

*ALPHABET HEADACHES*  
**HONG KONG'S ENGLISH LITERACY CHALLENGE**

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### CHINESE LEARNERS, LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

*In Chinese, we must know the word before we can say it. In writing English, we write what we say, but in Chinese (well, Cantonese) we can't write what we say, we have to slightly change it.*  
(68) Word Wizards course participant, 2004.

*Writing in Chinese is much more different from English because we're speaking in Cantonese, which is just a dialect. Spoken Cantonese is different from written Chinese. However, in English, what we say is what we write. When I read Chinese I just guess the meanings. I don't check up words in the dictionary.*  
(53) Word Wizards course participant, 2004.

*You can't "cheat" in Chinese dictation! What I mean is that in English you have phoenix and you can try to make up a word according to its sounds. In Chinese, you can't do that.*  
(45) Word Wizards course participant, 2004.

In the eyes of many visitors and in international media coverage, Hong Kong still retains something of its earlier "colonial" image. There are many people outside Hong Kong who are inclined to think of the territory's "Britishness" before they consider its "Chineseness". It needs to be stated very clearly that, while Hong Kong was a British colony for over 150 years, this did not necessarily make the place particularly "British", nor particularly English-speaking. It was not until the late colonial period that mass education and wider access to English-language learning became available in Hong Kong. Following a series of riots in the colony in 1967 and stinging criticism from the international community, a series of social reforms were brought in by the colonial authorities. These included the education reforms of 1974 and 1978, which provided for a system of free and compulsory education for nine years (Postiglione and Lee, 1997). It is largely due to these reforms that the number of English speakers has risen above the small percentage of the population who had previously enjoyed access to the colony's selective mission schools. In 1960, the proportion of the population claiming to "know English" was estimated at only 9.7 percent. Just before the handover to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, this proportion had risen to 38.1 percent (Bolton, 2002, p. 6).

In terms of ethnicity, the territory has always been overwhelmingly Chinese. In 2001, the Home Affairs Bureau estimated the non-Chinese proportion of Hong Kong to be just 4 percent (Home Affairs Bureau, 2001). It is important that this thesis should focus on Hong Kong's "Chineseness", not only in linguistic terms, but also in terms of the effects that such an overwhelming cultural dominance can have on the family and educational settings in which Hong Kong's children pursue the territory's espoused goal for them to become trilingual and biliterate citizens (Bolton, 2002, p. 8).

In the first issue of a publication, entitled *The Journal of Psychology in Chinese Societies* (2000), editor W.C. Chang notes that studies of "Chineseness" had recently become the "flavour of the month", something that disturbed her as she feared much research in this area was founded on an orientalist notion of "difference" (Said, 1978). She wrote with concern that Western cross-cultural researchers would "find Chineseness in all the wrong places", that they would define it as an independent variable in research and would see it in terms of deviance from Western norms (Chang, 2000, p. 125). Certainly, Chinese language, culture and customs have long piqued the curiosity of non-Chinese visitors to the "fabled East" – and there are fables aplenty in the literature regarding the Chinese people and the Chinese language. As students from Chinese-backgrounds have become increasingly more able to travel abroad to further their studies, their interactions with Western educators have naturally brought them to the attention of academic researchers who are eager to understand what they see to be "paradoxes" in Chinese learning behaviour (Kember and Gow, 1991; Watkins and Biggs, 1996 and 2001; Volet, 1999; Barron and Arcodia, 2002; Dooley, 2003). Hong Kong's Chinese university students, caught as they are between a Chinese heritage and the academic philosophies of recent British colonialism, have found themselves at the centre of numerous studies of Chinese learning styles (Kember and Gow, 1990 and 1991; Gow and Kember, 1993; Biggs, 1996; Marton, 1996; Tang, 1996).

By contrast, relatively few such studies of learning behaviour have been conducted in Hong Kong's primary and secondary schools (Hau and Salili, 1990; Watkins, 1996). In a paper given in 1999 at an international conference

on second language teaching held in Hong Kong, I looked for reasons why there were so few studies of school-level language learning or school-aged learners in the Hong Kong context (Bunce, 1999). One reason is universal - it is never particularly easy for academics to gain entry to primary and secondary school classrooms, for this typically involves negotiating several levels of bureaucratic consent and cooperation. As a result, a high proportion of research into learning styles and second-language learning takes place on university campuses. The older students are readily available, their consent is easily obtained and there is a climate of support for research activities. Primary or secondary schools that willingly open their doors to educational research may not necessarily be typical, and the classes that are observed may not be randomly selected. These are often the "facts of life" in educational research. Add to this the fragmented and rather secretive atmosphere of Hong Kong's highly competitive school system (Bunce, 2004a), in which it is very rare to see either shared programmes or even teacher dialogue between adjacent schools, and the potential risks of an unfavourable research report are not widely entertained. To even present the paper mentioned above, which I had titled "Reluctant Language Learners: A Neglected Group" (Bunce, 1999), I had to defy my principal's ban on doing so. I had to appeal to the local District Education Office to mediate in the matter. A compromise was only reached when the conference organisers agreed not to name my school in either the programme or the proceedings. At no stage would my principal even read my paper to see if there was any problem with its contents. His sole concern was to keep the school name out of the spotlight. Such extreme reactions can occur in an atmosphere in which a sensationalist vernacular media leaps upon "bad news" stories such as fights, accidents, suicides, sackings and academic failure, and many schools are reluctant to draw any public attention to themselves.

## **THE CHINESE LEARNER IN HONG KONG**

*The Chinese Learner* (Watkins and Biggs, 1996) and *Teaching the Chinese Learner* (Watkins and Biggs, 2001) are two excellent collections of mostly university-level research conducted in Hong Kong. These two collections draw their

readers' attention to certain aspects of Chinese learning styles, particularly those which had started to gain the attention of academics in overseas universities in the 1990s. These issues included:

1. the apparent paradox of rote learning combined with excellent academic achievements
2. the attribution of academic success to effort more than ability
3. the intense power of extrinsic motivation
4. a remarkable sense of diligence
5. a notion of success and failure that is closely tied to family "face", and
6. a preference for collaborative learning despite the obvious competition for marks.

While there is a very real danger of oversimplifying Hong Kong students' apparent adherence to Confucian values in their approaches to learning, there is no denying a long cultural history of upward social mobility via educational success, which was exemplified in the old Chinese imperial civil examination system (Cheng, 1997). Hong Kong parents are very pragmatic when it comes to their children's schooling. They seek enrolment at particular schools, especially those with English-medium instruction. They prefer the "science stream" in upper secondary education. They demand large amounts of homework, while also seeking extra tuition. They pay close attention to their children's marks and numerical class positions, and often see failure as a result of "laziness". Unsuccessful senior students are urged to repeat their final year at school, rather than seek alternative educational programmes. Any attempts by the authorities to lessen the competitiveness and selectivity of public examinations are viewed with suspicion.

In 2004, in an attempt to soften these strongly held community attitudes, the Education and Manpower Bureau commissioned a series of television advertisements that tried to broaden the community's views of education with the prominent slogan, "marks are not everything". Unfortunately, Hong Kong parents do not appear to be ready for such a message. The Confucian assumption is that everyone is educable, and that differences in intelligence do not lessen a person's potential to be educated. If there are differences in attainment, these are traditionally seen as differences in attitude and effort. "The ants are always busy", says the traditional adage. Failure can only reflect an insufficient effort. Such views put enormous strains on students, particularly around the time of the annual public examinations, when a

number of primary and secondary school students may commit, or attempt to commit, suicide (Biggs, 2001, p. 7).

## LEARNING BY ROTE

Are *rote learning* and *memorisation* the same thing? Are Western interpretations of Chinese learning styles missing something? Can *recitation* (repeatedly verbalising and committing a text to memory) lead a learner to deeper understanding and long-term retention? These paradoxical questions captured the research interests of many Hong Kong academics in the 1990s, leading to the two research collections cited earlier. One of these researchers, Lee (1996), is at great pains to distinguish rote learning from memorisation in the Confucian tradition. He regards rote learning as a shallow end in itself, but memorisation as a step on the way towards deeper understanding. He takes the view that recitation and thoughtful reflection can make knowledge more meaningful. He quotes Zhu Xi, an influential philosopher who revived Confucianism in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as follows:

Learning is reciting. If we recite it then think it over, think it over then recite it, naturally it will become meaningful to us. If we recite it but don't think it over, we still won't appreciate its meaning. If we think it over but don't recite it, even though we might understand it, our understanding will be precarious.

(Lee, 1996, p. 36)

While Biggs, and other contributors to the literature on this issue (Kember and Gow, 1991; Marton, 1996), may join Lee in stressing that rote learning and memorisation are different, it is often quite difficult to see this distinction in younger learners. In their Chinese language lessons in primary and secondary school, Hong Kong students are required to memorise and reproduce many classical Chinese texts. Hong Kong's teachers of English ask their students to do something similar in English, by setting two- or three-paragraph excerpts from the students' textbooks as "seen dictation" tests each week. At home, often with parental help, students learn these selected passages by heart. On the day of the test, the teacher will read the passage in measured chunks for the students to write. The irony of this situation is that the students usually write the passages entirely from memory, taking little note of the paced reading by the teacher. To the incredulous NET observer, it

seems that all the teacher has to do is to say, “Go”, and the passage will be reproduced verbatim (Bunce, 2000b). Students who do not “prepare themselves” (i.e. memorise) for these tests, typically do very badly, with marks being deducted for every error. This means that a student can achieve 100 percent one week and 10 percent, or even a negative score, the following week. The most common punishment for a bad score will be for the student to have to memorise the passage, as they should have done in the first place, and then to recite it verbally to their teacher at the door of the staffroom. When the follow-up recitation is demanded on the same day, as can sometimes be the case, students will spend their intervening lessons “swotting” the passage under their desks. This practice of “learned (or seen) dictation” is close to universal throughout the HKSAR’s primary and secondary schools, despite the efforts of NETs, some leading academics, the EMB and newspaper columnists to try to reduce or eliminate it (Bunce, 2000b and 2005a). It is a “given”. It is centrally important to classroom practice and discipline, and teachers continually claim that “the parents want it”.

One wonders how Biggs, Watkins, Marton, Tang, Kember and Gow, cited earlier, would classify this practice, if not as *rote learning*. The crux of the matter is whether such a practice can lead to longer-term retention. Many teachers will claim that it does, and that this is how they have learned their own English. My observations of the practice lead me to believe that these passages are quickly forgotten, for they are often inane and irrelevant to student lives. This contrasts sharply with the deeper power and beauty of the classical Chinese-language texts that are learned and dictated in the same fashion. Perhaps the quality of the text has something to do with the depth of meaning and the depth of understanding.

Salili (1996, p. 97) concedes that less-able and low-achieving Hong Kong students “may have no other choice but to engage in surface learning in order to survive in the highly competitive education system of Hong Kong”, and Watkins (1996, p. 116) allows that “problems with English as the language of instruction influence many students to rote learn, at least at early secondary level”. In a study of Form Four (Year Ten) reading behaviour in Hong Kong, Johnson and Yau (1996) observed that students often resort to memory-based

“survival strategies” when they cannot understand English text. These strategies are “developed and passed on from student to student, and even taught, and their use [is] encouraged by some, perhaps many Hong Kong teachers”. These authors acknowledge that “it is not just single statements that are memorised, but complete discourses ... and students with what would appear to be an inadequate level of English may obtain high grades through judicious use of memorised material” (Johnson and Yau, 1996, p. 132). I have seen numerous examples of memorised “model essays” in the open-ended writing tests that my Hong Kong international school sets as entrance exams. Even entry to the summer school programme, of which the *Word Wizards*® course is an integral part, is assessed by vaguely themed essays, which lend themselves to preparation in advance.

In a report entitled, *Legal Education and Training in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong Law Society, 2000, p. 9), the consultants remarked that the University of Hong Kong’s law students took a “utilitarian approach” to their education. The legal practitioners consulted for the report summed up the problems that they had experienced with Hong Kong law graduates as “emanating from the school system, [comprising] language problems, learning by rote, learning in order to accumulate knowledge and deference to authority”. In defence of their graduates, however, the authors of the report conceded that their students had the ability to think critically, but that they “fell back into a memorising-of-content/learning-by-rote approach” because this is what the examination system, at school and at university, continually demanded of them (Hong Kong Law Society, 2000, p. 26).

Clearly, there is still a long way to go in getting to the bottom of Hong Kong’s Chinese students’ approaches to learning, which will probably have far more to do with what is asked of them by way of academic assessment than what they might report in surveys and interviews about learning. It is also clear that the language of instruction (and assessment) and the individual’s literacy skills will play a role in determining whether students merely opt to “survive” or whether they will seek to achieve a deeper understanding of the academic material that is presented to them.

## THE CHINESE WRITTEN SCRIPT

The nature of what constitutes “Chinese” language and its relationship to “Chinese” writing is far from clear-cut. In a recent book about the Chinese writing system, Unger (2004, p. ix) writes that “there is probably no subject on earth [about which] more misinformation is purveyed and more misunderstandings circulated than Chinese characters”. De Francis of the University of Hawaii makes the same point in his scholarly book on the world’s writing systems, *Visible Speech*, in which he declares the description of Chinese characters as ‘pictographic’, to be “intellectual muddle-headedness on a par with discoursing about astronomy in terms of astrology” (1989, p. ix).

The spoken vocabulary of Chinese is represented in writing by a vast number of visually complex characters, of which children are expected to learn approximately 3,000 by the time they leave the Sixth Grade, with thousands more to be learned during high school and further studies. While this task may appear daunting, it should be noted that the most common one hundred characters account for nearly half of all of those that appear in a typical modern Chinese text and that the most common 1,100 account for about ninety percent (Unger, 2004, p. 4). Despite the widespread belief that there is just one Chinese script available to speakers of all the regional dialects, it should be noted that there are currently *two* Chinese scripts: a simplified Chinese script, introduced after the communist revolution in mainland China, and the traditional script, used in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as by Chinese minorities in other countries. Structurally, simplified and traditional Chinese scripts are similar, but the simplified script is visually less complex (fewer strokes), as it was designed to make reading and writing available to the “masses”. Traditional script can be written from left-to-right, right-to-left, or top-bottom from the left- or the right-hand side of the page. In Hong Kong, the city’s wide array of vernacular newspapers and celebrity magazines can easily make use of all these writing styles on a single page!

The number of brush strokes in a traditional Chinese character can vary from one to over twenty, with an average of fourteen (Hoosain, 1991, p. 5). The

sequence of strokes is prescribed by convention and correct stroke-sequencing is emphasised in learning to write. About ninety percent of Chinese words are represented by two components, one a *radical*, which carries information about meaning, and one a *phonetic*, which provides information about pronunciation. The information carried by the phonetic, however, is not governed by rules, and this type of script does not operate in any systematic way, such as the sound system of an alphabetic language. Each Chinese phonetic has to be learned individually, and there are approximately 800 of them. In modern usage, only twenty percent or so of combined characters share the pronunciation of their phonetic. The “cueing” function of the radical is, in practice, of greater significant assistance in working out meaning, and there are some 200 or so of these (Hoosain, 1991, pp. 10-11). Some phonetic indicators have more than one pronunciation. So, neither the radical nor the phonetic components produce an exact indication of meaning or sound, but each provides an approximation. A possible analogy for English speakers is the party game of Charades played out in graphical form, where the phonetic provides a “sounds-like” clue and the radical provides a category. Extending this analogy, one could propose a phonetic that indicated “sounds like horn” and a radical that indicated a cereal crop, thus producing the English word, “corn”.

Chinese languages are tonal, with Mandarin, the national language, having four or five tones, and spoken Cantonese estimated to have nine (So, 1998). A change in the pitch of a phoneme will change its meaning, in other words, the same consonant-vowel combinations with different tones will have different meanings. The phonetic components in Chinese characters “suggest” pronunciations, but characters cannot be sounded out as in English. In some cases, this phonetic component is the same as the pronunciation of the character’s meaning, but in many cases the full character has a different pronunciation. So, pronouncing Chinese characters involves making reference to stored representations of each particular character, rather than assembling phonological sub-components into words, as one does in an alphabetic script (Bookheimer, 2001, p. A1).

Contrary to the many claims about the universality of Chinese character-use throughout China, there are many carry-over effects from dialectal differences into word order. Hoosain (1991, p. 21) gives the example of spoken Cantonese, the everyday language spoken in Hong Kong, and its different rules regarding word order compared with standard written Chinese. The Cantonese speaker would say, "I gave an apple to him", whereas standard written Chinese prefers the word order, "I gave him an apple". While this particular sentence can be understood in either sequence, there will be other situations in which meanings might be changed if the word order changed. This is particularly relevant when one remembers that the Chinese script provides no spaces between groups of characters to indicate word boundaries.

### **LEARNING TO WRITE THE CHINESE SCRIPT**

So, how are Chinese youngsters taught to read and write the Chinese script? In mainland China there is a national curriculum and some seventy percent of primary schools use the same set of Chinese-language textbooks and teacher guidebooks, published by the People's Education Press (Wu, Li and Anderson, 1999). Over the six grades of primary schooling, students should have mastered some 3,000 characters. Characters and word learning are emphasised in the first three grades and then the emphasis will shift to the reading and comprehension of texts of a paragraph or more in length. The typical order of introduction of Chinese characters will be from single-element characters to compounds, from high-frequency to low-frequency characters and from regular to irregular characters.

The typical routine for teaching a new character is to first pronounce it, then look at its features, discriminate it from others, then write it in the air, rehearsing the order of strokes, then analyse its structure and explain its meaning. Students write the character repeatedly on squared paper, up to as many as 50 or 100 times. Each lesson in the early grades might introduce between five to eight characters (Wu, Li and Anderson, 1999, p. 578). Teaching styles will vary from classroom to classroom, with some instructors

doing more pattern analysis and story-telling than others. Wu, Li and Anderson (1999, p. 585) lament that too often characters are taught using “arbitrary mnemonics instead of highlighting structurally significant features”, which would help students to take more of an analytical approach.

There are three broad approaches to the teaching of characters, each of which emerged from a particular era of educational thinking. The first two of these are very evident in Hong Kong schools, but the third, the use of the alphabetic *hanyu pinyin* system is uncommon in the SAR’s schools. Hong Kong’s fundamental approach to the teaching of Chinese characters represents a pre-Mao-era style of instruction, even though it may be taught using apparently lively and colourful textbooks. The *pinyin* approach taken by the Putonghua teacher in my first school met with mixed reactions. The new arrivals from the mainland, such as the boy whose prowess with alphabetic pseudowords was mentioned in Chapter Two, revelled in this familiar approach, while most of the Hong Kong teachers of Chinese Language (i.e. Cantonese) had misgivings, as it was not the style in which they had learned to write.

The oldest and most traditional style of teaching Chinese characters uses a “concentrated character approach”, in which characters are organised by categories and studied family-by-family. While students learn to quickly recognise familiar patterns, this approach also requires them to learn seldom-used characters which happen to fit the pattern. One disadvantage of this approach is that it takes a long time before learners can use their knowledge to read meaningful “words” or sentences (Wu, Li and Anderson, 1999). A “diversified approach” to the teaching of characters was developed during the first half of the twentieth century. This approach emphasises that characters are parts of words, words are parts of sentences, sentences are parts of paragraphs and that new characters can be learned gradually, in context, while reading. These two non-*pinyin* approaches have subtle parallels in the two major schools of thought which continue to influence early literacy teaching in English, with the concentrated method echoing a phonics approach, and the diversified method echoing some aspects of whole-language instruction.

By the 1950s in China, teachers had become rather dissatisfied with the diversified approach, and many had adopted features of the concentrated approach, organising characters by category and then providing meaningful texts. Some suggested grouping characters by their phonetics, some preferred to group them by their radicals. In the 1980s, the newest of the three methods, *hanyu pinyin*, was added to the national curriculum. Most of the early characters are now introduced using this romanised, alphabetic script, which represents the syllables of spoken Chinese. *Pinyin* is taught during the first ten weeks of the first grade, and it can be seen in all the first and second grade textbooks, written above the simplified characters. From the third grade onward, *pinyin* is mainly used for unfamiliar characters. According to Wu, Li and Anderson (1999), the latest textbooks used in China have elements of all of these methods, and they use simplified characters throughout. From the concentrated character method comes the teaching of parts of characters and the grouping of them by category. From the diversified method comes the strategy of including unfamiliar characters in meaningful groups, sentences and texts, and the use of *pinyin* is most clearly seen in books for younger learners.

### **SCRIPTAL DIFFERENCES AND DIFFICULTIES IN HONG KONG**

In Hong Kong, with its “political preference” for traditional characters, its Cantonese language (many mainlanders would say *dialect*) not always matching the phonetic elements of characters, and occasional word-order problems, trying to establish an analytical approach to character learning is a considerable challenge. Hong Kong children can learn to write good Chinese characters without knowing Mandarin, but it has inherent difficulties. To go from a spoken Cantonese phrase to a written Chinese one, the child must learn that certain characters need to be inserted, deleted or replaced to create an acceptable written phrase (Kwo, 1992, p. 205). It would seem that “many Cantonese speakers are inclined to write a kind of Chinese that is considered odd or even incomprehensible to Putonghua [Mandarin] speakers” (Kwo, 1992, p. 205). Even the characters for classroom vocabulary such as desk, ruler, ball-pen and eraser are written differently in Hong Kong, compared to the mainland (Figure 4.1).

English	(Hong Kong) Chinese	(China) Chinese
desk	書枱	書桌
ball-pen	原子筆	圓珠筆
ruler	間尺	尺
eraser	擦紙膠	橡皮
blackboard duster	粉擦	板擦
classroom	班房	教室

**Figure 4.1: Differences in written Chinese between Hong Kong and Mainland China (Kwo, 1992, p. 206)**

Cantonese functions very strongly as a symbol of cultural and group identity for all Hong Kong people (Pierson, 1992, 1998; Li, 1998; Patri and Pennington, 1998; Richards, 1998; Tsui et al., 1999). Its speakers are proud of its close links to the most ancient form of the Chinese language, and of their shared heritage with the people of the Pearl River Delta region. Interestingly, despite all the efforts of the central Chinese authorities to promote Mandarin, Guangdong Province (formerly Canton) is still largely Cantonese speaking. Even in education, Mandarin has mainly been the language of instruction in designated “key point schools”, while the majority were still using Cantonese in the 1990s (Pierson, 1992, p. 185). Since the creation of two very successful “special economic zones” in the province over the last two decades, and the continuing influx of people from all over China, it should be noted that the use of Mandarin in the southern regions has become more widespread.

According to Tsui et al. (1999, p. 210), Hong Kong has its “own variety” of Cantonese, which differs from the Cantonese spoken over the border, and Li (1998, p. 164) is amused by the idiomatic, “invented words and phrases” used in Hong Kong’s high-circulation, tabloid Chinese-language newspapers. Luke

(1998, p.148) sees two distinct varieties of Cantonese in Hong Kong. One he describes as a “high” variety, which is more formal and associated with higher education. This is used for such functions as public announcements, news broadcasts, formal speeches and lectures. The other is a “low” variety, which is used in informal situations such as the home, between friends and in the neighbourhood. Whether this is truly a situation of *diglossia*, in which two distinct varieties of a language co-exist in one society, or whether it is more “fluid” than that, resembling what Bernstein (1971) would call an elaborated-code versus a restricted-code situation, relating to social class factors, is a subject of some debate (Luke, 1998, p. 157; Tong, Adamson and Che, 2000, p. 160).

In a recent book on the rising use of written Cantonese in Hong Kong, entitled *Cantonese as Written Language: The Growth of a Written Chinese Vernacular*, linguist Don Snow (2004, p. 2) writes that “the task confronting [Hong Kong] students is similar to that which Dutch people would face if they had to learn to do all of their reading and writing in German”. He tells of the puzzlement experienced by mainland and Taiwanese visitors when reading advertising signs and billboards in Hong Kong, and estimates that “perhaps a quarter or more of [these] boards have sentences containing Chinese characters used in unfamiliar and often unintelligible ways, not to mention some characters that are completely new to the visitor”. Snow provides a large and fascinating body of evidence to demonstrate that the use of written Cantonese has increased significantly in recent decades, and he attributes this to the rising group identity of “Hong Kong people” in greater China. The commercial prestige of Hong Kong has no doubt contributed greatly to the vitality of the language, and the fact that the school system now uses Cantonese as a medium of instruction guarantees that it will also grow in use as a written language. Snow describes the current situation as a “diglossic balance” of written scripts, with Standard Chinese being used for texts with serious or formal purposes, and a written Cantonese in texts which attempt to capture spoken language for lighter, more entertaining purposes. He concludes that written Cantonese acts as “an in-group language that allows Cantonese speakers to express the local Hong Kong component of their identity” (Snow, 2004, p. 217).

Because the spoken language in Hong Kong does not correspond closely to the standard written form, there are complications inherent in any written text that may be used in schools. In Hong Kong, written Chinese can often become a “mixture of standard written Chinese, classical Chinese and Cantonese dialectal features”, according to Luke (1998, p. 157). The dichotomy that exists between the oral and written aspects of the language in Hong Kong has led to the Chinese Language curriculum in schools being focused on discrete aspects of the language, rather than being more contextualised and holistic, as one might expect in a mother-tongue teaching situation. Teachers “may not see a way to use contextualised tasks to help children learn the ideographic [sic] Chinese characters” (Tong, Adamson and Che, 2000, p. 160). According to these researchers (p. 166), the teaching of Chinese characters has “traditionally relied on memorisation of stroke order, even though there are pictorial and phonetic clues to assist in recognition and retention”.

Jean Nicol, an educational psychologist with an occasional column in the *South China Morning Post*, makes the observation that Hong Kong Chinese children learning to read Chinese script “are only vaguely aware of the phonetic component of characters, if at all”. These children “simply encode characters as a series of impenetrable, unconnected emblems and memorise the pronunciation along with the character as a whole” (2004, A15). In her view, Chinese language teachers see the explicit teaching of the phonetic components of characters as “counterproductive”, because only “about 23 percent of the compound characters in school Chinese are perfectly regular”. This is the very same argument that is sometimes raised when it comes to the irregularities of the English spelling-sound system. Nicol argues that “partial data” is still enormously helpful in either language. On this point, she makes reference to the research work of Anderson and his colleagues regarding reading instruction in China. These researchers argue vehemently for there to be more explicit teaching of the internal structure of characters, believing that this can help “average and low-performing children who tend not to make discoveries about structure unless prompted by the teacher”. They urge Chinese language teachers to “teach reading in a manner that allows more

children to understand that problem solving is essential in reading” (Wu, Li and Anderson, 1999, p. 585).

How similar this advice sounds to the calls for more explicit teaching of the internal structure of English words. It would seem that far too many Hong Kong children miss out all around when it comes to analytical approaches to the “printed word”. Anecdotal evidence of this learning deficiency can be seen in the student quotations which head the various chapters of this thesis. Common patterns in these comments will be explored in Chapter Seven.

### **BISCRIPITAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN HONG KONG SCHOOLS**

Formal schooling starts early in Hong Kong, with children going to kindergartens or nursery schools from the ages of three to five. While the majority of kindergarten instructors have only had a secondary-school level of education themselves (Luk, 1999, p. 232), they nevertheless become every child’s first formal language teachers. Most kindergartens expect their children, on completion of the upper class, to be able to count to 100, add and subtract up to 10, write 50 English words, recognise 100 Chinese characters and be able to write 50 of them (Opper, 1999, p. 353). These tiny children have homework, textbooks, tests and exams, not to mention extra tuition in playing a musical instrument or ballet lessons. Many of them will need to present themselves for interviews at prestigious primary schools, for which they will be well groomed and thoroughly prepared. Such interviews often require the presentation of a folder containing the child’s *curriculum vitae!*

Over the last three years, I have participated in weekend voluntary work in a Cantonese-medium Hong Kong kindergarten, as part of a social service project with my international secondary school students. During one particular session, it was amazing to see the little children “read” (recognise, surely) all of the animal words that the secondary students had written in English on flashcards for a session on the story of Noah’s Ark. The kindergarten teachers would not allow us to put any illustrations on these cards. The children could not be faulted. They knew *sheep, duck, monkey,*

*elephant* and *horse*, as well as the more common domestic animal names - all written on decontextualised cards. At other sessions during the year, however, these same children misread the words, *donkey* and *turkey*, as “monkey” in both cases, thereby providing strong evidence of their visual memorisation techniques. At this age, this type of visual learning is the norm in Hong Kong, regardless of the written script. It is widely employed by young learners who need to memorise quite extensive English and Chinese vocabulary lists. These can include such gems as “A for astronaut” and “C for chimpanzee”. This whole-word learning occurs in the apparent absence of any phonemic awareness training or letter-sound-correspondence instruction in the case of English, or character stroke-pattern recognition in Chinese. At this impressionable age, Hong Kong children’s first exposure to literacy work is overwhelmingly visual. Johnson and Yau (1996, p. 124) have dubbed this whole-word, non-analytical approach to reading, “lexical processing”, and they argue that it is the most common language teaching practice to be found in the HKSAR.

As Hong Kong’s young Chinese children move up to primary school studies, the emphasis in Chinese Language instruction in the early years is on the building of a storehouse of characters. The EMB’s Learning Targets for Key Stage One (Primary 1 – 3) Chinese Language are as follows (Figure 4.2):

Reading	Understands characters, phrases and sentences Understands paragraphing Understands the use of punctuation Understands the main theme of the text Develops an interest in reading
Writing	Writes new characters and phrases Writes sentences, paragraphs and different types of composition Develops a habit of writing
Listening	Understands different types of oral content: story, report and conversation Develops a good listening attitude
Speaking	Uses different types of oral content: story, report and conversation Develops a good speaking attitude

**Figure 4.2: Learning Targets in Key Stage One Chinese Language**  
(Tong, Adamson and Che, 2000, p. 160)

Textbooks in the later primary years, while very colourful and highly illustrated, largely rely on passages of model literary texts, where the main focus is on the mastery of individual sentence patterns and the recitation of poems, the stress in the latter being more on pronunciation than on literary appreciation. According to Luk (1999, p. 250), these chosen texts “are almost all from other times and places, and pieces by Hong Kong authors or about local situations are rarely used”. Such texts do not relate directly to the students’ experiences of growing up in Hong Kong, nor do they provide models of younger voices.

During the years 1945 to 1965 the Hong Kong colonial government exerted a strong and direct control over the curriculum in schools in its attempts to counter what it saw as the threatening influences of both the KMT (Kuomintang, the nationalists) and the CCP (Communist Party of China). The end result was a “depoliticised, decontextualised and abstract curriculum content within the context of an elitist system of secondary schooling” (Morris and Chan, 1997, p. 115). It was aimed at teaching character recognition and the sentence patterns of formal, written Chinese. Despite the advent of mass secondary education from 1965 to 1984, the Chinese curriculum still emphasised “a detached, high-status knowledge with little *real-life* spoken or written language” (Morris and Chan, 1997, p. 115). Interestingly, the colonial authorities only declared “Chinese” to be an official language in Hong Kong in 1975 (Pierson, 1992). During the 1990s, when Hong Kong’s return to China was imminent, there were some attempts to change the focus of Chinese language teaching to a more functional and communicative style, with more mainland texts becoming available. In 1996, the Hong Kong Education Department even produced a teaching kit for schools, which introduced the simplified characters used on the mainland. The idea never caught on, and the use of *pinyin* is not well understood in Hong Kong (Adamson and Lai, 1997, p. 89). It is interesting to note here that the Education Department also produced a booklet entitled, *The Teaching of Phonics* in 1993, and that this publication suffered the same fate. Morris and Chan (1997, p. 116) make the wry observation that, “the rhetoric of reform is not always an accurate indicator of either the adopted or the implemented curriculum”.

In a book entitled, *Reading Development in Chinese Children*, edited by two prominent linguists at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (McBride-Chang and Chen, 2003), a section dedicated to the Hong Kong Chinese language situation concludes with the bald comment that, “the basic approach to Chinese reading instruction is sheer memorisation of character names” (Cheung and Ng, 2003, p. 9). By contrast, for Singaporean children “the main approach to reading instruction is alphabetic transcription ... characters are also broken into their radical and phonetical components ... to reveal the systematic relationship between character and radical meaning”. In Taiwan, “children learn characters by repeatedly writing them together with their Zhuyin equivalent” (a phonetic transcription at the level of onsets and rimes, rather than phonemes). These authors make the strong point that, as the Mandarin-based lexical and syntactic structures of written Chinese are quite different from those of spoken Cantonese, that “Hong Kong children [are] more subject to speech-reading mismatch than children in mainland China, Singapore or Taiwan”. They also note that there has been no systematic research on the impact that very early English language learning has had on Chinese reading development in either Hong Kong or Singapore. On the mainland and in Taiwan, children do not start learning English until the late primary years (Cheung and Ng, 2003, pp. 9-15).

The Johnson and Yau study (1996), referred to earlier with regard to the use of “model essays” and a “lexical-processing” approach to reading, attributed some of the blame for their students’ whole-word style of English reading to an educational context in which the receptive skills of reading and listening are over-emphasised to the detriment of the productive skills of speaking and writing. Typically, Hong Kong’s large class sizes and teacher-centred methods limit the opportunities for students to speak English in the classroom, and there is “little or no opportunity or incentive for them to do so outside the classroom” (Johnson and Yau, 1996, p. 124). Far too many of Hong Kong’s 114 EMI secondary schools fail to create anything remotely resembling an English-speaking environment, effectively limiting students’ exposure to the language to the pages of their textbooks. In such circumstances, it is difficult to even describe some English-language classroom activities as “reading” at all. Johnson and Yau argue strongly that

most Hong Kong students learn “how to deal with text”, rather than actually reading it. They see this as a particularly worrisome learning strategy in many English-medium instructional settings. As students move from Chinese-medium primary schools to English-medium secondary schools, “there is a gap between the level of proficiency students have and the level they need in order to be able to follow the curriculum through English. As a result, many of these students will develop “survival strategies” that will help them to complete their classroom tasks rather than to understand the content of the texts” (Johnson and Yau, 1996, p. 125). The “meanings” that they will derive from these texts may not always be those that were intended by their writers.

Students who are “lexical processors” of English will tend to focus on the content words of a reading text and infer their grammatical relationship to each other in a top-down fashion, not unlike the way a Cantonese reader of a Mandarin text will do. The inferences that they make, however, may at best lack precision, and at worst, lead to complete misunderstandings. Such students are basically just “sampling” the text, rather than reading it as continuous prose.

Johnson and Yau (1996) worry that such survival strategies, once established, will be very hard habits to break and that these learners will probably continue to use them in all their future reading activities. There is a real tension here for Hong Kong readers who need to “get through” pages of English-language text in order to learn their science, economics and geography. Their need for silent, factual information far exceeds any need to prepare themselves for classroom discussion. This “mining-approach” to English text places a far higher priority on the spelling of key items of vocabulary than it does on pronunciation. Students know that if they can stand up and spell out the correct answers to their teachers’ questions, that this will be acceptable. The teacher will probably supply the appropriate pronunciation at the time, but the student will still earn some praise for providing the right answer. After all, there are no “oral exams” to worry about in the content courses.

In a study of word-learning conducted with upper-primary aged children in Hong Kong, Leong et al. (2005) found that these young students showed a much greater sensitivity to, and a reliance on, the spelling patterns of English words than they did to their sound patterns. These researchers saw this as a possible consequence of the *memory-and-meaning emphasis* that so dominates literacy instruction in the HKSAR, in both English and Chinese, to the detriment of more analytical approaches to either Chinese characters or English word-building.

In my international school, I was once invited to address the mathematics department regarding the clear tendency of our Hong Kong Chinese students to merely “sample” when reading continuous text. These teachers were keen to find ways to help their mathematically bright students to handle mathematical problems that were expressed in *words*. Time and again, these students would miss the key relational words in this type of problem and wrongly apply their otherwise excellent knowledge of mathematics. I advised them to spend some time reading these kinds of questions aloud, to ask the students’ peers to read them aloud, to ask students to re-word the questions, to demonstrate the importance of the key words in questions by altering them slightly and seeing the effects on the solutions, to pay close attention to the “little words” (often prepositions) that can have so much power, and to insist that students make it a habit to underline all of the “indicator words” in such written problems.

The survival strategies that students develop for reading may even *inhibit* the development of more valid strategies. Unfortunately, these coping strategies are often reinforced and encouraged by tutorial schools and teachers who are over-focused on performance in exams. Johnson and Yau put it this way:

Survival strategies enable teachers and students to maintain the appearance of a credible teaching and learning environment. It is acceptable (to teachers, school principals, parents and students) for teachers to set tasks that are difficult and for students to perform badly, because the potential for improvement is there. It would not be acceptable to acknowledge that no learning is possible, nor is it acceptable for students to do nothing when a task has been set ... Survival strategies enable at least the appearance of an effective teaching and learning environment to be maintained.

(Johnson and Yau, 1996, p. 132)

Such an *illusion* of learning is what probably permits students with relatively low levels of English to obtain passable grades through the careful insertion of memorised material into examination answers. The extremely competitive nature of Hong Kong education is such that at least one full-time tutorial school in the city is able to thrive as a business by providing current and potential students of my K-12 international school with strategic tutorial support. Any new courses that we develop are very quickly picked up in the advertising material of this “shadow school”. I have also heard of “agents” from tutorial centres waiting outside various prestigious EMI schools and offering students money for copies of their school’s internal examination papers.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has provided some further details of the cultural and societal contexts in which Hong Kong’s students of English learn to operate. Despite most outsiders’ lingering perceptions of Hong Kong as a “British outpost”, it should now be clear that this is most definitely a Chinese city with only a rather thin “British veneer”. The learning of English in such a social and cultural context is highly valued, but it presents an extremely challenging undertaking in the existing education system. Current government-led proposals to reduce the number of EMI secondary schools and to promote more “mother-tongue teaching” (i.e. Cantonese) are meeting with enormous resistance from parent organisations, ex-student associations and school-sponsoring bodies. The loss of EMI status in any of the 114 schools that cherish this prestigious label would precipitate widespread “loss of face”, even though it is widely acknowledged that many of them are pseudo-EMI, and greatly lacking in creating anything like an English-speaking environment for their students. While this debate rages in the pages of the local press, more and more CMI schools are quietly switching to EMI teaching in their post-compulsory, upper-secondary classes. This is a decision that school-based management bodies have the legal right to make, for whatever reasons they see fit.

It would seem that there is no holding back the prestigious power of EMI status at the present time in the Hong Kong community, regardless of the efficacy of current teaching practices. Rather than reject the notion outright, as some political leaders are clearly attempting to do, Hong Kong's educational community has to pay serious attention to up-grading the quality of English-language learning and teaching in the territory. The demand for English is as high as ever, but the HKSAR government is clearly unable to match this demand with its current educational provision. Less obvious, and less widely reported, is a short-fall in the wider delivery of Mandarin-language education. For the HKSAR to achieve its own stated goal of a trilingual and biliterate citizenry, there needs to be a major re-examination of current pedagogical practices in language education in the territory.

One promising new development on the fringes of the education scene in Hong Kong is the application of new and exciting technologies to brain research, which has given neuroscientists amazing new insights into the workings of the human brain and the different ways in which it processes alphabetic and non-alphabetic written text. Ironically, much of this research has been conducted right here at the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, without it necessarily finding its way into local educational discussions or recommendations for practice. The following chapter will look at the findings that have come from this new field of research, and any implications there might be for Hong Kong's biscriptal learning environment.