

Setting language benchmarks

Whose benchmark?

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This paper considers Hong Kong's benchmark language assessments for English teachers. It asks whose standard of English the government, business community, examinations authority, and the teaching profession itself expect teachers to measure up to. As well as examining documentation from these various sources, the paper analyses discussions on *TeleNex*, a computer network set up for English teachers in Hong Kong. Although the question was seldom explicitly mooted in documents and teachers' messages, the implicit standards were found to be largely exonormative. Most documents implied a native speaker norm, and teachers were found to regard British dictionaries and grammars as the main authorities on correctness and acceptability. Only the benchmark developers were found to be seeking an "educated Hong Kong model", but even their criteria rule out an "average" Hong Kong model for teachers.

For more than a decade, there have been complaints from various sectors, especially the business sector, that English standards in Hong Kong are declining. In the early nineties, a consortium of the biggest business enterprises in Hong Kong launched a "Language Campaign" to raise English standards in order to maintain Hong Kong's competitive edge. In the mid-nineties, the government in its education policy report, *Education Commission Report No. 6* (Education Commission, 1995), recommended that teachers be required to meet language benchmarks. From 2001 onwards, teachers were required either to take a benchmark test (for details about the Benchmark Assessment and its components, see Falvey and Coniam, this issue) or to enrol on refresher courses to raise their English proficiency to benchmark levels. This policy caused strong reactions from the teaching profession and generated heated debate between the government, teachers and even parents. After the initial responses to the policy,

exemptions were given to teachers who had both a relevant degree and a professional qualification in teaching English, but such teachers were widely acknowledged to be a minority, e.g. less than 20% in Tsui, Coniam, Sengupta, & Wu (1994) and Coniam and Falvey (1996).

This paper examines the issue of whose English standard the government, business community, examinations authority and the teaching profession expect Hong Kong's English teachers to measure up to in the benchmark assessments: particularly whether a Hong Kong standard is expected or whether the standard is an exonormative one of native speakers.

Hong Kong English?

As background we need to consider recent views on whether Hong Kong English is emerging as a standard variety. Earlier research questioned its validity. Luke and Richards (1982) believed that "the norm or standard consumed by learners of English is an external one rather than an internal one. ... There is no such thing then as 'Hong Kong English'. There is neither the societal need nor opportunity for the development of a stable Cantonese variety of spoken English". Tay (1991) likewise claimed that "there is no social motivation for the indigenisation of English in Hong Kong. ... English in Hong Kong has been considered either a learner's language, a developmental rather than a lectal continuum, ... or is described in terms of a cline of bilingualism". Johnson (1994) was still able to state that the notion of a Hong Kong variety of English had thus far gained "little support".

Recently, however, a volume of *World Englishes* was devoted to "Hong Kong English: autonomy and creativity". Its guest editor, Bolton (2000:277, 267), refers to such views as the "invisibility myth" and asks "is it possible to argue that the conditions now exist for a recognition of the autonomy of Hong Kong English?" The developers of the benchmark criteria, Falvey and Coniam, in their paper in the present issue, state that their model for speech is "recognisable as a Cantonese speaker, but an 'educated Hong Kong speaker' not an 'average model' of a Hong Kong speaker". This appears to be an attempt to break away from a native-speaker norm while at the same time rejecting, for teachers, the typical Hong Kong model. We shall examine later in this paper how much this is borne out in the benchmark criteria, particularly in the pronunciation and grammatical accuracy components of the Classroom Language Assessment.

Characteristics of a variety

Butler (1997: 106) lists five characteristics that define a variety of world English. These characteristics raise many broader issues, but we shall comment briefly on each only in terms of their relevance to the benchmark criteria.

1. Accent: a “standard and recognisable pattern of pronunciation handed down from one generation to another”. It is widely acknowledged that there is a recognisable Hong Kong accent, but as we shall see later in this paper, the benchmark criteria specified by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (hereafter HKEA) for the highest level state that the pronunciation is “completely error-free with no noticeable first language (L1) characteristics”. The level below the benchmark is for pronunciation where “many L1 characteristics ... are obtrusive” (HKEA, 2000: 110).
2. Vocabulary: “particular words and phrases which spring up usually to express key features of the physical and social environment and which are regarded as peculiar to the variety”. There are a number of words distinctive to Hong Kong, such as “chop” for rubber stamp and “shroff” for a car-park or government cashier, which are commonly used and are comprehensible to the community. The benchmark descriptors make no mention of such Hong Kong vocabulary.
3. A history: “a sense that this variety of English is the way it is because of the history of the language community”. This is not directly relevant to the benchmark criteria but we shall consider below some attitudes of government and business leaders as well as those of the teaching profession.
4. Literary creativity: a “literature written without apology in that variety of English”. This is a broader issue that does not feature in the benchmark criteria.
5. Reference works: “dictionaries and style guides — which show that people in that language community look to themselves, not some outside authority, to decide what is right and wrong in terms of how they speak and write their English”. We shall consider below the teaching profession’s attitudes towards reference works.

These last two characteristics are similar to Bamgbose’s (1998:4) criteria of “codification” and “acceptance”, the second of which he claims is “the ultimate test of admission of an innovation” (or new variety). Bamgbose points out that innovations which are not accepted are labelled errors. This can be seen in some of the benchmark sets of criteria which refer to errors.

As evidence of Hong Kong English, Bolton (2000:278–9) cites samples of Hong Kong vocabulary from a *Macquarie* database that will be published in the *Grolier International Dictionary: World English in an Asian Context*. He also reproduces (p. 281–2) a sample of two Hong Kong students' ICQ English, which he describes as “a ‘mixed’ form of written English and Chinese, with Cantonese vocabulary items and conversational particles ‘romanised’ into a linguistic matrix of written Hong Kong English (p. 276)”. Interestingly, this is the reverse of the spoken ‘mixed code’ that has been so common in Hong Kong classrooms and society, with English vocabulary items interspersed in a matrix of Cantonese. It seems that the medium determines the type of mixed code chosen: in speech Cantonese predominates with English vocabulary interspersed; but when a computer keyboard is used, English is more convenient, with romanised Cantonese called on for enrichment of the vocabulary.

We would argue that there is certainly a lot of linguistic creativity and hybrid language use at the interface of English with Cantonese, but that neither written nor spoken “English with Cantonese characteristics” appear to be what the government, business leaders, the exams authority, the benchmark criteria, or teachers are promoting or accepting. Let us consider first the Government's attitude.

Government

The standard of English required of Hong Kong teachers is presumably associated with and determined by the purpose of promoting the use of English in Hong Kong.

The Secretary for Education and Manpower, Joseph W. P. Wong, speaking to the Legislative Council on the motion “Promoting extensive use of English” (1999) said: “Underpinning Hong Kong's strength as a service economy with an international outlook, as well as a knowledge-based society, is the ability of our people to communicate with the rest of the world. English is indisputably the language of international trade and finance. It is also the most commonly used language in science and technology and on the internet. The importance of maintaining a high standard of English, and to maintain its extensive use in Hong Kong, could not be overemphasised.”

The Government clearly wants Hong Kong speakers of English to be able to communicate with the rest of the world for purposes of trade, finance, science and technology. Mr Wong announced that pre-service courses for student

teachers would include an element of immersion training in such countries as the United Kingdom and Canada (and since then Australia has been the venue for some immersion programmes). He also reported that the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) scheme, launched in 1998, to place one NET in each public sector secondary school, already had 387 such teachers in place, with a financial commitment of \$1.5 billion over five years. In October 2001, the Chief Executive, Tung Chi Hwa, in his policy address to the Legislative Council, announced the extension of the NET scheme to all primary schools, which, if the target is achieved, would bring the total number of NETs in Hong Kong to well over 1,200. All these measures seem to indicate strongly that a native speaker model is considered desirable for Hong Kong's English teachers and students, although the NETs themselves represent a variety of models, such as English, Scottish, Australian and American.

The contracts the Government recommend that aided schools adopt for NETs include an appendix of *Guidelines on the Duties of Teachers Appointed under the Enhanced Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme* (Education Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2001). As well as teaching and assessing in accordance with the school curriculum, these duties include:

- iii. To provide support to the English Panel Chairperson, including assisting in curriculum development / adaptation and preparation of teaching materials;
- iv. To assist in conducting extra-curricular activities relating to English Language, e.g. speech, drama, debates, choral speaking and extensive reading;
- v. To assist in running oral activities for students after school;
- vi. To assist in setting up an English corner in the school where students can come together to practise oral English and read English books under their guidance;
- vii. To act as an English Language resource person for other teachers in school, including assisting in school-based teacher development.

Whilst many of these duties are often carried out by local teachers, points (iii), (vii) and possibly (v) appear to give NETs particular responsibilities that derive from their status as native speakers of the language. For example, they are given the task of providing support to the panel chairperson regarding preparation of materials and curriculum development even though many of the NETs recruited are less experienced than their local panel chairs. There is also a heavy emphasis on oral work being conducted by NETs. In some schools, NETs have been given no other teaching responsibilities except conducting oral lessons. The emphasis on oral work conducted by NETs suggests that, apart from

providing an English speaking environment in schools for students, NETs also serve the purpose of providing a native-speaker model for speaking skills.

Now we shall turn to the business community.

Business leaders

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the business sector in Hong Kong have been most vocal about the importance of maintaining English standards ever since the eighties and have launched initiatives such as the Language Campaign to halt what they perceived to be rapidly declining standards of English. The change of sovereignty in 1997 aroused fear in this sector that English would lose its prestige, leading to further deterioration of standards, hence compromising Hong Kong's competitiveness. The Chief Executive of the Hang Seng Bank Limited, Alex Au, contributed to a June 1997 conference entitled "Building Hong Kong on Education": "In the area of language proficiency, which is the single most important tool for effective business communication, I have observed a decline in standards (Au, 1998: 179). English, which some have wrongly associated with colonialism, is today the most widely used language in the world of business. It is the common link and the language of trade in the global village. If Hong Kong is to remain the great economic success that it is in the competitive global economy, it is vital for its voice to be heard and its products to be promoted. A good command of English is essential for that, especially among the territory's leaders. ... Sadly, poor grammar usage in English has seen the spread of Chinglish (Ibid p.180). Ideally, English should be taught in schools by teachers who have native proficiency in English, to provide students with a good foundation from the outset. The Government has made a start by recruiting a number of native English speakers, but more need to be recruited. There are, of course, locals who are well qualified to teach English. But because a great need is there, the availability of appropriately qualified local staff should not deter the government from hiring native English teachers (Ibid pp.181-2)".

We can see from the above speech that Chinglish, which is often used in a derogatory sense, is not considered a local variety of English but is seen as synonymous with poor grammar. Native speaker teachers, or teachers with native speaker proficiency, are considered the ideal model for students and a guarantee of providing a "good foundation" for students. Implicit in the above excerpt is also the use of a native speaker model as the benchmark against which local teachers will be judged in terms of whether they are "appropriately qualified" or not.

Benchmark developers and the benchmark descriptors

Falvey & Coniam (this issue) state that the benchmark subject committee made clear that the model or variety of English adopted should be:

- fully acceptable to Hong Kong teachers of English
- fully acceptable to the Hong Kong public
- wholly intelligible in an international context

They maintain that “no one native speaking L1 model such as RP (Received Pronunciation), or Standard American educated usage should be adopted”. Falvey and Coniam explain that the standard should be attainable by most educated Hong Kong L2 speakers. Such a person will be recognisable as a Cantonese speaker, but an “educated Hong Kong speaker” not an “average model” of a Hong Kong speaker. In support of this they cite Jenkins (1998: 124–5) that “non-native teachers will, themselves, still be required to develop the ability to approximate more closely than their students to a standard native norm”.

The stance taken by Falvey and Coniam is to use the “educated Hong Kong speaker” as the benchmark rather than the native speaker. Their rejection of an average Hong Kong speaker model can be seen from a very interesting footnote to the syllabus for one of the components of the Benchmark Assessment, the Classroom Language Assessment (HKÉA 2000). In the descriptors for “Grammatical accuracy” in which they addressed the issue of errors impeding communication, a note to the level below the benchmark states:

Because of long exposure to the teacher and familiarity with ingrained systematic grammatical/syntactic errors, the students may not experience undue strain or difficulty understanding what the teacher says. However, *as a classroom model of educated spoken language in Hong Kong*, the teacher’s grammatical accuracy is unacceptable because it is likely to perpetuate unacceptable levels of grammatical accuracy in students’ speech and writing (p. 120, our emphasis).

In this footnote, Falvey and Coniam take pains to specify that they are using “educated spoken language” as the model against which the acceptability of teachers’ grammatical accuracy is considered. There is an almost identical footnote to the “Pronunciation, stress and intonation” descriptor for the Classroom Language Assessment (Ibid p.121).

In designing the Reading and Listening papers for the pilot benchmark examination, Falvey and Coniam used both native and non-native writers and speakers. The Reading paper has two articles from the *South China Morning*

Post, the largest circulation English daily newspaper in Hong Kong, one by a Hong Kong Chinese writer, the other unattributed but citing a Hong Kong Chinese union official. However, the Listening paper is published in two versions in the same document and although the final version (Ibid pp. 93–99) features a local teacher and a NET discussing the NET scheme, the dialogue they use is an edited version of the original discussion which took place between two UK native speakers of English and which is to be found in the pilot paper (Ibid pp. 70–77). In other words, a piece of native speaker discourse is still the basis of the Listening Test, despite one role being later assigned to a local speaker.

The Writing descriptors make frequent reference to “errors”. For example, Level 2, the grade below the benchmark, for “Grammatical accuracy” begins: “Grammatical errors occur regularly and may sometimes impede the reader’s understanding” (Ibid p. 53). Level 2 for “Correcting errors/problems in a student’s composition” begins “The candidate can only achieve approximately 50% correction rate for the specified items at the phrase and clause level; and fails to adequately correct any discourse-level errors” (Ibid p. 55). This focus on “errors” could be interpreted (per Bangbose) as rejecting “innovations” in the Hong Kong variety of English.

In the Speaking and Classroom Language Assessment descriptors the native speaker model seems to be the benchmark against which teachers’ spoken proficiency is measured. In each case, the highest grade (Level 5) is for pronunciation that is “completely error-free with no noticeable first language (L1) characteristics”, while for Level 2, “many L1 characteristics ... are obtrusive” (Ibid p. 110 & 121). Level 2 for Speaking specifically mentions “e.g. for Cantonese, consonant clusters pl/pr; l/n/r; v/w; th/f problems” (Ibid p. 110). Whether the native-speaker model is the benchmark depends on the interpretation of “L1 characteristics”. If it merely refers to characteristics that impede intelligibility, then the benchmark is international intelligibility, and not a native-speaker model. But if it simply refers to L1 characteristics without reference to intelligibility, then the native-speaker model is the benchmark. Upon examining the descriptors closely, we can see that teachers’ speech that contains L1 characteristics that are “obtrusive”, that is, impeding intelligibility, is considered not to have met the benchmark (although it must be remembered that the footnotes mentioned above do not accept intelligibility that is the result of long exposure to the teacher and familiarity with L1 interference). However, for teachers to reach Level 5, that is the highest level, they need to produce speech that has “no obvious L1 characteristics”. In other words, while spoken

proficiency with L1 characteristics will not prevent teachers from achieving the minimum benchmark, it will hamper teachers' attainment of the highest level in the benchmark assessment.

Next we shall consider the Hong Kong Examinations Authority who carry out the Benchmark Assessment for teachers and public examinations for school students at Certificate level, taken at secondary five level (equivalent to Grade 11), and Advanced Level, which is a university entrance examination taken in the seventh year of secondary school.

The examinations authority

In Hong Kong, all school public examinations are administered by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA). In terms of personnel, the subject officers for English are predominantly native speakers: one American, two British, and only one Hong Kong Chinese. The subject officer for the teacher Benchmark Assessment is also from Britain although his predecessor was Hong Kong Chinese. On the other hand, the three assessors recruited by the Education Department for classroom language assessment are all Hong Kong Chinese.¹

The Secretary of the HKEA (i.e. the executive in charge), C.C. Choi, speaking at the same June 1997 conference as Alex Au above, argued that perceptions of falling standards are often based on anecdotal evidence: "Many people have a somewhat nostalgic view of university days when students were able to communicate in English at a near native speaker level. It is easy to forget that in those days, only about 3% of the relevant age group were able to go to university whereas now 18% are able to go" (Choi, 1998:187). There is an assumption here that the standard is native speaker English. This is further borne out when he goes on to state that Grade C in the HKCE English Language exam (Syllabus B) is equivalent to a GCE O-level pass. In other words, the HKEA maintains the standard of its English exam by comparison with a British norm. (This is achieved through an arrangement by which examining authorities in Britain play a moderating role to ensure that the standard is maintained year by year.)

Having considered government and business leaders and those associated with the benchmark tests, we shall finally turn to Hong Kong teachers themselves.

English teachers in Hong Kong

To understand the views of English teachers in Hong Kong, we analysed messages on an internet-based computer network for English language teachers across Hong Kong. The network, known as *TeleNex*, was created by the Teachers of English Language Education Centre (TELEC) in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Hong Kong. Over 5,000 teachers are registered users. The messaging component of this network consists of a number of conference corners on various topics, including “Benchmarking” (later incorporated in a corner called “Policy and Curriculum”), “Teaching Corner” (where teachers can ask questions and share ideas on the teaching of English), “NET Corner” (issues concerning the NET scheme), and “Public Forum” (where non-teachers can also post messages). We analysed 113 messages on these corners about the Benchmarking issue. Relevant to the discussion in this paper is the question of who needs to be benchmarked. The English Benchmark Subcommittee recommended that all English teachers, both native and non-native speakers of English, should be benchmarked. There were views for and against NETs having to take the test. Views supporting the benchmarking of native speakers as well as non-native speakers were based on equity and fairness (one local teacher even suggesting that they should do a harder test). Views against often assumed that native-speakers already represented “the standard”, and therefore there was no need to test them. Indeed some NETs felt that their L1 *is* the benchmark.

Views on the benchmarking policy as a whole were evenly divided, although individuals opposed to it sent more frequent messages and expressed their views more strongly. Most of those who supported the benchmarking policy were very concerned about the standard of English of some of their colleagues. This view was expressed by both local teachers and NETs. The word “appalling” appeared several times in these messages. It was used by some NETs but also one local teacher to describe the English of fellow English teachers. Another message referred to the Hong Kong Department of Justice’s use of the same word “appalling” in 1999 to describe the English of Law graduates applying for positions, four of which the department refused to fill despite hundreds of applications.

What is the standard?

In the teachers' discussions on benchmarking, there was little reference to what constitutes "the standard". In an earlier study, Tsui and Bunton (2000) analysed 1,234 messages in the "Language Corner" of *TeleNex*, which gives teachers a chance to raise and respond to questions on grammar, vocabulary and other aspects of English which are important to their teaching. We found considerable evidence that the sources that Hong Kong teachers turned to as authorities on correctness or acceptability were exonormative. Dictionaries, grammar books and usage books from native-speaking countries, particularly Britain, were the most frequently cited sources of authority. By contrast, Hong Kong sources such as textbooks and the media were treated with caution and sometimes criticised. According to Bamgbose (1998), codification is an important means of establishing the status of a linguistic form or usage. Clearly, teachers did not appear to recognise codification as taking place in Hong Kong.

In some cases, Hong Kong teachers simply deferred to a native-speaker (NS). For example, in responding to a question from another teacher about whether there is such a word as "shopaholic", a non-native speaking (NNS) student-teacher said:

I have heard this word used by native speakers, so it *must be okay*. [Message 3/12,² our emphasis].

In other cases the NNS teacher took account of what a native-speaker said, but still wanted confirmation from a dictionary or grammar:

When I was in primary school, I was taught to use 'sporty' to describe people. Recently I've heard a native speaker use 'sportive' to describe a kid. *I checked the dictionary*, but 'sportive' isn't in it. I wonder if anyone can help? [Message 9/46, our emphasis]

When it comes to Hong Kong media and textbooks, the NNS teachers were less certain:

This Sunday, I watched a RTHK³ TV program of which topic is about the difference between American English and British English. I found an interesting point and want to confirm whether it is true or not. [Message 16/540]

The reason for me to raise this question is that in (name of textbook in Hong Kong), *there's an expression saying "Robot Teacher is a comedy film."* which is rather odd to me. I discussed it with my colleagues but we have no answer. [Message 17/810, our emphasis]

Native-speaking (NS) teachers⁴ in Hong Kong were, if anything, more critical of Hong Kong sources such as textbooks and the media:

This is not helped by grammar books like the one you mention that give “There is much food in the refrigerator” as an example of correct English. This sentence is clearly unacceptable and therefore I would probably not use that particular grammar book with my students. [Message 29/1115]

There is a need, I think, to be a little careful with film subtitles. “Nightcap” refers to an alcoholic drink just before you go to bed; it cannot be applied to food (see *COBUILD*). Also, we would not really use the term “night snack” ... [Message 31/1268]

Note the contrasting positive reference in the second message to *COBUILD*, a British dictionary published by Collins, as the authority. Even commercial publication in native-speaking countries is taken as conferring acceptability:

This native speaker has also heard, and used, “shopaholic” — also “chocololic”. There is a *book with a title* something like “Chocololic’s Handbook” on sale *in the UK*. Well, if it’s in a *BOOK TITLE* it must be OK!!!!!!? [Message 23/015, our emphases]

In all the 1,234 messages in the “Secondary Language Corner” there was no mention of the term “Hong Kong English”. The term “Chinglish” was used twice, in each case to refer to student errors. No deviations from a native speaker norm were referred to positively, by NS or NNS teachers.

Conclusions

The sources we have examined, from the Government, business leaders, examinations authority and the teaching profession, generally imply that a native-speaker norm is the standard Hong Kong teachers should be aiming at. Only the benchmark developers were found to be seeking an “educated Hong Kong model”. However, while they were more tolerant of non-native speaker characteristics at a lower level of the benchmark, they were not as tolerant when setting the highest benchmark level. They also ruled out an “average” Hong Kong model in which, for example, teachers and students may be accustomed to each other’s pronunciation and grammar but may not be intelligible to international speakers.

Perhaps it is in the very nature of benchmarks that they will militate against

new varieties of language. Hong Kong seems to be holding up a native speaker model as the goal so that teachers, being closer to it but not necessarily attaining it, will prevent their students (the average Hong Kong speakers of English) from being too far away from it. Meanwhile Hong Kong English and Hong Kong Cantonese continue to influence each other in ways that are constantly developing, with considerable vibrancy and imagination, but which are not gaining acceptance from community leaders or the teaching profession.

Notes

1. The Hong Kong Examinations Authority is responsible for setting the benchmark examination papers and the Hong Kong Government Education Department is responsible for recruiting classroom language assessors because of their long-standing responsibility for school inspection that involves assessing classroom teaching quality.
2. Messages cited from the network are verbatim. No attempt has been made to edit them. We would like to thank the teachers who gave us permission to cite their messages. Every effort has been made to conceal the identities of the teachers who wrote these messages.
3. RTHK stands for “Radio Television Hong Kong”, a local broadcasting station which produces radio and television programmes.
4. The term NS teachers refers to any native-speaker teacher. NETs refers specifically to native-speaker teachers who were recruited by the NET scheme.

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