

Unveiling the Cantonese Proficiency of Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong

Written by Ding Hongdi

The growing number of mainland Chinese students studying in Hong Kong's universities has sparked new research into their Cantonese language abilities. A recent study—led by Dr. Ding Hongdi from The Education University of Hong Kong, Wu Wenli from Aston University, UK, and Dr. Yao Shuiying from the College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University—assessed the proficiency of mainland Chinese university students in Cantonese, a language they learn as an additional language (CAL). The study was also supported by two research assistants: Lam Wing and Lau Shuk-yiu.

To conduct the study, two tests were administered: a grammatical test and a communicative test. The grammatical test consisted of 68 questions that covered five linguistic domains of Cantonese: grammatical categories, lexical categories, morphology, pragmatics, and structure. The questions were categorized into three difficulty levels based on their similarities and differences with other Transitional, Central, and Northern Sinitic languages. The communicative test comprised two role-play questions and three interview questions. The results of the tests revealed that the mainland university students possessed limited Cantonese grammatical competence and lower moderate proficiency in Cantonese communication. When compared to native Cantonese speakers, there was a significant proficiency gap, making effective communication challenging for the CAL students.

“CAL learners may rely on simplified language structures and vocabulary to convey messages, even without deep understanding of complex grammatical rules of Cantonese. This can be attributed to the knowledge of their background Chinese language. Despite limited Cantonese grammatical competence, they can use their background language's grammar to engage in basic communication. At this stage, functional communication takes precedence over grammatical accuracy, prioritizing effective message conveyance despite inaccuracies”, said Dr. Ding Hongdi, the leading researcher of the study.

The data of the research indicates that mainland university students learning Cantonese should acquire at least 80% of the knowledge possessed by native speakers in order to become adequately proficient in Cantonese. But native-like pronunciation should be

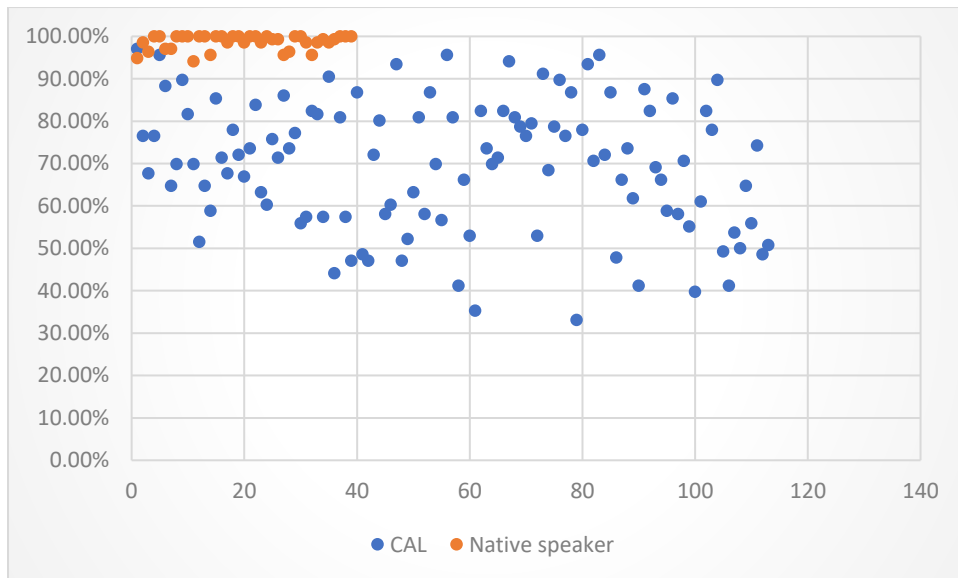
downplayed, as the speech community of Hong Kong generally accepts non-native pronunciation.

The participants included 113 CAL mainland university students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, and 39 native speakers of Cantonese from Hong Kong. Interestingly, the study found that students speaking Southern Chinese languages generally displayed higher Cantonese abilities compared to those speaking Northern, Central, and Transitional Chinese languages. However, no significant advantage in learning Cantonese was observed for students speaking Central and Transitional Chinese languages.

Additionally, the duration of their stay in Hong Kong did not notably impact the students' Cantonese proficiency. These findings suggest the presence of social fragmentation between local and non-local students, indicating potential barriers to integration.

While mainland Chinese students typically possess strong Chinese language skills and high English proficiency, they often perceive Cantonese as a local “dialect” of lesser importance. This attitude hampers their motivation to learn Cantonese, despite its practical value in the job market and for social integration within Hong Kong communities. The report emphasizes that Cantonese competence is still highly valued by local companies, and proficiency in the language is crucial for effective communication and career prospects.

The study proposes recommendations to enhance the Cantonese proficiency of mainland Chinese university students. Suggestions include tailoring language support programs to students' linguistic backgrounds, training Cantonese teachers in Chinese language typology, fostering social integration and cultural immersion, and providing additional support for female postgraduate students. These measures aim to bridge the competence gap, enhance language skills, and create an inclusive environment for CAL mainland university students in Hong Kong.



Performance Comparison in Cantonese Grammatical Test between Native Speakers and CAL Mainland University Students

Are you ready to embark on a Cantonese adventure? Buckle up and get ready to put your language skills to the test! Follow the link: https://uedhkm.my.sharepoint.com/:f:/g/personal/hding_eduhk_hk/EkvznketBWtEj46k74pjZGcBLdBH2mctNWSTaMwtWLZyBg?e=b7MtP2 to try the grammatical test and communicative test.