



Contexts, Problems and Solutions in International Communication: Insights for Teaching English as a Lingua Franca

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The globalisation of English in recent decades has focused scholarly attention on the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) where second language English speakers are the overwhelming majority. This emerging field of research has significant implications for English language teaching (ELT) because it reveals the real-life use of English in international communication. Against this background, this study reports on the first-hand experiences of a wide range of English users in Hong Kong through interviews specifically focused on language use contexts, problems and solutions. The findings suggest that although the daily use of English by the interviewed English speakers tended to be context-specific and perhaps individualised according to its occupational nature, many of those interviewed reported that they had encountered similar problems with international communication, including accent variations, telephoning and cultural differences. It was also found that the participants altered their language use when communicating with English speakers with different language and cultural backgrounds and in different situations. This study highlights some important observations and recommendations based on the challenges and the solutions suggested by the people interviewed, with wider implications for the choice of appropriate ELT goals and approaches for contemporary English language education.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, English language teaching, language use and contexts, problems and solutions, Hong Kong

Introduction

One major consequence of the globalisation of English in recent decades is the increasing number of second language (L2) speakers worldwide, who have become the overwhelming majority of English language users (Graddol, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2011). Over the past two decades, the language use of L2 English speakers in international communication has become the focus of attention in the emerging research paradigm of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Much of the early exploratory work on ELF has been informed by corpus projects such as the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) (Seidlhofer, 2001) and the corpus of English as a lingua franca in academic settings (ELFA) (Mauranen, 2003), which investigated the simultaneous spoken interactions of (mainly L2) English speakers in Europe. More recently, ELF research has been extended to a seemingly comparable multilingual context, i.e., Asia, alongside the establishment of the Asian Corpus of English (ACE) (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2016). These corpora, together with other ELF studies, have yielded important descriptive findings regarding how ELF is used by speakers of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, particularly in the areas of phonology (e.g., Jenkins, 2000, 2002), lexis and lexicogrammar (e.g., Cogo & Dewy, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2001) and pragmatics (e.g., Björkman, 2014; House, 2013; Kaur, 2011). Further, many ELF studies have

centred on the spoken discourse in the business (e.g., Evans, 2013; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2010) and academic domains (e.g., Björkman, 2013; Jenkins, 2014) due to the presence of a wide range of ELF speakers.

Given the prevalence of L2 speakers in international communication, a significant implication of ELF research is a shift in the conceptualisation of the changing functions and forms of English in multilingual societies worldwide. This poses immense challenges for traditional ELT theories and practices guided by L1-based standards (e.g., British/American English) because L1 speakers are no longer relevant to most international communication (Seidlhofer, 2001). The ELF paradigm therefore points to the need for a pedagogical approach that takes account of the language use and cultural identities of L2 speakers. Proponents of the so-called 'English as a lingua franca' approach argue that successful local multilingual speakers (e.g., ELT teachers) should serve as learning targets (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Central to this lingua franca approach has been an ideology of linguistic pluricentricity that promotes one's cultural identity, empowers L2 English learners/users, raises language/cultural awareness, maintains international intelligibility, and ensures communication effectiveness (see Baker, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2007). In this regard, Canagarajah (2013) suggests that English proficiency should focus on 'language awareness rather than grammatical correctness in a single variety', 'strategies of negotiation rather than mastery of product-orientated rules' and 'pragmatics rather than linguistic competence' (p. 8).

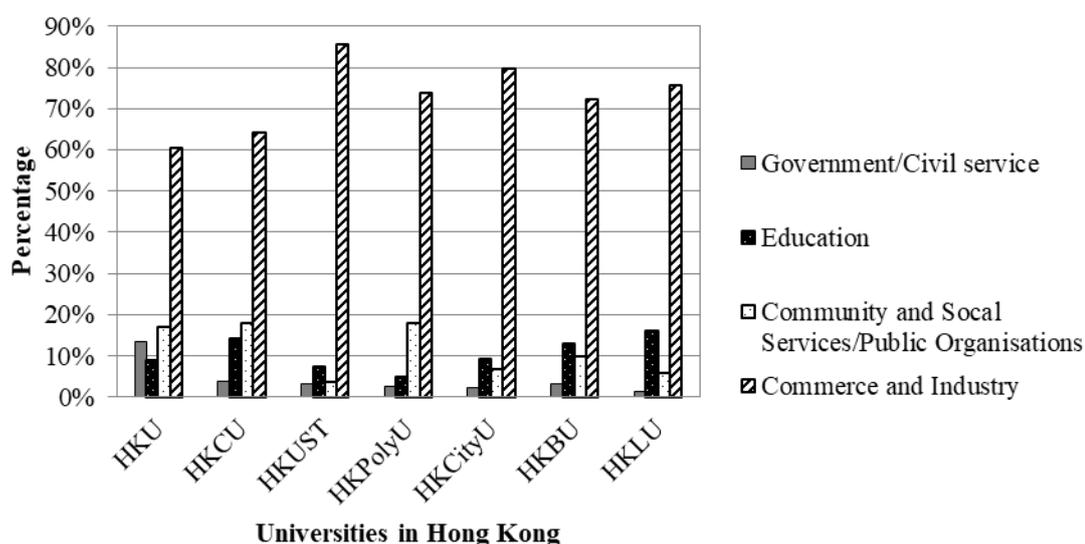
Although the key advantage of the ELF approach is its high degree of relevance to real-life language use in international settings, many studies in this area have been confined to the European context (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Mauranen, 2003; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2001). Only a few recent studies have investigated the use of ELF in other regions such as Southeast Asia (Fang, Hu & Jennifer, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Sung, 2016). This lack of empirical data regarding the functions and use of ELF in the wider social context and its comparability to typical ELF settings (e.g., Europe) somehow questions the applicability of the lingua franca approach in ELT classrooms worldwide. For instance, even though it has been argued that raising students' and teachers' language awareness of real-life English communication is a crucial first step to initiating a paradigm shift in ELT (Jenkins, 2006), the authentic use of English in a specific sociolinguistic setting might require substantial investigation before such real-life contexts can be reflected in the classroom. As Nickerson (2013) argues, there is a 'pressing need to understand much more about the nature of ELF communication and what leads both to success and to failure in an ELF interaction' (p. 451) (see also Graddol, 2006). It is therefore the purpose of this study to investigate the use of English by the key stakeholders (i.e., professionals) in Hong Kong, where English is used as an international language. Unlike many early ELF studies that draw on corpus data, this study seeks to identify contexts, problems and solutions in international communication based on the first-hand experience of the English users from a sociolinguistic perspective. The ultimate objective of this study is to provide pedagogical recommendations for English language education from an ELF perspective.

Background of the Study

Like many former British colonies (e.g., Singapore, India), the use of English in Hong Kong can be traced back to its colonial period, well before the era of globalisation, in which English was the key medium of written communication in the domains of government, the legislature, the judiciary and education (Evans, 2010). Owing to its advantageous geographical location and its role as a British trading port, Hong Kong's economy had been connected to global networks involving both a regional (i.e., East and Southeast Asia) and an international dimension (e.g., the presence of firms from countries such as Britain, the US, France, Germany) (Evans, 2013). As a result, English was well-established as a valuable asset in colonial Hong Kong because it enabled people to access well-paid and stable civil service and white collar positions (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007), thereby accelerating their upward social mobility (Evans, 2011). Since Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, despite the increasingly important role of Putonghua (i.e., the national language of China), research has shown that (spoken)

English remains an important communicative tool in the workplace and tertiary education, especially in formal situations, including meetings, interviews, presentations, seminars and conferences (Evans, 2010, 2011, 2013). These English-speaking situations apparently resemble those found in ELF contexts (see VOICE, 2016).

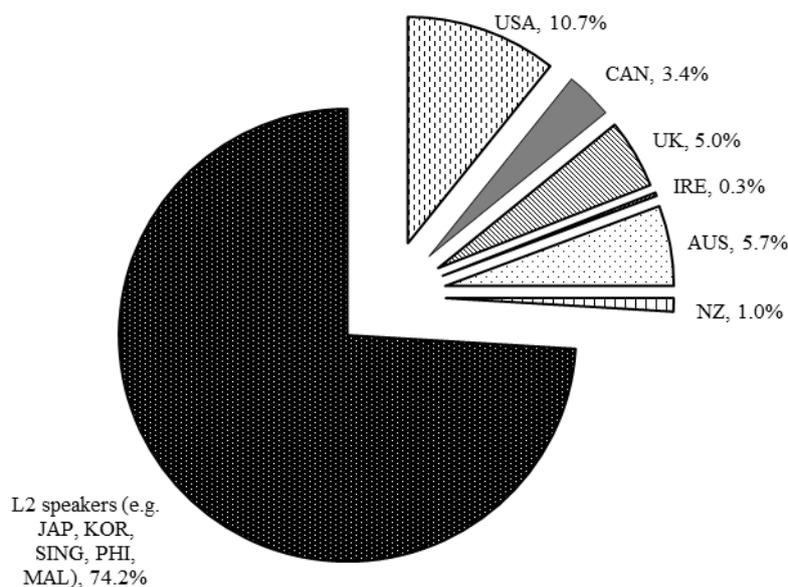
Recent government census data have also provided additional information about the use of English as an international language in the Hong Kong workplace. First, the services sector has been the pillar of Hong Kong's economy, contributing to over 90% of its GDP and about 88% of its total employment (Hong Kong Government, 2015). Within the services sector, the four key industries in Hong Kong include trading and logistics (accounting for 23.9% of GDP in 2013), financial services (16.5%), professional and production services (12.4%) and tourism (5%) (Census and Statistics Department, 2015), all of which might involve differing degrees of cross-country collaboration (see also Evans, 2013). These data generally accord with the findings of graduate employment surveys from Hong Kong's major universities in that most undergraduates (over 60%) entered the commercial and industrial sectors following their graduations in 2014 (Figure 1).



Sources. 2014 Graduate employment survey in seven major universities¹

Figure 1. Graduate employment in Hong Kong by sector (2014).

Second, census data have also revealed the presence of a considerable number of foreign regional headquarters (1401 in 2015) and offices (2397) in Hong Kong, implying the potential use of English in these companies (Census and Statistics Department, 2015). According to Evans (2013), Hong Kong's attractiveness for foreign companies can be attributed to its 'advanced transport and communications infrastructure, independent judiciary, low and simple tax regime, fully convertible and stable currency, and quality professional services' (p. 232). Third, as depicted in Figure 2, L2 speakers (e.g., Japanese, Korean and Singaporean) account for 74.2% of Hong Kong's non-Chinese visitors, and English would inevitably be their lingua franca because they do not share the mother tongue of most Hong Kong people. It has also been reported that around one quarter of non-Chinese visitors come from Anglophone countries (25.8%) such as the United States (10.7%), Australia (5.7%), Britain (5.0%) and Canada (3.4%). Most of these non-Chinese-speaking visitors come to Hong Kong for vacations, business meetings or to visit friends or relatives (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2014). While the above statistical information points to the use of ELF in the Hong Kong context, there also appear to be some L1 English speakers in Hong Kong, which may signal that the direct application of Europe-based ELF findings to Hong Kong might not be appropriate. It is therefore crucial to specifically study Hong Kong's local English-speaking situation.



Source. Hong Kong Tourism Board (2014)

Figure 2. Non-Chinese² visitors to Hong Kong in 2014.

To date, research into the use of English in Hong Kong and the workplace discourse has tended to fall under the discipline of English used for a specific purpose such as business communication. Some scholars have investigated written discourse such as tax computation letters (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006), audit reports (Flowerdew & Wan, 2010) and business emails (Evans, 2014). Others have focused on particular professions, including merchandising (Li & Mead, 2000), aviation (Bilbow, 2002), banking (Chew, 2005) and surveying (Cheng & Mok, 2008). However, there has been little discussion of the implications for English language teaching in Hong Kong, particularly from the ELF perspective, drawn from successful (and also unsuccessful) international, intercultural spoken interactions (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). Indeed, investigations into English use in the workplace are essential not only for English for specific purpose, but also general English language education, because international communication in the professional domains (and tertiary education) is the major reason English is used in Hong Kong and most English-speaking contexts worldwide. In this regard, Evans (2013) conducted one of the few large-scale studies in Hong Kong to reveal the nature and extent of business ELF as compared with other written (Chinese) and spoken codes (Cantonese, Putonghua) (see also Evans, 2010). On the basis of the reported English-speaking contexts and language choices, this study investigates the professionals' use of English, along with the challenges and solutions inherent in international communication. As described below, this study collected both quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (interview) data, and this paper specifically focuses on the qualitative findings, revealing detailed information about the English-language situation in Hong Kong.

Method

Research Design

The investigation reported in this paper forms a part of a more wide-ranging, multifaceted project, which sought to investigate the experience and perceptions of English use and English varieties among the major English users in Hong Kong and thus explore their implications for teaching English as an

international language. The project sought to triangulate both quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (interview) research methods. The first phase of the study, i.e., the quantitative questionnaire, was previously reported in Chan (2017), which provided a broad-brush picture of the daily English-speaking conditions and perceptions among English language users. One important finding from the survey was that these professionals were exposed to various degrees of L1 and L2 English in the workplace, signalling a highly individualised English-speaking experience associated with their occupations. In addition, the survey revealed that the participants experienced different levels of difficulty understanding both L1 and L2 English accents.

This article reports findings from the second phase of the project, which involved face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with the professionals. As the questionnaire survey only provided an overview of the participants' English use, the main purpose of the interviews was to examine individuals' English use with specific foci on the English-speaking contexts, speaker identities, and the problems and solutions inherent to international communication, because these have previously been the key aspects of ELF research. It is expected that the findings are of significant implications for ELT from an ELF perspective.

Instruments

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate each participant's distinct language experience in detail. An interview guide was prepared in advance, which focused on the participants' daily use of English, English-using context, interlocutor identities, and problems and solutions associated with English language communication (see Appendix A). A pilot interview was carried out to ensure that 'the questions elicit sufficiently rich data and do not dominate the flow of the conversation' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 137). Most of the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the mother tongue of the participants, except for one interview (conducted in English), where the participant was bilingual in English and Cantonese. An advantage of interviewing in the participants' mother tongue is that it can avoid the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpretation due to language differences (Patton, 2015, p. 392-393). All of the interviews were audio-recorded using a professional Memo 703 digital voice recorder (and were saved as HP-128Kps MP3 files), yielding a total of 18 hours 27 min 21s. Note taking also took place during the interviewing process, as it stimulated thinking and probing for more useful information. Any reflections were written immediately after the interview (Merriam, 2009, p. 107).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was adopted to select information-rich cases to study in depth (Patton, 2015). Among the various purposeful sampling strategies, maximum variation sampling was applied to this study, as it identified and sought out those who represented the widest possible range of characteristics of interest (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). To investigate the issue from multiple perspectives, the 18 carefully selected English language users (Male 9; Female 9) came from a wide range of occupational domains³ and were drawn from different levels from within their occupations (junior or middle 13; senior or managerial 5). The key selection criterion was that they had constant exposure to English in their workplace and/or daily life. In the longer interviews, the participants' English learning experience was discussed, for example at their universities, institutes, and/or from the relevant English training they had undertaken. Given their rich experience of English use and work in the company, the senior staff were also invited to share their observations of the challenges facing their younger colleagues and (if any) the corresponding solutions.

Data Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim or translated into English by the researcher who conducted the interview and who understood the context of the recording. The researcher also maintained contact with the participants for cases where there were areas needing clarification for the transcriptions. Rudimentary analysis was carried out parallel to the process of collecting data. This gave a preliminary impression of the context and possibly helped to improve the forthcoming interviews (Merriam, 2009). The analytical and interpretative process was primarily inductive and comparative. More specifically, the initial and second-level coding involved reading and annotating the interview transcripts, leading to the formation of categories and subcategories based on recurring patterns perceived in the participant response data (Dörnyei, 2007). Some of these categories and subcategories were quantified and cross-referenced⁴.

Finding and Discussion

The interviews with the professionals sought to explore their everyday authentic English-using experience. Specific attention was given to the English speakers' challenges and solutions in terms of international communication, because these were particularly crucial to inferring any pedagogical recommendations (Graddol, 2006). Table 1 summarises the categories of spoken English they used mainly based on their original word choices. Although English is hardly the language for intra-ethnic communication in Hong Kong, because most residents speak Cantonese as their first language, many professionals did indicate that they spoke English frequently in the workplace and sometimes during their leisure time. Furthermore, whereas most ELF research has been based on spoken interactions in L2-speaker-dominating contexts, the interview findings suggest that the professionals encountered both L1 and L2 speakers depending on the nature of their company (see also the questionnaire findings, Chan, 2017). This is probably due to Hong Kong's status as an international city since the colonial period, and more crucially, due to the presence of headquarters and offices of companies based in the traditionally strong economic markets (e.g., North America, Britain) (Evans 2013). Some of the perceived origins of the interlocutors included Britain (number of interviewees mentioning it: 8), India/Pakistan (8), Australia (4), Japan (4), Hong Kong (4), Canada (3), Singapore (3), the Philippines (3), mainland China (3) and Taiwan (3). The professionals were asked to describe any challenges they faced with English communication and their corresponding solutions in specific situations and with different interlocutors. The following sections discuss the five major themes emerging from the interview data, namely, English proficiency and self-confidence, accent variation, telephoning, cultural differences and situational differences in language choice (Table 2). Given the complex nature of English use, these themes tended to be interrelated in the interviews, as the professionals sometimes encountered a combination of various problems in a single instance.

TABLE 1
Use of Spoken English by Interviewees

| Workplace | Number* | Leisure time | Number* |
|---|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| Face-to-face interaction with customers | 9 | Talking with domestic helpers | 3 |
| Telephoning | 8 | Talking with family members/relatives | 2 |
| Face-to-face interactions with colleagues or bosses | 7 | Casual chats with friends | 1 |
| Video conferences | 5 | Talking to foreigners on the street | 1 |
| Interviews | 5 | Travelling | 1 |
| Presentations | 4 | Computer games | 1 |
| Meetings | 3 | | |
| Seminars/conferences | 3 | | |
| Casual chats with colleagues | 2 | | |
| (Conducting) questionnaire survey | 1 | | |

*Number of interviewees who mentioned the category of language use

TABLE 2
Major Themes in Interviews with Professionals

| Theme | Number* |
|--|---------|
| English proficiency and self-confidence | 12 |
| Accent variation | 12 |
| Telephoning | 8 |
| Cultural differences | 4 |
| Situational differences in language choice | 7 |

*Number of interviews in which specific themes appeared

English Proficiency and Self-confidence

Initially when the professionals were asked to discuss their difficulties with English language communication, many of them reported they were relatively weak in speaking and listening, probably due to the pedagogical foci on ‘grammar’ and ‘textbook English’ (PF7) in their previous English learning experience. Many professionals’ linguistic difficulties in spoken English tended to be associated with their knowledge of ‘vocabulary’, ‘English expressions’, ‘styles and formality’ rather than ‘grammar’ (PF1, PM2, PM3, PF7, PM15). In particular, some professionals found it more difficult to converse casually (e.g., ‘socialise’ or ‘speak English naturally’ (PF1)) than to speak formally in English (e.g., ‘meeting’ (PF1), ‘presentation’ (PM2)) because they had limited opportunities to speak English in their daily lives, whereas their prior language training often focused on formal or academic English. For example:

PF1: I think it is not the most difficult to speak English in the meetings but in daily conversation such as in the pantry. This is most difficult because you are not accustomed to using this kind of routine, daily-life English for communication [...] Because when you were learning English at school in the past, you were only taught some formal English such as how to ask a question in a complete sentence and answer in a complete sentence. Also you may lack something (vocabulary) you may see in your daily life.

PM14 pointed out that the degree of difficulty in understanding English speech depended on the interlocutors’ English proficiency, and stressed that ‘fluency’ and using the ‘right terms’ were the most important aspects of spoken English. The following two excerpts recorded how PM14 evaluated English spoken by people in Switzerland and Italy, respectively, when he visited their dentistry hospital:

PM14 (talking about the Swiss): It (their English) can be understood. English is the lingua franca. That’s the only way to communicate. However, the English proficiency of older people was lower. But generally speaking, their English standard was quite

high.

PM14 (talking about the Italians): Very often, when you asked them in English, they replied to you in Italian. So they didn't really speak English. Their English proficiency was low but you could still understand.

As senior personnel in an international investment company where the boss was an L1 English speaker, PF4 observed that the new employees were 'afraid of speaking English' and they thought that 'the shorter (they speak) the better' while trying to 'hide their weakness by avoiding talking to the boss'. Nevertheless, she noted that her colleagues' English proficiency 'gradually improved' after they immersed themselves in the English-speaking environment of the company and accumulated experience (PF4, also PF11, PF12). PF11 (senior staff member in an airline company) added that correct grammar (e.g., 'tenses') was not very important in international communication 'if the aim was only to achieve the purpose of communication' and her L1 colleagues would not 'criticise' her for 'using wrong words' as long as she could 'communicate and express meanings'. She shared that she would accommodate individuals whose English proficiency was relatively low, which is a common practice in ELF interaction (Seidlhofer, 2011). Other strategies reported by the professionals when they encountered English speakers with lower English proficiency included 'drawing', 'writing down key words', 'speaking more slowly' and 'repeating' (PM3, PF7, PF12, PF16).

Communication problems also stemmed from Hong Kong people's low English proficiency and their lack of confidence in speaking (PF4, PM5, PF12, PM15, PF16). Comparing the spoken English of the locally and overseas educated employees in her company, PF12 (manager of the marketing department) commented that the former 'were not active enough', 'were a bit afraid of speaking English', 'often hesitated', 'had a low English proficiency' and 'spoke English mechanically' (i.e., 'just like reciting sentences') (also PF16: 'lack of confidence' and 'insufficient vocabulary'), while the latter 'were more confident', 'had a higher English proficiency' and 'spoke English more fluently'. Therefore, as an interviewer of candidates for employment in her department, she acknowledged the advantage these overseas graduates had for meeting Western customers because they 'were accustomed to their way of socialising' and 'could more easily get along with them'. The local counterparts were considered to be 'relatively shy'. Nonetheless, she did observe that her colleagues gradually overcame communication problems by accumulating experience, regardless of whether the interlocutors were L1 or L2 speakers.

Accent Variation

The most salient theme in the interviews was the issue of L2 accents (e.g., Indian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Filipino, African, Japanese) being difficult to understand in English communication (PF1, PM3, PF4, PM5, PF7, PM9, PF11, PF12, PM14, PM15, PF16). While the Indian accent (e.g., PF4, PM5, PF16) was commonly reported to be problematic, the participants had different opinions of some of the other accents (e.g., the Singaporean and Taiwanese accents). A considerable number of the participants commented that the spoken English or pronunciation of people from Hong Kong was less of a problem in international communication (e.g., PM2, PM3, PF11, PF12) than grammar and vocabulary were (e.g., 'phrases, sentences and structures')⁵.

Based on the interviewees' explanations, the inability to understand some L2 accents was associated with the speakers' 'not very accurate English' (e.g., PM3, PF11), rapid speaking rate (e.g., PF16) and the listeners' prior exposure to the corresponding varieties of L2 English (e.g., PM5/PF16: Indian accent; PM15: Japanese accent; PM3: Singaporean accent). Nevertheless, some of the participants stated that they had gradually overcome this through frequent exposure to the corresponding accents (PM3, PM5, PM15, PF16). After working in an Indian company for years, for example, PM5 could specifically pinpoint some of the features of Indian English pronunciation:

PM5 (diamond seller): The most important thing is that the Indian do have the aspirated sounds. They will change all the aspirated sounds into 'Table' (non-aspirated 't'). Or 'coffee and tea' is pronounced as 'go-ee and dea'. That is, 't' is changed to 'd', something like that.

According to PM3 (civil servant), communication problems did not necessarily occur only during conversations with L2 speakers, but sometimes when conversing with L1 speakers (e.g., British, Australian), especially when they 'spoke English too fast' and did not 'accommodate the others' in their speech. In such a scenario, PM3 suggested that he needed to 'ask for repetition', 'check the dictionary' and 'write to communicate' or, if everything else failed, to 'ask someone for help'. As a manager in a multinational company, PF12 described the challenges facing both herself and her colleagues when talking with a wide range of ELF speakers (e.g., from Britain, the US, Middle East, Asia and Australia). Comparing the accents of the various English varieties she and her colleagues encountered, she noted that not only were L2 accents sometimes found to be problematic, but some varieties of L1 accents, such as Australian (e.g., 'data' in the Australian accent) and Scottish accents (with 'a very strong Gaelic accent'), were reported to be even more difficult to understand. On some occasions she experienced difficulty understanding some 'non-standard' British English spoken by the 'younger generations' as 'they tended to "have eaten some sounds" and "mix the words together"'. This perhaps indicates that L1 accents, other than the textbook ones, might equally cause intelligibility problems in ELF interactions. In contrast, P12 suggested that 'Singaporean English was quite easy to understand' because 'it is in fact quite like the Chinese's English' (also PM5). This experienced professional stated that her customers from L2 countries 'tended to show tolerance with each other and 'use whatever methods' to communicate 'as English is not their native language'. Alternatively, when communicating with L1 speakers, she suggested that she would be more conscious of using appropriate English (e.g., 'choice of vocabulary', 'slang') because, in her experience, her British colleagues 'made jokes' of her use of language.

Conversely, PF16 suggested she 'felt more comfortable' talking with L1 speakers because they were eager to 'slow down their rate of speech when talking to L2 speakers' (also PF12). Likewise, both PF4 and PM5 acknowledged that there was a tendency for L1 speakers to accommodate them in L1-L2 communication by using 'simpler English' or 'more general terms' and 'avoiding lengthy descriptions' (PF4, PM5). PF4 suggested that communicating with an L1 speaker is relatively easy because they ask for clarification, whereas L2 speakers might choose to 'let it pass' without explicitly sorting out the problem, if any (cf. Rogerson-Revell, 2010). These findings have pointed to the importance of mutual accommodation and respect in international communication, regardless of the speakers' linguistic background.

Telephoning

A considerable number of the professionals claimed that they encountered difficulties in telephoning, especially when it also involved another L2 speaker (PF4, PM5, PF8, PF11, PF12, PF16, PM17). In this regard, PM5 explained the reasons for problems with telephone communication, including the absence of visual cues (e.g., the speakers' facial expressions, objects for discussion) and the voice quality from the telephone (also PF16):

PM5: First, you really have to follow the grammar, as you can't imagine what they want to say based on their facial expression or body language. Second, it is the environment. For example, you ask your boss to go to the showroom where, as I sell diamonds, there is a diamond. Your boss will begin to be attuned to it. All the terms and knowledge about diamonds would begin to appear in his/her mind [...] Third, the most important thing is that there is disturbance on phone. It would be relatively unclear.

PM5 further detailed the different communication skills he had adopted to communicate with L1 and L2 speakers respectively. Particularly with regard to the latter, he suggested that he might need to use simpler expressions, and grammatical correctness might become less important:

PM5: If one person is an L1 speaker and the other is not, their communication on the phone would be better because the L1 speaker can lead the discussion in English [...] If both are not native speakers, what is the solution? The simplest way is to get rid of the unnecessary grammar. For example, 'I want to watch a movie with you tonight'. In an exaggerating way, s/he can simply say it as 'you', 'me', 'movie', 'tonight'. This is clear enough.

Other suggested solutions to overcome challenges with telephone conversations involved the use of new technologies such as Skype to enable face-to-face communication (PF4) and WhatsApp to 'take a photo of a receipt and WhatsApp to the boss' to facilitate discussion (PM5). PF12 reported that face-to-face communication and video conferencing were easier than telephoning due to the presence of visual cues such as 'body language' and facial expressions (e.g., 'the shape of the speaker's mouth') that the listeners could refer to (also PF16). Further, to cope with communication problems during phone conversations, she recommended that the Hong Kong speaker undertake some psychological preparation regarding the nationality of the interlocutors. In addition, she suggested that strategies such as repetition, asking for clarification, speaking more slowly and writing were helpful.

PF12: In fact, if I know where they come from, I would have already known that it might be difficult for them to make me understand. [...] Even if the Middle East people have repeated many times, they won't be unhappy or angry. Maybe they already understand that it is difficult for us to communicate. However, finally we would also send emails for safety reasons, to make sure something when doing business.

Cultural Differences

Another frequently addressed issue is the differing cultural backgrounds among ELF speakers, which often magnify communication problems caused by the interlocutors' language proficiency and variation in English, or by telephoning (PF4, PM5, PF8, PF11, PF12, PF16, PM17). One detailed case was reported by PF16, who encountered both cultural and linguistic problems in the marketing field when she needed to communicate with foreigners from many different countries on business trips. She complained that although some of her clients spoke English 'very fluently' and/or 'had a relatively high education level', they did not realise that their L2 linguistic features might have been problematic to her. She lamented that it was indeed a matter of respect more than their language proficiency, although the latter was also deemed to be important (especially vocabulary):

PF16: In fact, it depends on whether the person knows how to respect you. So far, among the people I have encountered, even if their English was really bad, they would use whatever ways such as speaking more slowly, drawing and using facial expressions to help you understand if they respected you. The Indian client spoke very fluently. The reason why I found it so difficult to understand was that s/he didn't care about you but just finished what s/he wanted to say.

According to PF12's rich work experience and observations in a multinational company, the employees were quite aware of the cultural differences among people of differing nationalities. For instance, she suggested that she could 'say more jokes in front of the British' but she 'didn't quite dare to say many jokes in front of the Asians who are duller' (PF12). Some other cultural issues she mentioned, however,

were not directly related to the use of language. For example:

PF12: Some customers like bringing their business cards but some do not. [...] Some like shaking hands but some don't. For example, we won't send a female colleague to meet a Middle East customer. We certainly would send a male. [...] Don't talk about religious issues with any customers, especially with the Middle East customers. That's too sensitive.

She added that 'whenever you visit a country, you need to know about their cultural background and taboos so that you won't be offensive' or 'feel embarrassed'. Especially when she met Japanese clients, she suggested that communication problems were even more serious due to their 'poor English' and 'very difficult business culture'.

Situational Differences in Language Choice

Considering the interlocutors' identity, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds, some professionals showed their diverse language strategies and patterns for catering to others' communication needs (PF1, PM2, PF8, PF10, PF11). For instance, cultural (and pragmatic) problems were emphasised by PF11, who had previously worked for two airline companies where she had frequently encountered L1 speakers internally but L2 speakers externally. The following two excerpts are from her recorded comments regarding her experience and interactions with these two types of speakers:

PF11 (communicating with her Australian/US bosses): As we have a different nationality, there might be some cultural issues. For example, you might not have approached them or asked them for something in the right time. There might also be difficulties when explaining the project to them and asking them to cooperate. It might also be because of language problems.

PF11 (communicating with colleagues from Southeast Asia, e.g. Thailand, the Philippines): Usually, there would be problems for the new (overseas) colleagues. The new one wouldn't understand even if you have written, spoken or explained to them what you wanted. They completely didn't get what you wanted. I didn't know if it's the problem with the project or the use of language.

Other participants suggested that their different attitudes towards language choice were based on the interlocutors' L1 or L2 identity. As a marketing executive, PF10 claimed that she would alter her English pronunciation with different interlocutors:

PF10: You will sometimes speak with L1 speakers with a different intonation or rhythm because you would want to sound like an L1 speaker. However, when you are facing an L2 speaker, it highly depends on who the interlocutor is. For example, my manager doesn't like Hong Kong people sounding like an L1 speaker. S/he thinks that it is a kind of showing off because s/he is not that good at English.

Similarly, PF8 reported that she was more concerned with linguistic correctness (e.g., tenses) and choice of vocabulary when communicating with her British boss because she wished to project a more 'professional' image. As for her communication with other L2 speakers, she suggested that she also wanted to create a better impression to new acquaintances by speaking more like a Briton, but might gradually 'relax' later on. In this sense, her differing ways of speaking English seemed to be a pragmatic issue, where the power differences between interlocutors and social relationships are decisive factors

(similar views also shared by PM2):

PF8: When I talk with my boss who is an L1 speaker, he sometimes will use some more professional terms. You may not be able to understand his meaning. You also want to modify your spoken English to one that can be comparable to him, though it is not possible. [...] when I am talking to my colleagues in Hong Kong, we just speak English normally using simple English as long as we both understand. [...] When talking with L2 speakers, you would want to give a better impression to the other at the first place [...] We first communicated in this way and gradually you could relax. We accommodated each other.

On the contrary, PF1 tended to care less about grammar and vocabulary when conversing with L1 speakers because she assumed that they could understand her. Based on her previous experience communicating with some Japanese people, she pointed out that language mistakes (including those she claimed were 'HK-like English') might cause greater problems in L2-L2 interactions:

PF1: When you are talking to L1 speakers, I won't care about the grammar or vocabulary so much because I think they would be able to understand, though I would also try my best not to make mistakes. Rephrasing is only used when I need to express some very complicated concepts. [...] I remember that when I was talking to the L2 speakers who are Japanese or so, some of the mistakes we made were based on our own (first) language.

Whether people paid attention to linguistic correctness also depended on the formality of the English-speaking situation and the degree of social pressure. For example, PM2 claimed that he was 'frightened' that he might 'make mistakes in front of the boss'. Although PF1 stated that she 'would not have much psychological pressure when she was speaking with a tourist asking questions', interestingly she suggested that pressure might be exerted on her if she 'met an L1 speaker on the street while having a friend' beside her⁶.

As a local bilingual professional whose first language was English, PM13 commented on the intelligibility of English spoken by the Hong Kong people he encountered. In his experience, the HKE accent, rather than grammatical correctness, tended to be the major source of problems, especially in telephone conversations. His experience from an inner circle speakers' perspective was contrary to PM2, who worried about making grammatical mistakes that might cause communication problems with L1 speakers:

PM13: I do have problems because there've been many situations where I've had to speak to a person with a HKE accent and it can be as worse as not being able to understand 60% of what they have said. [...] I think accent plays a very strong role because even if what they've said is grammatically incorrect, I think if you ask an L1 speaker to say what they've said about that sentence, I would be able to make sense of it so to say.

Interestingly, even though this bilingual professional was able to speak and understand Cantonese, he did not think that it helped him understand English spoken by Hong Kong people whose mother tongue was also Cantonese because 'the way they pronounce the words doesn't sound like Cantonese'. In his own experience communicating with Hong Kong people, he indicated that he would not have altered his way of speaking English to accommodate the L2 interlocutors. This perhaps reflected his lack of awareness regarding mutual accommodation in ELF communication (see Jenkins, 2000).

Conclusion and Implications

Through semi-structured interviews with local professionals from a wide range of occupational backgrounds and different rankings in their companies, this study has recorded English-using situations, problems and solutions experienced in international communications in Hong Kong. In terms of their use of English, the findings were generally in accord with previous studies (e.g., Evans, 2011), in that spoken English was often used among Hong Kong professionals in their workplace and sometimes in their leisure time. Some of the major discoveries related to their difficulties with English communication in their daily workplace situations are listed below.

- Some Hong Kong people were relatively weak in listening, and particularly in speaking skills due to the insufficient training they received at school/university. In turn, they might lack confidence in speaking English.
- Accent variation was a major source of communication problems, although it depended on the specific type of accent (e.g., Indian). The HKE pronunciation, however, tended not to cause intelligibility problems.
- Cultural differences caused communication problems, especially for people with a particular ethnicity (e.g., Middle East).
- Communication over the telephone was more difficult than face-to-face interactions.
- Communication problems occurred in both L1-L2 and L2-L2 interactions.

The sophisticated language used in real-life international communication has thereby confirmed Canagarajah's (2013) suggestion that language goals in ELT be redefined. Language proficiency aligned with rigid L1 norms can no longer satisfy the language requirements of a learners' future English communications, which are full of possibilities and uncertainties. In this regard, contemporary ELT curricula should reflect the dynamic or emergent nature of English by incorporating the relevant knowledge and awareness of language use in local and international contexts, especially if students, or even teachers, have limited experience with English use and exposure to variations in language during international communication (see Baker, 2015; Kankaanranta & Plankenn, 2010). Further, the highly contextualised use of language (e.g., purposes, interlocutor identities, linguistic choices) underscores the importance of focusing on communication and accommodation skills in ELT, rather than linguistic correctness (Jenkins, Dewey, & Cogo, 2011).

Although communicative competence has apparently been promoted in the latest developments to the communicative language teaching approach, namely, task-based language teaching (TBLT), Seidlhofer (2011) argues that the tasks in TBLT are not designed to develop the communicative proficiency required for ELF communication, but to conform to L1 norms. Indeed, recent research has shown that the ELT curricula and textbooks are still conceptually guided by Anglophone-centric L1 standards (i.e., American and British English), as revealed in their assessment criteria, pedagogical foci and choice of English-speaking contexts and English accents in the tasks (Bunton & Tsui, 2002; Chan, 2014; Kopperoinen, 2011). Even though many commercial textbooks claim that the communicative approach has been adopted to promote 'meaning making' in language use rather than emphasising 'language form' (see Ellis, 2003), their task design tends to overlook the authentic use of language in real-life English communication. For example, as revealed in Chan's (2013b) analysis of Hong Kong secondary textbooks, the task designs tend not to be based on a detailed needs analysis of local language use, which, according to Long (2015), is the most pertinent initial step for developing TBLT syllabi and instructional materials.

In this regard, the present study may provide the necessary needs analysis of the local language use for modifying the localised communicative (or TBLT) syllabi and teaching materials so as to better prepare learners for international communication by adopting an ELF perspective and a local perspective. First, the value of investigating local language needs lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between the global and local findings, which could subsequently contribute to the development of globally and locally relevant

ELT curricula and teaching materials. While many of the language uses and challenges reported in this study are in alignment with those in typical ELF settings in the Europe-based studies, some others are more specific to the local Hong Kong or Asian contexts. For instance, an important discovery in this study is that local professionals were exposed to diverse L1 and L2 accents depending on the nature of their occupations and they encountered problems in both L1-L2 and L2-L2 interactions (see also Chan, 2017). From a pedagogical perspective, if ELT seeks to reflect the sociolinguistic reality of Hong Kong, a complete shift to an ELF approach based on the L2-dominant empirical findings is not entirely appropriate due to the high possibility that both L1-L2 and L2-L2 English will be used in the workplace. Nevertheless, as the professionals indicated, the challenges they faced occurred more frequently in ELF communication than in L1-L2 communication, and based on their working experience, the incorporation of some elements of the ELF approach into ELT was seemingly necessary.

Second, the localised ELT curricula and instructional materials should take account of the corresponding language-use contexts, speaker identities, varieties of English, and patterns of language use as shown in linguistic and sociolinguistic studies. That is, the communicative tasks should be designed to simulate or model communicative functions in (semi-) authentic situations. For Hong Kong, these situations are likely to correspond to business and academic discourses (see Table 1), featuring language patterns of L1, local and other L2 speakers. Although our findings suggest that difficulty in understanding L2 accents can gradually be resolved by the listeners' accumulated experience, the inclusion of these accents and speakers from different cultures in a relevant context may not only accelerate this process, but it may also raise students' awareness of authentic language use and promote a pluricentric view of both language and culture in the era of globalisation (Canagarajah, 2013).

Third, the ELT curriculum and assessment criteria should shift from adhering to NS linguistic forms to regarding communicative proficiency for international communication as the learners' ultimate target. In accordance with this study, this proficiency should enable learners to cope with the possibilities and challenges encountered in diverse, complex sociolinguistic settings (e.g., accent variation, telephoning, and cultural differences), where a wide range of L2 or even L1 speakers are present. This learning target should also allow learners to more flexibly choose the ways they speak English (e.g., choice of accent, grammatical patterns and vocabulary) as long as their choice facilitates communication in that particular context. On the basis the aforementioned principles, Table 3 illustrates some of the recommendations that may address the problems reported by the professionals in Hong Kong and other similar sociolinguistic settings.

TABLE 3

Recommendations for ELT based on problems reported by professionals

| Problems | Recommendations for ELT |
|--|--|
| Lack of confidence in speaking English | Maximising students' speaking opportunities in (semi-) authentic communicative tasks in the ELT classroom. Focusing on mutual understanding rather than linguistic correctness. |
| Accent variation | Exposing students to a wide range of L1 and L2 accents that are frequently encountered in the local/global context (e.g., Indian accent). |
| Cultural differences | Raising students' awareness and understanding of cultural differences. |
| Communication problems in specific situations (e.g., telephoning) | Incorporating communicative activities that prepare students for similar English-speaking situations and communicative purposes. |
| Communication problems with different interlocutors (e.g., L1 and L2 speakers) | Equipping students with the relevant knowledge, attitudes and communicative strategies (e.g., written cues, speaking slowly, requesting repetition and clarification, mutual accommodation) to communicate with different interlocutors. |

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Which aspects of English do you usually use (writing, reading, listening, speaking)? Please give examples.
2. Under what situations do you usually use English? (Which varieties? Which channel? To whom)? Please give examples.
3. What difficulties do you face when using English (or spoken English) in your daily life?
4. In spoken English, which aspect(s) do you think is/are most important (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, communication skills, culture)? Why?

¹ HKBU: Career Centre, Hong Kong Baptist University (2014). Graduate Employment Survey 2014. Retrieved from http://sa.hkbu.edu.hk/career/grad_emp_sur/

HKCityU: Office of the Provost, City University of Hong Kong (2014). CityU Facts & Figures. Retrieved from <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/fnf/graduate.htm>

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HKLU: Student Services Centre, Lingnan University (2014). Graduate Employment Survey 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.ln.edu.hk/ssc/career/resources/>

HKPolyU: Office of Careers and Placement Services, Hong Kong Polytechnic University (2014). General Report on the Graduate Employment Survey 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/caps/graduate-employment-survey>

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HKU: The University of Hong Kong; HKCU: The Chinese University of Hong Kong; HKUST: The University of Science and Technology; HKPolyU: Hong Kong Polytechnic University; HKCityU: City University of Hong Kong; HKBU: Hong Kong Baptist University; HKLU: Lingnan University.

HKUST: Career Centre, The University of Science and Technology (2014). Graduate Employment Survey 2014. Retrieved from <https://career.ust.hk/cgi-bin/web/cctr.php>

² Although mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and Macau citizens were the majority of the visitors in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2014), they are excluded in the discussion because Mandarin or Cantonese is often the medium of communication when they arrive in Hong Kong.

³ The participants were in the domains of marketing, overseas education consulting, investment banking, diamond selling, programming, accounting, secretarial, phone testing, exhibition organising, dentistry, the government sector, social work (for local ethnic minorities), financial consulting and higher education, respectively. All of them were educated to a higher degree level and some of them were young professionals who had recently graduated from university and at the time were studying for master's degrees in diverse university programmes (e.g., sciences, business, social sciences and humanities).

⁴ Excerpts from the interviews of the individual participants are included with their corresponding identity codes, including their nature (i.e. P: professional), gender (F: female; M: male) and their identification number.

⁵ The participants' comments on the Hong Kong people's pronunciation generally accord with the professionals' responses in the questionnaire regarding their perceived high intelligibility of the HKE accent (Chan, 2017).

⁶ In the questionnaire survey, although the participants had divided opinions on whether speaking like an

L1 speaker is a 'show off', most of them associated inner circle English with high English proficiency, high education level and an advantage for job hunting and career development (Chan, 2017). Nevertheless, the finding regarding contextual variations in the use of English does echo previous attitudinal studies such as Chan (2013a, 2016), which indicated that people had fewer reservations about the use of an L2 accent in less formal and more interactive English-speaking situations.