

Chinese Language Education in Hong Kong: Twenty Five Years of Educational Research in Hong Kong

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The learning of Chinese has experienced great changes over recent decades and, as a school subject, has dramatically increased in importance both in Hong Kong and around the world. This paper reviews a number of key educational research topics and issues in Chinese language education in Hong Kong, the focus being on processes of teaching and learning Chinese language as a school subject and across the curriculum, the reading and writing of Chinese characters, spoken communication and comprehension of oral Chinese, mechanisms and standards of assessment, the place of information and communication technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning of Chinese, and the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction in the classroom. The review is by no means comprehensive and, for the sake of brevity, some of the details offered about research into Chinese language education in Hong Kong are rather concise. It is hoped that this paper will

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highlight useful instructional implications for curriculum planners and front-line practitioners, as well as pointers for the direction of future research.

Key words: Chinese language education, Hong Kong, review

Introduction

Chinese has been spoken in Hong Kong for centuries. Colonial days saw the introduction of an educational system initially aimed at educating in English the children of the British occupiers (Education Department, 1989). After a century and a half, when Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony and was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, Chinese was being taught in almost every school in Hong Kong and departments and faculties of Chinese were present in most colleges and universities.

Academic staff in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong are well trained in research methodology and well versed in Western scholarly literature. Staff in University faculties and departments of Chinese Language and Literature, faculties of Education and departments of Curriculum Studies who have comprehensive knowledge bases that extend into traditions in the Mainland and research into the teaching of Chinese in Hong Kong has been informed by traditions and studies in both the East and West. Cross-department collaboration has meant that a broad range of skills has been able to be marshalled to inform and guide research into the teaching and learning of Chinese language in Hong Kong. The research methods and strategies engaged are rigorous, and sophisticated techniques of analysis have helped yield robust evidence that has attracted worldwide attention.

Traditional Chinese scholars hold the view that the rote learning of celebrated sections of text in Chinese is the ideal starting point for the young learner's mastery of Chinese, and many traditional-minded educators are convinced of the value of students being set the task of learning the Chinese language through memorising "good literature" (Tse et al., 1995, pp. 10–11). There may be grains of truth in this but such a long-accepted belief needed to be put to the test years ago. Regrettably, research into the teaching and learning of Chinese language has not been as practice-focused

as in other subject areas in China, due in part to the teacher training and research system operating there. In China, the training of teachers is organized by the Department of Chinese Language and Literature. Scholars in these Departments focus on Chinese linguistics, literature and culture and their main research interest is in the content and knowledge of literature and language, not on language education. The focus of much of their educational research is not on students but on text processing. Although study of the curriculum of Chinese Language is in the hands of the Department of Education, researchers in the Department are not selected on the basis of their expertise in the teaching and learning of Chinese. Their chief interest is curriculum organisation and they leave educational research to departments of psychology in universities. Researchers in these disciplines tend to concentrate on neurological, metacognitive and neurolinguistic aspects of processing images, words and sentences, not the comprehension of text or spoken discourse. In other words, for historical reasons, Chinese language educational research in the Mainland tends to look more at learning in the abstract and at a theoretical level, whereas the efforts of Hong Kong Chinese language researchers are deployed on finding ways to boost attainment levels in the classroom, improving the impact of teaching on learning and on involving parents and society into helping children learn.

In this paper, I review Chinese language education in Hong Kong over a quarter of a century, especially the teaching and learning of Chinese language in several major curriculum areas, in different phases of education and also important variables thought to significantly influence attainment and learning. The review is not comprehensive and, for the sake of brevity, some of the details about the research into Chinese language education in Hong Kong are rather sketchy.

The Chinese Language Curriculum

A wide spectrum of views can be found on what should be the central focus of the Chinese curriculum. The predominant foci reflect the integrationist and separationist views and approaches. The integrationist view holds that the subject of Chinese should serve two functions: the main focus should not be on teaching language and thinking skills but on learning how to use the language as a vehicle for accessing Chinese cultural and ethical values.

The separationist view advocates that the acquisition of language skills and thinking abilities should be the primary objective of Chinese language education in schools, and the transmission of cultural and ethical values should be a secondary objective. The integrationist view was prevalent in the 1950s (Tse et al., 1995) but, from the late 1960s, the separationist has gradually gained acceptance (龐德新, 1979).

In colonial times, the official syllabus in the 1990s stressed that the objectives of the subject of Chinese Language were to teach language, thinking and learning skills and to nurture cultural knowledge, personal and social responsibilities (Tse et al., 1995). However, since the transfer of sovereignty back to China in 1997, Hong Kong has drawn closer to the motherland and far-reaching education reforms have been carried out. The Curriculum Development Council (CDC) has been restructured and the school curriculum reformed (CDC, 1999).

A learner-focused Chinese curriculum has been encouraged in the best interest of students. It has an open and flexible curriculum framework and specifies key concepts, issues, skills, values, attitudes and generic elements of learning that suit the needs, interests and abilities of Hong Kong students and the educational direction of their schools. The student-focused spirit as a common and overriding principal for teaching (CDC, 1999) has been encouraged, and task-based and computer assisted learning is now featuring increasingly in the classroom. Since 2001, a new curriculum guide has been offered for Chinese Language, key learning areas being stressed including the learning of the Chinese registers for other subject areas on the timetable. Learning domains are listed, including language knowledge, language abilities (listening and speaking, reading, writing and integrated skills), learning processes, learning strategies and attitudes. Prescribed texts are no longer strictly assigned for public examinations and schools are free to develop their own school-based curriculum.

As Chinese language was the first key learning area to be implemented, the Education Bureau contracted research studies to evaluate the Chinese curriculum. 黃顯華(2000) and his research team conducted several research that probed into the new Chinese Language curriculum in primary and secondary schools. They published over 10 technical reports based on the findings of their studies. They found that more than 40% of students enjoyed lessons in the new Chinese curriculum: they were engaged more in learning because there were more activities; there was a more pleasant classroom atmosphere and more experiential learning in lessons; and there was less daily stress on assessment. However, another 40% of students did

not enjoy Chinese language lessons, saying they were faced with ineffective, inefficient and monotonous teachers (李玉蓉、黃顯華, 2002). Lee conducted research into major changes at school level in parallel with the launching of the “Chinese Language Curriculum Tryout” (Lee, Lo, & Wong, 2000). 黃顯華、李玉蓉(2006) studied the schooling processes that contributed to students’ engagement in learning Chinese and strong language ability, and concluded that the favourable reading atmosphere created by a whole-school effort and the provision of ample opportunities for oral practice in real situations outside the classroom were important factors affecting students’ engagement in learning. Their general conclusion about research directed at evaluating and implementing the new secondary Chinese Language curriculum at school level was that it was generally successful.

何文勝(2003b) evaluated the implementation of the new Chinese Language Curriculum in schools, and later looked at the Chinese Language curriculum itself and the available teaching materials and teaching strategies encouraged from the ability training approach in the period following the education reforms (何文勝, 2006). He concluded that the new curriculum was far from perfect and needed improvement (何文勝, 2003a).

The Teaching and Learning of Chinese Characters

Unlike English and many Indo-European languages, Chinese is a tonal and logographic language. Instead of using alphabet letters to arrive at phonemes that make up words and units of meaning (morphemes), the basic units of writing in English, the Chinese use logograms, more conventionally referred to as “characters”. These characters are morphemes independent of phonetic change.

Phonology

A distinctive characteristic of Chinese characters is that each of them corresponds to one syllable that carries a particular tone. All varieties of spoken Chinese use tones, and the number may vary from dialect to dialect. Considerable difficulty in trying to learn the language is presented to speakers of non-tonal or intonation languages in which the meaning of words does not change with tone, and a problem of ambiguity often occurs.

The processing of Chinese characters requires a cognitive system that differs in essential ways from that used to learn English and other intonation languages. Ki, Lam, et al. (2003) point out that speakers of intonational languages, although well-equipped to sense tone patterns in speech sounds, often view these patterns as if they belong to the sentence rather than the syllables. They also tend to see the tone and semantic features of characters as separate units instead of integral wholes. Drawing reference from the phenomenographic perspective and the variation theory of learning, one may discuss possible strategies to help intonation speakers restructure the way they attend to meanings in speech sounds and to develop effective learning experiences for mastering Cantonese.

Orthography

The majority of Chinese characters are composite characters assembled from one or more multi-stroke components fitting a square space. To facilitate students' learning of written Chinese, there needs to be a curriculum that systematically leads to an increase in orthographic awareness that helps students distinguish similarities and differences between different characters. Lam (2006) investigated the development of children's orthographic knowledge of part-whole and part-part relations in Chinese characters, and suggested effective ways to enhance orthographic awareness.

Morphology and Vocabulary

While many Chinese characters are single-syllable morphemes and can stand alone as individual words, in modern Chinese they are often agglutinated with one another to form multi-syllabic words. 陳瑞端 (2007) compiled and developed a character and word list for Hong Kong primary schools and closely examined Hong Kong students' wrongly-written characters. The findings and errors highlighted have implications for the teaching and learning of Chinese characters in Hong Kong, especially the practice of presenting words in isolation rather than in similar clusters. In order to explore the relationship between teaching and learning of words by Hong Kong primary school students, Chik (2006) looked at the learning emanating from the use of different word teaching strategies by primary school Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong. It was found that students' perception of what they had learnt was closely related to what was made

possible for them to discern in the pattern of variation and invariance of words encountered and the context of their usage in lessons. Students who had been led to discern aspects of words that varied and those that did not did better on a related writing task than counterparts who had encountered the same characters in isolated strings. Seeing that the latter is a practice used in many lessons in Hong Kong, the findings have important implications for the development of reading and writing skills in Hong Kong and for the teacher's choice of pedagogical approach.

Integrated Approach

Tse, Marton, Ki, and Loh (2007, in press) developed an integrative perceptual approach to the learning and teaching of Chinese characters by making use of the learners' own language. In this approach, characters are taught in contexts that are meaningful to the learner and in relational clusters. Special attention is paid to structural features, written forms and pronunciation. Similarities and variations among related characters in these clusters are carefully highlighted and crucial aspects of Chinese characters and words are emphasized. The approach has been shown to be effective in an investigative study in many primary schools in Hong Kong.

The Teaching and Learning of Reading

Reading, in the sense of being able to work out what written words say and mean, is one of the most important abilities students worldwide need to acquire. Young readers in school are taught how to construct meaning from a variety of texts, to use their reading to learn and to read for enjoyment. It is assumed that students who possess basic reading skills will naturally move on to acquiring the more complicated skills needed for processing complicated texts but it has been found that such progression is not always automatic and learners invariably need guidance (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996).

Enhancing students' ability to read and write Chinese is one of the key objectives of curriculum reforms in Hong Kong. However, before the education reforms, the teaching and learning of reading beyond the beginning stage was little emphasised. Traditionally, practice in the classroom was heavily dictated by teacher handbooks and guides for commercially produced textbooks. These contained a large number of

independent short passages and simplified Chinese literature. A lack of cohesion in the themes and writing styles of the passages often presented obstacles for both teacher and student, and this often led to teachers losing sight of the focus of lessons outside the prescribed guidelines. Reading was seen as a “by-product” of Chinese Language teaching, and decoding the textbook passages was considered to be the main objective (Tse, 2002, 2007; 謝錫金、林偉業、林裕康、羅嘉怡，2005，2006). In the 2002 education reforms (CDC, 2001), the teaching and learning of reading became one of the key learning areas on the Chinese Language curriculum. All primary school students are now expected to learn how to read, then to learn how to learn using their reading. They are also expected to develop good reading habits and positive reading attitudes towards reading.

Tse and his research team studied the reading ability of Primary 4 students in Hong Kong in 2001 (before the education reforms) and in 2006 (after the education reforms were introduced), so were able to comment on any progress made. They organised and implemented the Hong Kong contribution to the project: “Progress in International Reading Literacy Study” (PIRLS), reporting that Hong Kong students ranked 14th out of 35 countries in PIRLS 2001 with a mean score of 528 (international mean scores = 500) (Tse, Lam, Lam, & Loh, 2003). In the PIRLS 2006 study, after the reforms, the mean score for Hong Kong students was 564 and ranked 2nd in the world. During the intervening years from 2001 to 2006, improvements in the percentages of students reaching a high level in the “Index of Students’ Attitudes Toward Reading” and “Index of Students’ Reading Self-Concept”, and an increase in the number of students reading novels and non-fiction reading materials outside school were observed. Higher levels of engaging parents in reading activities at home with their children were also observed. More teachers were aware of the importance of students’ developing good reading habits and were presenting a wider range of reading materials and reading activities in the classroom. Children were encouraged to choose their own reading material and to read for pleasure. Many schools today now have their own written statements about reading and their own school Chinese language reading curriculum. They also now provide facilities for children to read before school and during lunch time, and more schools are involving parents in the conduct and promotion of reading activities (Lam, Cheung, & Lam, 2009; Tse & Loh, in press; Tse, Loh, Lam, & Cheung, 2009).

As well as an ability to read Chinese, Hong Kong students need to be able to read English. To examine the bilingual competence of students, in

2004, 謝錫金 and his research team studied the “Current State of Chinese and English Reading Literacy at Primary 4 in Hong Kong and Approaches to and Strategies for Enhancing the Quality of the Teaching and Learning of Reading”. The study was a follow-up to the PIRLS 2001 investigation, the research framework and design of the research instruments being adopted and modified from the PIRLS study. It was disconcerting to find that, although students had better Chinese reading scores in 2003 than they did in 2001, the gap between good and bad readers in Chinese had widened. Average English literacy was about 70% that of the Chinese literacy level. Students tended to differ widely in English reading skill and only 8% of the students achieved the international mean on the English reading test, in the sense that the mean ability on the second language was up to that of the first language (Tse, Loh, Lam, & Lam, in press).

In 2007, Tse’s research team conducted “A Three-year Follow-up Study of English and Chinese Reading Literacy at Primary 4 in Hong Kong” and found that 24% of students exceeded the international mean score of 500, their English reading level being on a par with ability to read the mother tongue. Hong Kong students’ English average reading literacy overall was equivalent to 74% of their Chinese reading literacy (Chinese mean score: 566; English mean score: 423), whereas the mean scores for Chinese and English in 2004 had been 532 and 381 respectively. It was disappointing to find that, although students had better English reading scores in 2007 than they did in 2004, the gap between good and bad readers was still widening (*SD* has been increased from 75 in 2004, to 95 in 2007). Students’ Chinese reading literacy was better than their English reading literacy, especially on higher-level reading skills. Compared with the situation in 2004, students’ reading literacy at all levels had improved impressively. Although, on the whole, Hong Kong students’ bilingual reading literacy was getting better, the differences in attainment for some individual students were very marked, especially as a result of poor English performance. Female students’ bilingual reading literacy was better than that of male students’ (Tse, Lam, & Loh, 2007), and an important finding was that the digital culture seemed to have had a detrimental effect on students’ reading. Browsing blogs, playing computer games and sending Chinese or English messages did not help improve students’ bilingual reading literacy. In fact, the more they were involved in such activities, the worse their reading scores (Tse, Lam, & Loh, 2007; Tse, Yuen, Loh, Lam, & Ng, in press).

In the light of the above studies, more in-depth analyses and enquiries have been conducted and the findings have been reported in a number of studies. These include the influence of home language on reading attainment (Tse, Lam, Loh, & Lam, 2007); pedagogical correlates of reading attainment in English and Chinese (Tse, Lam, Lam, Loh, & Westwood, 2007); the influence of English speaking domestic helpers on students' English reading attainment (Tse, Lam, et al., 2009); a comparison of the attitudes and attainment of Hong Kong, Singaporean and United Kingdom students' reading (Tse, Lam, Lam, Chan, & Loh, 2006); students' test performance on PIRLS and their attitudes to reading across ability groups (Tse, Lam, Lam, Loh, & Westwood, 2005); self perception as a reader and attitudes and habits of reading; factors affecting the outstanding performance of Hong Kong students (Loh & Tse, 2009); and gender differences in teacher influence on teaching reading (Lam, Tse, Lam, & Loh, in press).

Ho Sui-chu and her research team have researched the reading literacy of students aged 15 years in Hong Kong in the "Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)" studies. Her contributions in this area are very revealing, especially on the influence of family capital on reading (Ho, 2005, 2006; Ho et al., 2005; 何瑞珠, 2004, 2007; 林智中、何瑞珠, 2006). Chun, Tong, and Sze (2003) reported the reading performance of 15-year-old students in Hong Kong in PISA 2000. The findings are relevant for the language curriculum of the time and they suggested how the curriculum could be improved in the future. Ho and Man (2007) looked at students' performance in Chinese- and English-medium schools in the PISA study, reporting findings important for policy makers in schools.

In addition to studies that have looked at the comparative reading performance of Hong Kong primary and secondary school students against the international benchmark, a number of researchers have conducted investigations of various factors affecting reading performance and growth. For example, Leong and Ho (2008a, 2008b) studied the role of lexical knowledge and awareness of linguistic components on the reading of average and poor language comprehenders of Chinese to uncover the difficulties involved in processing Chinese. Leong, Hau, Tse, and Loh (2007) studied the specific influence on reading of working memory, pseudo-word reading, rapid automatized naming and phonological segmentation in Chinese children, and the reading skills of less competent Chinese comprehenders. Leong, Tse, Loh, and Hau (2008) also studied the

relative contribution of verbal working memory, pseudo word reading, rapid automatized naming, and onset-rime phonological segmentation in text comprehension in Chinese children. 劉潔玲、陳維鄂(2003) studied instructional strategies for promoting reading, the inclusion of Chinese reading strategies in instruction programmes and the teaching of reading strategies to good and poor readers (Lau, 2006 ; 劉潔玲, 2004). 羅燕琴、陳桂娟 (2004) studied the effects of teaching specific reading strategies in Hong Kong and examined the relationship between word recognition, reading comprehension and the writing performance of Primary 6 students in Hong Kong. 羅燕琴 (1998) also examined the relationships between word recognition, reading comprehension and the writing performance of Primary 6 students in Hong Kong. Ng and Tse (2006) investigated the ability of senior secondary students to draw inferences and the influence of their comprehension strategies on the processing of expository text. The above are important studies which have had an important impact on the teaching of reading in Hong Kong.

Aware of the various deficiencies of existing practice in schools in Hong Kong, Tse and his team have developed an innovative curriculum focusing on popular fiction and reference texts, rather than the usual short passages used so often in schools (Tse, Marton, Loh, & Chik, in press). The use of novels allows students to engage in studying reading material over a longer period of time and to see a degree of continuity in lesson-to-lesson content. The use of fiction and non-fiction allows students to study text with differing types of content and structure, and text that calls for the use of different reading and learning strategies. Sharing opinions and interpretations of particular episodes in novels has been encouraged through on-line discussion forums. When the relative reading performance of students taught via the innovative curriculum and the conventional curriculum was compared, students who had experienced the new curriculum scored statistically significantly higher on tests of reading comprehension and expressive writing. These findings support the conclusion that Chinese literacy can be promoted in a variety of ways, other than through having all students work through a set text.

The Teaching and Learning of Writing

Learning how to communicate in writing is very important as this allows people to communicate with each other remotely. The teaching of writing is

a key component of the Chinese Language curriculum and, as with the teaching of reading, the choice of lesson activity and pedagogy is vital. Simply having students write at length will not in itself significantly improve writing skills (Englert, 1992), and students need well-targeted guidance from the teacher. They need to learn strategies of writing and how to match and vary writing style to the purpose of the communication. Teachers need to understand the composing process and the difficulties students encounter at each stage, and they need to be aware of how a love of writing can boost students' conceptual and linguistic development (Goldenberg, 1992).

Writing is the act of putting thoughts into visible print, a means of articulating and refining one's thinking and a means of communicating such thinking to others. In the past twenty years, a growing number of studies have researched the composing process in Chinese (謝錫金, 1990; 謝錫金、林守純, 1992). They present an in-depth study of the key sub-processes of generating (謝錫金、黃潔貞, 1997), information retrieval (Tse, 1990, 1997), transforming (謝錫金、羅綺蘭, 1991), pausing (謝錫金, 1996) and revising (Tse, 1994). The methods used to gather evidence and data are composing aloud and transcribing their utterances, video and audio-recorded observation, text analysis, on-task observational notes and cued-recall interviews. These methods have been widely used in studies of the composing process in English and, to a lesser extent, in Chinese in Hong Kong.

A number of researchers have closely examined the conventional writing curriculum with a view to improving its impact and content. 謝錫金、岑偉宗 (1995) investigated the traditional genre system of Chinese writing and its effect on the writing curriculum. Tse investigated communication and writing (謝錫金、譚佩儀, 2002; 譚佩儀、謝錫金, 2002), while Kwan (2003) analysed the Chinese sentences produced by primary school children to chart their syntactical development. 羅嘉怡 (2007) looked critically at the curriculum as she researched children's emotional development by analyzing their Chinese emotive writing. Such research has helped curriculum designers develop effective teaching strategies to help students develop writing skills and competence.

Tse, Loh, Cheung, & Kwan (2004) conducted the Hong Kong Writing Project and introduced various innovative and effective teaching strategies to help teachers enhance the writing interests and ability of students, leading many schools to reform the Chinese writing curriculum in their schools. 李孝聰 (1998) looked at creativity in the context of Chinese language lessons

and the extent to which creativity can be promoted via teaching Chinese writing. Cheung (2005) carried out a quasi-experimental study trial with teachers of Primary 3 students. The teachers assessed students' ability to write creatively, then subsequently used creative writing strategies to teach writing skills. It was found that the enhancement of creativity in Chinese writing was to a significant extent associated with the teachers' awareness of the role of variation and invariance in learning, evidenced in the way they conducted lessons. Other research studies have sought to improve students' Chinese writing, and many scholars have conducted error analyses on the Chinese writing of school students and investigated teachers' ability to identify, describe and correct students' language errors (Tse et al., 1995; 何萬貫, 2006, 2007; 謝錫金, 1994; 謝錫金、張瑞文、劉國昇、余慧賢、薛玉梅, 1995).

Using Putonghua as the Medium of Instruction in Chinese Language Lessons

Since 1997, there has been debate about whether to use Putonghua as the medium of instruction in schools as a strategy for helping Hong Kong students master the spoken language used in the Mainland. Most Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong are happier using Cantonese but the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) and educationists from the Mainland continue to advocate the use of Putonghua as the teaching medium. In 1985, Putonghua was included in the primary school curriculum, and shortly afterwards, in 1988, it was incorporated into the secondary school curriculum. In 1989, the Hong Kong Examinations Authority introduced the Test of Proficiency in Putonghua for the general public (Tse et al., 1995, p. 91).

In 1998–2000, the Chinese University of Hong Kong conducted research into the influence of using Putonghua as the medium of instruction on secondary school students' learning of Chinese language. It was found that at Secondary 3 there was a slight improvement in writing and speaking Putonghua but the improvement was patchy. From 2000–2002, research has been carried out by SCOLAR comparing the use of Putonghua and Cantonese as the teaching medium and its impact on students' Chinese language. It has been found generally that the use of Putonghua helps students to learn Chinese writing but that there were no obvious gains in terms of general comprehension. In 2003, SCOLAR conducted research

looking at the criteria for introducing Putonghua effectively as the teaching medium. Some 20 schools were researched and it was found that the quality of teachers, the attitudes of school management, the quality of the language environment, the learning ability of students, the curriculum and the availability of good teaching materials and support were key elements necessary for the successful use of Putonghua as the teaching medium.

In 2000–2002, the Hong Kong Institute of Education conducted research into the feasibility of using Putonghua as the medium of instruction (MOI) for teaching Chinese language. It was found that many parents supported the use of the Putonghua medium in principle, believing that this would help students listen and speak Putonghua. In some schools, it has actually helped the learning of Chinese writing but in other schools the language achievement of students is better when Cantonese is used as the teaching medium. In similar vein, in 2000–2002, the Chinese University of Hong Kong conducted research into the benefits of using Putonghua for the teaching of Chinese and found that this helps students write, revise sentences, to listen to and speak Putonghua.

In 2002, 何偉傑 (2002) reviewed the outcomes and the future prospect of using Putonghua as MOI. 何國祥、張連航、張國松、鄭崇楷 (2002) concluded the questions most frequently asked by the teachers on using Putonghua as MOI and provided suggestions to solve the problem.

Tse, Lam, Loh, and Lam (2007) examined how the language used at home, Putonghua or Cantonese, had influenced the Chinese reading attainment of 4,335 primary school students in Hong Kong. The influence of the birthplace, home background, and socio-economic status (SES) of the reader was also examined. Although the indigenous Hong Kong population uses Cantonese for everyday communications, the Chinese written in school is Modern Standard Written Chinese (MSWC), the written equivalent of Putonghua. Many of the numerous families migrating from China to Hong Kong in recent years have brought with them children educated in Putonghua in China and with extensive experience of MSWC. It was hypothesized that the reading attainment of these students would be superior to that of classmates born in Hong Kong and using Cantonese habitually. This would apply particularly to students from advantaged SES homes. The children born in China indeed had superior reading attainment but children speaking Cantonese at home and Putonghua “sometimes” had the highest reading scores, regardless of their birthplace or SES. This indicates that Putonghua as a home language had not played a significantly greater role than Cantonese in helping students to read in Chinese.

Leung (2002) studied the pretransitive construction in Putonghua and Cantonese, and its implication for Chinese language teaching and proposed an “action plan to raise language standard” (Leung, 2005). 王培光 (2005) also investigated the relationship between Putonghua ability and Chinese language ability.

There has been much public debate about the effectiveness of using Putonghua versus Cantonese as the medium of instruction in Chinese language lessons, and more and more primary schools are using Putonghua as the medium of instruction for teaching Chinese language, largely as a result of parental preference. A knowledge of Putonghua is essential if school leavers are to earn a good living, for China is becoming very powerful economically. Many Hong Kong people go to China to work and even civil servants have to be able to communicate without misunderstanding with counterparts in Mainland China.

The Teaching and Learning of Listening and Speaking Chinese — Cantonese

Listening and speaking are key channels of human communication and acquisition of skill in these areas is an important accomplishment in language development. The development of children’s listening and speaking ability determines to an extent what and how teachers can teach on the Chinese Language curriculum, and investigations of children’s oral language development are very important. Tse, Chan, and Li (2005) studied the spontaneous utterances produced by 492 Cantonese-speaking children aged 36, 48 and 60 months in toy-play contexts and found that verb dominated requests for actions were a dominant function in Cantonese interrogatives. Gender differences in syntactic development represented in oral language were also investigated (Tse, Kwong, Chan, & Li, 2002), and it was found that girls were more advanced than boys in terms of verbal fluency. Li and Rao (2000) critically investigated parental influences on the Chinese literacy development of preschoolers in Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore.

A profile of listening with understanding to Chinese language in Hong Kong junior secondary education children has been provided by 張綺文、羅燕琴 (1998), and 張綺文 (1999) reviewed approaches to boosting students’ ability to listen to and comprehend language. These authors also

looked at the resources available for teachers and improvements were suggested about existing materials. 區婉儀、何志恆、張志儉 (2002) designed teaching materials using media resources to enhance the teaching effectiveness of teachers seeking to develop listening and speaking skills in primary and secondary school students. It was already known that some students had difficulty with the phonology of Cantonese and that this resulted in communicating difficulties in the classroom. In fact, there have been few empirical studies looking at the teaching of listening and speaking in Hong Kong and this will be a good target for future research.

The Use of Information Technology in the Teaching and Learning of Chinese

Developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have allowed the public to practise their Chinese independently, directly and indirectly, as they manipulate today's technology, be it on computers, using mobile phones to communicate, manipulating TV and video recorders and so on. Schools are taking a prominent role in training students to use ICT hardware and software, and computer software packages have been developed to assist Chinese Language teaching and learning. 謝錫金、祁永華、林浩昌 (2001) have developed a number of useful computer software packages for helping students comprehend Chinese and to learn how to write Chinese script. The "Dragonwise series" is one such software package aimed at helping students master reading comprehension in effective and interesting ways. 謝錫金、祁永華、羅嘉怡 (2001) have also developed curriculum teaching materials and ways to monitor and assess Chinese language learning using information technology.

何萬貫 created "A passage A Day" online reading programme to promote online reading among primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong (何萬貫, 2000a, 2004), and a number of studies into the effectiveness of using computer software for enhancing students' awareness of the structure of Chinese words and characters have been conducted (Ki et al., 2002). Programs have been devised to teach critical thinking (Ki, Tse, Shum, Lin, & Loh, 2003) and communicative writing (Shum, 2007; 謝錫金、祁永華、岑紹基、譚佩儀、劉文建, 2006) in Chinese. The results are very encouraging and strongly justify the use of computer software in the teaching and learning of Chinese.

Standards and Assessment

Discussion of the comparative performance of Hong Kong students against counterparts internationally has been discussed earlier. From the perspective of Hong Kong schools, the assessment of Chinese Language ability is important as the information obtained helps inform teaching and helps teachers gauge learning effectiveness.

Various research studies have been conducted with a focus on assessment. For example, 區婉儀、何志恆、葉瑞蓮 (1999) set out criteria for assessing students' Chinese Language homework, while Chung and Law (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of the school-based assessment component of the 2007 HKCE Chinese Language examination. On a more practical level, 何萬貫 (1999) introduced the use of the audio recorder to assess and provide feedback to students about their Chinese writing, and focused scrutiny of practice led 何萬貫 (2000b) to suggest that teachers use symbols to record students' errors in their Chinese writing. 鄭兆基、陳志良 (2003) spelled out the prerequisites for improving the grading of Chinese writing, and 祝新華 (2005) has helped the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority to develop a framework for assessing students' use of the Chinese Language in public examinations. In fact, Zhu has published widely on the communicative approach in assessing writing; on the assessment of developments in written language ability (謝錫金、祝新華、姚安娣, 1998); and on developing secondary school students' writing ability (祝新華, 1993) and his work is widely read by Hong Kong teachers.

Peer checklist evaluation of Chinese writing has been developed for diagnostic and assessment purposes (岑紹基, 2005; 謝錫金、岑紹基, 2002). Mok and Cheung (2008), using Rasch analytical measurement techniques to validate the "Chinese character difficulty scale" for primary students. Factors contributing to the difficulty level of characters include the number of strokes, character form and the level of abstractness carried by the characters.

Conclusion

The above discussion is evidence that scholars in Hong Kong have robustly contributed to the improvement of Chinese language education in Hong Kong over the past 25 years. Their work is much more classroom- and

school-based than research conducted on the Mainland. Their research into the teaching and learning of Chinese Language, and to the impact of teaching on attainment levels is impressive. However, if Chinese language education in Hong Kong is to move forward much faster, there has to be a massive injection of research effort into the scientific understanding of the subject and the creation of a solid knowledge base.

It is also clear from the foregoing review that, almost all of the research studies conducted by Hong Kong scholars have centered on the teaching and learning of Chinese as a first language, and the hope is that attention will increasingly turn to the learning of Chinese as a second language.

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