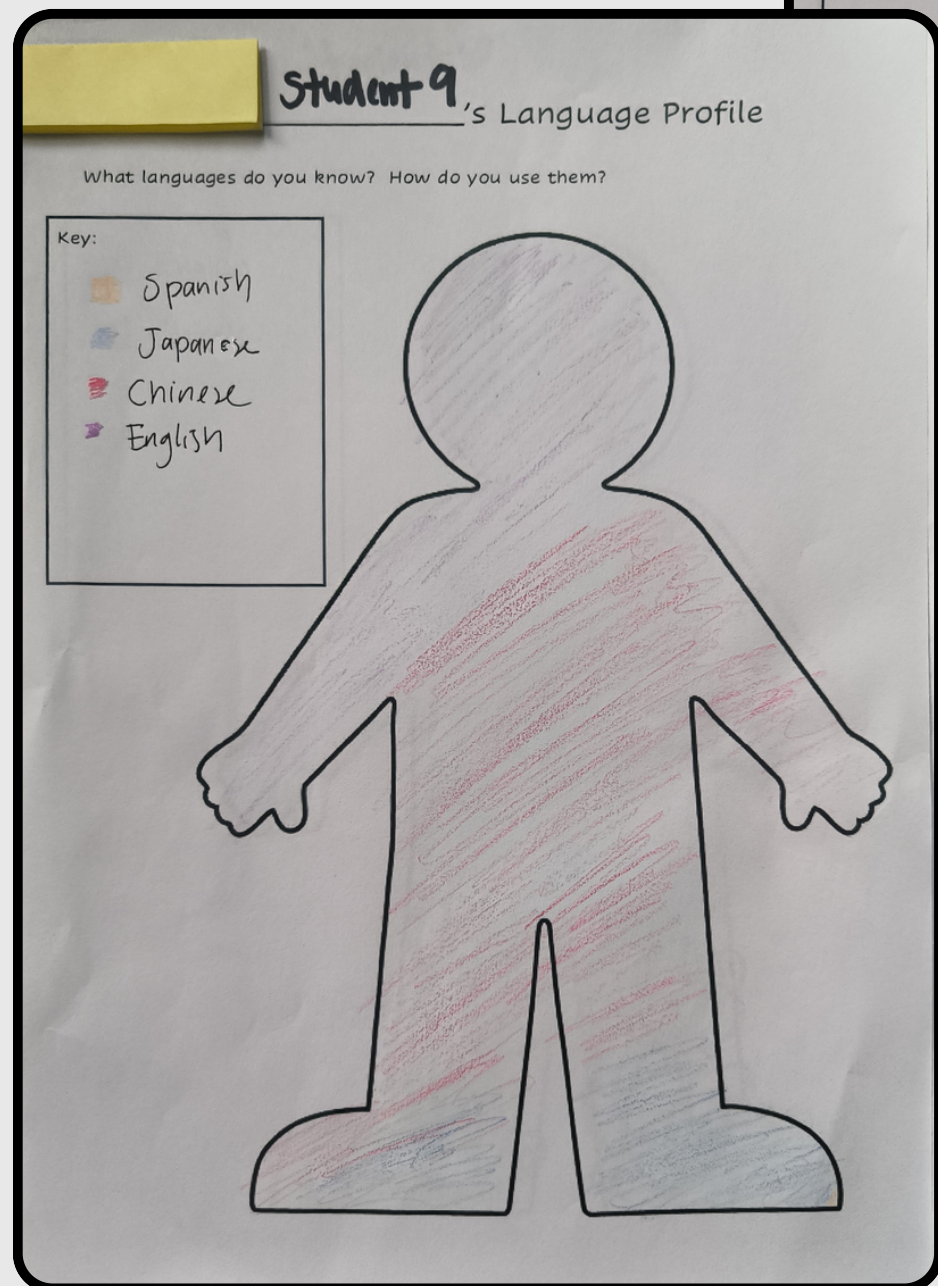


Language Profile: Languages included in the Key

"In home I use Chinese language to talk to my families. In school I use English and a little bit of Chinese to talk to my friends. Then I talk to teacher I use English."

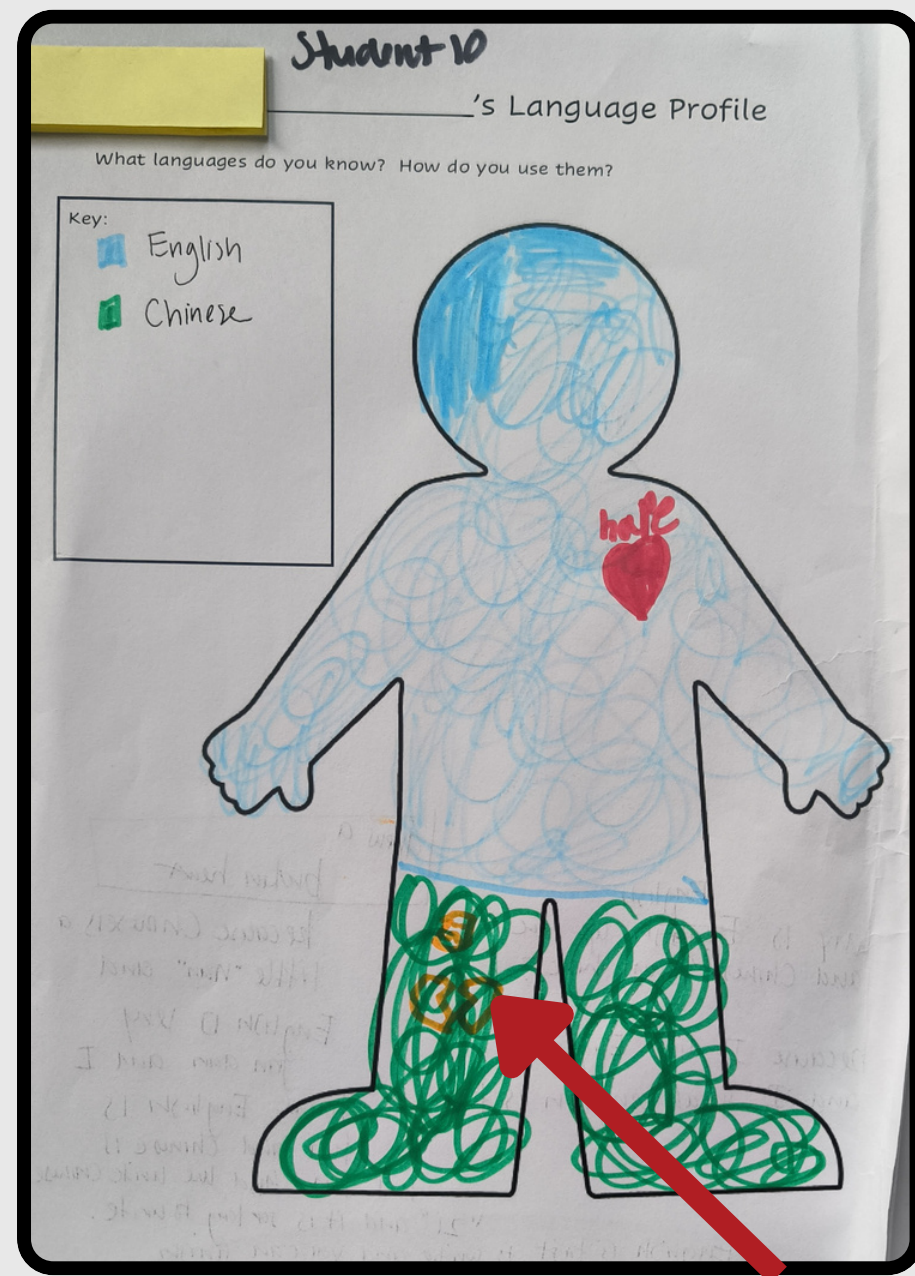
"In my home and at recess I use Chinese. But I use English in other classes like math and UFLI and many class I use English because in school this school was international so we need to say English more."

"In school I can use the USA language and the Chinese language. At home I can use the Chinese language."



Some students colored their entire language profile activity, while other students left space between their languages.

Survey Findings: Quotes and Notable Responses



Why did you draw that?

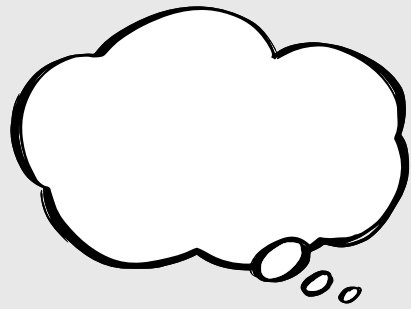
“Because Chinese is a little 难 and English is very 简单。And I think English is fun and Chinese is not fun. And we write Chinese 字 and it is so long to write. English is fast to write, and you can finish.”

(Student drew a broken heart on the Chinese part of the language profile activity.)

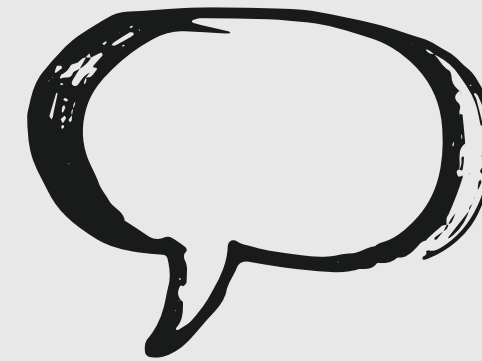
Survey Findings: Quotes and Notable Responses

Overall Summary of Key Findings: Language Survey

This data shows that Grades 1–3 students reported:



- Using a mix of Chinese and English for their **thinking** in EAL class.



- Using more English for their **speaking** in EAL class.



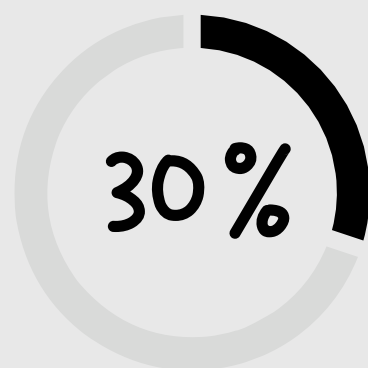
- More positive **feelings** towards Chinese than English.



- A couple of students reported negative **feelings** towards both English and Chinese.

Overall Summary of Key Findings: Language Profile Activity

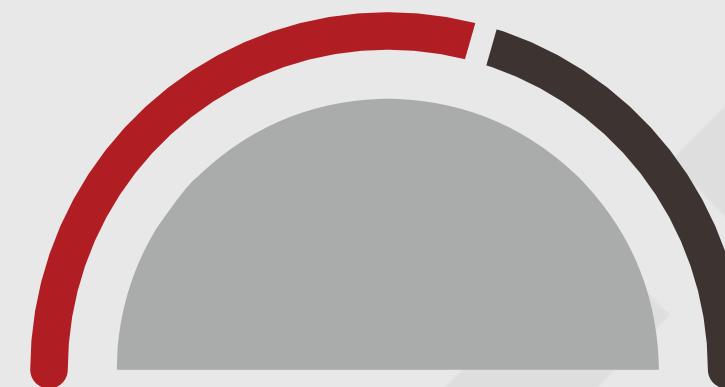
This data shows that Grade 2 students reported:



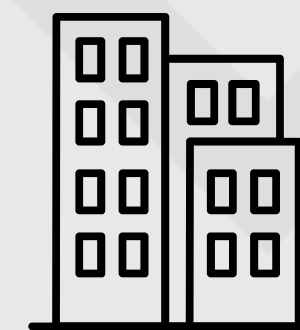
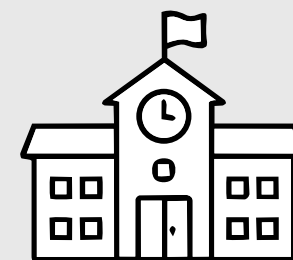
- 30% of the students used translanguaging in their discussion around their language profile.



- Two students referred to English as USA or USA language, connecting language to a specific region.



- 55% of the students colored the entire portrait, while 45% of the students siloed the languages and left white spaces.



- Students reported using Chinese at home and English at school

What are the perceptions of students in Grades 1-3 regarding their use of languages in EAL class?

The students are all Chinese-speakers who are learning English. We found that the majority of these students hold very positive views of their Chinese language skills and neutral-to-positive views of their English skills. A minority of students feel negatively towards English and a smaller minority negatively view both languages.

Almost every student automatically siloed their languages, suggesting that students see the languages as separate from each other instead of a unified language repertoire. This could reflect the English-medium stance of the school, the views of parents, subconscious suggestions from teachers and the general school environment. More research at the school could be undertaken to determine what the contributing factors to this could be.

The language profile activity indicated that many Grade 2 children understand the nuances and complexities of languages, with many splitting languages into the domains and the function of language (e.g. “with my family”).

Language Survey Discussion

One finding supports what we found in the literature review about a **mismatch between students' self-reported language use and their actual language practices**. The students in our study reported using languages separately, when in practice they do use both their languages when engaging in conversations. This finding could relate to Gao (2023) **that the school's implicit policies influence students self-perceptions**. It is possible that this mismatch has been influenced by implicit school policies.

For example, one Grade 1 student said they only speak “sometimes in English with teacher, sometimes Chinese with students,” yet the Grade 1 classrooms including homeroom teachers, teaching assists, EAL teachers and students all use Chinese and English interchangeably in their daily communications when speaking. Another example of this perceived language separation was with a Grade 3 students who stated “Playground I say Chinese, and at class I say English.” despite the fact that they were using both languages throughout the interview recording, showing a fluid mix of both languages when communicating.

Language Survey Discussion

Another finding supports the literature review by McIntyre et al. (1997) about **student's negative feelings towards their L2 linked with underestimation of their L2 performance**. Majority of students in the study reported a lower rating of English than Chinese in their feelings towards language.

Some Grade 1 students explained in their reasoning behind rating their feelings for English lower than Chinese being that they feel English is “hard” or “I don’t know some English” despite being able to listen and speak everyday in English as a part of their full linguistic repertoire (with both Chinese and English) in the EAL class and beyond.

Other examples include several Grade 3 students rating their English as “3” (neutral) or lower, with one student saying “my English is not good”, even they were able to switch between languages during the interview smoothly to communicate. Another student in Grade 3 explained their lower rating of English because “...my English is not good.” even though the whole interview was using majority English to communicate.

Language Profile Discussion

Impact of Emotion on Student Perception Around Language

One finding from the language profile survey potentially indicates that **strong negative emotions about language can skew metacognitive awareness about teacher translanguaging use in the classroom.** One student reported not speaking Chinese in class because they believed the teacher did not understand it, though the teacher uses translanguaging and speaks Chinese. This suggests that students' negative perceptions of Chinese may shape how they interpret how teachers' use language in the classroom.

Language Choices

The data from our language portrait activity confirmed that students could identify their language choices which is in line with the research findings from Roehr-Brackin (2024). Students completing the language portrait activity shared that they used Chinese with friends, at home, at recess and that they used English when talking with the teacher.

Language Profile Discussion

Strategic Use of Language and Hierarchies of Language

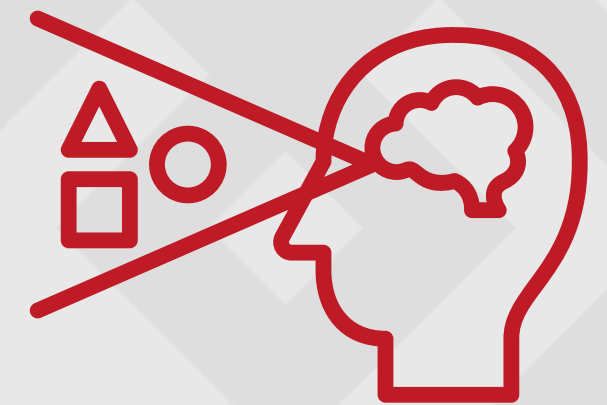
Our data from this activity also supports the finding from Seltzer (2019) that **children strategically choose which language to display**. In our study, 3 out of 9 participants shared that they used English in classes and with teachers, and Chinese among friends, at home, and at recess. This might also support Seltzer's (2019) finding that students have a perception about the prestige of certain languages, as our students completing the language profile activity often equated English use with classes and with teachers, and Chinese use with more social settings.

In contrast, 4 out of the 9 participants reported using English and Chinese at school and did not indicate a separation of their use of languages between social and academic settings. This could indicate that these students perceive both languages as prestigious, although more research is needed.

Language Profile Discussion

Research Methods for Understanding Young Learners' Metacognition

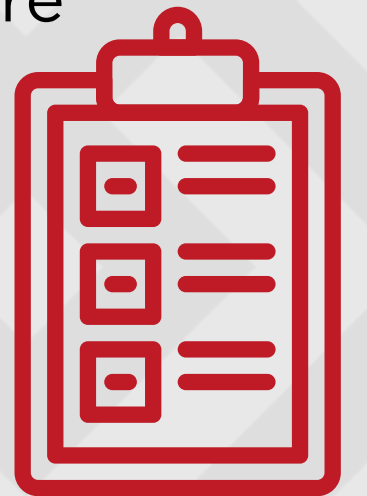
As Roehr-Brackin (2024) discussed metalinguistic awareness being under-researched in young learners, **our study demonstrated the value of using visual representation to help young learners reflect on their language use.** Using the language profile activity in a one-on-one interview setting, where students drew their profile and answered questions about what languages they know, yielded rich data. Having students visualize the languages they knew and reflect on how they used them supported their metacognitive reasoning about their language.



Preparation for Researcher Alignment

Time constraints limited the ability to fully explain the research process to collaborating colleagues, which affected consistency in survey administration and student guidance with the following:

Inconsistent questions and follow up interpretation by researcher: Some researchers extended the question "What language do you think in this class?" to include other settings in the school (playground, homeroom, etc), while others asked only about the EAL class. Some researchers added "Why do you feel...?" to the question "How do you feel about your language?" resulting in more qualitative data for some students than others.



Preparation for Researcher Alignment

Researcher influence: One researcher increasingly used clarifications based on previous students' responses (e.g., adopting the word "equal" after a student used it for the language spectrum), which may have influenced subsequent student responses.

Unexpected data collection: One researcher asked students to read survey questions in Chinese, which unintentionally provided additional information about students' Chinese reading abilities.

To mitigate these, we would recommend that researchers spend more time to devise a consistent approach and understanding before separating to conduct individual surveys. For example, conducting the first few student surveys together.

Simplistic Nature of Survey's Key Limitation:

The numeric scale (1-5) used in the language survey question and response is too simplistic to capture students' complex language interpretations. Many students described situational, fluid and mixed language use that the scale could not accurately represent.

The language portraits provided richer data but were only collected and analyzed for Grade 2. It captured nuances and details about how students conceptualize and perceive their whole linguistic repertoire.

Future studies could include gathering language portrait data from all students across all grade levels, not only Grade 2.



Grade-Level Language Culture

There are teaching assistants modeling translanguaging in Grade 1, with language agreements completed in all homerooms. This suggests that classroom support and explicit teacher modeling are key factors in fostering a translanguaging culture, which in result affects the students perception and exposure to translanguaging.

Grades 2 and 3 did not have consistent language agreements and teaching assistant support in the homeroom. This may have affected student responses and limit the comparability of results between Grades 1-3.

To mitigate this, we would recommend that researchers document grade-level differences in language agreements, TA support, and translanguaging modeling before comparing results across grades. For example, conducting a classroom language culture audit alongside student surveys to better isolate the effects on student language perceptions.

Future Studies: Continue to gather data on metalinguistic awareness in Chinese speaking students learning English

- Collect language profile data in Grades 1-5 through interviews and language portrait activity.
- Conduct a study measuring changes in student language perceptions over time.
- Conducting and collecting data using a student's L1 or dominant language.
- Focused analysis on comparing grade level results.
- Conduct and collect data across different international schools and curriculum in elementary sections.

Looking Forward: Suggestions for Further Studies

Next Steps for BCIS

Whole-School Translanguaging Stance



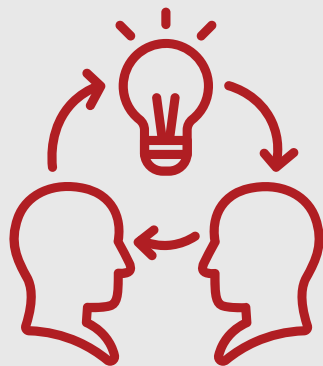
- Responsibility of Head of School
- Add official translanguaging stance into the school wide language policy
- Communicate stance across parent workshops and assessment policies

PD on Translanguaging for All ES Teachers



- Responsibility of ES administration and EAL team
- Deliver PD series on translanguaging pedagogy and strategies
- Follow up with instructional coaching for homeroom and specialists

Shared Understanding of Translation for Teaching Assistants



- Responsibility of TA and EAL teams
- Create shared understandings of translation in classes with the TA team
- Create one-page visual guide for reminders and referral in daily practice

ES Language Agreements



- Responsibility of ES administration and teachers
- Create language agreements as an Elementary school based on the translanguaging stance
- Teachers implement language agreement within their classes in daily practice

Recommended Next Steps for BCIS

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