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ENGL 414

Final Paper

1/22/23

**How Hong Kong English as a Second Language Acquisition Impacts the Cultural  
Identity of Hong Kongese Individuals**

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English 414

January 22nd, 2023

Today, Hong Kong possesses 150,000 L1 speakers, 2,200,200 L2 speakers of English out of an approximated population of 7,210,000 people. Therefore, just over 2 million individuals in Hong Kong speak an L2 variety of English, making up nearly a third of the total Hong Kong population (Jenkins, 2015). A former British Colony, Hong Kong has an authentic mixture of Western and Eastern influences and is also one of the most major hubs for finances in the world (Phillipson et al., 1970). In Hong Kong, 91% of the population are native Cantonese speakers, but English is often learned as a second language, as previously stated. One main reason for learning English as a

second language (as is for many other countries and native language's reasons for learning English) is that it is used for international communication (Phillipson et al., 1970). Regardless of the reasons why many people in Hong Kong learn English, this second language acquisition has caused complex effects on cultural identity as the history of Hong Kong individual's identities was already unique and complex.

To provide a brief history on Hong Kong, Hong Kong was "handed over" to China in 1977. When colonization was occurring, the English settlers looked at their mother country as a symbol of cultural and political power. However, they had to speak in their own variety of English to blend in. Given that the local Chinese people did not want to teach Cantonese to the English settlers, they also learned a new variety of English to foster communication between the settlers and locals. Essentially, not only did the settlers contribute to the creation of this new variety of English, but the locals helped further develop it too, using lexical borrowings from Cantonese (Phillipson et al., 1970).

Further, up until the First World War, (years of British Sovereignty) English in Hong Kong was limited to colonial use in the areas of the law, the government, the professions, and education. In between the two world wars, an "elite" type group, made up of Western-educated Chinese, began involving themselves in different types of business which led to English in Hong Kong transforming from a purely colonial language, to a language used by the Chinese elite. After some time of this language being restricted to the Chinese elite, it soon became a language of far greater

importance and source of much communication. This can be attributed to the simultaneous transformation of Hong Kong from a “colonia backwater” into a “leading center for business and finance” (Jenkins, 2015). Around the same time that this transformation for Hong Kong was happening, English also became the international “Lingua Franca”; meaning, more and more Chinese people wanted and needed to at least be proficient in the English language (Jenkins, 2015).

Next, it is important to understand what Hong Kong English (HKE) really is. Hong Kong English is often referred to as a nativizing variety; a variety where local elements of language as well as cultural elements worked its way into English. Another important aspect of Hong Kong English is that it is a variety of English that is constantly changing, transforming, and developing as a result of the social, cultural, and educational changes in Hong Kong. However, this mixing did not happen immediately. First, a type of pidgin English in “Canton” jargon was formed. This served as the main way for English settlers and the local Chinese people to communicate. While the local Chinese people saw this pidgin English as a more approachable way to communicate with the English settlers, the settlers did not feel the same way. Instead, the merchants and aristocrats felt as if this type of English was “unbecoming” (Phillipson et al., 1970).

While the mere existence of Hong Kong English is rarely ignored, many feel quite connected to the British norms of English and correct grammar, wording, structure, etc.

Some argue, however, that in order for Hong Kong English to truly stand on its own and have its own identity (being its own version of English as opposed to a departure from Standard English), teachers of English in Hong Kong must admit to, love, and embrace the “errors” that Hong Kong people commonly make. Yet, this may be difficult with a vast majority of English teachers in Hong Kong being native English speakers. Further, another aspect of Hong Kong English is the effect that social and cultural values, as well as the intimidation of assessments and curriculum changes had on English education in Hong Kong (Jenkins, 2015).

In the year 2000, there was an education reform in Hong Kong. Before this, however, English classes were generally geared towards instruction on grammar as opposed to focusing on actual English usage and practical applications. Additionally, students were often motivated to learn and practice English to earn good grades on assessments and in classes, gain acceptance to higher levels of education, and then have the opportunity to have a job that pays well. In one study regarding Hong Kong children’s attitudes towards their English education, it was concluded that there were two aspects of their desire to learn English. The first is the previously stated reason, being pragmatic reasoning. The second reason was to actually improve their skills for their future and because they often faced language anxiety (like not being able to communicate properly in mandatory English courses because they didn’t speak English well enough) (Jayawickarma, 2016). Parents of these children in school also agreed that

their children needed access to a high quality English education because most thought that in learning and being at least proficient in English, their children will have many doors opened for them in terms of their education, jobs, and general future (Phillipson et al., 1970).

A perception of language acquisition (second language) can often be that the learning of English, in this case, can pose a threat to one's identity. This can, in turn, increase or decrease one's motivation to learn English. Richards (1998) explains three main areas that may influence this motivation. First, the article mentions how one's willingness to let in the values, both cultural and cognitive, that are encapsulated in the second language impacts one's desire to learn the second language. Secondly, the article states that a major influence is the degree to which a person already identifies with their own ethnicity, and most importantly, their language. Lastly, the article explains how the relationship between the two language groups is quite influential. For example, what is the size and status of both groups, are there cultural similarities or major differences, and how do each of the language groups feel about each other (Richards, 1998).

Given that Hong Kong is quite a multilingual place, local English developed into a variety so solid that it has become a "local lingua franca" (Jenkins, 2015). This development is as monumental as it sounds, especially in terms of the effects this change has had on the cultural identities of the Hong Kong people. Firstly, in the

process of learning a new language, the learner adjusts their tone, rhythm, and more. Beyond these vocal changes, the second language learner is simultaneously confronted with the cultural values of the language, as they take in the words, patterns, and begin to truly comprehend the language. As the second language learner does this, bonds with one community can solidify, while ties to another community loosen. In this way, the second language learner's cultural identity is quite malleable (Richards, 1998).

For many Hong Kong people's experience learning English, they crave to mix into the community of the second language, but do not want to lose connection to their own unique ethnicity. When learners keep this in mind, it can often be helpful, as they remind themselves that they are not replacing one language, or one culture, for the other. Further, if a second language learner tries to put a wall up against the cultural community of that second language, tries to completely assimilate into the cultural community of the second language, or is left feeling ostracized from both communities entirely, they may find that their motivation to continue learning English is dwindling (Richards, 1998).

Connecting cultural identity back to the history of Hong Kong, an individual from Hong Kong's authentic identity is comprised of a complex mixture of the West (British rule) and the East (China). Therefore, this unique blend has also turned into an identity with a unique blend of values, traditions, and beliefs. Additionally, people of Hong Kong are often told that they aren't even Western or Chinese which can cause

them to feel like their identity is unclear or uncertain. When this uncertainty combines with second language acquisition, cultural identity (or the ability to stand strong in one's cultural identity) becomes complex (Phillipson et al., 1970).

Overall, given Hong Kong's history, how the settlers communicated with locals, the education of English in Hong Kong, and more, it is safe to say that the spread and use of English in Hong Kong has influenced the people of Hong Kong's cultural identity.

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