17 Challenges faced by Cantonese speakers in a UK university Mandarin course

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Abstract

After Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, those in the Chinese migrant community in the UK who anticipated returning to China saw the significant benefits of learning Mandarin. The challenges are not only related to the social and cultural differences between the Cantonese and Mandarin migrant groups, but also the intrinsic linguistic differences between the two languages. This case study investigated students' motivation, needs and barriers in relation to Chinese Mandarin learning. Previous research (Lo & Chen, 2014) found there was a communication gap between Cantonese and Mandarin speakers within the Chinese migrant community. This gap poses difficulties to the Cantonese speakers in their Chinese Mandarin learning. Establishing a Languages Exchanges Community (LEC) programme, involving both Cantonese and Mandarin groups, is seen as an appropriate means to bridge the gap and increase the learning outcomes for Cantonese speakers.

Keywords: Cantonese speakers, Chinese Mandarin learning, Chinese migrant community, languages exchange community.

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1. Introduction

With China's rise in influence, the teaching of Chinese as a heritage/community language has emerged as a key issue in the Chinese diaspora of Europe (Lo, 2014). According to Shum, Tsung and Gao (2011), Hong Kong's reintegration with China has raised both the value and use of Putonghua (Chinese Mandarin) in Hong Kong. It has been speculated that more and more Cantonese speakers started to learn Chinese Mandarin in order to understand more about the contemporary mainland of China in terms of social, economic and cultural aspects. However, in relation to the significance of learning Chinese Mandarin, there is little research highlighting the needs and challenges faced by Cantonese speakers.

Although Mandarin and Cantonese share a similar writing system (Cantonese speakers use the traditional version of Chinese characters while Mandarin speakers from Mainland China use a simplified version), hundreds of Cantonese colloquial characters are either completely unrecognizable or with unpredictable different meanings; there are also differences regarding phonetic and phonological aspects between the two languages.

In the above context, this paper reflects the needs and barriers of Cantonese speakers in a university course, and using West's (1994) needs analysis approach, the objective was to identify what learners will be required to do with the foreign language in the target situation, and how learners might best master the target language during the period of training. The research was designed to explore the following questions:

- What are the reasons which motivate Cantonese speakers to learn Chinese Mandarin?
- What teaching approach works best for them?
- What barriers are they facing during the learning and what are their reasons?

- What factors can help them to overcome the barriers and improve their learning outcomes?

The case study describes the different methods for data collection, which aimed to understand learners' needs and barriers, and explores a productive way of Mandarin education for the Cantonese speakers within the Chinese migrant community.

2. The case study

The case study was carried out on a 'Mandarin for Cantonese speakers' module at the University of Nottingham from September 2012 to March 2014. In this study, classroom observation, questionnaires and in-depth interviews were employed; a total of 150 hours was observed and 119 questionnaires were received.

The gender breakdown of the learner respondents is 25% male and 75% female. More than half (52.5%) of the 119 learner respondents were final year university students, while 47.5% were year two and year one students.

A majority of learner respondents (93%) had learnt Mandarin before; less than half (43%) had learnt Mandarin in the last 6 years, while 13% of the learner respondents stated they had studied Mandarin more than 10 years ago and did not remember any Pinyin and basic Mandarin.

76% of the learner respondents mentioned their previous Mandarin study only covered basic Pinyin, listening and speaking content in comparison with 20% who had studied some basic grammar and 33% who had studied some reading and writing of Mandarin before.

The interviews were open interactions around the learners' needs, difficulties and applicable learning methods and the objective was to obtain some insights into the learners' views on these issues. The interviews were conducted in

Mandarin, with the purpose of practicing their listening and speaking skills in Mandarin as well.

3. Needs analysis on Cantonese speakers

In the interviews with Cantonese-speaking learners, participants were asked about the reasons for learning Mandarin to examine their learning motivation on a UK university Mandarin course. According to the interviewees, Mandarin is a significant language for their future, students may be studying Chinese for vocational or travel reasons, cultural/heritage or academic/interest reasons or for combinations of these, as the following examples demonstrate:

> "I think to speak Putonghua well is very important, very useful in the future, because this skill can help me a lot on my future job" (student A).

> "To learn Putonghua well, in the future it will be an advantage for me to look for jobs" (student B).

> "The reasons for my Mandarin learning are to improve communication with my Mainland friend, and also to help me understand Chinese culture and history" (student C).

4. Learning barriers for Cantonese speakers

Cantonese is mainly used in Guangdong, Guangxi province, Hong Kong and Macau. Cantonese is widely spoken in overseas Chinese communities, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the UK (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2011). One interviewee expressed that he had not studied the language systematically before, so he found Pinyin difficult, especially the pronunciation. He also mentioned a lack of learning and practising opportunities in Hong Kong, as Hong Kong people think speaking English displays higher class and speaking Mandarin is almost identified as foreign. Moreover, student interviewees stated

that it is hard to differentiate tones for Cantonese speakers, especially as Hong Kong Pinyin has nine tones while Putonghua has four tones (five tones including neutral tone).

Furthermore, the 'ong' or 'ang, eng, ung' sounds of Pinyin are hard to pronounce and the 'ch, sh, zh' sounds are hard as "there is no similar sound in Cantonese" (student D); "Putonghua has retroflex sounds such as 'zh, ch, sh, r', while Cantonese hasn't. For example: Cantonese speakers easily read 'Shanghai' as 'Songhai', and they produce all retroflex sounds with a flat tongue" (student E).

Word order is different in Mandarin and Cantonese, e.g. the adverbial modifier is placed after the verb, there is double object word order, contrary to the use of different function words, and the adjective is put in advance, such as:

> "The same two-syllable words in Cantonese and Mandarin have opposite word order. The central word of Cantonese is at the front, such as in *guests* 客人 (Mandarin) – 人客 (Cantonese); *morning* 早晨 (Mandarin) – 晨早 (Cantonese); *love* 喜歡 (Mandarin) – 歡喜 (Cantonese)" (Student E).

As Morita (2000) observes, oral presentation is a "frequent, highly routinized part of classroom life" (p. 258) in higher education settings. It is also well-known that business courses have been putting more emphasis on oral activities, such as oral presentations.

In this study, many academic Cantonese-speaking students reported a lack of active participation and speaking in classes they had previously attended. When asked to give presentations in the target language, i.e. Mandarin, these students found it especially difficult and experienced great stress. They can write, read and even listen excellently in Mandarin, but when asked to present their Mandarin oral skills, they delivered poor presentations in the target language and were usually nervous, and avoided eye contact with the audience. From the students' feedback, it can be seen that oral presentation is an approach for Mandarin competency enhancement.

Interviewed students also stated that the oral presentation practice linked employability with the Mandarin learning, so they believed it helped their future career prospects. Due to the interests and popularity of the oral presentation themes it resulted in strong learning motivation for Cantonese speakers to overcome their difficulties in learning Mandarin. The Cantonese speakers in the case study thought that Mandarin learning for real situations allowed them to "practice a lot, interact a lot – very effective and very useful for a future career" (student F).

5. A proposal for improving Mandarin learning in Cantonese speakers

According to the interviews with the Cantonese speakers on their Mandarin learning, most of the students also mentioned they had no or little contact with Mandarin speakers for practice.

Given the above findings, a new project is proposed in this paper, namely the LEC for bridging the gap between the Mandarin learners and Mandarin speakers. The target groups will be Cantonese and Mandarin speakers at University of Nottingham.

The project will include a series of workshops with themes such as 'getting to know each other better' on mutual sides between the Mandarin and Cantonese migrant groups and 'communicate with each other better' to improve mutual language competency. The proposed activities include student-led workshops for introducing features of the Cantonese and Mandarin languages, comparisons between the Cantonese and Mandarin culture, as well as student-led presentations and joint workshops run by the Cantonese and Mandarin speakers.

It is hoped that this paper can serve as a starting point, offer guidelines to improve understanding of Cantonese speakers' challenges when learning Mandarin, and increase their learning outcomes in the end.

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