A Successful Artificial English Learning Environment—Hong Kong Study

Lin, Cheng-Ti. Dept. of International and Comparative Education, National Chi Nan University

Abstract
Even as an international trading city, Hong Kong residents are not born to speak English. Most of them are Chinese and speak Canton dialect. English ability is something they struggle to acquire. Efficient English learning needs a whole English environment, or gifted learners with strong motivation. However, as an ex-colony of Britain, Hong Kong does not really have English environment. With up to 97% residents speaking Cantonese, people can survive there without English ability. Nevertheless, Hong Kong, to some extent, can not survive without English. Thus, to keep their people highly motivated and to ease their struggle for learning English, the whole society needs to build up a friendly environment for English learners. As a colonial language without daily necessity, how English promotion can get the support of Hong Kong people is an intriguing phenomenon. In this research, the researcher tries to analyze the social status so that the reason for this phenomenon can be induced. What value does English stand for to Hong Kong people? How can this value be strong enough to support people to learn English under such a social condition? How have Chinese culture and the government policy worked together to create a unique artificial English environment through education? To answer these questions, political and economic factors are reviewed. The interaction between the mainstream culture and the government policy will display a positive example for those countries with strong motivation to promote English learning but without real English environment.

Keywords: English learning, English ability, English promotion, Hong Kong

I. Introduction: Background and Motivation
21st century is also regarded as an era of knowledge economy. Globalization is an inevitable trend. Under the structure of WTO, human resources, investment, and technology flow around all over the world. Talented human resources will not belong to any country or area exclusively any more. The market becomes a global market. Thus, in order to enjoy the interest of this market, a country must have high quality human resources, which represent the control of knowledge and technology.
Under this trend, Mainland China has attracted great amount of investment, human resources, and new technology from the rest of the globe because of its irresistible giant market and cheap labors. With serial quick growth of GDP, it has surpassed Japan in 2010 as the second largest entity of economy in the world. With its open market to the world, Hong Kong has become the window of China toward outside. Great amount of finance and products transfer here in or out of China. Hong Kong was once the No. 1 port, in terms of cargo transfer. It has been the second largest financial center in Asia, with Tokyo at the first place. It is a de facto international city. Hong Kong as a special district of Mainland China also works as the bridge between Mainland and the other part of the world. Leung (2009) argued that Hong Kong has been the exchange center of knowledge economy for China; as China will continue to develop its economy, Hong Kong has to continue to play this important role. This indicates Hong Kong has found its position in the global economic system—being the bridge between China and the world.

However, to keep this status, Hong Kong needs high quality of English speakers. It has been a difficult mission for Hong Kong government, especially after 1997—China took over the sovereignty. Chou (2009) points out that since the economy of China and Hong Kong should merge as one and develop together, Hong Kong needs both good English and Chinese to keep its edge in the global market. Nevertheless, the 1997 takeover elevated the importance of Chinese language. This made the making of language policy and practicing of it even harder than before. Yang (no date) indicates that Hong Kong government promotes “2 languages and 3 dialects policy.” Two languages refer to English and Chinese while three dialects stand for Mandarin, Cantonese and English. Students should learn to write English and Chinese and speak English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Since Hong Kong is an international city, English is the language of business; people cannot communicate with foreign visitors without it. Mandarin is the national language; as civilians of the Chinese special administrative district, Hong Kong citizens have to handle it. However, Cantonese a local dialect of South China is the main language of Hong Kong daily life. 95% of the residents can speak Cantonese. This implies that neither Mandarin nor English is necessary for people to live in Hong Kong. Therefore, without the support of proper policy to go well with Hong Kong culture, Mandarin and English cannot prevail.

II. Inquiry
The researcher is interested in finding out the answers to the following inquiries:
A. What value does English stand for to Hong Kong people?
B. How can this value be strong enough to support people to learn English under such a social condition?

C. How have Chinese culture and the government policy worked together to create a unique artificial English environment through education?

III. Method
This research will apply content analysis to analyze the social context of Hong Kong. With literature study, the researcher hopes to find out how Chinese culture and the government policy have worked together to create a unique artificial English environment through education system to cultivate their human resources with good English ability.

IV. Reasons for efficiency of language learning
The efficiency of language learning is related to many aspects of causes, including at least three aspects—learners, teachers, and social culture. Learners’ personal quality, motivation, starting time to learn the language, life surroundings, economic status, parents’ education background all affect learning results a lot. In terms of teachers, personalities, concept of teaching, talents, choice of teaching methods, ability to handle teaching methods, teaching goals, material picking, and etc. all make sense to the efficiency of learning. Social culture is seldom considered for the efficiency because it seems to affect everyone in the society without deviation. However, the atmosphere social culture produces, the universal concept the public share, the government policy, political status, the need for economic development, the history where the society comes from and etc. have great affection to each member of it, including learners, and teachers; thus, it can carry the greatest effect on the efficiency of language learning.

People in the same society usually hold the same or similar social value, which forms its unique social culture. Even though there does exist personal difference, few in the society can avoid being affected by the culture when making decisions. Whether one’s motivation to learn a language other than mother tongue is strong is affected by whether the family or the society supports the learning. To follow the expectation of other members in the society is one’s normal behavior.

However, proper government policy can work to form a new social culture, changing the social value. For example, China has made Mandarin its national common language successfully through its language policy. Before that, Chinese people spoke a variety of dialects which were harmful to the unity of the nation. Nevertheless,
policy making should obey its public opinion; thus, the policy can gain support from
the public. In another words, the policy needs to be in accord with the social culture,
or social value, especially in a society of democracy. Making English learning
efficient needs a delicate policy to create atmosphere of encouraging the public to
learn it, but not being forced to learn it.

V. Social culture and language learning
Education phenomenon occurs in the social context; thus, to have a thorough
comprehension of this phenomenon, one must research on the relation between
education and the society (Hong, 2000). Point of view of humanity and social science
can enlarge the research of comparative education, such as historical background,
ideas toward education, contribution of education to economy, parents’ affection and
political power, and etc. (Bereday, 1964; Hong, 2000). Factors affecting education not
only exist inside school, but outside it. Social factors can affect education even more.

Parsons argued a social system includes three parts: institutional structure, context for
action, and culture tradition. His theory focuses on the structural stability of a society.
He thinks that action of any social member must be the result of interaction between
the social atmosphere and one’s own condition (Tsai, 1990). Hamilton thinks what
Parson cares about is how a person can create a beneficial social structure to oneself
through one’s free decision. Since one is soaked in the social atmosphere, his
personality cannot avoid being affected, even without knowing it. Every decision
making must correspond to the social rule (Tsai, 1990). In another words, people tend
to do decisions for their own benefits with the control of the social culture.

Hamilton indicates change of a society costs material. Material can stimulate people
to change under the lead of its culture (Tsai, 1990). This explains how social change
occurs. The change of a society needs the change of the social culture. Desire for
material can help to it. Material can work as a medium to bring about the change. For
example, a government may have some free gifts for the public while promoting a
new policy. Through the giving of free gifts, people have their first contact with the
new policy. After that, they may know the policy and accept it. The successful
development of the policy, without doubt, starts from the lure of material. Promotion
of learning a language may also apply for this theory.

Luhmann agrees with Parsons’ idea basically; however, he thinks social value varies
from person to person. A person makes decision not depending on a social culture of
unity, but on the atmosphere around him (Lu, 1998). This means that closer factors
have more effect than distance ones. As for the learning of a foreign language, one’s motivation to learn is greatly affected by his surroundings; one’s family has greater effect than his school while parents and friends have great effect than teachers. Teachers, in turn, have greater effect than the principal or educational experts.

To sum up, people nearby can have more effects than the social atmosphere. However, these people are also under the control of the social culture, especially while they have been educated under similar education system. As previously mentioned, a government can set a new policy, and then use material as a hook to make its people change habits and culture. For English learning, proper policy should be set in consideration of the social culture, and then use proper material to seduce its people for learning it.

For Hong Kong residents, their culture can be considered a subculture of China. Their culture value is quite from their matrix. Leung (1996) pointed out that Chinese elites, consisting of land owners, scholars, and officials, had “the grandiose Confucian ideals of moral cultivation and self-perfection as a preparation for serving the country of the people (p50).” Those who went to Hong Kong were mostly refugees or people in pain. They cared mainly about their living. In this culture, “the most important personal goal was to make as much money as possible without breaking the law (Leung, 53).” Lau (1983) argues “Hong Kong’s populace are stratified mainly along the economic dimension… (p8).” A very high percentage of workers in Hong Kong would like to go to school for more learning because they think studying can help them meet the requirement they need for promotion (Leung, 1996). This means to say what can make them get higher pay will be highly valued. This can explain why they are eager to be able to handle good English. With a culture highly respecting the usefulness of English, regarding handling of English as symbol of social status and of success, the government can improve the residents’ English ability by designing and supplying an artificial English environment because they have already been highly motivated by their culture background.

VI. The building of the artificial English learning environment
From the start as a British colony, English has become official language of Hong Kong. However, the colonial government never forced the residents there to use English in their daily life. English is only a language of doing business. Chen (2008) points out that even Mandarin was once the main language in Hong Kong from 1949 to early 1970s. Speaking Cantonese has become the mainstream after that. Mandarin is not an official language until 1984.
In Hong Kong, English is the most important language. In the early years as a British colony, poor Chinese people could not have education opportunity. The only chance of education was provided by the church. However, the language of instruction was English. Huang (2009) points out that after taking the education opportunity, Chinese people started to change their concept of being excellent. They found that English education could endow them with opportunity to work for the government, do business, participate politics and even have their own business, and become the middle class of the society. From then on, Chinese residents there started to be eager to learn English for its usefulness under the rule of the colonial government.

Before 1997, more and more schools of compulsory level in Hong Kong chose English as the language in the classroom. Zeng (2003) indicates the trend of using English as language of instruction is a destined result of capitalism market. To survive, schools must choose English for the need of job market and education market. Students’ personal ideas or feelings were not put into consideration about language of instruction in school. For the choice of language of instruction, students were oppressed. Kuo (1989) argues Hong Kong government’s policy led to this result. He predicted that the status of English would be a little lower after China took over the ruling. It is a fact now. However, this does not prevent English from staying as the favorite language of learning in Hong Kong.

After 1997, The Hong Kong Administrative Region retains much of the British system, which contributes greatly to the continuous application of English there. Being part of China, Hong Kong people have to find ways to identify themselves. Even though they accept their Chinese nationality, they are proud of their achievement, feeling superior, and want to distinguish themselves from mainlanders. The ability of using English can serve to achieve this purpose. Leung (1996: 68) argues “the rise of Hong Kong identity is a dual process of dissociation from colonial domination as well as from the social and political life of mainland China.” This points out that the foundation of so-called Hong Kong identity is intensified because of reunification with China. It infers that English may become a more welcomed ability in Hong Kong because of Hong Kong identity. Leung (1996) mentioned Hong Kong people identified with Chinese culturally, but they regarded China inferior to them politically and socially. Under this environment, education naturally needs to meet the requirement of people to learn English, for English can work as both social capital and a tool for financial success and Hong Kong identity.
However, with Mainland China as its hinterland, Hong Kong has better opportunity to be a world financial center than Tokyo. It has language advantage for its residents’ ability to handle both Chinese and English (Sit, 2004). According to Zhao, Zhang and Sit (2004), the economic structure of Hong Kong changes greatly during the 15 years from 1984 to 2001. The number of manufacturing employees reduces 80% while that of service employment expands two times. This structural change will result in the increasing need of human resource with good English.

Since English is the key to economic success in Hong Kong in most cases, the cultivation of English ability in school is always discussed or criticized. The medium of education in university carries especially great influence on the successful cultivation of English. Universities’ policy of language decides the death or living of English in Hong Kong, and also decides the future of Hong Kong. It constructs the basis of the artificial English learning environment.

Since 98% of Hong Kong residents speak Cantonese, Hong Kong, in fact, does not need English for daily communication. Thus, policy takes the lead to help English prevail in Hong Kong. Since higher education is the way to success, if students need English to finish their college education, they have to prepare their basic ability before entering it and be ready to take everything in English during university days. This motivates their students to start learning English early and so they can prepare enough English ability for their university learning. With this basis, Hong Kong creates a special artificial English environment for higher education students and from this produces the human resources they need for being an international city. With a culture supporting any language which can lead to economic success and good life, this system surly can work to support the prosperity of English in Hong Kong.

Under this cultural atmosphere, Chinese is not much favored. Brad and Koo (2004) notes that British government intended to increase the use of Chinese in secondary schools, but did not gain much support from the civilians. The post colonial government intends to enact the policy, but faces fierce objection. Hong Kong residents are apparently against this intention. Besides, the attitude of the government is still crucial. About the language policy in university, the government reveals its favor for English. Brad and Koo (2004) points out:

> The postcolonial authorities, viewing English as an essential tool for access to international knowledge and desiring to retain Hong Kong’s position as an international city, have broadly supported these institutional language policies. (p228)

Since Universities apply English for their main medium of instruction, students need
to be equipped with good English through previous levels of education. English surely will be a preferred medium of education in almost all levels of education. T. J. Tan (1986) points out that the choice of parents and students about language of instruction is decided by the social surroundings, which include three parts: language policy of higher education, official rules for employment, and the language level required by commerce. Once the changes in these three parts occur, the choice changes with them. Among these three, the language policy of higher education carries the most effect. That is, when the entrance is for those with English as medium of instruction, English will be broadly applied; on the contrary, when the policy is for those with mother tongue as medium of instruction, mother tongue will be broadly applied. The situation now in Hong Kong is still for English because it is what Hong Kong needs now.

For those who lead universities, English is the key for their students to maintaining the ability to move around the world. Keeping English as the medium of education is the necessary way to achieve this goal (Flowerdew & Miller, 1998). Since English ability is a basic requirement for university learning, students need to acquire enough of it before entering it. This ability cannot be gained overnight, so students must start to prepare for it early. This concept affects the language of education in earlier education stages, such as secondary and primary, even pre-primary ones. University education is the gateway for Hong Kong people to better social status and economic success. With the diploma and ability they gain from university, they can make access to better job opportunity and thus the group of social elites. That is to say that once university decides its language in class, it also decides on what language all the students should learn, what language parents should focus on, and what language the earlier stages of education should apply in class.

With the lead of university’s language policy, the whole education system in Hong Kong serves as an artificial English learning environment. Under the atmosphere, students can feel the need to learn English for survival. Once the motivation is aroused, the artificial environment can become real to the learners.

VII. Conclusion

Hong Kong is unique with its historical background, location and culture. It has a British colonial past, and thus has a long contact with English. With its location, it becomes the bridge between Mainland China and the outside world. As an international language of business, English is no doubt important and necessary for Hong Kong. However, traditional Chinese culture is not favorable for learning a foreign language, such as English or accepting a new culture. Fortunately, Hong Kong
has developing a subculture of China, which favors any idea for improving their living condition; thus, English is well accepted, for good English is highly related to successful life. Besides, reunification with China has created a need for Hong Kong identity. English, as a colonial language, is naturally a symbol to distinguish Hong Kong citizens from mainlanders. Thus, even with the need for learning Chinese increasing, the need for English learning is still strong. For the Hong Kong Government, English serves to support its unique status in the world while Chinese Central Government needs Hong Kong to stay at its international status to serve for China as a bridge to communicate with the outside world. Under this background—the need for economic success, and the need for Hong Kong identity, the need of China’s and Hong Kong’s development, Hong Kong creates an artificial English learning environment in its education system for students to cultivate their English. English, thus, becomes a useful tool for learning in school, and in turn, a useful tool for finding a better job. It works for it goes well with the culture and benefits all.

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