

Unleavened Cakes:

L2 Chinese Education for South Asian Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This review examines a unique case of K-12 education of Chinese as a second/foreign language in a global context, that is, teaching Chinese as a second language (L2) to South Asian (SA) students in Hong Kong. Findings indicate that in spite of the collective endeavors of all major stakeholders over the past decade, notable challenges await policy makers, researchers and teachers of L2 Chinese. There is an urgent need: (1) to design an L2 Chinese specific curriculum, (2) to enhance teachers' professional experience teaching L2 Chinese as opposed to teaching Chinese to native speakers, and (3) to foster better communication between schools, teachers, SA parents and students. There is also a lack of consideration of SA students' multilingual and multicultural background and how their multilingual capital can be utilized in L2 Chinese teaching and learning.

Keywords: L2 Chinese, literacy, language planning and policy, South Asian, Hong Kong

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This article focuses on an under-examined population in the literature of K-12 education of Chinese as a second language (L2) — South Asian (SA) students in Hong Kong. The SA group in Hong Kong refers to ethnic minority population from India, Pakistan, Nepal and other Asian countries. SA students comprise 2.4% of the student population in Hong Kong; yet few of them gain entry to tertiary education because of their low educational achievement in general, and their insufficient Chinese proficiency in particular (Tsung & Gao, 2012; Tsung, Ki, & Shum, 2008). Over the past decade, there have been increasing efforts to investigate L2 Chinese education for this cohort across research domains (e.g., *social policy* in Ku, Chan, & Sandhu, 2005; *education* in Chan, 2008, and *public law* in Loper, 2004). Nevertheless, the status quo of teaching L2 Chinese to SA students in Hong Kong is still far from maturity, being referred to as “unleavened cakes” in Wong and Yip (2014). Moreover, to date, there has not been an integrative review that identifies the resources and challenges that multilingual SA students have related to their acquisition of L2 Chinese. This article aims to examine L2 Chinese education for SA students in Hong Kong via a comprehensive review of: (1) the language education policy for SA students, (2) the implementation of L2 Chinese education at the school level, (3) teachers’ professional experience and attitudes, and (4) SA parents’ and students’ attitudes and perceptions of L2 Chinese education. The review is divided into four main sections. The first section briefly describes the demographic characteristics of SA students in Hong Kong. The second section provides the rationale and method of the review. The next two sections present a synthesis of the pertinent literature, as well as conclusions and implications for K-12 L2 Chinese education in Hong Kong and other multiethnic and multilingual communities.

Demographic characteristics of SA students

According to the Hong Kong 2011 census, there is a total of 451, 183 ethnic minorities, constituting 6.4% of the whole population in Hong Kong, the majority of which are from SA countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). Their socioeconomic status is relatively low considering that most of the SA working population work in semi-skill occupations like service workers and domestic helpers, and that their median monthly income is HK\$3,680, much lower than the average of the total working population (HK\$10,000). Notably, only 25% of them have received tertiary-level education. As to primary and secondary school education, in the 2011-2012 academic year, there were about 36,000 primary and secondary school SA students, comprising a small portion of the total student population in Hong Kong (i.e., 2.4%). In a research report on the education of SA groups in Hong Kong, Ku, Chan, and Sandhu (2005) described the typical language profile of this cohort: (1) The common mother tongues include Nepali, Punjabi, Tagalog and Urdu. (2) SA students' self-evaluation of mother tongue proficiency indicates that they were good at listening and speaking, but less so in reading and writing. (3) Surprisingly, regarding English language proficiency, SA students considered themselves very good at all four skills. (4) Finally, when asked about Chinese language proficiency, the majority of them thought they were poor at all four skills. Notably, SA groups' underachievement of Chinese language skills is often held to be the main cause of their low socioeconomic status against the sociopolitical context of Hong Kong. Since the handover in 1997, the language policy in Hong Kong has shifted to trilingualism (to speak fluent Cantonese, Putonghua and English) and biliteracy (to master written Chinese and English) (Evans, 2013). This has had a great impact on SA groups. As pointed out by Tsung and

Gao (2012), in the colonial period, with their command of English, the first-generation SA groups mostly worked in police and civil service-related jobs on fixed terms; but, after the handover, the second- or third- generation no longer enjoy such job accessibility due to their low Chinese proficiency. Improving L2 Chinese education for SA students in Hong Kong is thus of utmost significance.

Rationale and method of the review

The past decade has witnessed an increasing amount of research on K-12 L2 Chinese education for SA students in Hong Kong. However, there lacks an integrative review that summarizes the current stage of pertinent research, provides implications for major stakeholders, and identifies future research directions. To fill this gap, this review sets out to expand our understanding of L2 Chinese education for this cohort. It was conducted through literature search, sample screening based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and coding. Literature search was conducted among multiple types of resources. First, electronic database search among LLBA and ERIC was made with a combination of three key words, *South Asian/ethnic minority*, *Chinese education/teaching/learning*, and *Hong Kong*. In addition, manual search was made among previous review articles (e.g., Chan, 2008; Tsung, Ki, & Shum, 2008). 805 searching results were yielded as of January 31st, 2015. The literature pool was then screened based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: First, only studies published after 1990 were included because L2 Chinese research has thrived since then. Second, duplicated reports were excluded. Third, studies that merely focus on adult learners were excluded considering that this review focuses on K-12 education. The final literature pool includes 19 articles/reports. With regard to coding, there are two steps. The first-order coding was open coding guided by the three types of

language policy and planning proposed by Hornberger (2006), namely status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. Following first-order coding, themes were combined and synthesized in second-order coding. Based on this, five themes were generated: language education policy, school systems, teachers' professional capabilities and attitudes, parents' attitudes, and students' attitudes.

Review findings and discussion

In what follows, we discuss L2 Chinese education for SA students in Hong Kong around the aforementioned five themes.

Language education policy for SA students in Hong Kong

While the policy makers emphasize the role of Cantonese as the mother tongue of 90.8%¹ of the population in Hong Kong, the home languages of SA students are not well recognized. Rather, Educational Bureau (EDB) reports that SA students are encouraged to integrate into the local Chinese community as early as possible (2004). In this past decade, however, notable changes have occurred in the decisions of policy makers at two time points (i.e., 2011 and 2014) by recognizing that SA students are not a transient group in Hong Kong and by striving to provide them with equal opportunities for education.

According to the 2011 EDB report, various support measures were put in place for non-Chinese speaking/NCS² students to help them adapt to the local education system. This was followed by notable improvement in L2 Chinese education for SA students. In academic year 2011-2012, there were 20 designated³ primary schools and 10 designated secondary schools for SA students. These schools included the following features: (1) the development of school-based

Chinese curricula adapted to SA students' Chinese language levels; (2) the allocation of teaching resources to support after-school or out-of-school Chinese language tutorials; (3) the employment of temporary bilingual teaching assistants (TAs) to scaffold the Chinese language learning of SA students; (4) the employment of temporary bilingual adult assistants to facilitate the liaison between schools, teachers and SA parents; and (5) the increasing awareness of SA religious cultures and special arrangements for the convenience of religious activities (Gao, 2011). Another major change occurred in 2014, as the government released the Initiatives in the 2014 Policy Address — Support for Ethnic Minorities (*Initiatives* henceforth). The *Initiatives* specifies that comprehensive support will be provided for ethnic minority students in learning the Chinese language, including (1) tailor-making the “Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework” for NCS students, (2) offering Chinese language subject or a subsidy scheme to address SA students' need to take local or international Chinese language examinations for tertiary education (e.g., General Certificate of Education Exams and International General Certificate of Secondary Education Exam), (3) providing financial assistance for NCS new-arrivals to attend Chinese language courses outside schools, (4) increasing funding support for both designated and non-designated schools that admit ten or more NCS students, (5) launching the Professional Enhancement Grant Scheme to enhance teachers' professional capability to teach L2 Chinese, and (6) encouraging NCS parents to let their children begin learning Chinese at the pre-primary stage.

Although the 2014 *Initiatives* is quite encouraging, questions still remain as to whether stakeholders (e.g., school administrators, teachers, parents and students) are ready to embrace these changes. As pointed out by a recent non-governmental organization (NGO) report, there has

been a discrepancy in the government policy and the actual implementation of L2 Chinese education at local schools (Hong Kong Unison, 2013). In the next section, we report a survey of extant literature regarding current L2 Chinese education at the school level.

L2 Chinese education for SA students at local schools

In Hong Kong, regardless of children's background (e.g., Chinese speaking or NCS), children aged six to fifteen are entitled to received nine-year compulsory education in government and aided schools for free (Equal Opportunity Commission, 2015). For SA students, educational opportunities are available across six types of schools: government schools, aided schools, direct subsidy scheme schools, private schools, English School Foundation schools, and International schools. Because of diverse reasons such as lower socioeconomic status of ethnic minority families, high tuition fees of private and international schools, and strict academic requirements in some elite government and aided schools, the majority of SA students attend low achievement public schools (Ku et al., 2005). Also, SA parents face the dilemma of choosing between schools with English or Chinese as the medium of instruction (MOI) schools. Oftentimes, English MOI schools are more appealing to SA parents and students because English is the *de facto* second language for most SA populations in Hong Kong. However, there are significantly fewer English MOI schools. To the researchers' knowledge, there are only two designated schools that have adopted dual-language MOI. One common problem for different types of public schools is that the curriculum is not designed for the purpose of teaching Chinese as a second/third language. Schools either design their own curriculum or adapt a simplified version of curriculum for learners of Chinese as their mother tongue (Tsung, 2009).

Other than the regular Chinese learning programs offered by local schools, there are supplementary programs for different purposes including: (a) six-month initiation programs to help newly arrived children with their Chinese and English proficiency development and adjustment to local society, and to provide placement assistance to mainstream schools, (b) 60-hour induction programs run by NGOs targeting new arrivals, and (c) four-week summer bridging programs to prepare SA elementary school students for local mainstream curriculum. However, the extent to which these programs are effective calls for further investigation. As noted by Hong Kong Unison (2013), social workers are not trained to teach L2 Chinese, and their prep courses for SA new arrivals might not be as helpful as schooling. Recently, there has been enhanced cooperation between schools and experts/researchers from Hong Kong tertiary institutions to help organize after-school learning activities, to prepare students for Chinese language examinations, to conduct teacher development workshops, and to develop innovative instructional programs and software like the Dragonwise Project initiated by the research team affiliated with The University of Hong Kong (The Centre for Advancement of Chinese Language Education and Research, 2015).

Still, what remains unclear is whether all local schools include optional SA language courses in their curriculum; and if they do, how the courses are constructed. Based on the EDB 2011 report, among the government designated schools that provide alternative language subjects for NCS students, there are seven primary schools and two secondary schools that offer optional SA language courses, such as Urdu, Hindi and Nepali. Future research is needed to closely examine what has actually been offered in these courses in relation to SA students' multilingual background.

Teachers' professional capabilities and attitudes

As indicated in the 2014 *Initiatives*, grant opportunities will be available to practitioners engaged in teaching L2 Chinese to SA student. According to previous studies conducted through interviews or survey with front-line teachers, there is an obvious shortage of experienced L2 Chinese teachers for SA students (Tsung, 2009; Tsung et al., 2008; Zhang, Tsung, Cruicksha, Ki, & Shum, 2012). For one thing, the lack of L2 Chinese-specific curricula, training, and teaching resources may lead teachers to opt for traditional teaching methods originally targeting Cantonese-speaking students. For another, teachers are faced with challenges induced by the target language properties and SA students' language learning background. Secondary school teachers interviewed by Tsung et al. (2008) pointed out the special case of teaching L2 Chinese in Hong Kong, that is, the spoken language is based on local vernacular language-*Cantonese*, whereas the written language is based on *Putonghua or Mandarin* that is not available in the immediate context. This mismatch makes it difficult to teach Chinese in a secondary school class with SA students who vary in their Chinese proficiency, ranging from new arrivals and zero foundation in the Chinese language to those who upgrade from local elementary schools that teach Chinese as a subject. Another often cited challenge is to teach students to learn how to read Chinese characters, which requires certain level of memorization. But SA students show resistance toward memorization, and prefer speaking and listening over reading and writing.

Previous studies also indicate that the lack of professional experience may affect teachers' awareness of SA students' needs (Gao, 2012a, 2012b; Ku et al., 2005). In a survey with 200 SA students aged between 17 and 19, Ku et al. (2005) found that more than one quarter of the students perceived that they received unequal educational experiences at schools, and believed

that teachers tended to show more attention to their Cantonese-speaking peers and showed lower expectations toward themselves. Teachers' low expectations of SA students' Chinese competence could be related to the stereotype of cultural/linguistic disadvantage of South Asian population in Hong Kong (Gao, 2012a, 2012b). As such, teachers often teach basic vocabulary and formulaic expressions used in daily life rather than using cognitively demanding language in academic settings, and never incorporate the home culture of SA families into teaching. This approach might further suppress SA students' learning motivation, especially among secondary school students. One effective solution to this issue would be to hire bilingual TAs. Bilingual TAs not only take on the role of linguistic mediators to help SA students with Chinese learning, but also act as cultural mediators between school teachers, students and parents. However, there are only a few schools with active bilingual TAs (Gao & Shum, 2010).

Parents' attitudes

When it comes to SA parents' attitudes toward L2 Chinese education for their children, the current literature indicates that SA parents: (1) prefer English MOI schools over Chinese MOI school because English is the *de facto* second language for most of them despite that, currently, there are only three designated English MOI secondary schools; (2) recognize the increasing status of Chinese in Hong Kong, yet expect their children to learn English first, followed by Cantonese, then Putonghua, and hope teachers will use English to teach Chinese grammar; (3) dislike the traditional Chinese teaching methods that emphasize copying and repetitions; (4) are aware of the discriminations against their children in schools and society, and (5) wish teachers can provide more encouragement for their children's Chinese learning (Tsung, 2009; Tsung et al., 2008). As for SA parents that send their children to Chinese MOI schools, it

is observed that they are not enthusiastic about sending children to summer preparation classes, and that they do not perceive after-school tutorials to be useful because the extra remedial lessons might require more work (Hau, 2008).

More insights can be found in a recent study by Tsung & Gao (2012), which focuses on the issue of SA parents' support and attitudes for their children's language education. Tsung & Gao (2012) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten Pakistani and Nepalese SA parents, who were viewed as representatives of the SA ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, with low socioeconomic status and low levels of education. It was found that (1) all SA parents had high aspiration for their children's education and wellbeing; (2) they lacked Chinese skills and knowledge of the local education system, as to what schools to attend, what supplementary books to buy, and even about how to communicate with teachers; (3) they had limited time to check children's homework and spend with their children at home and at cultural events, and (4) they could not afford private tutorials. Although there are government designated schools for SA students, parents held that those schools are like an "apartheid", not to mention that they are all low achievement schools in Hong Kong. But they could not afford the alternative—attending expensive private or international schools. Moreover, some parents felt that their mother tongue should be valued by the school system in Hong Kong, in alignment with the government policy of mother education for local Chinese students in Hong Kong. As Tsung and Gao (2012) summarized, SA parents' effective involvement in children's education is limited by the lack of their "valued linguistic, cultural, economic and social capital" (p. 61).

Students' attitudes

The findings of SA parents' attitudes toward their children's language education experience and achievement suggest that SA students' attitudes might be affected by their parents' and that they might demonstrate similar patterns. But it might not necessarily be the case as mixed results have been presented in studies to date (e.g., Gu & Patkin, 2013; Lai, Gao, & Wang, 2015; Tonsing, 2014). Tonsing (2014) investigated the acculturation and adaptation strategies of first- and second-generation South Asians (SAs) in Hong Kong, and found notable differences between the two groups: First-generation SAs possess low proficiency in the host language, positive attitudes toward their heritage culture and not-so-positive attitudes toward the host culture; whereas second-generation SAs (aged below 13 years old) possess higher proficiency in the host language, and not-so-positive attitudes toward both host and heritage culture, which is categorized as marginalization. Tonsing held that this might be partly attributed to the second-generation SAs' need to negotiate between both the demands of their heritage culture and those of the host culture, as well as higher psychological stress. Similar findings were observed in Gu and Patkin's (2013) interviews with an older cohort consisting of ten secondary school SA students (at the age of 16 years old and above). According to Gu and Patkin, SA students did not make full use of local linguistic and cultural resources (e.g., interaction with their Chinese-speaking peers), preferred learning English over Chinese, and turned to western culture for inspiration (e.g., western music, media and food).

On the other hand, other research found that SA students' positive attitude toward both heritage and host language and culture has a great impact on their L2 Chinese learning outcomes (school-based Chinese examinations). In a large-scale questionnaire survey with 111 SA student (mean age=16), Lai et al. (2015) examined a range of affective and linguistic factors through SA

students' self-evaluation such as cultural identification, acculturation attitudes, general language proficiency and use, peer contact, self-esteem and Chinese learning self-confidence. It was found that bicultural integration strategies promoted SA students' Chinese language learning. Also, statistical results based on path analysis indicated that the bicultural integration attitude bootstraps Chinese learning through language-specific experience (e.g., peer contact and Chinese learning self-confidence), as well as affective factors (e.g., bicultural competence and self-esteem). In a similar vein, Li and Chuk (2015) held that a solid foundation in the vernacular language (i.e., Cantonese) and written Chinese based on Putonghua, plus access to a network of Cantonese-speaking peers, will play an important role in potentially empowering SA students in their independent learning of the Chinese language. Two important implications can be drawn here: (1) Stakeholders need to consider the importance of maintaining the ethnic culture and language in L2 Chinese learning; (2) when assessing L2 Chinese learning among ethnic minority students, both linguistic and affective factors need to be taken into account.

Conclusions and implications

This review has provided a broad-brush picture of the current status of L2 Chinese education for SA students in Hong Kong. It is not our purpose to advocate monolingual/cultural assimilation of SA students into local Chinese-speaking community. Rather, it is important to realize that unlike ethnic minorities in other multilingual societies that can survive with a global language like English (e.g., in Singapore), the acquisition of Chinese proficiency, especially literacy, is the gatekeeper of SA students' opportunities for local post-secondary education and social upward mobility (see Li & Chuk, 2015). As well, it is hoped that, attention to all stakeholders (policy makers, researchers, school administrators, teachers, as well as SA parents and

students) should be drawn to the fact that the multilingual/cultural competence of SA students has not been maximally utilized to boost their educational achievement. Such multicultural orientation in L2 Chinese education can apply not only to Hong Kong context, but to other multiethnic and multilingual communities across the world (see also Lai et al.,2015). Lastly, it is noteworthy that in spite of the increasing amount of studies of L2 Chinese education for SA students in Hong Kong, most of which emerged in this past decade, the majority of them undertook a sociocultural and/or educational perspective. To our knowledge, there have been only three studies that directly examined the linguistic and cognitive factors that contribute to their Chinese literacy development and pointed out challenges specific to second language learners as opposed to reading Chinese as a first language (e.g., Wong, 2010; Leong, Tse, Lo, & Ki, 2011; Shum, Ki, & Leong, 2014), which seems to be incompatible with the body of L2 Chinese research in other contexts (e.g., mainland China and the U.S.). More research is needed to provide a thorough understanding of the sociocultural, affective, cognitive and linguistic factors that potentially affect the optimal teaching and learning of L2 Chinese in SA students in Hong Kong.

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Footnotes

1. The number is based on the 2006 Hong Kong SAR census (as cited in Chan, 2008).
2. SA comprises the majority of non-Chinese-speaking/NCS students attending local public schools. Henceforth, SA and NCS are used interchangeably in what follows.
3. There is a network of primary and secondary schools that are ‘designated’ to NSC students in Hong Kong (Gao, 2012a).