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## ABSTRACT

This paper explains how, in 2001, failing rates on the writing and oral sections of the first Language Proficiency Assessment Test for Hong Kong's inservice or prospective English teachers shocked the Education Department and the public, creating general concern about failing English standards among Hong Kong students. Government officials and school administrators declared that immediate remedial measures must taken to stem this tide, moving the issue of language in education into the spotlight. This paper suggests that in the midst of such an overwhelming language crisis, it is important to be open to different perspectives in order to better understand the whole issue and devise appropriate measures to deal with the problem. It focuses on the fundamental question of whether the English standard is actually falling, as the public believes, what standard English in Hong Kong is like, the role of "social psyche" in standard English, and what can be done about the issue. It concludes that English to Hong Kong students is only a second language, mostly used vocationally in reading and writing, noting that language can be creolized. It suggests that by understanding these facts, it might be possible to establish another perspective on the issue of declining English standards among Hong Kong students. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

The falling English standard in Hong Kong: A tide has to be stemmed or a "social psyche" has to be changed?

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## Abstract

In 2001, the failing rate in writing ( 66.67% ) and oral ( 49.29% ) sections of the very first Language Proficiency Assessment Test for the in service or prospect English teachers of Hong Kong shocked the Education Department and the public. It stirs up the general concern about the falling English standard among the students of Hong Kong. Government officials and school administrators declare immediate remedial measures that have to be taken to stem such tide. The issue of language in education once again moves in the spotlight. The worry and concern are certainly understandable. Yet, they should not mislead us towards any sort of bias, which might hinder the healthy development of our language policy in education. Instead, in the midst of such overwhelming outcry of language crisis, we should be more open to different perspectives so that we can grasp a better picture of the whole issue and in turn devise appropriate measures if needed accordingly. This paper, therefore, attempts to first go back to the fundamental question of whether there is a real fall in the English standard as what the general public believes. What kind of standard are we looking at? Finally, what can we do about it? Through the exploration of any possible answers to all these questions, we might be more capable of looking at the issue from another standpoint which could be crucial in the language policy planning in the future of Hong Kong.

## Introduction

In Hong Kong, because of its colonial history with Britain and close tie with China, the linguistics environment is unique and complex. Language in education has always been a hot topic and aroused public concern for more than a century. It can be traced all the way back to the start of the colonial history of Hong Kong when English was first introduced as a foreign language in schools. Even though the predominant language used by over 98% of people of Hong Kong in their daily lives is Cantonese, English is always seen as the "prestigious" language linked to prominent career and tertiary education opportunities. As what Hirvela (1991) stated, English in Hong Kong is the 'language of success' or 'the vehicle for economic mobility. So (1992) also claimed that Proficiency in English is always regarded by most Hong Kong Chinese as the "principal determinant of upward and outward mobility" (p.78).

In the post-1997 era, the status of English in Hong Kong has not changed much if there is any. The presentation made by Mrs. Fanny Law, the Director of Education of Hong Kong, during the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement Plenary Session in 1999 stressed once again the importance of the English language skills of the young people of Hong Kong. She said, "...our young people must also possess the language skills to communicate effectively in a global community...The Government remains committed to strengthening the learning of English as a second language." Such commitment probably explained why the government was so determined to

introduce the English Proficiency Assessment Test for the English teachers in 2001 despite the strong oppositions from the teacher unions. The result of the first test released was astonishing. A failing rate of 66.67% and 49.29% in writing and oral papers respectively disappointed not only teachers who took the test but also the general public as a whole. In a press release, a spokesman for the Education and Manpower Bureau said, "There is however room for improvement in some papers". No wonder years before the test, Wilson (1983) had already complained that "the standard of English among many Cantonese speaking teachers is so poor that they use what has been dubbed here as 'Chinglish' in the classroom". Consequently, such disappointing test result sparked off once again the concern of the falling English standard among the students of Hong Kong when their teachers cannot even meet the required standard.

Different remedies are proposed by different parties such as the preparation and development of different English graduation test for the universities graduates, the use of foreign English test as an assessment tool for the admission of primary school students, the urge of the government secretariat to use English as a medium of communication in meetings and so on. It certainly reflects the concern as well as anxiousness of the public about the English standard of the students of Hong Kong. From novice English learners as young as six year old primary student to expert English users as university graduates and from students to teaching professionals as well as government officials, their English standard has been tested from time to time. How bad the

standard of English among the students of Hong Kong is remains an unsolved question which has been puzzling millions of people in Hong Kong for years.

### **A long history of falling English standard?**

The concern about the falling English standard is in fact not new at all when one looks back to the history of English in Hong Kong. Over the years, sadly, most of the assessment of the English standard of the Hong Kong students has been quite negative indeed.

Back in 1880, the Inspector of Schools, E.J. Eitel already commented that "an overwhelming majority of scholars leave our Government Schools year after year unable to speak English" (Fu 1979, p.4). In 1935, Edmund Burney, a visiting British schools inspector, reported that "not only do the pupils commonly speak English badly but even their understanding is often so poor that they have to be given special training" (Evans, 1996, p.30). In the mid-1970s, " For the majority of students entering the University of Hong Kong English is not a viable means of communication at all. About a fifth of them cannot make themselves understood in English, and their comprehension of spoken English is poor in the extreme...Few students can write English which is not bizarre" (Lord, 1974, p.1). In 1979, Keith Wescott, a British council officer in Hong Kong, concluded that "it is tragic that so much time is given to English language teaching with so little result...it is quite usual to meet people who have studied all this English and cannot put a simple sentence together, either orally or in writing" (Evans, 1996, p.32). More than a century after the comment made by Eitel, Raymond Young, deputy secretary of the education and manpower bureau, made a similar

statement. He said, "English is a foreign language despite 150 years of British rule. We have had English-medium teaching for 50 years, but look at the results - 12-year-olds can't utter a coherent English sentence" (Spencer, 1999). They all undoubtedly depicted a gloomy picture of the disappointing result of English learning among students of Hong Kong.

Simply based on all these comments, one might conclude that the English standard among the students of Hong Kong was "bad" from the very start in 1880. It looks like it never gets improved and the problem has lasted for more than a century. How could that possibly happen when most if not all of the people of Hong Kong do realize the importance of English language skills and are highly motivated to learn it?

### **Rationale behind the "fall"**

One of the answers to the question raised in the last section actually emerged almost sixty-five years ago when Burney made his recommendation in the Report on education in Hong Kong in 1935. He said, "the teaching of English in the schools of Hong Kong should be reformed on a frankly utilitarian basis" because English in Hong Kong only has a negligible social role (Evans, 1996, p.36). Johnson (1994) took the same stance by claiming that "There is no social or cultural role for English to play among Hong Kong Chinese; it only has a role in their relations with expatriates and the outside world." Bruce (1990) added "it seems clear that English has a negligible social role to play in everyday Hong Kong life; it only has communicative currency in the technological, academic and above all, the international commercial sectors."

In spite of the supreme status English enjoys in the special linguistics environment in Hong Kong, it "is of restricted use...only in education, government and business" (Lai, 1994). English is more of a means of educational survival (Lord, 1974, p. 6). "...Hong Kong is essentially a monolingual, Cantonese-speaking society where English is used in only a restricted number of domains" ( So, 1992, p.79 ). As what Luke and Richards (1982) put it, English in Hong Kong was an 'auxiliary' language because its use has traditionally been restricted to the 'high' functions in society, notably government, business, and education.

Even the Education Commission Report of the working group on language proficiency in 1994 supported similar argument. It revealed that "Since Hong Kong is a racially homogeneous, largely monolingual society, English is rarely used for intra-ethnic social interaction. While English is mainly used in official, formal situations, Cantonese is overwhelmingly the language of the home, the street and the entertainment media" (Evans, 1996, p.36). Given such a strong Cantonese linguistic environment, students reported that there is no chance to use English apart from some English lessons at schools ( Lai, 1994 ). As a result, the students of Hong Kong can hardly improve their English, which contributes to the falling English standard among them.

On another front, Lord (1987) attributed the falling English standard to the democratization of education. He claimed, "With the introduction of mass education in the 1970's it is hardly surprising that the number of weak performers in English was bound to show an increase" (p.11). Joseph (1996) extended such

reasoning to the Hong Kong's system of higher education where university enrollment dramatically increased since 1990's, which resulted in the falling English standard. Quoted by Bolton & Lim (2000), McGurn also stated that "because the university no longer reflects simply the cream of Hong Kong society, the general level of English has declined as the numbers have increased".

### **"Fall" without empirical support**

No matter what the reasons different scholars suggested to explain the decline of the English standard, Boyle (1989) rightfully put, "That the standard of English in Hong Kong has declined is easy to say, but hard to prove" (p.14). In fact, it is more of a perception without any empirical support yet at least so far. The way Joseph (1996) put it was "...when a privilege of the few (access to learning English) becomes open to the 'hoi polloi' (public), it is no longer perceived as having the same quality as before" (p.170). Lord (1987) added further that, "it has seemed to many that standards of English are falling" (p.11). In short, the falling English standard is still at its "perceived" and "seemed" stage. No empirical support has yet been established.

On the contrary, there were at least two empirical researches supporting the reversed scenario that instead of falling, the English standard has actually increased. In a language survey project by Bacon-shone and Bolton, it concluded that there has been a "steadily accelerating rise from the 1930s to the present in both the proportion and the sheer numbers of Hong Kong People proficient in English" (Joseph, 1996, p.168). Another statistical analysis done by King (1987) who revealed the statistics relating to the results of the Hong Kong

Examination Authority's English language examination of 15,000 students for the years 1984 and 1986, concluded that there was no proof, which could show the English standard has been falling. (Bolton & Lim, 2000)

In addition, if the focus is shifted towards the total number of people of Hong Kong who "know" English, the standard of English is actually increasing. Think about our older generations, education was a privilege instead of a basic human right. With the compulsory nine-year education program since 1978, the actual number of students who enrolled in regular schooling has been expanded dramatically. A lot of people who did not have the chance to learn English in school are now having the chance to learn at least nine more year English. Relative speaking, therefore, the standard of English of the people of Hong Kong as a whole has actually increased. The logical outcome as what Boyle (1989) put it, "is clearly quality versus quantity". (p.14)

### **What is the "standard English" in Hong Kong?**

According to the Longman English-Chinese Dictionary of Contemporary English (1988), the word "standard" is defined as "a level or a degree of quality that is considered proper or acceptable" (p.1396). As Hong Kong was a British colony for more than a century, in the context of English in Hong Kong, the standard that most if not all people refer to is the standard British English. In other words, people in Hong Kong measure the English in Hong Kong against the British Standard English. When its level of "quality" is not proper or acceptable when compared with the British Standard English, it is not up to the standard. When people say the English standard among the students is falling,

they simply imply that the students are drifting away further from such standard and the quality of their English is undesirable.

Is it so? Let's take a quick look of what language is before we can answer this simple question. First of all, as what Joseph (1996) said, "...we have no independent criteria by which to measure the quality of languages, even relative to one another" (p.167). If there is no criteria to determine the quality of language, it might sound arbitrary to say that one language is more desirable than the other. Besides, the concept of "general standard English" itself is actually unclear (Boyle, 1989, p.14). If it is unclear, how can we compare the English in Hong Kong against the British one even we mean to do it?

The attempt to define what Standard English is by the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Johnson and Johnson) seems to be relatively conclusive. Quoted by Davies (1999), it said "Standard English is a dialect with the most prestige and/or influence within the English-speaking community...Due to its association with the upper and middle classes, it is considered to be the 'correct' version of English". In accordance with this definition, there are at least two circumstantial factors for Standard English to take grounds. First, it must be the most prestige and/or influence. Second, it must exist in an English speaking community. Quirk (1990) also added that, "The most remarkable thing about Standard English is in fact its unobtrusiveness: we tend to notice someone's use of English only when it is not standard" (p.114). In other words, the native English speakers know what standard English by heart. As he said, "whoever

and wherever we are in the English-speaking world, we have been familiar with it all our lives" (p.112).

In Hong Kong, the status of British Standard English is certainly prestigious and influential. Also, it is always associated with the upper and middle classes and thus is considered to be the 'correct' version of English. It explains why whenever people are deviating from this 'correct' version, their English standard is perceived as falling. Yet, over 95 percent, give or take one to two percent, of the people of Hong Kong in the community are not speaking any English. And the people of Hong Kong have never been living in an English speaking world. Based on such reasoning, it might be fair to suggest that basically, it would be extremely difficult if not totally impossible for a non native English person of Hong Kong to attain the British Standard English in a non-English speaking community. It is, therefore, not surprising that even the top rank government officials, who are the elite of the elite and supposedly the experts in Standard English, are still making grammatical mistakes in their well-prepared English essays.

### **The role of "Social Psyche" towards "Standard English"**

In order to state that the standard of the students of Hong Kong has been declining, there must be a "standard", if there is ever any, which they are compared to. As discussed above, there is actually no such objective standard. Whoever mentions that the English standard of the students of Hong Kong has been declining, it is compared to the very own standard of whoever mentions it. Hence, when a highly educated judge in the Hong Kong Supreme Court

complains about the falling English standard, the standard in his or her mind might be totally different from that of a high school drop out who makes a similar comment. There is none whatsoever common ground their standards they mention are based on when these two people sound like sharing the same thought and making the same statement. The only common ground that might stand a chance is the common belief that the British Standard English is the only "correct" English. It is such socially accepted and generated psyche or common language, which contributes to the general belief that the English standard has been falling. Unless more research and hard data on subject issue can be shown to the public, this social psyche cannot and will not be broken. It will simply continue to grow.

### **Conclusion**

After tremendous amount of resources have been allocated in the English language education for more than a century, people of Hong Kong are without doubt longing for positive results and raising expectation. Mastering the British Standard English is naturally becoming the ideal that we expect our students to reach. Aim high is important and same as establishing an attainable goal. After more than a century of dedicated efforts by the Hong Kong Government to enhance English proficiency among the students of Hong Kong, it looks like we are still at square one. Maybe it is the time that we should take on another perspective on the English language education in Hong Kong and make a change.

If we only look at the English of Hong Kong from the psyche of British Standard English, we probably will come up with similar comments made by those British inspectors who evaluated the English Standard of Hong Kong over the last century. When it is next to impossible to change the English learning environment in Hong Kong to enhance the social role played by English in an overwhelming Cantonese speaking community, the British Standard English after all might not be the best or appropriate "standard" that we want our students to achieve or adhere to. Not that we are altering our psyche to meet the lowered expectation. Instead, it is the shift of psyche towards what second language acquisition really means in the Hong Kong context.

The psyche among the people of Hong Kong towards English learning is that the British Standard English is the only standard that English language learner should adhere to. Anything deviates from that is "bad" English. As what Tsui & Bunton (2000) said, "...in the business and government sectors, the model of English has always been exonormative. Any deviations from the model of English have been considered errors. The term 'Chinglish' is a derogator term which refers to English sentences containing features of Chinese syntax or lexical items which are directly translated from Chinese" (p.289). That also probably explains why the grammatical mistakes made by the top rank officials has been picked and posted as headlines in the newspaper even though it has minimal negative effect, if there is any, on the communication purposes of their messages. It is such social psyche which differentiate between "bad" and "good"

English that feeds the general concern of the declining English standard among the students of Hong Kong.

English has been existing in Hong Kong for more than a century and its legacy will certainly go on. The infusion of the local Cantonese and/or Chinese syntax or lexical item has been happening. “Chinglish” is probably a natural and inevitable outcome when two languages have met for such a long period of time. As what Lord (1974) said, “The tendency for languages diffused over a large area of the world to become regionalized, and even 'creolized', is a perfectly normal phenomenon (p.4 )”. The Hong Kong regionalized English or “Chinglish” might be what we should look up to instead of look down upon.

In short, only do we accept the principles that the use of language is to communicate; that the effect of fossilization and interlanguage as well as the limited social role of English in Hong Kong could possibly hinder the development of native-like English language competency in a non-English speaking community; that language should not have a so-called standard and most important of all, there is no “bad” or “good” English, then we would realize that English to the students of Hong Kong is only a second language mostly used vocationally in writing and reading and that language can be creolized. With such new psyche, we might be able to open up another perspective on the issue of the “declining English standard of the students of Hong Kong” which will be crucial to our English language education.

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