

# Hong Kong Ethnicity and Influence of Cantonese As a First Language on English Language Acquisition: A Literature Review

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Sylvia Cho, LING 190 course The Science of Speech. The assignment asked students to write a literature review on a topic of choice regarding diverse backgrounds that influence speech. The paper uses APA citation style.

This literature review compiles the history and evolution of research on the influence of Cantonese as a first language on the language acquisition of English. Through examining previous studies, phonological processes causing transfer difficulties are contextualized to highlight the major differences between the two languages. The emergence and distinctions of Hong Kong English is summarized to embrace Cantonese speakers' proliferation of their own form of English, contrasting the conception of their transfer difficulties as errors. Directions for future research are discussed.

At the current time of writing, Hong Kong is experiencing a decline in their global English proficiency ranking, having fallen three places in EF Education First's 2024 English Proficiency Index and losing its place as a 'high proficiency' region. It is ranked 32nd among 116 countries and regions, placing it among the 'moderate proficiency' category (Fung, 2024). Linguistic insight into how acquiring Cantonese, the language most commonly spoken in Hong Kong, as a first language influences the acquisition of English is crucial to understanding the difficulties and best methods in learning English. Analyzing the contemporary literature illuminates the research gaps and the differences in phonology that

explain why English is a hard language to acquire for native Cantonese speakers. This literature review aims to synthesize relevant observations on the topic, identify potential directions for future research and reflect on the findings of the research conducted.

The contrast of English and Cantonese phonology has been extensively recorded. According to Chan & Li (2010), the load of Cantonese speakers' difficulty in speaking English may be accounted for by the fundamental differences in the phoneme inventories of both languages, their characteristics and distribution, the syllable structures and the rhythmic patterns. Through comparison of the consonants, plosives, fricatives, affricates, nasals and laterals, approximants, vowels, syllable structure, tone, rhythm and linkage, the authors pinpoint all the factors that create learner difficulty for Cantonese speakers. The article comments on learning transfer and how knowledge of Cantonese affects the acquisition of English, specifically Received Pronunciation (RP). For instance, the lack of syllable-final plosives in Cantonese influences the perception of English words with those traits. Hence substitution occurs for words such as 'robe' and 'maid' with the consonants /p,t,k/ for /b,d,g/. Similarly, syllable-initial plosives often get devoiced. Finally, another integral suprasegmental difference between the two languages is rhythm. As syllables in Cantonese tend to be spoken with near equal duration, a Cantonese accent can lack the rhythm native English speakers have and be regarded as 'flat and uninteresting'. The authors conclude that remedial teaching programmes benefit from being designed with the contrastive differences in mind and should prioritize only the pronunciation errors that affect intelligibility.

A study conducted to further investigate the challenges Cantonese speakers face in obtaining native-like speech, specifically focusing on connected speech phonological processes (CSSPs), finds that Chinese English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners struggle with the natural speech production of native English speakers. Wong et. al (2019) define CSSPs as phonological processes such as altering, blending or removing sounds which are otherwise present within a word's canonical form. The goal of the research was to examine the key characteristics of Cantonese participants' English CSPP and utilize the findings to more effectively address difficulties in their ESL learning. Participants included 60 Cantonese speakers who were all university students, 10 native speakers of General American (GA) English and 10 native speakers of RP. There were 21 men and 39 women. The Cantonese speakers shared the background of learning compulsory English from 3 years old, but had varying English proficiency levels

as determined by the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. The two native English groups served to establish a benchmark for comparison. The GA speakers were from metropolises in the United States and the RP speakers were from the southern region of England. Participants were given 18 English sentences to read as quickly as possible without reducing intelligibility. They were given some time to rehearse their pronunciation with a written form of the sentences provided. Recordings of them saying the sentences aloud were then marked by phoneticians through a grading scheme. Prior to the experiment, the groups of native speakers were given the same instructions and their pronunciation formed the baseline for the marking scheme. The results of the data showed that the Cantonese speakers scored significantly lower than the native speakers, producing 64% of the CSSPs on average compared to 83.9% and 81.5% for the GA and RP speakers respectively. The Cantonese speakers also had the greatest amount of inter-speaker variability in terms of producing categories of CSSPs. Another thing of note was that the highest scoring participant from the Cantonese group did not score as high as the native speaker's highest score. These findings showcase how Cantonese as a first language influences pronunciation to make native-like speech more difficult, notably due to the deletion of articles or suffixes or avoidance of consonant clusters that are not in Cantonese. The study concludes that more emphasis on CSSPs as a way to fix phonological errors in classrooms can assist in teaching ESL.

In contrast to research on the influence of Cantonese on the acquisition of what society perceives as 'proper' English, such as RP, there is the development of Hong Kong English (HKE) as a new "autonomous variety of English in the future" (Sung, 2015). He analyzed the linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives on the emergence of HKE. In fact, the aforementioned failing standards of English in Hong Kong are linked to the people of Hong Kong "becoming more aware of the distinctive features in the English spoken in Hong Kong, which is somewhat different from the traditional or mainstream varieties of English" (Sung, 2015). HKE is phonologically distinct enough to potentially become a linguistic norm. By cross-referencing the data from this article with other documentation on Cantonese accents, the similarities can be culturally explained as to why Cantonese speakers have such a distinct phonology. The seven simple vowel contrasts in HKE mirror the issue of assimilation, such as the vowel sound /I/ applying to both 'heat' and 'hit' in HKE. Another distinct feature of HKE is the replacement of /θ/ with [f], such as in the word 'youth'. These differences give a Cantonese accent or, HKE, identity as it does not affect

the intelligibility of speech yet gives Hong Kongers a unique way to recognize other Hong Kongers. It is also utilized in different contexts to express formality or seem more approachable. The increasing positive attitudes towards HKE in Hong Kong lend credence to the possibility of more widespread acceptance of HKE as a subset of English.

The research on the influence of Cantonese as a first language on learning English has been critical in language education. Educators can correct errors and know the underlying linguistic reasons for what constitutes a Hong Kong accent. However, as seen through the declining English proficiency rate, there appears to be a gap on how such phonologically aware practices can be implemented into standard schools in Hong Kong. A clear and common curriculum on English speaking can benefit any Cantonese speakers looking towards speaking like a native. Evidently, potential development for research on the influence of Cantonese on speaking English should focus on child language acquisition and the differences between that and adult language acquisition. Given that many errors stem from suprasegmentals lacking in Cantonese, research could be done on whether ingraining those features early on in a child's language in addition to Cantonese can assist in teaching English. Conversely, accepting HKE as a valid form of English can serve to benefit the ever-advancing world of linguistics, dismantling the preconceived notions of what constitutes as proficient English.

To conclude, the phonetic rules of Cantonese conflict with English in a way that creates a strongly perceptible Hong Kong accent. Of interest are the commonly noted substitutions used by Cantonese speakers such as between /l/ and /n/, something which is noted in speakers of Cantonese as 懶音, or 'lazy pronunciation' within the language (Cheng, 2017). The speech patterns observed from research provide great insight to and help archive the changes of the increasingly important language of Cantonese, thanks to the field of linguistics.

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