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Learning Cantonese as an additional language (CAL) or not: What the CAL learners say

從廣東話學習者的角度看學習廣東話的需要

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Abstract: Based on qualitative data obtained from 33 participants in four focus groups, two each in Putonghua (17) and English (16) respectively, this study shows that learners of Cantonese as an additional language (CAL) in Hong Kong experience a lot of difficulties. As a ‘dialect’, Cantonese has not been standardized and is not part of school literacy. A variety of romanization systems are used in commercially obtainable learning aid like Cantonese course books and bilingual dictionaries, which tend to diverge from romanized Cantonese in street signs and personal names. Independent learning is difficult while incidental learning is almost impossible. Cantonese tuition, often focusing on tones, is reportedly not so helpful. With six distinctive tonemes, the Cantonese tone system appears to be a major stumbling block. When spoken to in Cantonese, local speakers tend to switch to English or Putonghua. Inaccuracies in tone contours often trigger laughter, damaging CAL learners’ self-esteem and dampening their motivation to learn and speak Cantonese. Unlike sojourners, non-Chinese residents who see themselves as Hongkongers often get upset as their identity claims are questioned or even challenged by the mainstream Cantonese society.

Keywords: Cantonese, tone language, dialect, attitude and motivation, identity

摘要: 本研究的資料取材自 33 位學習廣東話人士參與的四次焦點小組面談，其中包括兩次普通話 (17人) 和兩次英語 (16人) 焦點小組面談，結果顯示這些參與者在學習廣東話方面遇到很多困難。作為一種方言，廣東話沒有規範標準，亦不是一種書寫語言。坊間的廣東話教材和雙語字典多採用不同的拼音系統，而這些拼音系統往往又與路標或個人姓名所採用的拼音系統大相逕庭。因此，自學廣東話非常困難，延伸學習甚至可說是不可能的事情。本研究結果顯示，著重聲調教授的

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廣東話課程對學習者的幫助不大。廣東話包含的六個獨特聲調，似乎是學習人士最大的絆腳石。遇到非本地人說廣東話，本地人往往會以英語或普通話回應。由於聲調錯誤而惹來的嘲笑，不但傷害學習人士的自尊，亦窒礙他們學習和使用廣東話的動機。與旅港人士不同，自忖為香港人的非華裔本港居民，經常因為被主流廣東話社會質疑其香港人的身分而感到不快。

關鍵詞：廣東話、口語、方言、態度及動機、身分

1 Introduction

In an increasingly globalized, multilingual world characterized by frequent cross-border people movements, knowledge of one's first language is hardly sufficient. For adults moving to a multilingual society where their first language is not shared by the locals, the question naturally arises as to whether it is worth spending time learning the local language. Additional language learning, however, is a major investment (Norton 2013a, 2013b). Such a decision is often a factor of a host of concerns, including but not limited to: how useful it is to learn the target language, how easy or difficult, attitudes toward its speakers, the duration of stay, among others.

In many parts of the world, the local curriculum typically requires school children to learn one or more second or foreign languages. In the process of learning a school-based additional language, learners usually have ready access to linguistic norms of its native speakers, including pronunciation, grammar and lexis, written standards, etc. When in doubt, teachers or learners can quickly turn to authoritative references such as dictionaries and grammar books, many of which are readily available and accessible online today. All this sounds routine if the target language is highly codified and standardized, with its norms being well-defined and closely adhered to by its native speakers. Where the target language is not widely spoken in the local community, opportunities for practice and incidental learning could be sought through other means, such as immersion. For instance, under the auspices of Erasmus, many young undergraduate students from various EU member states could spend one or more semesters in another EU country where the target language is used as an official language. Under such a 'study abroad' scheme, regular exposure to and opportunities to use the target language are instrumental for learners to sharpen up their communicative competence in that language.

But what happens if such language learning resources are non-existent, as when the target language is a vernacular, with no standardized representation and is not meant to be written? This study reports on a special case: the learning

of Cantonese as an additional language (CAL) by sojourners and residents, Chinese and non-Chinese, in Hong Kong. Traditionally, Cantonese is one of the southern ‘dialects’, a vibrant regional vernacular not used in formal writing. Where ‘written Cantonese’ elements occur (e. g. in informal sections of Hong Kong Chinese newspapers such as columns, infotainment, cartoons and adverts, Snow 2004), typically in logographic, non-alphabetic characters, they are seen as non-standard, as is evidenced by considerable variation in print, including in Roman script (e. g. *hea* means ‘idle’, ‘laid-back’). In Hong Kong, school literacy in Chinese is Mandarin-based, but unlike the rest of Mainland China, Cantonese is used as the medium of instruction in most primary schools and around 70 % of secondary schools.

Like all other Han Chinese ‘dialects’, Cantonese and Mandarin are tone languages which are not mutually intelligible. With six distinctive tonemes, the Cantonese tone system is considerably more complex compared with that in Mandarin, which has four tonemes. There is some indication that Mandarin speakers have a harder time learning Cantonese than Cantonese speakers learning Mandarin (see below).

1.1 The language situation in Hong Kong

Home to over seven million inhabitants, Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated metropolises in the world. According to census figures in 2011 (Census and Statistics Department 2012), about 93.5 % of the population is ethnic Chinese. Whereas 89.5 % speaks Cantonese as their usual language, 6.3 % speaks it as an additional language/dialect (total 95.8 %). By contrast, only 3.5 % speaks English as the usual language, while 42.6 % speaks English as an additional language/dialect (total 46.1 %). As for Putonghua, the corresponding figures are, respectively: 1.4 % (usual) and 46.5 % (additional), making the aggregate percentage (total 47.8 %) fairly close to that in English. These self-reported census figures suggest that, compared with census figures in the past decade (2001, 2006), increasing numbers of Cantonese-dominant Hongkongers are becoming bilingual in Cantonese and English, or even trilingual to include Putonghua in addition, in accordance with the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government’s language-in-education policy of ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’ (兩文三語, loeng²³ man²¹ saam⁵⁵ jyu²³). Such a trend of increasing plurilingualism may be regarded as a natural outcome of the nine-year compulsory education policy since 1978 (extended to 12-year from 2012), thereby allowing secondary school-leavers to develop basic language and literacy skills in Chinese and English, the two co-official languages of the Hong Kong SAR.

Compared with research on Cantonese-dominant learners learning English or Putonghua in Hong Kong, there is a dearth of research on how the minority of non-Cantonese-speaking residents and non-local sojourners fare in terms of their motivation to learn Cantonese and their learning outcomes. Li and Richards (1995) did a small-scale survey of the learning of Cantonese as an additional language (CAL). Based on 150 valid returned questionnaires, they found that most respondents needed Cantonese mainly for transactional, as opposed to interactional purposes (Brown and Yule 1983). The top-ranked four situations were (a) buying things in the market place, (b) taking a taxi, (c) asking for directions, and (d) ordering food (Li and Richards 1995: 3–4).

The majority of the respondents (90 %) characterized their Cantonese proficiency as basic, despite having made an effort to learn Cantonese. A number of unfavourable factors were mentioned, including (a) no accessible written word forms; (b) lack of a standardized Romanization system; (c) dictionaries not available; (d) Cantonese tuition being unhelpful; (e) poorly designed teaching materials; (f) ineffective teaching methods and pedagogies; (g) unfamiliarity with tones; and (h) lexico-grammatically unrelated to the learners' language (s). Very similar findings were obtained in three studies (Smith 1995; Tinker-Sachs 2002; Tinker-Sachs and Li 2007), while Li and Richards (1995) and Smith (1997a, 1997b) offer suggestions for improving the CAL curriculum and provide tips for independent learning.

This study was conceived to collect contextualized, qualitative data from CAL learners, with a view to better understanding the reasons why the success rate of CAL in Hong Kong tends to be so low. By engaging CAL learners and users in dialogue through interviews – individual and group – and providing an opportunity for them to articulate problems from their respective vantage points, we believe there is a better chance for the exact nature of CAL learning difficulties encountered by different CAL learners to see the light. We hope this study can complement earlier research by letting CAL learners voice their own observations, situated problems and personal concerns where appropriate. Accordingly, our key research questions are: What are the motivations for (not) learning CAL? And, what are the linguistic, acquisitional and interactional factors that impinge on the learning outcomes of CAL?

2 Data and methods

Three closely related methods were used to collect qualitative data: phone survey (pilot), individual semi-structured interviews, and focus group (FG) interviews. A draft questionnaire in English was piloted through a mini phone survey

involving about 100 randomly selected informants, whose names and contact numbers were obtained from the homepages of academic departments in various disciplines.¹ After being fine-tuned and consolidated, the finalized questionnaire was translated into Chinese. The bilingual questionnaire was then used to conduct individual interviews in a one-day field trip on a Saturday on Lamma, an outlying island inhabited by expatriates and a popular holiday spot. The four authors worked in two teams and approached target informants randomly; with a few exceptions, non-Chinese informants were interviewed in English, Chinese informants in Putonghua. Most of the requests for audio-recording (using MP3) were accepted. A total of 51 in-depth individual interviews were successfully completed (29 in English, 22 in Putonghua); the audio files were subsequently transcribed for content analysis. Based on the commonalities in the individual interviews in English and Putonghua respectively, salient ‘talking points’ were identified and listed in a two-page stimulus material consisting of 30 statements in eight sections for the FG’s in English and 31 statements for those in Putonghua. The FG’s were organized on the same day: two in English (eight participants each) and two in Putonghua (eight and nine participants respectively). All of the FG’s were moderated by two co-authors. The interviewees were selected from the pool of informants who had either completed a phone or face-to-face interview. Permission was obtained from all FG participants for audio and audio-visual recording. As it later transpired, a few non-Chinese participants were eager to attend the focus groups because they had something to say. Data reported in this study was thus constituted essentially by four two-hour FG transcriptions. It is hoped that this study will provide contextualized and situated perspectives from the vantage points of CAL learners and users regarding their personal experiences with learning and/or using Cantonese. Tables 1 and 2 give an overview of the 17 Putonghua-FG and 16 English-FG participants, respectively.

The 17 Putonghua-FG participants came from different parts of mainland China (Table 1). All except one (native speaker of Chaozhou ‘dialect’ from Shantou, Guangdong province) stated Putonghua as their first language. The majority were students at undergraduate ($n=8$) or postgraduate ($n=4$) level. There were also four young tutors of Putonghua. The 17 participants had been in Hong Kong between six months to 3.5 years, hence more like sojourners than residents, although a few mentioned that they might consider working in Hong Kong after graduation.

¹ Non-Chinese informants were easily identified by their names. Similarly, non-Cantonese-speaking Chinese informants were usually spelled using pinyin.

Table 1: Profile of the 17 Putonghua focus group participants (pseudonyms).

AM group (n = 9)				PM group (n = 8)			
Name	F/M	Education/ Work status	In HK for (approx.)	Name	F/M	Education/ Work status	In HK for (approx.)
Jane	F	UG student	3 years	Bei Yu	F	UG student	3.5 years
Fang Zhen	F	UG student	1.5 years	Zhang Ye	F	UG student	3.5 years
Yan Ya	F	UG student	0.5 year	Du Xiang	F	UG student	0.5 year
Didi	F	UG student	1.5 years	Ji Lan	F	UG student	2.5 year
Renfeng	M	PG student	1 year	Wu Yang	M	PG student	0.5 year
Yawen	F	PG student	0.5 year	Mayan ¹	M	PG student	0.5 years
Xiaoquan	F	PTH tutor	1.5 years	Cheng Ran	F	PTH tutor	1.5 years
Wenzhao	M	PTH tutor	1.5 years	Zheng Yao	M	PTH tutor	0.5 year
Paijun	M	Academic	2 years				

Note: ¹Mother tongue = Chaozhou (Shantou, Guangdong province).

Table 2: Profile of the 16 English focus group participants (pseudonyms).

AM group (n = 8)				PM group (n = 8)			
Name	F/M	Education/ Work status	In HK for (approx.)	Name	F/M	Education/Work status	In HK for (approx.)
Minglang ^{1, 2}	M	Manager	4 years	Suzie ⁷	F	UG student (ENG Major)	3 years
Perry ³	M	Senior academic	20 years	Cindy ⁷	F	UG student (ENG Major)	3 years
Steve ²	M	Senior academic	11 years	Candy	F	Exchange student from USA	1 year
Ivan ^{3, 4}	M	Manager	30 years	Leo	M	Teaching Assistant	0.5 year
Nicky ^{4, 5}	M	Teacher of English	4 years	Neil	M	English instructor	22 years
Matt	M	Librarian	<5 years	Serena ⁸	F	Academic (German)	2.5 years
Heyang ^{4, 6}	F	PG student	<1 year	Iona ⁹	F	Teacher of English	5 years
Jim ²	M	Research Assistant	20 years	Ted	M	Senior academic (retired)	30 years

Notes: ¹Born to Chinese mother; grew up in Australia; ²“Married in”, i. e., wife being HK Cantonese speaker; ³Grew up in Hong Kong; ⁴Have learned Putonghua/Mandarin; ⁵Spanish-L1 speaker; ⁶Korean-L1 speaker; ⁷Putonghua-L1 speaker; ⁸German-L1 speaker; ⁹French-L1 speaker.

In the English focus group, the participants' L1 backgrounds are, respectively: Putonghua (2), French (1), German (1), Spanish (1), Korean (1), and English (10) (Table 2). One English-L1 participant, Candy, was a Chinese exchange student from USA. Another English-L1 participant, Minglang, being half Chinese, characterized himself as a highly motivated CAL learner. Three of the participants – Jim, Minglang and Steve – had “married in” to a local Cantonese-speaking woman. Six of them had lived in Hong Kong for over 10 years, including two who grew up, and three who spent their adult working lives (up to 30 years) here. Apart from being holders of a ‘HK Identity Card’, therefore, their extended stay made them bona fide Hong Kong residents rather than sojourners. As we will see, this point has direct implications for their perception of ‘Hong Kong identity’.

3 Results

An earlier observation, that few non-Chinese Hongkongers speak Cantonese, is largely confirmed. For instance, Perry said “I know people who live here over 20 years don’t speak a word of Cantonese, and yet they live in their own little cultural bubble and manage somehow”. In terms of situations where incomplete knowledge of Cantonese would be a problem, ordering food in a canteen or Chinese restaurant was the most frequently mentioned:

Matt: Normally in the canteen, I eat caa⁵⁵ siu⁵⁵ baau⁵⁵ (叉燒包, ‘barbecue bun’). [My colleagues asked me] why do you like caa⁵⁵ siu⁵⁵ baau⁵⁵ so much? Ah, cos’ it’s the only thing I can ask for [in Cantonese].

Neil: there’re environments like Chinese restaurants that I don’t go to except with Chinese colleagues, because it’s not stress-free [all giggle]. You can order, you can get what you want but it’s not stress-free for the waiters or for me.

Another recurrent high-frequency problematic situation was taking a taxi, which was reportedly stressful to many participants. Serena, for example, explained how she developed a ‘taxi phobia’, while Neil felt perplexed how, after telling the taxi drivers the same destination for nearly 20 years, he still faced communication problems. Neil’s frustration is understandable: that the same message to taxi drivers still fails to get across after repeating it so many times (20 years!) makes one wonder “what’s going on?”. Notwithstanding minor inconvenience occasioned by recurrent situations such as those discussed above, all participants agreed that by and large they could get by with limited or even no Cantonese in their everyday lives.

3.1 Why learn Cantonese?

If people with limited or no knowledge of Cantonese could get by in their daily lives, largely because local Cantonese-speaking people can converse with them in English and/or Putonghua, why then would non-Cantonese speakers make any effort to learn Cantonese? For those who felt such a need, ‘for practical reasons’ was the most often mentioned motivation. The second motivation most often mentioned is expressing politeness and respect, although such a concern for rapport was contended by some participants. For example:

Matt: I try to speak a little bit of Cantonese, maybe a word, out of polite[ness] and respect, and (...) create a feeling of closeness, or rapport.

Cindy: if I speak Cantonese to the cleaner it is my way to show my respect because that would be too odd for me to say ‘thank you’ [to her].

To those participants who valued this symbolic function, being able to signal rapport using their interlocutors’ first and preferred language was an important motivation to learn Cantonese. Several participants also noted that good relationship with their local, Cantonese-speaking interlocutors was basic for securing all sorts of benefits, be they material (e. g. getting a discount from vendors at the wet market) or less tangible (e. g. to mingle with locals or better understand one’s students).

A third type of motivation is related to one’s future work prospects. Several mainland Chinese student participants pointed out that being able to interact with locals in Cantonese was a basic requirement should they eventually decide to look for a job in Hong Kong. Without this ability, communication with students, school principals and fellow teachers would be problematic. Other motivations were more idiosyncratic. One participant found Cantonese attractive as it was a ‘prestige dialect’ in southern China and abroad, while three other male ‘married-in’ participants cited the need to communicate with family members on the side of their spouse. There is some indication that ‘marrying in’ is fairly common. Matt, for example, remarked that “I know a number of British ex-Hong Kong policemen. They all speak Cantonese fluently and they’re all married to Hong Kong girls”.

3.2 Why not learn Cantonese?

Three reasons were identified for not learning Cantonese. The first one is somewhat unexpected, for it concerns local Cantonese speakers’ advice against learning their own first language. This point was shared by two Caucasian

participants working in the tertiary education sector. Steve, shortly after taking up the position in his university 11 years ago, was advised against learning Cantonese or Putonghua by a senior colleague in the faculty whom he described as a “functional trilingual biliterate person”. That advice he had difficulty understanding: when in Portugal or Spain, he argued, one would need Portuguese or Spanish, so what makes Cantonese in Hong Kong so different? “What’s the secret?” Instead of following that advice, therefore, he became all the more determined to pick up at least some Cantonese. A similar experience was shared by Matt when assuming his new post in Hong Kong five years earlier, except that some of his more senior colleagues proposed to him that instead of Cantonese, Putonghua would be a more worthwhile learning goal. It is unclear how widespread such opinions are shared among educated, Cantonese-dominant speakers, and why they espouse such views.

The two other reasons were each upheld by one participant. Leo said “I feel like I’m a guest (...) I’m on a year-long job here (...). So I never thought that I was gonna settle down here”. In view of his short stay in Hong Kong, learning Cantonese was a low priority. The last reason represented the view of Wenzhao, a young tutor of Putonghua, who believed that being just a ‘dialect’, Cantonese was lower in status than “our” national language Putonghua. Another reason he gave is that in Hong Kong, one could get by with Putonghua.

3.3 Experiences reported by focus group participants

The four FG’s have yielded a wealth of information concerning the CAL participants’ success and failure, delights as well as frustrations, although positive remarks tended to be outweighed by negative comments.

3.3.1 Cantonese is difficult to learn

There is plenty of evidence that to non-Chinese or Chinese CAL learners alike, Cantonese is not easy to learn, although the areas of difficulty may not be the same to both groups. One difficulty is related to the fact that Cantonese is a vernacular which “is purely spoken, and there’s no written equivalent”. Xiaoquan, a Putonghua instructor, also noted that the discrepancy between (spoken) Cantonese and (standard written) Chinese made her feel that they were different languages. In general, non-Chinese learners tended to find vocabulary more challenging than grammar except noun-specific classifiers.

Of all the difficulties mentioned, most of the participants, non-Chinese and Chinese alike, found Cantonese tone contours a great or even insurmountable

challenge. Iona described tones as a “disaster”, while Serena said “the tones are so difficult; without the tones you cannot speak anything”. Since the learning of a Cantonese morpho-syllable or word is incomplete without the correct tone level, wrong tone typically results in misunderstanding, often embarrassment as well. Many anecdotes were shared at the FG’s. For example:

Neil: I was in a restaurant with some Chinese colleagues and I didn’t have a spoon. They were getting me to ask the waitress for a spoon, and we were wondering what kind of spoon would come. [All giggle]

Instead of a *ci*²¹ *gang*⁵⁵ (匙羹, ‘spoon’), however, the waitress brought him *zi*³⁵ *gan*⁵⁵ (紙巾, ‘tissue’). Some mainland Chinese participants found it difficult to differentiate *zoeng*⁵⁵ (張) and *coeng*²¹ (長), both being pronounced with a front vowel. An additional complication here is that the same morpho-syllables are pronounced with a back vowel in Putonghua (i. e. *zhāng* and *cháng*). Several other minimal pairs which differ only by tone contours were cited as really challenging, for example, *sei*³³ (四, ‘four’) versus *sei*³⁵ (死, ‘die’); *sik*⁵⁵ (識, ‘to know’) versus *sik*²² (食, ‘to eat’). In the latter minimal pair, an additional challenge for Mandarin-L1 CAL learners is syllable-final plosives /p, t, k/ in Cantonese, which are non-existent in Mandarin. There is thus strong evidence that Cantonese tones are elusive to CAL learners, be they Chinese or non-Chinese. Ted made the point that after learning Cantonese for 30 years, including one-on-one tuition, he still could not get the tones right.

3.3.2 No standardized romanization system

The absence of a standardized romanization system is widely perceived by CAL learners as a major source of learning problems. Several participants expressed frustration that various romanization systems were used in different course books and commercially obtainable materials (e. g. Sidney Lau [1979], Wade-Giles, Yale, JyutPing), which they found very learner-unfriendly. For instance, a morpho-syllable like ‘to eat’ (食) was variously romanized as *sikh*, *sik*, *sik6*, or *sik*²², using diacritics or numbers to represent the tone level (Li and Richards 1995: 7). In the last example (*sik*²²), the two digits are meant to capture the tone contours (here: low level tone) as opposed to a randomly assigned number to a tone level (e. g. *sik6*, the 6th tone). A few non-Chinese teacher participants pointed out that, without a standardized romanization system, some romanized Cantonese elements (e. g. *Tsz*) are difficult to pronounce – a linguistic frustration that they had to put up with when calling out their students’ names.

A related problem is that there were no reliable dictionaries that CAL learners could turn to for clarification, unlike pinyin for Putonghua learners in this regard. As Suzie put it, “in Cantonese, unless you know how to write the word, you cannot look it up in the dictionary”. This point was echoed by a few mainland Chinese participants, who compared the constructive role of pinyin in support of independent learning of Mandarin/Putonghua:

Paijun: 普通話, 只要把漢語拼音學會了, 我可以自學, 這個發音不會我就查字典. 但是廣東話呢? (...) 現在我還沒有看到很好的一本書, [可以] 跟著書來學.

‘[Consider] Putonghua, I only need to master Hanyu Pinyin, then I can learn on my own; if I’m unfamiliar with pronunciation, I can look it up in a dictionary. But what about Cantonese? (...) I still couldn’t find a really good book that [I can] learn [Cantonese] by following it.’

Confusion due to non-standard romanization was exemplified by place names like *Kowloon* (gau³⁵ lung²¹, 九龍, literally ‘nine dragon’) and *Mongkok* (wong²² gok³³, ‘prosperous corner’), where CAL learners were tempted to pronounce the initial consonant of gau³⁵ and gok³³ with an aspirated [k]. As for *Mongkok*, Nicky found it puzzling why the morpho-syllable wong²² was romanized as *Mong*.² In view of the discrepancies between pronunciation and romanization such as these, Neil commented that “for people who first want to access Chinese through some writing code, it’s very misleading”.

The availability of a standardized romanization system is all the more important given that two participants reported making good progress with the help of the LSHK system JyutPing [粵拚]:

Minglang: When I first started, my tones were terrible. I didn’t know tones, I thought you could just learn by listening, that sort of thing. (...) I remember recording myself on my Cantonese forum [online], and people said it sounds so terrible (...) so what I did was, I learn jyut²² ping³³ [粵拚]. I don’t like these accent things on top. So I have to memorize the number, with every single character. Every character I went back and memorize the number: ngo²³ [我, 1st-person pronoun], faai³³ [快, ‘fast’], [tone level] four, everything just carries a number. I would never learn a word unless I memorize the tone.

Neil went so far as to claim that, since there is minimal discrepancy between spoken (Putonghua) and written (Chinese), plus the fact that the learning of

2 The district 旺角, pronounced as wong²² gok³³ but romanized as *Mongkok*, was originally called 網閣 (mong²³ gok³³). Its pronunciation and written form were later shifted to 亡角 and mong²¹ gok³³, respectively, making it sound like ‘death corner’. To avoid this unpleasant meaning, it was renamed 旺角 (wong³³ gok³³), a euphemism meaning ‘prosperous corner’. The original Romanization *Mongkok*, however, remains unchanged (see ‘Mongkok 不是旺角’, <http://www.master-insight.com/content/article/2613>.)

Putonghua is supported by the standardized, widely recognized romanization system pinyin, the teaching and learning of Putonghua is more “scientific” than that in Cantonese.

3.3.3 Few opportunities to practise Cantonese

Few participants were satisfied with the quality or outcome of their CAL learning; almost all of them pointed to a lack of opportunities for practice because local Cantonese speakers tended to be reluctant to cooperate, give little encouragement, and respond in English or Putonghua. Consequently, there was a widely shared feeling that their CAL learning efforts were either ignored or unduly thwarted by local Cantonese speakers. Several participants noted that shared knowledge of English or Putonghua made it difficult for them to learn Cantonese through practice with local Chinese speakers:

Serena: Some of you have already said, people are very fast switching back to English because it's much more easier and much more convenient and then they switch back to English [giggle].

Cindy said her peers' response in Mandarin put her off and made her upset because “I would interpret that [as] my Cantonese is not good enough and you don't like to speak Cantonese with me”, while Iona lamented that “we don't feel encouraged”. Neil similarly expressed frustration about local Cantonese speakers' reluctance to speak Cantonese with him, and jokingly proposed a reductionist dichotomy as follows:

Neil: My experience really is that there're two kinds of Chinese people. There're Chinese people who speak to me in English and there're Chinese people who don't speak to me [all giggle].

For Neil, a lack of Cantonese in Hong Kong “definitely limits friendships” and made it difficult for foreigners like him to broaden their social networks:

Neil: When you're with one person, it's no problem. But as soon as you're with the group, then either you're left out or they speak in English to include you, and it's much more difficult to be close to the group.

3.3.4 Cantonese tuition unhelpful

Most of the participants had attended Cantonese lessons. Except for two participants who appreciated the classroom input they received, there were

far more participants who found Cantonese tuition unhelpful and utterly disappointing:

Perry: I've learned so little from teachers. I learned a lot from my own students. (...) it's very formal, very dry and not interactive at all. It discourages you from learning. It's odd and very strange.

Serena: I had a bad experience; I attended a Cantonese course (...) and I was so terribly shocked by the [teaching] method.

Jim similarly expressed disappointment with his Cantonese teacher who, in his view, overemphasized tones too much:

Jim: I attended one course and what disappointed me the most, this is probably after my 15th year in Hong Kong, was that the teachers just solely focused on tones. And I thought to myself if we're week after week just focusing on tones, it didn't make much sense to me.

Perry observed that Cantonese teachers often felt unsure about the exact tone levels and “they have to think a long time before they tell you whether it's [tone] one or four [after going] through all the tones”. Neil also felt that some Cantonese teachers did not know the romanization system (e. g. Yale) so well.

Our participants' collective experiences above suggest that the quality of Cantonese instruction depends a great deal on (a) whether CAL learners' needs, learning styles and preferences are taken into account; (b) whether the curriculum and teaching materials are informed by frequency word lists (lexis) and an appropriately structured grammar syllabus, and (c) whether the instructor has received proper training in (especially communicative) language teaching methods (Li and Richards 1995; cf. Matthews and Yip 2011).

3.3.5 Basic Chinese literacy and learning strategies that help

There is some indication that knowledge of basic Chinese literacy is conducive to learning Cantonese. Leo, for instance, pointed out that despite learner diversity in an intensive one-year course he attended (some rather fluent already; others barely any Cantonese), he could “catch on a little more quickly because I understood the characters already”. Conversely, for Steve, a lack of progress beyond intermediate Cantonese was attributed to unfamiliarity with Chinese literacy:

Steve: I have been in Hong Kong for 11 years, and I have hit the glass ceiling, intermediate Cantonese, which is precisely where I've been stuck for many years. I can speak, but I don't read, I don't write.

Ivan studied Mandarin in Beijing after learning Cantonese for one year in a local ESF (English School Foundation) secondary school. In Beijing, he had to learn about 30 characters every day, which he found highly conducive to facilitating independent and incidental learning:

Ivan: You start learning by writing, you start recognizing, you start maybe guess what the words mean. And it does help. It's unbelievable, cos' you can just see words up there, and then you recognize the words. (...) After going back to Hong Kong, even though Mandarin isn't [so] useful as in Beijing, it still helps me to read the characters a little bit more, I understand more about what's going on.

Ivan was also proud to say that, when speech failed to get across his meaning in Cantonese or Putonghua, he could type up the characters on his cell phone, which would usually help clarify things.

Regarding productive learning strategies, watching Cantonese TV dramas and listening to Canto-pop songs were mentioned by a few Chinese participants. Candy, who likened Cantonese classes to “social meeting places” with fellow exchange students, said “I actually learn more characters singing karaoke than in the classes”. In these activities, basic knowledge of Chinese literacy, while not required, seems to facilitate learning. This is probably why as a learning strategy, the consumption of CantoPop AV products received no mention from any Caucasian participants.

3.3.6 How local Cantonese speakers responded

Short of being interactive, oral practice can hardly proceed. To make progress in Cantonese through conversational practice, therefore, the importance of Cantonese-speaking interlocutors' collaboration and encouragement cannot be overestimated. When asked how local Cantonese speakers would respond, the participants generally agreed that in addition to laughing (see below), there were two salient and recurrent types of response: being surprised or offering praise, or both. Iona, for instance, said her students would be pleasantly surprised by her Cantonese improvisation, while Matt said he had received a lot of encouragement and appreciation from his colleagues (e. g. hou³⁵ lek⁵⁵ aa³³, 好叻啊, ‘very smart’). While affirming that praise was indeed a salient response to his use of Cantonese, Minglang was more cynical and regarded that as “fake encouragement”, sometimes only as a prelude to switch (back) to English-only conversation:

Minglang: I think locals give me fake encouragement because all they'll say is that waa³³, nei²³ hou³⁵ sai⁵⁵ lei²²! (嘩, 你好犀利!, ‘you are awesome!’). They'll say one word in

Cantonese, everything that comes is English afterwards. So it's called fake encouragement; well, I don't believe that.

Of the three salient types of response, none elicited a more enthusiastic and emotionally charged outpouring from our participants than laughing. Speaking from their experience, most felt that laughing damaged their self-esteem and dampened their motivation to learn and speak Cantonese. Perry's sharing of frustration is instructive in many ways:

Perry: My attempts to show respect [by using Cantonese] were rebuffed by a colleague [who] didn't speak a word of English. I always try to express myself in Cantonese with him. And he would never reply, he will just laugh. Every time he just gonna hehehe like this. I asked people why he wouldn't even try to interact (...). I was trying to communicate with him in Cantonese, and he pretended not to understand me, and I find this very frustrating.

Similarly, Neil, who had been in Hong Kong for two years, found that the "normal reaction to my Cantonese is laughing" when he used Cantonese. Visibly frustrated, Neil said in resignation, "to be honest you get tired of it". Candy echoed that "my hostel mates might chuckle when I start practicing my Cantonese". Heyang, the Korean participant, felt very upset because laughing shows that "they don't treat me as a serious language learner. Oh you can speak Chinese, just laugh at me".

There is some indication that laughing was sometimes triggered by inaccurate tone contours. For example:

Steve: I got a thick skin and then I made a pedagogical change. (...) I actually let my students laugh (...). Maybe after class, [I asked] what were you laughing at? And they explained to me, well actually your tones were wrong here, here and here. So after class, they helped me with my Cantonese.

Didi: 香港人都比較愛說笑話，我儘量試著去用廣東話去說，但是有時候我就是有些音嘴巴只是張大一點點，然後就變成了髒話。然後他們就開始狂笑。雖然不是有惡意的，但是始終是自尊心受到了挫敗，然後就不敢說。

'Hongkongers all like to crack jokes, [so] I try my best to join in and speak in Cantonese, but sometimes my mouth opened a little wider than it should be, [inadvertently] that sounded like dirty language. Then they would laugh like crazy. Though it was not malicious, [my] self-esteem was damaged, then I was afraid to speak [Cantonese].'

There is one instructive example in our field notes showing how inaccurate tone contours do result in funny meaning. A Caucasian colleague, an expert in English grammar and avid learner of Cantonese who had been working in Hong Kong for over 15 years, asked a local female colleague about the political situation in Thailand. In Cantonese, 'politics' is expressed by the bisyllabic word *zing*³³ *zi*²² (政治) (mid-level tone 33 and low-level tone 22, respectively).

However, his pronunciation approximated high level (55) and high rising (35) tones instead (i. e. zing⁵⁵ zi³⁵), making it sound like ‘sperm’ (精子). In this case, however, the ensuing laughter was followed by explanation and apparently a good lesson on fine tonal differences.

Thus a laughing response, if unexplained, tends to leave CAL learners with a bitter taste and dampen their motivation and readiness to practice using Cantonese. Some participants felt strongly offended by laughter, a disincentive that put a lot of CAL learners off and eventually they gave up learning. Steve found it “devastating”; while he felt more composed now after becoming “thick-skinned”, he still recalled that “my first few years were really uncomfortable”. There was some speculation that, rather than ridicule or insult, laughter indexed the laughing person’s embarrassment or being at a loss for words. As noted by Glenn (2004: 48), however, “laughter is *indexical*; it is heard as referring to something, and hearers will seek out its referent” (emphasis in original). For CAL learners, that referent must have something to do with the way they use Cantonese, given that laughter is triggered by their attempt to make meaning in it. Hence laughter tends to impact negatively on CAL learners’ enthusiasm and motivation to learn and use Cantonese. Matt was the only participant who sounded positive on this: while agreeing that laughing was a common response of his Cantonese-speaking colleagues, based on his experience, he said laughing back would seem to be the most effective strategy or way out, for it would help mitigate or dilute any feeling of embarrassment on both sides. Matt’s proposed strategy sounds sensible, for shared laughter “can display co-orientation or alignment of laughs, remedy interactional offenses, and provide a sequential basis for displays of conversational intimacy” (Glenn 2004: 84).

3.4 Cantonese and Hong Kong identity

The relationship between Cantonese and CAL speaker identity has generated a good deal of interesting discussion. Probably because participants in this study were drawn from the tertiary education sector (rather than, e. g., from the community of immigrants such as new arrival children from across the border), Cantonese was clearly a foreign language to those who may be broadly characterized as sojourners (i. e. intending to stay from several months to a few years but not much longer). Unlike in-migration societies like Australia or Canada, where the immigrants’ investment in learning the mainstream language is closely tied up with their ethnic and professional identities (Norton 2013a, 2013b), our data shows that in Hong Kong, sojourners experienced little, if any, identity concerns or conflict when using Cantonese.

The same cannot be said of non-Chinese participants who spent a greater part of their adult lives working in Hong Kong (in six cases, from 11 to 30 years), and those who grew up and received education up to primary or secondary level. These “local expat” residents, often non-Cantonese-speaking, felt strongly about their identity as ‘Hongkongers’ and Hong Kong being their ‘home’, but many were upset by the fact that such an identity claim was not recognized or even questioned by the mainstream Cantonese-speaking society. Among our participants, there were three special cases of such “local expats” (Jim, Minglang and Steve) who, having “married in” to a Cantonese-speaking family, were particularly vocal and forthcoming with sharing personal experiences and anecdotes concerning how their ‘Hong Kong identity’ was disputed. No less assertive was another participant (Ivan) who grew up locally as a child but received secondary and higher education in the United States before starting his career in Hong Kong. Whereas the “married in” Hongkongers were eager to blend in by learning and interacting with others in Cantonese, the home-grown “local expat”, Ivan, questioned the assumption that being able to speak Cantonese was an integral part of being ‘local’.

In Hong Kong, for demographic reasons, Cantonese has come to be intimately associated with the label ‘local’, to the effect that non-Cantonese speakers’ Hong Kong identity, if claimed or asserted, is often called into question or queried. Ivan considered himself a Hongkonger through and through, but found it strange why stating his land of origin in response to a question like “where’re you from?” in the US was retorted with “but you’re not Chinese”. While such queries did bother him, he dismissed the widely held assumption behind what constituted a Hongkonger, namely ethnicity (Chinese) and language (Cantonese):

Ivan: Yes, I’m a local in terms of where I work and who I am, whatever else, but I’ll always be viewed as an expat. (...) I consider myself completely Hong Kong. I mean this is my home and it always will be. In fact, to the extent that I am actually taking out Chinese nationality so I can get my Hong Kong passport, (...) I have a very strong sense of what it is to be in Hong Kong. (...) Speaking Cantonese has never been, for me, fundamental (...). [Talking about the link between] language and culture, I don’t think it’s necessarily inherent. I don’t see you have to learn the local language to understand the culture.

Steve was particularly concerned that his daughter might suffer from the kinds of identity problems and anomie that he faced throughout his working life in Hong Kong:

Steve: I married in. My daughter is a mix, so [there’re] a lot of reasons why I’m committed to the dialogue David you’re making. (...) My daughter is a fair-skinned Chinese person, (...) I don’t want her to be like, you know, having children ah struggle to fit in and get along, like everybody in this room. (...)

Another recurrent problem and source of frustration experienced by Steve was his Chinese colleagues' rejection of Hong Kong being his "home":

Steve: The story from yesterday, a colleague, whom I know, I wouldn't say intimately, but I've known her for about a decade. We sometimes run into each other and when we walk our way to the campus. She said, so when you're going home this summer. I said, home, 我日日都會返大嶼山架嘛。I live on Lantau. No, she said, so are you going home this summer? 係啊, 會留係香港呀嘛。And she [goes], 唔係, 唔係, 我話你會唔會返去美國, No, no, I mean America. So, very interesting, you know you can pay taxes, you can marry in, you can have a child, but you're not allowed to own a home. And that struck me again (...), no matter how long you've lived here, you won't be allowed to call Hong Kong home.³

After this emotional anecdote where he failed to convince his Chinese colleague of Hong Kong being his home, Steve drew implications for his learning and use of Cantonese as follows:

Steve: I felt if I gave up on Cantonese, I give up on belonging. I refused. I was stubborn. I didn't want to give up on belonging.

For "local expats" like Steve, therefore, far from being given, 'Hong Kong identity' is something that is constantly being negotiated or contested in their interaction with Hong Kong Chinese. No wonder those Caucasian participants who felt so strongly about Hong Kong being their home were the most sensitive to social labels such as *gweilo* (鬼佬, literally 'ghost guy', or 'foreign devil' in common parlance), even though the original racist meaning has been bleached over time after being used in non-discriminatory contexts, including self-mockery by "local expats" themselves.⁴ For instance, Steve said *gweilo* was "a term of exclusion". By contrast, sojourners were more neutral and did not feel so offended. Matt, for example, said bluntly that "I can live with being called *gweilo*".⁵

3 我日日都會返大嶼山架嘛

ngo²³ jat²² jat²² dou⁵⁵ wui²³ faan⁵⁵ daai²² jyu²¹ saan⁵⁵ gaa⁵⁵ maa³³
'I go back to Lantau every day [mind you]'.
係啊, 會留係香港呀嘛

係啊, 會留係香港呀嘛

hai²² aa³³, wui²³ lau²¹ hai³⁵ hoeng⁵⁵ gong³⁵ aa⁵⁵ maa³³
'yes, [I] will stay in Hong Kong'.

唔係, 唔係, 我話你會唔會返去美國

m²¹ hai²², m²¹ hai²², ngo²³ waa²² nei²³ wui²³ m²¹ wui²³ faan⁵⁵ heoi³³ mei²³ gwok³³
'No, no, I said will you go back to America'.

4 The word *gweilo* (鬼佬) has become a generic term, in contrast with gender-specific *gweipo* (鬼婆, literally 'ghost - old woman', or 'female foreign devil').

5 Before working in Hong Kong, Matt, a Caucasian Australian, had worked in another Asian country, Vietnam. At the time of writing, he had already moved back to Australia. Matt's

4 Discussion and conclusion

The qualitative data collected from 33 Participants in four focus groups, two each in English and Putonghua respectively, have yielded a wealth of contextualized insights to complement earlier survey-based research on the learning of Cantonese as an additional language (CAL) in Hong Kong. The primary motivations for our CAL informants to learn Cantonese – for practical reasons, out of concern for politeness or rapport with Cantonese-speaking locals, and job prospects – may be broadly accounted for by Bourdieu’s (1977: 651) notion of ‘linguistic market’, which is defined as a “symbolic market, constituted by various social domains within which linguistic exchanges take place”. Xu (2009: 124) extends that notion by drawing attention to the functional, exchange, symbolic, and sign values of a language. According to Xu, languages are valued differently in various local, supra-local and glocal linguistic markets. With respect to the linguistic market place in Hong Kong, regardless of whether our participants were still learning Cantonese, there was general consensus that as the preferred language of local Chinese, Cantonese was instrumental for conveying a sense of respect or politeness, rapport or closeness – symbolic meanings that would otherwise be impossible to obtain when using other languages.

Most of the earlier findings concerning linguistic, acquisitional (including pedagogical) and interactional challenges are confirmed in this study. Linguistically, the tone system in Cantonese consisting of three level tones (55, 33, 22), two rising tones (35, 23), and one falling tone (21) has been shown to be a major stumbling block to Chinese and non-Chinese CAL learners alike. Also, from the point of view of relative learning ease, the fact that Cantonese is a vernacular with no standard romanization system and, where written, makes use of a non-alphabetic (logographic) script, renders independent or incidental learning very difficult, if not impossible. No wonder those CAL learners who have basic Chinese literacy, probably resulting from their Mandarin/Putonghua learning experience, tend to find Cantonese relatively easier to pick up. As a Chinese ‘dialect’, Cantonese has not been subjected to rigorous standardization. One consequence is that few authoritative bilingual (e. g. English-Cantonese) dictionaries are available to serve as study companions. The formal teaching of CAL is also riddled with a big problem, namely, different romanization systems (e. g. Sidney Lau, Wade-Giles, Yale, and JyutPing) are used depending on the course materials and instructors, who may or may not have been properly trained in teaching Cantonese to Chinese or non-Chinese learners. There is also some evidence that some CAL instructors’ repertoire of

tolerance of being called *gweilo* is probably also shared by the community of internationally mobile Caucasian professionals.

teaching methods were neither communicative nor interesting enough to engage CAL learners in learning useful expressions they need in everyday life.

Finally, regarding interactional dynamics, whereas laughing as a typical response of local Cantonese speakers was identified in earlier research (e. g. Tinker Sachs and Li 2007), the FG participants in this study provided a few contextualized examples showing how laughing was typically triggered by funny meanings or associations resulting from inaccurate tone contours. Our findings suggest that few CAL learners would be “thick-skinned” enough to ignore such seemingly malicious ridicule; where laughter is unexplained, their passion for learning and practicing Cantonese would be dampened. To bi- or trilingual local speakers (i. e. English and/or Putonghua in addition to Cantonese), a lack of Cantonese among their non-Cantonese-speaking friends or peers hardly matters, for communicating in English or Putonghua for interactional purposes (Brown and Yule 1983) would be far more efficient anyway. All this helps explain the relatively low success rate of CAL learners and users in their endeavor to add bits and pieces of Cantonese to their lingua-cultural competence. Following Xu (2014: 223), it is our belief that “higher education institutions in Hong Kong and other multilingual societies should develop and implement policies that help revitalize the local language, as well as promote the national and international lingua franca as languages of education”.

This study is not without limitations. Our findings are based on commentaries made mainly by CAL learners and/or users studying (typically sojourners) or working (sojourners or “local expats”) in the tertiary education sector. Their views are far from being generalizable to include other communities of CAL learners/users, especially migrants who came to settle here (e. g. new arrival children from mainland China) or non-Chinese (e. g. South Asian) people growing up in Hong Kong. More research is therefore needed with a view to assessing what linguistic, acquisitional and interactional challenges are faced by other communities of Hong Kong residents.

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