

# A Review of the Status of English in Hong Kong

Tianrong Li

Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai 519000 Zhuhai, Guangdong, China

---

**Abstract:** The status of English in Hong Kong has been controversial. Scholars like Luke, Richards and David Li have made their efforts to reach some groundbreaking discoveries. However, since 1999 when David Li updated his survey, Hong Kong has witnessed significant changes in all social sectors in the past 20 years. This made this issue more complicated yet interesting. People have good reasons to be concerned about the status of English in Hong Kong, in that it may influence Hong Kong's future development. In this paper, the status of English in Hong Kong and the possible reasons that render its present status will be analyzed.

**Keywords:** Status of English; Hong Kong; Bilingualism

---

## Introduction

The status of English in Hong Kong has been controversial. Scholars like Luke, Richards and David Li have made their efforts to reach some groundbreaking discoveries. However, since 1999 when David Li updated his survey, Hong Kong has witnessed significant changes in all social sectors in the past ten years. This made this issue more complicated yet interesting. People have good reasons to be concerned about the status of English in Hong Kong, in that it may influence Hong Kong's future development.

## Foreign language versus Second language

People have been arguing whether English should be referred to as a foreign language or a second language in Hong Kong. The discussion should be started with the definition and difference between a foreign language and a second language.

According to the definition given in Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, "a foreign language refers to a language which is not the native language of large numbers of people in a particular country or region, is not used as medium of instruction in schools, and is not widely used as a medium of communication in government, media, etc." (Richards, 265) On the other hand, a second language means "a language that plays a major role in a particular country or region though it may not be the first language of many people who use it. It fulfills many important functions in those countries (including the business of education and government) and learning the second language is necessary to be successful within that context." (Richards, 607) From the two definitions one can see that the fundamental difference between a second language and a foreign language is whether it is widely used in all kinds of social domains, whether is used in both formal and informal contexts for the sake of communication.

It can be seen that the status of English in Hong Kong is apparently higher than a foreign language. The basic reason is that it's frequently used in many social domains, and it is difficult for people who do not understand English to achieve academic and career development. Here are the details: First of all, English is the official language in HK, most governmental and legal documents are written in English. For example, when you visit the website of HKSAR government, English is one of the mediums. In education domain, the medium of instruction is English in universities and the textbooks of all subjects are written in English except Chinese. Most importantly, students must discuss with their classmates and teachers in English in class. Thirdly, in daily life, English is commonly used in street signs, MTR stations and restaurants. For example, the menu is written in both English and Chinese in a restaurant. When I was an exchange student in Lingnan University, what surprises me most is that a local waiter can not understand my Putonghua, but he can understand English very well. In employment domain, according to a survey on the use of English conducted by Hong Kong government in 2012, 43.3% of the people send emails to their colleges in English, and 44.3% of the interviewee write working reports, proposals in English and read English books, newspapers, documents and web pages for work purposes. In a nutshell, English is so widely used in many social contexts in Hong Kong that it can not be simply regarded as a foreign language.

It seems that English has permeated into people's daily life. Then should English be counted as a second language? I found this argument worths questioning after reading thought the results of the previously mentioned survey. The household survey is on the use of language in Hong Kong. The subjects are randomly chosen and they are all local people aged from 6 to 65.

First of all, from the perspective of people's mastery of English. Among 5,615,100 interviewees, when they are asked to evaluate their competence of spoken English, only 23.7% of them regard themselves as very good or good speakers. 36.9% of them are average speakers and 39.5% perceives their English as not so good or even no knowledge. As for the writing competence, only 24.2% of Hong

Kong people thinks they are very good or good at writing in English.37.5% of them are average, and 38.3% are regarded as not so good or with no knowledge. From the statistics, it can be seen that a large proportion of Hong Kong people have not reached the level of excellence in both spoken and written English.

In daily life, the subjects of this survey are asked about their frequency of using English under different situations, such as chatting with spouse, children parents and friends, watching TV, seeing movies and listening to and singing songs. The percentage of people who often or sometimes used spoken English when chatting is 9.5% .This is a rather small percentage. Therefore English is not as commonly used in Hong Kong in interpersonal life as in other countries where English is a second language.

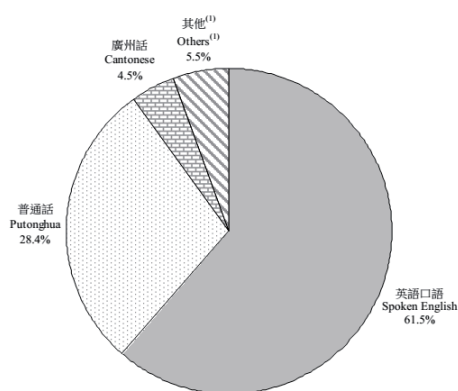
In the employment domain, interviewees are asked about the frequency of using English under different situations, “including meeting and chatting with colleagues and external clients.” For frequency of using spoken English, the proportions of those who often or sometimes used spoken English is 29.8% for chatting with colleagues and 34.7% for chatting with external clients. Although Hong Kong is not a monolingual society, the frequency of English used in the employment domain is just mediocre.

## Auxiliary language versus value-added language

Due to its special status , English has been recorded as auxiliary language by Luke and Richards, and as value-added language as David Li. I tend to agree that English is a value-added language rather than an auxiliary language.

Considering its instrumental value for students to go further study and for white-collars to get promotion, it’s self-evident that English is endowed with significant market value. “Among 3,398,600 employed persons aged 15 to 65, 61.5% cited that English was the spoken language that they would like to learn for the sake of work. For written language, the corresponding percentages for English and Chinese were 83.4% and 10.7% respectively. Among people who are attending schools, 71.7 % said they are willing to spend spare time on studying spoken English. In earlier childhood education, some 49.5% said that they often or sometimes used English to communicate with their children.” (As displayed in chart 1 and chart 2 below, quoted from the survey) The reason is that they think it’s better to get their children exposed to English earlier. These datas all prove that English in Hong Kong is a type of capital, which is favorable for people’s career success.

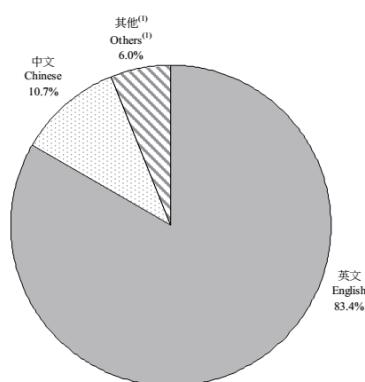
Chart 1 Percentage of employed persons aged 15 to 65 by spoken language which they would learn/further study most for the sake of work



註釋：(1) 包括「不需要學習/進修廣州話/英語口語/普通話」。

Note: (1) Including "learning/studying Cantonese/spoken English/ Putonghua was not required".

Chart 2 Percentage of employed persons aged 15 to 65 by written language which they would learn/further study most for the sake of work



註釋：(1) 包括「不需要學習/進修中文/英文」。

Note: (1) Including "learning/studying Chinese/English was not required".

## Possible Reasons

It can be seen that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the use of English in Hong Kong is constantly changing, which makes the status of English a more complicated issue. The distinctiveness of English’s status in Hong Kong may be attributed to the following factors.

Firstly , as a result of its history as a British colony ,English enjoys a distinctive status in Hong Kong.As an official language, it’s unavoidable that people who have to deal with government branches should be able to understand and use English.Secondly, the status of English in HK is elevated due to its uniqueness as an international financial center. In this metropolitan city, numerous multinational corporations require people who work in these skyscrapers to master English.Thus English is endowed with a higher status than foreign language based on these two reasons. Thirdly, the use of English in HK is largely influenced by people’s language attitude.For people of Hong Kong, “English is still a prestigious language for upward and outward mobility and therefore is indispensable even after the change of sovereignty.”(MEE-LING LAI,2005).Both students and employees are willing to improve their English in light of its high instrumental value, and students also agree that English is essential for the Hong Kong’s future development and prosperity. Last but not the least, language policy plays a significant role in the use of English in Hong Kong.Since the the policy of “bi-literacy and trilingualism” was enacted, Putonghua and mother tongue Cantonese is emphasized in secondary school education, which to some extent influence the frequency of English used in the education domain.

## References:

- [1] Jack C.Richards,(2005)Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.  
[2] Use of Language in HK.Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics.June 2014.