

## ***Choosing an Appropriate Pronunciation Model for the ELT Classroom: A Hong Kong Perspective***

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The study reported in this article examines Hong Kong secondary school students' recognition of and attitudes towards Hong Kong English (HKE) as an autonomous variety of English and thus as a potentially suitable pronunciation model in the local ELT classroom. The study is based on findings derived from a questionnaire survey of 531 participants from a wide range of secondary schools in the territory. The survey findings reveal that local students have a generally negative attitude towards the existence of HKE as a variety and the adoption of HKE as a teaching model. However, there is no consensus among the participants as to whether the use of HKE equates to a low level of English. The evidence also suggests that the majority of students have limited exposure to spoken English. While students' reservations about the localised pronunciation seem to accord with earlier research, the article argues that Hong Kong students are indeed offered little or no choice but to accept other pronunciation models due largely to the emphasis on native-speaker norms in the curriculum and their limited exposure to spoken English, and therefore accent variation, in their everyday lives. The article concludes by discussing the implications of this lack of local acceptance for the choice of an appropriate pronunciation model, ELT curriculum and materials design and

directions for future research.

**Key Words: Language attitudes, Hong Kong English, varieties of English, accent variation, native-speaker norms, pronunciation model, endonormative nativised model**

## INTRODUCTION

The globalisation of English in recent decades has focused scholarly attention on the choice of an appropriate pronunciation model in the ELT classroom. Traditionally, native-speaker (NS) pronunciation such as Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA) has been regarded as the only goal for second-language (L2) learners in most ELT contexts and has thus been widely adopted in ELT listening and speaking materials, curricula and teacher education around the world. One consequence of regarding the exonormative NS model as the ideal learning target and, presumably, the benchmark for English proficiency has been the routine teaching practice of correcting students' inevitable mother-tongue influenced English accents, which are considered as pronunciation 'errors'. Over the past two decades, the NS model has been criticised in the field of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics on the grounds that it not only neglects real language use and needs in multilingual settings, but also takes little account of local culture and identity (Kirkpatrick, 2007a). To overcome these limitations, two other pedagogical models have been proposed by World Englishes (WE) (e.g. Baumgardner, 2006) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) scholars (e.g. Jenkins, 2000) respectively, namely the endonormative nativised model and the ELF approach.

The advantages and disadvantages of these pedagogical models have been discussed by Kirkpatrick (2007a) in a recent monograph. Kirkpatrick highlights the disadvantages of adopting the NS model, which he sees as unrealistic, unattainable and unnecessary in most non-Anglophone countries, and thus argues that the nativised and ELF models are potentially more

appropriate in outer circle (i.e. ESL) and expanding circle (i.e. EFL) contexts respectively. Together with other WE scholars (e.g. Baumgardner, 2006), he contends that the adoption of an endonormative nativised model is likely to be particularly advantageous in the outer circle where English plays an important institutional role and functions as a lingua franca. In some quintessential outer circle countries such as Singapore and India, the frequent use of English among diverse ethnic groups has gradually led to the emergence of a new variety of English, a distinct form of English which people use daily and are most familiar with. By identifying and generalising the characteristic linguistic features of these newly-emerged varieties, through the codification process, WE scholars advocate that a legitimate nativised model may be highly attainable and beneficial for promoting the self-confidence and self-esteem of both teachers and students (Kirkpatrick, 2007a).

The ELF approach differs from the nativised model in that it centres on communication among non-native speakers of English (NNSs) with different first languages (L1) in global contexts, such as continental Europe (Seidlhofer, 2010) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This approach marginalises NSs as they are claimed to be a minority in most English-mediated communication in the modern world (Seidlhofer, 2009). A major contribution to the development of an ELF pronunciation model is Jenkins's (2000) pioneering lingua franca core (LFC), which aims to provide a teachable and learnable alternative based on the frequency of miscommunication and communication breakdowns in authentic interactional speech data derived from educated NNSs speaking a variety of L1s. This model emphasises segmental phonological features rather than the suprasegmentals (i.e. weak forms, word stress, 'stress-timing', pitch movement and other features of connected speech), which Jenkins claims are either 'non-manageable' in ELT classrooms or less crucial to intelligibility in international communication. She further suggests that only the segmentals, which have been found to impede international intelligibility, should be the focus of teaching and learning in the classroom. However, in

Jenkins's (ibid.) view, students should be encouraged to retain other features of local pronunciation which are not found to impair intelligibility.

One of the crucial issues in the adoption of a localised model is the notion of acceptability. This has been seen as a key factor to determine whether the model can be regarded as either a legitimate nativised norm (Bamgbose, 1998) or an ELF pedagogical model (Ferguson, 2006). In the Asian context, the choice of a pedagogical model is still controversial due largely to the question of local acceptance among the general public and other major stakeholders such as educators, professionals and government officials. In many outer circle contexts (e.g. Singapore and Malaysia), it has been found that the tension between linguistic identity and economic pragmatism is often more a political issue than a purely educational matter (Gill, 2002). A case in point is Singapore, which in Schneider's view (2007) has entered phase four (endonormative stabilisation) of his Dynamic Model, indicating the 'the acceptance of a local norm as identity carrier' (p.56) and furthermore the emergence of Singapore English as an autonomous variety. Despite this recognition of 'Singlish' mainly based on its significant functions in society and distinctive linguistic features, the adoption of a nativised model has yet to be accepted by government policy makers, who in the past decade have promoted the 'Speak Good English Movement' to encourage Singaporeans to use a more standard form of English (Cavallaro & Ng, 2009; Rubdy, 2001).

In light of this concern about acceptability in many outer circle contexts, the present study examines the attitudes of a sizeable sample of secondary school students towards Hong Kong English (HKE) as a pedagogical model in the local classroom. Before describing the study, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the debate over HKE from a sociolinguistic perspective.

### **Hong Kong English**

Unlike India, Singapore and other 'typical' outer circle countries, English (particularly its spoken form) is generally not used in intra-ethnic communication in Hong Kong since more than 90 percent of the local

population speak Cantonese as their L1. Given the ubiquity and vibrancy of Cantonese, scholars have argued that Hong Kong lacks an essential condition for the evolution of a nativised variety of English, namely, its use as a *lingua franca*. Early proponents of this view were Luke and Richards (1982), who characterised the sociolinguistic situation in late colonial Hong Kong as ‘diglossia without bilingualism’ (p.51) with English functioning as ‘an auxiliary language’ (p.58). Owing to the lack of a societal basis for the development of a localised variety, they concluded that there was ‘no such thing’ as HKE (p.55). In the past three decades, the notion that English has a limited role in Hong Kong has been a recurring theme in the literature (e.g. Cheung, 1984; Johnson, 1994; Hyland, 1997; Pang, 2003; Li, 2009a; Poon, 2010; Tay, 1991).

Since 1997, when sovereignty over Hong Kong reverted to China, this position has continued to be endorsed by scholars such as Pang (2003), who questioned whether HKE was ‘a stillborn variety’ in consequence of the ‘limited use of English’ (p.16) in the Special Administrative Region (SAR). On the issue of acceptability, Pang claimed that ‘the mass of Hong Kong people will not easily accept that a distinctive Hong Kong English exists’ (p.17). More recently, Li (2009a) has also pointed to ‘the absence of a conducive language-learning environment’ (p.72) for students to practise and use English outside the classroom, where intra-ethnic communication among Cantonese speakers in the language is judged to be highly marked. Li therefore suggests that Hong Kong is an expanding circle context rather than an outer circle territory and highlights the problems of learning English in the SAR. This perception of the restricted societal role of English is also held by Poon (2010) in her account of language use and planning in Hong Kong. Poon discounts the possibility that HKE is a variety of English, but instead regards it as a ‘variant of English spoken by Hong Kong people’ carrying ‘a connotation associated with erroneous and improper use of English’ (p.9).

One of the limitations of the case against HKE is perhaps its oversimplification of the sociolinguistic situation in the SAR. Bolton (2003), the leading advocate of HKE, has challenged what he sees as the

'monolingual myth' by pointing to the steadily increasing proportion of the population who claim to be able to speak English. The expansion of the English-using community in Hong Kong, which has been a result of compulsory schooling since the 1970s (Evans, 2009), has led to a significant growth in the use of English (especially written English) in the last two decades. This growth, as Evans (2010) suggests, has been particularly prominent in the business and professional worlds where English is often used as a *lingua franca*.

A key argument in Bolton's (2002, 2003) case for HKE is his belief that it fulfils four of the five criteria in Butler's (1997: 106) definition of a new English variety, namely (1) pronunciation, (2) vocabulary, (3) history and (4) literary creativity. Kirkpatrick (2007a) also agrees that HKE meets the first three criteria, but is sceptical about the literary creativity criterion. He further observes that reference works (i.e. the fifth criterion) usually appear after decades of language development in the community. One of the limitations of Butler's criteria is that they do not include the question of local acceptance, which is an indispensable factor to justify the existence of an autonomous variety (Bangbose, 1998). In this regard, Schneider (2007), who also considers the issue of local acceptance, claims that Hong Kong has entered phase three (nativisation) of his Dynamic Model. However, one possible limitation of his account of the evolution of HKE is his overreliance on secondary sources and expert opinion rather than on empirical evidence.

To date, only a handful of studies have sought to examine the local acceptance of HKE. Bolton and Kwok's (1990) landmark study was one of the first to explore Hong Kong people's attitudes towards the HKE accent vis-à-vis NS accents. Using a verbal guise test, the study elicited the responses of 131 undergraduates to audio samples of different accents. Notwithstanding the participants' difficulties in recognising various accents of English (except the HKE accent), it was reported that RP had the highest status followed by the 'Hong Kong bilingual accent' (p.169). One interesting finding was a quite divided attitude between the female (20.2%) and male (43.3%) participants on choosing the 'Hong Kong bilingual accent' as the

teaching model. In a follow-up study (involving 66 secondary students), Luk (1998) also confirmed students' preference for RP over the HKE accent despite their high awareness of the local accent. More recently, Li (2009b) revealed generally negative perceptions of the NNS accent in a sizeable sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students and working adults in Hong Kong. An important finding from this investigation, which employed a questionnaire survey and focus-group interviews, was participants' concern about the local English accent being a 'source of intelligibility problems' (p.108). Despite the efforts in previous research to investigate students' attitudes towards the HKE accent and the choice of adopting it as the pedagogical model, little empirical research has been conducted to capture the views of a more representative sample of secondary school students in Hong Kong, who, in fact, constitute the principal stakeholders.

The study reported in this article sought to examine the attitudes of students from a wide range of secondary schools towards the localised form of English and to account for its degree of acceptability from a sociolinguistic perspective. After presenting the major findings, the paper discusses the implications in terms of the choice of an appropriate pedagogical model in the ELT classroom, materials design, curriculum planning and directions for future attitudinal research.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Objectives**

The investigation reported in the present article forms a part of a more wide-ranging, multifaceted project which seeks to evaluate the appropriateness of adopting a localised pronunciation model in the Hong Kong ELT classroom by exploring stakeholders' attitudes and the sociolinguistic situation in the local context. The project seeks to triangulate data collection methods such as questionnaire surveys, individual and focus-

group interviews, document analysis and ethnographic observations. The present paper reports findings from the first phase of the project, which involved a large-scale questionnaire survey of secondary school students.

The main purpose of the survey was to examine the appropriateness of choosing the endonormative nativised model in the local classroom from the students' perspective. More specifically, it sought to elicit data about students' recognition of and attitudes towards HKE as a new variety of English and thus as a potentially suitable pedagogical model. It also determined students' exposure to spoken English at school and in daily life so that we can make recommendations for future ELT development and directions for research.

### **Research Instrument**

The research instrument, a bilingual questionnaire (English and Chinese), was designed with reference to previous surveys on attitudes and language use (e.g. Bolton & Luke, 1999; Lai, 2005; Pennington & Yue, 1994). The questionnaire elicited information about the frequency with which the participants used English to read and write certain text types and listen and speak in various situations in their leisure time, their views on HKE and other issues relating to spoken English in Hong Kong (see below), their perceptions of the English ability of their family members as well as relevant personal details (e.g. home language, district).

This article is based on the section of the questionnaire which elicited the participants' views on HKE as a variety of English and potential teaching model. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements (15 in all) by circling the appropriate number on a scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 4 ('strongly agree'). As in many other studies of language attitudes in Hong Kong, a four-point Likert scale was adopted to avoid central tendency. The participants' responses to seven of these statements are presented below, viz. (Q1) HKE should be the model for English teaching in Hong Kong; (Q2)

HKE is one of the varieties of English like Indian English, Australian English and Singapore English; (Q3) If I use HKE people will think I am not well educated; (Q4) I try my best not to speak English with a HKE accent; (Q5) I feel uncomfortable when I hear Chinese people speaking to each other in English; (Q6) I like speaking to my Hong Kong friends in English; and (Q7) English is widely spoken in my neighbourhood.

### **Participants**

The questionnaire was completed in class by 531 students aged 15–19 from nine secondary schools and a commercial college between March and May 2010. Around a half of the students (280) were studying in English-medium institutions whereas the remainder were studying either through the medium of Chinese (219) or a combination of Chinese and English (32). The majority of the respondents resided in the New Territories (44.7%), while the remainder lived in Kowloon (39.4%) or on Hong Kong Island (15.5%). The composition of the sample broadly reflects the geographical distribution of the SAR's population as a whole: New Territories (52.1%), Kowloon (29.4%) and Hong Kong Island (18.5%) (Census & Statistics Department, 2006). Also consistent with the local sociolinguistic situation, the overwhelming majority of the students indicated that Cantonese was both their L1 (96.8%) and home language (96.2%). Around two-thirds of the participants indicated that their parents were unable to speak English very well or were unable to do so at all.

Although the sample reflects the geographical distribution of the SAR population, it is not necessarily fully representative given the complex teaching practice in the English-medium and Chinese-medium schools in Hong Kong. It is reasonable to expect that students' opinions towards pronunciation models will be influenced by their learning environment. For instance, students in English-medium schools might be more positive towards English. However, the official medium-of-instruction (MOI) policy in Hong Kong only applies to junior secondary (Form 1-3) students whereas all the

participants in the present study were senior secondary (F.4-7) students. The MOI policy at senior secondary level is entirely governed by the schools individually.

Under the school-based MOI policy in F.4-7, the teaching situation is particularly complex in the nominally Chinese-medium schools. In many cases, students might study some subjects in English (and take the English versions of the subjects in the public examination) while others may study (and take the corresponding version of the public examination) in Chinese. In some cases, certain subjects might even be taught in Cantonese with all the teaching materials in English. As a result, the incorporation of a considerable number of students from the two major types of schools in Hong Kong might provide a general picture of their attitudes. In any case, the present study makes no attempt to compare the attitudes among different groups of students according to MOI background.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings below are divided into two parts: attitudes towards HKE as a potential pedagogical model and the use of spoken English in everyday life.

### **Attitudes towards HKE**

For both the nativised endonormative model and the ELF approach, the acceptance of the local form of English pronunciation is a prerequisite for its adoption and implementation as a model in the classroom. The discussion of participants' attitudes towards HKE is based on the following four statements in Table 1.

#### *The Adoption of HKE as the Teaching Model*

As can be seen in Table 1, the vast majority of the respondents (79.8%)

rejected the idea of adopting HKE in the classroom (Q1, mean 1.84). Indeed, some 40 percent indicated strong disagreement with the statement. These findings largely accord with those reported in previous research (Bolton & Kwok, 1990; Li, 2009b; Luk, 1998). The findings generated by the other statements help to explain this apparent negativity. These relate to (1) students' understanding, recognition and knowledge of other varieties of English, (2) the status of the localised form of English vis-à-vis NS varieties of English and (3) the importance of and exposure to spoken English in students' everyday lives (which will be discussed in more detail in the second half of the article).

**TABLE 1**  
**Attitudes Towards Hong Kong English**

Statements	Strongly disagree (%)	<< (%)	>> (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
Q1. HKE should be the model for English teaching in Hong Kong.	40.4	39.4	15.1	4.9	1.84	.854
Q2. HKE is one of the varieties of English like Indian English, Australian English and Singapore English.	23.6	39.4	28.3	8.7	2.22	.905
Q3. If I use HKE people will think I am not well educated.	11.9	37.7	35.5	14.7	2.53	.885
Q4. I try my best not to speak English with a HKE accent.	7.5	22.8	43.8	25.8	2.88	.881

#### *Recognition of HKE as a Variety*

The responses to Q2 show that around two-thirds (63%) disagreed with the statement that 'HKE is one of the varieties of English like Indian English, Australian English and Singapore English' (mean 2.22). This finding has two

possible explanations: (1) students tend not to accept HKE as a variety of English and (2) students might believe that HKE has fewer claims to be regarded as an autonomous variety of English than Indian English, Australian English and Singapore English. In either case, the adoption of an endonormative nativised model would be premature as it overlooks a key factor in the development of a new variety, i.e. acceptability. Another point to consider is the respondents' understanding of the terms 'HKE' and 'varieties of English' because the participants were secondary school students who presumably have little or no knowledge of world Englishes. As many respondents will have read the Chinese instructions in the bilingual questionnaire, they may have had a different interpretation of the questions.

However, we might continue to question how the notion of 'variety of English' is conceptualised based on students' prior knowledge. To the best of our knowledge, most published teaching materials, as well as ELT curriculum documents in Hong Kong, claim to follow 'Standard' English (which is widely understood to be British and American English), whereas other varieties are excluded because they are judged to be interlanguages. In general ELT practice, if teachers rely only on NS-guided materials, students will have had little exposure to other varieties of English. The notion of 'Indian English' and 'Singapore English' may therefore not be familiar to students, though the students' awareness of diverse varieties of English has not been explored in the present study. Influenced by their teachers' frequent 'corrections' of their Cantonese-influenced pronunciation 'errors', students would gradually be nurtured in the belief that NS Englishes are the only 'correct' varieties of English to learn.

#### *HKE and Education Level*

The relationship between the concept of 'good' or 'correct' English is related to the status of the local form of English. Q3, 'If I use HKE people will think I am not well educated', aimed to determine the association between HKE and a speaker's education level. Quite interestingly, the

respondents' views on this issue were divided. Half of the respondents (50.2%) agreed that using HKE would project an image of low education (mean 2.53). Previous research into the relative status of Hong Kong's three major languages (Cantonese, English and Putonghua) has indicated that English possesses the highest pragmatic value due largely to the flourishing economy in recent decades (e.g. Lai, 2005). In other words, high English proficiency has generally been perceived as a prerequisite for educational and occupational mobility. While most advocates of HKE argue that it fulfils Butler's (1997: 106) first criterion, namely 'a standard and recognisable pattern of pronunciation handed down from one generation to another', this recognition of the local accent could not override the prestigious status of a 'standard' NS accent. If the HKE accent represents low English proficiency, the NS norm would inevitably continue to be the more desirable pedagogical model. However, there is not a consensus among the participants as to whether the use of HKE equates to a low level of English.

The absence of a strong association between HKE and education level may stem from the pronunciation of the participants' teachers. Even if HKE does not accord with 'Standard' English in teaching materials, students might find most of their English teachers, as their role models, are likely to speak with a HKE accent. It may also be the case that teachers who teach content subjects in English have even heavier Cantonese-influenced accents. Although at least two Native English Teachers (NETs) are employed in each school, they play only a minor role in students' acquisition of English as they are generally assigned to oral lessons, which constitute only a small proportion of the lesson time devoted to English. In these circumstances, local teachers remain the main source of exposure to spoken English for students. Another factor that may have influenced the participants' responses is their experience of their peers speaking English during discussions in class. Because of this sole exposure to the Cantonese-influenced pronunciation, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the participants disagreed with the notion that HKE equates to a low level of education.

The above circumstance where local teachers' pronunciation is the

dominant teaching model probably applies in most ELT contexts around the world. For example, although English in Singapore, unlike Hong Kong, is widely used as a lingua franca, it is reasonable to expect that students are to a great extent exposed to the Singapore Standard English (SSE) spoken by their local teachers and the Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), generally known as ‘Singlish’, among their peers and family members (Cavallaro & Ng, 2009). Indeed, the insistence on RP is perhaps also unrealistic in Britain where there is considerable variation in accent across the country (Coupland & Bishop, 2007). In many classrooms, it is quite likely that NS teachers have a regional accent or a variation of RP.

In the view of some WE scholars (e.g. Bamgbose, 1998), as linguistic variation exists within a particular variety in terms of acrolect (the educated variety), mesolect (the semi-educated variety) and basilect (the bazaar variety), it is argued that scholarly attention should be shifted to research on codifying the acrolect. Rather than debating the appropriateness of the nativised model, Bamgbose (1998) argues that the educated variety should be well-described and promoted as the ultimate point of reference in the classroom. In this respect, Kirkpatrick (2007b) recommends codifying the features of the educated Hong Kong English (HKE) pronunciation and, with reference to international intelligibility, establish a more appropriate and attainable set of endonormative linguistic benchmarks for the Hong Kong curriculum (also see Sewell 2009). However, the issue of local acceptance is again one of the key questions that requires further exploration.

#### *Willingness to Speak with a Local Accent*

While NNS teachers’ local pronunciation is likely to be the main input for learners, it is understandable that students aspire to RP or GA rather than HKE simply because, and this perhaps applies to any language learner, they wish to speak ‘standard’ English rather than a ‘substandard’ form of English. More importantly, this desire to acquire ‘standard’ English is likely to be reinforced by the education system as the NS accent is seemingly the ultimate

goal of pronunciation in public examinations. This NS target not only applies to high-stakes public examinations for students in Hong Kong such as the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), but also the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) in which local teachers are penalised for their L1 accent even if it has no effect on intelligibility (Bunton & Tsui, 2002).

This belief that students wish to speak 'standard English' is supported by their generally supportive responses (69.6%) to the statement 'I try my best not to speak English with a HKE accent' (Q4, mean 2.88). As noted above, this prejudice against NNS pronunciation stems partly from the fact that it has never been their learning target in the curriculum and partly from the learners' understandable desire to speak 'good' or 'standard' English. Similar to the findings in the previous section, the participants' reaction is not as strong as that towards the adoption of HKE as a local teaching model. This presumably reflects students' recognition of the reality that mastery of NS pronunciation is virtually impossible as many educated Hongkongers such as teachers and senior government officials, including the current Secretary for Education, have a recognisable HKE accent.

However, the findings are unable to prove (or disapprove) WE and ELF advocates' notion that NNS learners wish to preserve some of the L1 phonological features when they speak English. Indeed, Ferguson (2009) has expressed his concern about learners' attitudinal variation depending on the interactional context; that is, learners may wish to assert their identity, and hence their L1 accent, in NNS-NNS communication but sound like an NS in NNS-NS interactions. In most English-mediated situations at school such as group discussions, it is nevertheless hard to predict whether students prefer to sound like a 'HongKonger' to express solidarity or to imitate the NS pronunciation to demonstrate a sense of superiority when talking to peers or local teachers. On the other hand, we have no evidence to suggest that they tend to speak more like an NS in NS-NNS conversations. Students' only opportunity to practise English with NSs might be limited to their occasional interactions with NETs at school. While it is evident in this study that most

students would prefer to avoid a local accent, further investigations should focus on learners' attitudes depending on different speaking contexts.

This section has examined the participants' attitudes towards the adoption of a localised form of English as the teaching model. Whereas the suggested explanation for the perceived negative responses highlights their limited exposure to and knowledge of other varieties of English, this limited exposure also underlies the issue of the attainability of NS pronunciation. Not only do students have little opportunity to learn RP or GA, but they are also offered little possibility to accept other varieties of English given the narrow scope of the syllabus which emphasises 'Standard' British or American English and excludes other varieties of English. To provide a more comprehensive account of students' exposure to English, the next section reports their views on the use of spoken English in everyday contexts.

### **The Use of Spoken English**

One of the essential criteria for choosing an appropriate pronunciation model is its use in society at large. While the endonormative model may be more suitable for typical ESL countries where English is used for intra-ethnic communication, the ELF approach is beneficial in societies where English is used mainly as an international language (Kirkpatrick, 2007a). This section reports students' views on their use of spoken English in everyday life and compares the results to those reported in the preceding section.

Two points are worth mentioning when considering the participants' use of spoken English in Hong Kong. First, according to the Census and Statistics Department (2006), the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong people speak Cantonese as their L1 and home language. This proportion of population is to a great extent consistent with that of the sample in this study. Second, although written English is more widely used than spoken English in key domains, a recent study reveals that there is a high tendency for spoken English to be used in formal situations in the business world such as meetings, interviews and presentations (Evans, 2010). It is generally perceived that

spoken English is mainly used in workplace situations such as service encounters and business communication. As these situations only apply to working adults, it is worth investigating the use of spoken English from the students' perspective. The following findings reveal the respondents' feelings about the use of English in intra-ethnic spoken communication (Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**English in Intra-Ethnic Spoken Communication**

Statements	Strongly disagree (%)	<< (%)	>> (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
Q5. I feel uncomfortable when I hear Chinese people speaking to each other in English.	29.2	44.9	16.6	9.2	2.06	.909
Q6. I like speaking to my Hong Kong friends in English.	23	52.8	19.6	4.3	2.05	.774
Q7. English is widely spoken in my neighbourhood.	22.6	52.8	21.1	3.4	2.05	.756

*Feelings about English in Intra-ethnic Spoken Communication*

In response to the statement 'I feel uncomfortable when I hear Chinese people speaking to each other in English', just under three-quarters of the participants (74.1%) indicated some degree of disagreement (mean=2.06). This is an interesting finding as the long-established perception that spoken English has a limited role in the Hong Kong community might suggest that Hongkongers would find the use of English among Chinese people rather unusual. Cheung (1984) observed that the use of English in intra-ethnic communication was 'regarded as being in very bad taste and an indication of severance from the Chinese community along with its traditional culture' (p.274). Li (2009a) has also claimed that initiating or maintaining an English-only conversation is 'highly marked' except in the presence of non-Cantonese speakers (p.72) and, furthermore, that English is 'hardly used for

authentic meaning-making purposes among Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers' (p.81).

There are three possible explanations for the participants' responses. First, oral communication in English among Chinese students at school is not as rare as that in everyday life. Both in English classes and in some academic subjects, not only do local teachers teach in English, but students are also expected to answer teachers' questions or discuss with classmates in English. In English lessons, this expectation also applies to primary schools and even in some cases kindergartens. Thus, the use of English among Chinese students and teachers may have become commonplace for many students. Second, the term 'Chinese people' might have a broader implication in that it includes both Hongkongers and mainland Chinese. Having witnessed the closer relationship with mainland Chinese since 1997, some students may have more confidence in communicating with mainlanders in English than in Putonghua. This is somehow a possible consequence of students having more experience of learning English than Putonghua since primary school. Third, it is increasingly common to encounter Hong Kong Chinese who studied or resided for a number of years in English-speaking countries. These returnees often have a relatively low level of Cantonese proficiency and speak English as their L1 or feel more comfortable using English. The participants would also have become accustomed to the regular appearance of 'Chinese faces' who speak native-like English in the media. For these reasons, the participants might not find it particularly unusual hearing Chinese people interacting in English.

#### *The Daily Use of Spoken English among Students*

Q6 and Q7 sought to determine the extent to which the participants used English with their friends (mean=2.05) and the language's visibility in their neighbourhood (2.05). In both cases, only around a quarter of the respondents indicated that they liked speaking to their friends in English (23.9%) or resided in areas where English is widely used (24.5%). The first finding,

together with the fact that over 95 percent of the participants reportedly spoke Cantonese as their L1 and home language, tends to confirm Li's (2009a, 74) claim that English use in intra-ethnic communication is highly marked among local Cantonese speakers. However, this claim is only confirmed in terms of students' routine use of English because of the present survey's focus on students. This limited use of spoken English in young learners' leisure time reinforces the role of pronunciation models at school. On the one hand, the local teachers' L1-influenced pronunciation is the main source of students' exposure to spoken English whereas, on the other hand, the NS pronunciation is emphasised and regarded as the learning goal in the curriculum and ELT listening and speaking materials. As a result, students might be left with little choice but to accept any 'non-standard' accent but to regard them as undesirable. Nevertheless, whether this emphasis on the dictionary-recommended pronunciation (i.e. RP or GA) significantly reflects the use of spoken English when students graduate is another matter as NSs have apparently become the minority in English-mediated communication in international contexts (Seidlhofer, 2009). The key question should thus be: Who are students most likely to encounter after completing their education in Hong Kong: NSs or NNSs?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

This article has examined secondary school students' attitudes towards the HKE pedagogical model and sought to explain the results on the basis of their daily use of and exposure to spoken English in Hong Kong. Given the size and composition of the sample, the findings are reasonably generalisable, and thus offer possible pointers for the choice of an appropriate pronunciation model, the content of the ELT curriculum and teaching materials, and directions for future research.

First, reservations about the localised teaching model are still prominent among students. While this finding seems to accord with previous attitudinal

studies (e.g., Bolton & Kwok, 1990; Li, 2009b; Luk, 1998), it further implies that the adoption of an endonormative model would be premature due to students' reluctance to acknowledge HKE as a legitimate variety of English. However, this lack of acceptance is perhaps less a genuine choice than an unconsciously nurtured outcome of students' sole exposure to spoken English in an educational context where the NS norm is the benchmark for English proficiency

Second, as the majority of students have limited access to authentic English spoken communication (except the NS 'standard' in teaching materials and teachers' local accent as the role model), it is probably more pertinent to shift the attention to how to prepare students for real international communication in terms of accent variation after their graduation. Problems such as the inability to comprehend other NS or NNS accents may easily arise because of a lack of exposure and knowledge in their schooling. In this regard, Jenkins (2006) has good grounds for recommending that the incorporation of pronunciation variation awareness and knowledge of diverse varieties of English into the assessment criteria, curriculum and teaching materials is a significant first step. Attitude change is not easily initiated without increasing the awareness of teachers and students as well as setting an appropriate benchmark in the public examinations. As the 'washback' effect is particularly prominent in many examination-oriented Asian contexts such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the inclusion of elements of pronunciation variation in the examination would probably help to initiate a paradigm shift in education.

Third, whereas the preference for the NS pronunciation seems to be unsurprising in most attitudinal studies, an in-depth exploration of the major reasons is likely to be even more crucial, particularly for those who aspire to change people's deep-rooted perceptions of the NS ideology. Indeed, the factors might vary from context to context. In the case of Hong Kong, one of the reasons might be, as previously suggested, the gap between students' exposure to and awareness of accent variation and real-world communication. However, the findings from the present questionnaire survey provide only a

broad-brush picture of students' use of English in daily spoken communication, notwithstanding its relatively large sample size. As described in the methodology section, the present study is a part of a broader exploration of the issue of acceptance, which also includes other data collection methods such as class observations, interviews and focus groups. More importantly, while most previous attitudinal studies, like the present one, have targeted teachers and students, probably because of convenience, the present project also takes account of the perspectives of other stakeholders such as policy makers, publishers and professionals who contribute to the genuine use and long-term development of English as it is essential if any pedagogical recommendations are to be implemented effectively.

The present study has also highlighted the importance of investigating the issue of acceptance in specific contexts because people's attitudes, as this article suggests, are closely related to the unique sociolinguistic situations in particular societies. Nevertheless, the arguments in favour of the endonormative nativised model and ELF approach are closely based on the high attainability and appropriateness in terms of the linguistic features and, more crucially, sociolinguistic situations such as ESL, EFL and the international context. By matching participants' desires and expectations and social needs for English with a suitable and feasible pronunciation model, it is hoped that students could be better equipped to meet the challenges of communicating in a rapidly globalising world.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This work was supported by a Central Research Grant from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (G-U687).

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