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## **THE TYPE OF ENGLISH USED IN TOEIC CLASSROOMS CAN IMPROVE ELS LEARNER MOTIVATION AND ACHIEVEMENT.**

### **Abstract:**

The debate surrounding the status of learning English as a second language (ESL) has evolved greatly over the past twenty years. During this period, both the identification and classification of new varieties of English, such as Hawaiian, Maltese and Filipino English, has garnered considerable attention around the world from many educators. The spread of new Englishes has had a large impact on teaching, allowing educators to target their teaching methods more accurately to meet the needs of their learners. However, this has not always been the case, as notable examples of Englishes can be found that seem to buck this trend such as Hong Kong English. In the case of non-native Englishes, the question of what is the best approach for educators to adopt; whether or not to teach the local variety or a native speaker model, is worthy of attention.

Previous studies into attitudes towards new varieties of Englishes have generally followed a quantitative approach focusing on speakers' attitudes towards a given English, with few detailed qualitative studies conducted. Furthermore, the current classifications for the emergence and development of new varieties of English have dismissed the importance of speakers' sense of the value, usefulness and importance of the language they use, or their sense ownership of their English. Little in-depth research has been conducted into how notions of ownership may develop with the development of a new variety of English. To address this lack of data and provide educators with practical suggestions for teaching students of new Englishes, this presentation sets out to explore and examine the language attitudes of young professionals' attitudes toward the English that they use and how these attitudes can affect ESL learners' attitudes toward World Englishes. In addition, data from this presentation will add further to the body of the literature concerning the factors affecting new English speakers' sense of ownership.

The results show that when the learners believe their English is inferior to native models, then the notion of ownership suffers, often as a result of learners sensing no usefulness in their English. The motivational level of learners lacking this sense of value in learning a specific variety of English will suffer, and they will search for a more prestigious model of English to study. In such cases educators should change their teaching methods to better meet learners' language ambitions and abilities.

### **Keywords:**

ESL, motivation, TOEIC, ownership, World Englishes, new varieties of English

## 1. Introduction

Despite growing international recognition and enthusiasm for new varieties of English (NVE), Hong Kong English (HKE) lags far behind other Englishes in its level of acceptance. Whereas Englishes such as Singaporean or Pilipino have seen an increased interest in recent years, HKE alone amongst Asian Englishes appears to buck the trend in terms of its lack of local popularity and acceptance. This is partly due to Hong Kongers well documented aversion to the label of HKE, but specific origins are not so well documented. Whilst some authors have put the reason for this on Hong Kongers pragmatic language choices and others have attempted to link it to aspects of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991), few studies have actually attempted to provide qualitative data explaining the 'why' behind this. Instead, the current literature predominantly focuses on data obtained from quantitative studies from a narrow group of participants. To address this dearth of qualitative data this study set out to explore the language attitudes of young professional Hong Kongers towards the acceptance of HKE. Just what are the origins of Hong Kongers negative attitudes towards HKE and how this affects the growth of this new Asian variety of English is the focus of this study.

## 2. Background

The debate over the local existence of HKE is often traced back to Luke and Richards's (1982) seminal statement that there was no such thing as HKE and later by other authors who believed that there was no such motivation for development of a local variety of English (Tay, 1991). Reasons for this are often put down to Hong Kongers preference for native Englishes, such as British or American English, (BrE, AmE) itself often linked to a sense of higher personal status, intelligence and wealth (Chan, 2013; Lai, 2012) and a lack of interpersonal and or intra-ethnic use of English (Joseph, 1996; Pang, 2003). However, in the last decade or so the debate has changed with several authors pointing towards recognisable and persistent features of HKE, such as in phonology, lexis and syntax, and its increasing overt use locally, especially Bolton (2002) who has championed the cause for HKE stating that it may already poses many of the required features of a NVE. Evans's (2014) research showed the widespread use of English in the workplace due to its perceived links to professionalism and important works by Groves (2009; 2011) have shown how the public discourse on falling English standards may in fact reflect changing attitudes to what constitutes acceptable English, hinting at a growing use of HKE especially amongst the younger generations who have been shown to use more colloquial forms of English in digital communications (Groves, 2009). However, governmental, educational and business

preference for native forms of English (Luk and Lin, 2006) all indicate that HKE is still deemed far from acceptable in public / official use.

### **3. Methodology**

#### 3.1. Research Questions:

In order to elicit Hong Kongers attitudes to HKE, two research questions (RQs) were proposed, which are as follows:

1. In what contexts do Hong Kongers' believe HKE is appropriate? Are there any differences between attitudes toward written or spoken HKE?
2. Do Hong Kongers' believe particular varieties of English are connected with future socio-economic success? If so, which varieties and why?

#### 3.2. Context:

To answer the above RQs, a mixed method approach was chosen because it was felt that such an approach would provide a breadth and depth of qualitative data that a single method could lack, whilst mitigating some of the possible disadvantages of each method respectively, (Patton 2002; Ivankova and Crewel 2009: pp. 136). The method consisted of two parts, firstly of a brief questionnaire based upon Groves's (2011) study into language attitudes in Hong Kong (see appendix one) was formed from a mixture of closed and open-response questions concerning their attitudes towards the existence of HKE, its appropriateness, its links to socio-economic success and its role in education. Secondly, it included the novel use of a free focus group (FG) discussion that was chosen because hitherto no major study into HKE has used such an approach. Additionally, a FG discussion was felt to be an ideal method for gathering large amounts of qualitative rich data in Hong Kongers' very own words.

#### 3.3. Participants

In order to optimise the dynamics of the FG, a group of four female participants who all shared similar backgrounds, such as being aged approximately in their early thirties and educated to at least undergraduate level were selected. It was hoped that such a group would offer an interesting insight into a hitherto under explored group, as currently the literature tends to focus predominantly on data from pre-undergraduates, school or university educators.

### 3.4. Procedure

The FG began with a few warm-up questions designed to break the ice and to make participants more at ease. These naturally lead into the topics and themes vis-à-vis the data elicitation to answer the RQs. During the discussion the researcher acted in the moderator role, keeping back from the discussion, allowing the participants to talk freely and follow their own interests. The researcher only intervened when the discussion had veered off to irrelevance, or when the topic of conversation had come to an end.

### 3.5. Data analysis

After the FG was completed the recording of the discussion was fully transcribed and the contents analysed for data that could directly answer the RQs (see appendix two for transcription guide). Following this the remaining data was codified using a thematic approach based upon any predominate or noteworthy themes that were identified in the discussion.

## 4. Discussion

With regards to the first research question, the results were clear and showed that Hong Kongers believed the use of HKE in all formal contexts and modalities is inappropriate. Examples included “<...>when you’re doing say an interview^^ then maybe it’s less acceptable,” mirroring the findings of Evans (2014).

*M: I guess from what we have been talking about so far the definition of Hong Kong English is English without the right grammar^^ so it can’t be ¿?*

*V: Actually like “open rice” we say like, actually it’s not a proper English, we, you will not understand if, if I think someone not live in Hong Kong...they may not understand what is “open rice.”*

The example of ‘open rice,’ though an expression used in daily parlance in Hong Kong meaning ‘*bon appétit*,’ is deemed unacceptable only because it differs from Standard Englishes (SE).

The data from the study shows that the primary causes for these attitudes originates from their early educational experiences and continues later in life with a strongly held belief that there exists “a proper English.” Interestingly, the phrase “proper English” was used a total of forty-three times by all participants during the discussion, indicating a well entrenched local notion that such an English exists. Comments such as “<...>we

[were] taught that there's proper English" are perpetuated later in life with attitudes such as "If you teach them you gotta teach them proper formal English...Like British way or American way." In such a context HKE is inappropriate because "[it is] not deemed as what should be learnt in proper English schooling environment." Instead, SE such as AmE, but particularly "the British one...coz I learnt that one," are alone deemed acceptable. This leaves HKE in a denigrated limbo in which it is seen as "<...>just like casual saying or maybe just like some gimmick for me." The use of HKE in almost all contexts is lambasted denying it a venue for its development.

With regards to the second research question, all participants connected the use of SE with future socio-economic success. To the question of such a possible link in the questionnaire all participants answered affirmatively writing that this was, in summary, because English aided their ability to communicate and access information in the globalised world and or because it is a necessary component of their chosen professions. This was also due to its perceived use in examinations, government institutions and academia in which BrtE still dominates locally. One participant commented that "people tend to see those who can speak pretty good English as being like having a higher status" whilst the use of HKE carried negative connotations behind it. The data showed that Hong Kongers refused to take ownership of HKE speakers "<...>coz that means I don't speak very good English," thus denying it a status. The link between socio-economic success and the variety of English used was reserved exclusively for SE, as can be seen above.

An interestingly theme was identified during the data analysis, which was a possible additional origin of Hong Kongers attitudes to English. In the study the participants linked their Chinese language attitudes with those towards English, as can be seen below;

*P: But it's the same for let's say Mandarin, we won't want we speak Canton-Mandarin, but we don't think this is proper. We think that we speak bad Mandarin right? So it's kinda like I think we also think the same was as with English.*

In a society where children are taught four languages from primary school, English, Cantonese, Mandarin and standard written Chinese and when these latter three can be expected to have more resonance to their daily lives, it would seem natural that these attitudes would spill over into English. Several authors have recently studied changing attitudes to the use of colloquial Cantonese in electronic communication and concluded that these may offer insights as to the possible development of HKE, as many parallels exist between this and the development of HKE (Groves, 2011).

## 5. Conclusion

This study showed that the attitudes of young professional Hong Kongers are still overwhelmingly negative when it comes to the acceptance of HKE, mirroring the findings of Groves (2009, 2011) and Pang (2003). The data from the FG showed how Hong Kongers early educational experiences of being taught that only SE was acceptable, together with their experiences of the link between SE and higher social-economic benefits later in life, coupled with a possible borrowing of cultural attitudes towards Chinese languages into English, all appear to be holding back the development of HKE. Therefore, it appears that Pang's titling of his 2003 paper "Hong Kong English: a still born variety?" may be more apt than others have given him credit for, in that it cannot be predicted to move forwards towards emergence as a NVE until Hong Kongers attitudes change drastically. However, in what form the impetus for such a change would take is currently very difficult to predict.

## 6. Further research

The data from this study points towards a recommendation that researchers should try to examine Hong Kongers attitudes to English in conjunction with their attitudes towards Chinese as much as possible. As locals attitudes towards Chinese can be expected to have more resonance to their daily lives than English, it seems strange to study English in isolation. The data suggests that Hong Kongers have a strong sense of what constitutes appropriate Chinese usage and that these notions of appropriate language norms are somewhat carried over to English. Furthermore, as noted in the literature review, changing attitudes to the use of written Cantonese in electronic communication, itself an emerging area of research, may offer insights as to the possible development of HKE, as many parallels exist between this and the development of HKE (Groves 2011). The FG data demonstrate that more attention towards Hong Kongers attitudes to Chinese and their crossover into English is warranted.

## 7.1. Appendix One

Questionnaire about English in Hong Kong. Taken from:

Groves, J. M. (2011). 'Linguistic schizophrenia' in Hong Kong. *English Today*, 27, pp. 33-43.

Year \_\_\_\_\_ Major \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the best answer, according to your own opinion.

1. I speak a variety of:
  - a) British English
  - b) American English
  - c) Hong Kong English
  - d) China English
  - e) Other (please specify)

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2. I think that we should learn to speak English:
  - a) like the British
  - b) like the American
  - c) like other native speakers (e.g. the Australians)
  - d) in our own way
  - e) like educated non-native speakers from other countries
  - f) Other (please specify)

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3. Do you think there is such a thing as "Hong Kong English?"
  - a) Yes           > **Go to Q. 4**
  - b) No            > **Go straight to Q. 5**
  - c) Not sure    > **Go to Q. 4**
4. If yes, there is such a thing as Hong Kong English, then I believe it is:
  - a) A unique, acceptable variety of English spoken by educated Hong Kongers.
  - b) A variety of English but which is inferior to other varieties (e.g. British English, Australian English, etc.)
  - c) Other (please specify)

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5. If no, then what would you call the kind of English that Hong Kongers speak?  
(explain if necessary)
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## 7.2. Appendix Two

The below transcription guide was used in the study. It was adapted from the works of Higgins (2003) and Du Bois (2007).

..	Micropause
...	Pause (<0.5 seconds)
(0.0)	Pause (time in seconds)
[ ]	Talk in overlap
-	Abrupt cut off of speech
^^	Laugh / Humorous sounds
<u>CAPS</u>	Emphasis
¿ ?	Garbled speech
<CAPS>	Slowly enunciated speech
M:	Speaker / turn attribution (A: Agatha, V: Veronica, P: Peggy, M: Maud and R: Researcher)
°CAPS°	Whispered speech
<A***>	Date anonymised for privacy
<...>	Ellipsis
P:	Participant Peggy
M:	Participant Maud
V:	Participant Veronica
A:	Participant Agatha

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