

DOI:10.18686/cle.v2i2.3732

The Status of English as a Value-Added Language in Hong Kong

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Abstract:The aim of this paper is to explore the status of English as a value-added language in Hong Kong. This analysis is done on the basis of the quantitative researches. In this thesis, my discussion will focus on the language uses in three important domains, namely employment, education and government.

Keywords:English; Hong Kong; Employment; Education; Government

1. Introduction

According to sociolinguists “Luke and Richards”(1982), who make great contribution to the status of English in Hong Kong, English is depicted as an “auxiliary language”(Luke and Richards 1982) instead of a foreign or second language. However, the description of a “value-added”language(David Li 1999) can be more appropriate in post-colonial Hong Kong mainly because English holds the key to employment opportunities and career advancement, though it is not an indispensable part of their daily lives. Therefore, the term “auxiliary language” seems no longer to be suitable to characterize its status in Hong Kong in the different social-political background after handover. This paper aims to answer the question about to what extent is “value-added language” an appropriate description of the status of English in Hong Kong and offer the reasons accounting for such particular status by providing quantitative researches and giving an outline of the language uses in three important domains, namely employment, education and government.

2. Literature Review

Luke and Richards claim that English in Hong Kong can be described as an “auxiliary language” because of its unique status. By this, he means “a non-native language which is reserved for certain restricted functions in society and for use by a restricted section of that society”(Luke and Richards 1982:5) English as an official language is confined to formal settings including government administration, legal areas, business sectors and the educational system, especially in the written form for inter-group communication. So Luke and Richards conclude that “in Hong Kong English is somehow less important than a second language, but more important than a foreign language.”(Luke and Richards 1982:55)

It is, on the other hand, argued that the term “value-added language” seems to be a more appropriate characterization of its status after 1980s because of its social prestige and symbolic predominance. David Li carries out an updated and more comprehensive study on functions and status of English in the domains of politics, employments, education and media, emphasizing that “auxiliary language” is not suitable to describe English status in the post-1997 Hong Kong. Similarly, Hyland points out that “English is perceived among the community as having strong marketability, and knowledge of English correlates highly with income, social prestige and education level.”(Hyland 1997:193) The description of English “value-added” is more appropriate than “auxiliary” as English has a direct impact on Hongkongers’ employment possibilities as well as academic advancement.

In view of the above comments made by the scholars and professionals, I believe that nowadays it is more reasonable to describe English as a “value-added” language in such a macro-sociolinguistic situation as “polylossia with increasing bilingualism.” (Li 1999) The economy in Hongkong has shifted to service-oriented industries and more English is used in international trade to deal with customers from diverse backgrounds. The “add-on” language serving as a symbolic capital therefore plays an important role in career success and advancement in the competitive community.

3. Data and Methodology

According to Richard(2013:9),data collection methods are questionnaires and individual interviews and the number of subjects are about 40 participants.People who are invited to participate in the questionnaire and interview are 20 English majors studying in University of Hong Kong(Group 1)and 20 undergraduates majoring in Humanities from City University of Hong Kong(Group 2). All of these respondents are raised in Hong Kong and their age is approximately between 18 and 25 years old.

The questionnaire focuses on finding out students’ attitudes toward English and all of the participants are required to express their ideas about to what extent is English important for Hong Kong at present and in the future. The follow-up interview concentrates on further information about students’ language attitudes and all of the interviewers are encouraged to provide further explanation for their answers on the questionnaire.

4. Results or Findings

Questions	Rank	Mean (Group 1)	Rank	Mean (Group 2)
Speaking better English could enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong people.	1	1.7	1	1.8
English is a prestigious language.	2	2.4	2	2.0
English is a language of power.	2	2.4	3	2.2
Hong Kong people who could speak fluent English have higher status in society.	3	2.5	3	2.2

“The scale of mean is set from”1” to “5”, which is used for indicating the degree of agreement from the respondents.”
(Richard 2013:8)

The results in the first group are similar to those in the second group. Almost all of the respondents believe that speaking English can enhance their competitiveness, accounting for 95% and 90% respectively. Participants in group one claiming that “English is a prestigious language” account for 55%, 15% higher than that of group two. The percentage of students believing “English is a language of power and Hong Kong people who could speak fluent English have higher status in the society” is almost the same as that in two groups.

5. Discussion

5.1 Employment

English can be described as a value-added language since people need to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds in this globalized world. Working adults in Hong Kong find it necessary to master basic English communication skills in the workplace to communicate with their English-speaking clients in a globalized community. Local manufacturers in Hong Kong tend to move their factories to Mainland China to reduce operating costs, gaining a competitive edge over their counterparts. That’s why a growing number of people in Hong Kong nowadays are engaged in service-oriented industries instead of labor-intensive industries. “There is clearly a rise in the number of Hongkongers capable of communicating in simple, pidginized,English.”(Bacon-Shone and Bolton 1998:53)Taxi-drivers attempt to pick up spoken English if they need to communicate with foreign tourists about the address. Likewise, cashiers in the supermarket also equip themselves with basic English skills, say expression of English figures if they need to communicate with Filipino domestic helpers in the workplace. It explains why many blue-collar working adults have sought to acquire English, especially for those who need to increase their earnings so as to raise a family and have a good quality of life. In view of this, people acquiring basic language skills can be perceived as possessing added value. Just as Luke and Richards put it,“it is widely believed that knowledge of English means financial and occupational mobility.”(Luke and Richards 1982:53)

5.2 Education

English can be also considered as a value-added language, as students who have a good grasp of English are likely to gain more opportunities for academic success and career advancement in the future. Due to the fact the labor market nowadays in Hong Kong has become intensely competitive, parents believe that“the learning of English has the potential to raise the market value of the final product.”(Li 1999:98) For instance, if children have proficiency in English, they are more likely to pursue a degree overseas and find a job easier in a multinational enterprise. For this reason, the experience of studying abroad can help students to open the door to job opportunities and put them in an advantageous position. The reason why English plays a add-on role in education can be analyzed from two perspectives. Parents in Hong Kong, especially those in middle-class prefer to choose

English-medium schools for their children because a good command of English is deemed as a token of higher socioeconomic status. As Li suggests, “English is perceived to be much more prestigious, a symbolic capital invested with tremendous added value which is crucial for anyone eager to move up the social ladder.” (Li 1999:86) Colonial policy-makers usually gave preferential treatment to job seekers with high English proficiency. Civil servants in Hong Kong who can speak fluent English, for instance, tend to get pay rises and climb up the career ladder. This is the main reason why many parents in Hong Kong think that English skills can offer greater employment possibilities and achieve success in career. Moreover, “just as workers of a value-added industrial activity have no right to query corporate decisions,” (Li 1999:98) students from primary schools to universities are encouraged to learn English so as to meet their family members’ desire and ego, although English may not make difference to their daily lives. Another reason is that employers in Hong Kong are more willing to recruit graduates who can master language skills as the economic activities across the border are proceeding at an astounding rate in Hong Kong. Due to the shift from elite to mass education, students in Hong Kong are now at a disadvantage in terms of language competence. If companies fail to recruit college graduates with proficient English skills, they may need to provide those university students with language courses to upgrade their language skills. This means that the employers will spend more money on vocational training and increase the running cost, which may lead to a decline in companies’ productivity and profitability. As “parents see more added value in that language, namely commercial usefulness and social prestige,” (Li 1999:87) most of them encourage their children to have exposure to English knowledge.

5.3 Government

English can be viewed as a value-added language when having a profound influence on the government and law. Due to “linguistic imperialism and symbolic domination” of English in Hong Kong (Lin 1996; Boyle 1997b), written English, as one of the official languages in Hong Kong, still enjoys high prestige in post-colonial Hong Kong. For example, formal written discourse including official documents, minutes of meetings and bulletin boards are often written in English while senior officials’ meetings are usually held in English. “Standing Order No.2 of the Legislative Council stipulates that the proceedings and debates of the Council shall be in the English language. In addition, Section 7 of the same Ordinance requires a Councilor to possess an adequate knowledge of the English language.” (Wong, Shau-yin, Shirley 2010:8) because of this, English versions have been applied to proceedings in important courts, although simultaneous interpretation of the Chinese version is also offered. On the basis of the above examples, the official language can be appropriately depicted as a “value-added” language. This lies in the fact that official documents and law of English versions are regarded as “the ultimate source of authenticity” (Li 1999:97) because of the common law. The legal system still remains unchanged, though Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony in 1997 when English was the official and exclusive language in the legal domain. “The historical and cultural heritage of English such as common law” (Li 1999:97) enjoys great popularity in the HKSAR. Compared with standard written Chinese, English is considered as a language with more authority and professionalism by Hongkongers. It is understandable why “the social prestige of English in Hong Kong is derived from some societally legitimated added value.” (Li 1999: 98)

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, a good command of English has a beneficial impact on people’s career prospects, academic success as well as official affairs in Hong Kong, although one can survive in the community without English. It is therefore reasonable to think that English are more appropriate to describe as a “value-added” language. Employers’ expectation, parents’ preference and social prestige are main reasons behind the value added role of English in Hong Kong.

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