

普教中 language of education in Hong Kong:

In recent years, there have been strong complaints about the Hong Kong (HK) government's proposal to introduce Mandarin as the language of Chinese literary education in place of Cantonese. These come mainly from parents, who claim that Mandarin does little improvement if not actual detriment to their children's level of literary Chinese, and also from young citizens, who call for the preservation of Cantonese as the local language of HK for all purposes including education. These are all legitimate sentiments but hardly scientific/academic arguments. In this article, I propose evidence from sociolinguistic research for arguing that HK is **not** (yet) ready for adopting Mandarin as the official language of literary education and that in order to raise the level of Mandarin in HK, which is widely perceived as the ultimate goal of these reforms and is truly a noble cause in terms of facilitating communication between HK and the mainland, it is far more constructive and effective to improve the method of teaching Mandarin **as a foreign language** for which I suggest some useful strategies.

Mandarin in mainland vs Mandarin in Hong Kong:

In multilingual societies, it is widely observed that there is a systematic arrangement of different linguistic varieties in use, the classic formulation of which is Ferguson's 'diglossia' which argues that there is always a prestige variety which is used in formal 'high' (H) contexts (which include education) and a local vernacular reserved for common and mundane 'low' (L) functions. As mentioned in my last article, China has one of the densest dialectal concentrations in the world and this has similarly led to many diglossic communities throughout the country where Mandarin, the official *lingua franca*, is layered over the local vernacular. HK, likewise, is diglossic between Mandarin (H) and Cantonese (L), and given its historical status as a British colony, it also has English as another H variety and is hence a 'double-high' society. The argument that HK should adopt Mandarin as the language for education stems mainly from the fact that much of the mainland also use Mandarin for education (among many prototypical H functions), which is healthily counter-balanced by the local vernacular, and since there is as yet no sign of language attrition or language death, it is assumed that the same reforms can be realised in HK with no danger to the local Cantonese vernacular. These reforms are also intended to raise the level of Mandarin in HK which is notoriously poor as compared to the mainland, and since both HK and mainland Chinese communities are basically diglossic, it seems natural to introduce Mandarin as the official language of education as part of the wider movement to assimilate HK to mainland China.

There are some key differences between HK and mainland China, however, that have been overlooked, since a closer examination reveals that Mandarin is used

much more widely in the mainland than in HK (predictably). In the mainland, in addition to the local vernacular, Mandarin can easily be heard in many daily (L) activities due to the increasing level of mobility in China which entails that not every person is actually a local in a particular region. This is especially marked in big urban communities where Mandarin is regularly used in normal public settings in order to ensure successful and efficient communication. Furthermore, everyone in the mainland has relatively easy access to state media (e.g. television, radio, internet), all of which is conducted in standard Mandarin, and so Mandarin is very much an essential part of the daily lives of all mainland Chinese. Local dialects, on the other hand, while not (yet) threatened to the extent of being extinct, are really reserved for intimate domestic settings among family and friends, especially with elders, which is by no means a small and insignificant domain but is somewhat restricted. In this case, it is straightforward to integrate Mandarin within the education system in the mainland since it is already part of everyday linguistic discourse (both H and L).

HK, on the other hand, has a very different distribution of linguistic varieties, since although the exposure to Mandarin has risen significantly since the handover in 1997, Mandarin is still rarely used and is mainly reserved for communication with visitors from the mainland. In everyday discourse, Cantonese is firmly and exclusively the common language of communication and it extends to many H functions too as HK is still a special administrative region and has its own media functions, all of which are conducted in Cantonese. If anything, English is the other competing H variety as it is commonly used in schools not only for the teaching of English but also of nearly all subjects apart from Chinese, which leaves Mandarin really an external variety in HK which simply looks similar to the local language (Cantonese). However, one must not take linguistic similarity as identity, since Cantonese and Mandarin are sufficiently different and it is impossible to use them interchangeably so Mandarin cannot be used as the language of education as if it were Cantonese.

The critical difference between HK and mainland China, therefore, is that while both are diglossic, Mandarin is much more integrated and accessible in the mainland whereas in HK it is really a foreign, albeit cognate, language. To employ a foreign language as the language of education makes little sense as it is highly improbable that students will understand the content of their curricula effectively. Mandarin, therefore, should still be taught **as a foreign language** in HK, and it is in this area that I believe reforms should be made in order to improve the level of Mandarin in HK.

How raise the level of Mandarin in Hong Kong?

As outlined above, Mandarin in HK is essentially an external variety and as such it should be taught **as a foreign language** in schools on a par with English and all other foreign languages. Indeed, after 1997, Mandarin has been installed as an obligatory

subject in most (if not all) schools in HK and there has been a perceived improvement in the level of Mandarin in HK, which is encouraging. It seems that the school education of Mandarin is having a positive effect and it is advisable to stick with this policy and seek to raise the level of Mandarin in how it is taught in schools. As there are many linguistic similarities between Cantonese and Mandarin (and all Chinese dialects in general), Mandarin can be effectively taught differently from other foreign languages and here it is recommended that HK schools, in addition to using *pinyin* which is the standard method for learning/teaching Mandarin throughout the world, consider using dialect manuals (方言對照) to further students' awareness of the linguistic relationship between Chinese dialects, which should improve students' level not only of Mandarin (and other Chinese dialects) but maybe also of their native Cantonese, since they are gaining awareness of the linguistic affinities between different varieties of Chinese. This way Mandarin will no longer be externalized as a totally different variety from the students' native Cantonese (which it clearly is not) and can be acquired much more effectively and efficiently. One should be encouraged by the positive progress in the use of Mandarin in HK, and in order to take this further it is the author's opinion that reforms be made not in the choice of language but in the method of teaching it.