A survey of language use in the professional workplace in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The data reported here represent the initial stage in a large-scale, multi-method survey of the current use of Chinese (Cantonese and standard written Chinese) and English in the professional workplace in Hong Kong. The survey involving 1,475 respondents drawn from five key occupational sectors, was motivated by the paucity of large-scale, macro-level research into the languages of workplace communication in Hong Kong. Previous studies have tended to focus on single professions, or are small-scale in nature. The baseline data presented here offer demographic information on the respondents and discusses descriptive statistical data derived from the questionnaire survey. Reference is also made to focus group feedback to help interpret the quantitative data. Results indicate that reading and writing in English are demanded frequently in the professional Hong Kong workplace, but that English appears to play a less important role in spoken workplace communication; predictably, in informal situations but also in more formal ones, such as negotiating on the telephone and participating in job interviews in which Cantonese is as likely to be used as English.

Background to the study

Any discussion of English language use in the Hong Kong workplace needs to take cognizance of the unique role and status of English in the Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. Luke and Richards (1982) have characterized the historical status of English in Hong Kong as that of an “auxiliary” rather than a truly second language. For much of the colonial period (1842-1997), English held sway at the upper levels of government, law and business and in education, but played a very limited socio-cultural role among the population at large for whom Cantonese remained the language of intra-ethnic social interaction and commercial transaction. For Luke and Richards, Hong Kong with its overwhelmingly Cantonese native speaking population constituted a case of diglossia without true bilingualism; English, while unembedded socially, nevertheless fulfilled important institutional functions.
Further support for this view is offered by Li (1999) who, while supporting Luke and Richards’s analysis, feels that English in Hong Kong may be more accurately categorized as a “value-added” rather than auxiliary language. It is hard to take issue with the view that English remains essentially unembedded in Hong Kong society (“psychologically detached” in Li’s words), although interestingly Bacon-Shone and Bolton (1998) report survey statistics from 1993 which show that about 21% of the entire population of ethnic Hong Kong Chinese people considered themselves to be bilingual in Chinese and English.

Li also lends support to Luke and Richards’s view that the role played by English in the professional Hong Kong workplace makes greater overall demands on receptive rather than productive skills in that language, and that English plays a greater role in written rather than spoken communication. This view, however, has developed largely without the support of empirical evidence and one of the purposes of this paper is to re-examine this view in the light of the evidence gathered in this study.

Studies of workplace language use in Hong Kong

We will now examine briefly the current situation with regard to research into language use in the workplace in Hong Kong and the background to these enquiries. Since the early 1980s, Hong Kong’s economy has undergone a radical structural shift with service industries rapidly supplanting manufacturing at the core of the local economy. The growth of service industries, many of them international in nature or aspiration, has, in turn, led to increased demands from employers for a high degree of English language proficiency at all levels of the workforce. There is general agreement that these demands have been only partially met (Johnson and Cheung, 1992; Lai, 1996), and business leaders remain vociferous in their demands for a truly bilingual and, indeed, trilingual (Cantonese, English and Putonghua) workforce. At the same time, employers are united in emphasizing that it is not the duty of business to provide training in language skills (see, for example, Au, 1997; Lee and Lam, 1994).

Surprisingly, the strident calls of employers have elicited rather weak responses from educationists and researchers. Educationists, particularly those allied to government, have suggested that it may be unrealistic to expect people at all levels in society to become proficient in both Chinese and
English. Researchers have been hampered in their enquiries by the practical difficulties entailed in accessing workplaces to gather data, and by the limitations imposed on the use of such data by considerations of commercial confidentiality. However, an interesting example of collaboration between researchers and a professional body to analyze the use of English in the professional workplace is Forey and Nunan (forthcoming). Forey and Nunan enlisted the help of the influential Hong Kong Society of Accountants to carry out an investigation into written English use at all levels within the accountancy field in Hong Kong. Data were collected from slightly more than 1,000 subjects and when analyzed were found to have profound implications for the design of purpose-specific syllabuses and instructional materials – particularly those related to the development of writing skills.

Other interesting but smaller-scale studies have been reported by, for example, Cheung, 1984; Evans, 1999a, 1999b; Lai, 1996; Poon, 1992 and So, 1984. Evans investigated workplace English language use in a construction-related sub-field of engineering, building services engineering, while Poon’s enquiry focused on the professional use of English by accountants and company administrators. Evans’s study involved 150 subjects, and while Poon’s enquiry was more ambitious in scope – she distributed nearly 2,000 questionnaires – the return rate was only 25%.

Clearly, then, there is a paucity of large scale and macro-level data on a reasonably representative range of professional workplaces in Hong Kong, and the present study was motivated by the need to fill this knowledge gap. A further impetus to the present study was provided by the practical need to utilize the data intra-institutionally as information contributing to a needs analysis for the design of business English courses and their associated instructional materials.

Method

We reported earlier that accessing the professional workplace to gather data is no easy matter, but the potential problems multiply exponentially when a macro-level approach is adopted. The great number of professions subsumed in our study meant that it was not feasible to gather data through the agency of professional bodies, as Forey and Nunan did for the single professional field of accountancy. Issues of accessibility determined, therefore, that the survey be conducted through a direct approach to subjects. To this end, a range of part-time students, in full-time employment but attending
evening courses offering further professional qualifications at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), Hong Kong University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong constituted the population of 3,019 subjects for this survey.

**Subjects**

Subjects were chosen to represent five key occupational sectors recognized by the SAR government: business services, community and social services, construction and real estate, engineering, and manufacturing. Females constituted nearly 52% of subjects and males slightly more than 48%. The majority of subjects occupied either junior or middle ranks within their employing organizations with only 11% ranking themselves as senior. The average subject was under the age of thirty and had a work history of about ten years of full-time employment. In all, 63% of subjects worked for private Hong Kong-owned firms or Hong Kong government and government-related organizations. The remaining subjects either worked for foreign-owned or China-owned companies; 34% and 3% respectively.

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was developed and piloted with 60 subjects from the field of Building Services Engineering in late April and early May, 1999. The instrument was then modified in the light of feedback from the subjects. The final version of the questionnaire (see Appendix) differs from the piloted prototype principally in terms of length. The initial instrument was found to take twenty-five minutes on average to complete, while the final version was able to gather comprehensive information in about fifteen minutes and does so within a reasonably respondent-friendly format which focuses on the familiar four language skills. The final format also includes filters to expedite the completion process. A total of 3,019 questionnaires was distributed in October and November, 1999, and 1,475 returns were received, yielding a return rate of about 48%. The data finally analysed were drawn from 566 subjects from the business services sector, 327 from community and social services, 243 from construction and real estate, 137 from the engineering field, and 202 from manufacturing.
Focus groups

Two focus groups, each of ten subjects from the sectors of construction and real estate and business services, were convened in early December, 1999 following the administration of the questionnaire. The focus group meetings – called to help illuminate key findings from the survey – were video recorded and transcribed and reference is made to the feedback they offered below in the reporting of findings. It is worth noting at this point that the next level in our multi-method approach will consist of individual case studies from our five occupational sectors each of whom will be requested to keep a language log for a working week in which they distinguish between tasks which were performed in English and those which demanded the use of Chinese. This triangulation will allow us to carry out cross-checking of the findings deriving from each of the enquiry methods. It is not possible, however, to report the case studies within the scope of this paper.

Findings

Written workplace communication

The discussion of findings begins with a comparison by percentage (rounded up to the nearest whole figure) of the languages used by respondents to read and write workplace documents of various kinds (Table 1). The not applicable (N/A) response category was included for those respondents who are never required to read or write particular types of texts in either Chinese or English. It is worth emphasizing that the responses displayed in Table 1 include the need to read and/or write the text types in question. In effect, respondents were asked to distinguish between the roles played by Chinese and English in the mental processing and production of a full range of workplace-related documents.
**Table 1: Written Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always English</th>
<th>Usually English</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Usually Chinese</th>
<th>Always Chinese</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mails</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal documents</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memos</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agendas</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faxes</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Records</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuals</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notices</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulars</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotional materials</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals/magazines</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, English is the usual medium for e-mails and reports with minutes and legal documents also predominantly produced in English. Such text types are mainly for internal company use and so it is interesting to note that when certain extra-company texts are considered (e.g. journals and magazines, and advertisements), the use of Chinese increases, although English still predominates.

Respondents who reported using both languages were then asked to give up to three reasons for using English in written communication. Nearly 54% of respondents reported that they use English when communicating with a non-Cantonese speaker. Rather more interesting, perhaps, are the 32% and 30% who, respectively, use English if a situation is perceived as being
relatively formal and when communicating business-to-business. Slightly less than a quarter of the respondents used English because they regard it as the language of business in Hong Kong, while 12% and 11%, respectively, reported that they used English because it is their company’s policy to do so or because they feel they can communicate their ideas more effectively in English than Chinese.

The language policy adopted by companies specializing in particular fields manifests considerable variation (see, for example, Forey and Nunan, (forthcoming) with regard to the field of accountancy), but in the present (more general) study, few companies are shown to implement an "English only" policy. However, focus group data revealed a company which has a "Chinese first" policy. This is for pragmatic rather than patriotic reasons, however; most of the company’s business is with mainland China, but in this instance the forms of Chinese being promoted are Cantonese (and not Putonghua) and standard written Chinese, since the mainland contact is based in Cantonese-speaking.

The questionnaire then asked respondents to give up to three reasons for using Chinese in reading/writing the text types displayed in Table 1. Nearly half of the respondents use Chinese in written communication because they feel they can communicate their ideas more effectively in that language. Interestingly, more than 38% used Chinese when communicating in writing with a local junior, while only 22% reported using Chinese to communicate with a local superior. Roughly equal numbers (16%) use Chinese to communicate with another company and to communicate within their own companies. Only 8% reported using Chinese in formal situations.

These findings go some way towards confirming Li’s (1999) claim that English is the unmarked language choice for office-based written communication in Hong Kong. The choice of language is, however, context-sensitive; there is a perception on the part of respondents that the use of written English vis à vis Chinese increases with the formality of the situation and the seniority of the audience.

Focus group feedback confirmed that standard written Chinese (rather than simplified Pin Yin characters or Cantonese adaptations) is used for formal written communication with mainland Chinese companies, but in intra-company terms, it seems that written Chinese is used more to communicate with subordinates than with superiors. Lord (1987), among others, has noted that English was from the inception of the colonial period essentially an elitist
tongue in Hong Kong used at the higher levels of law, government and commerce. There are perhaps hints in the present finding – deserving of further investigation - that such elitism still exists, despite universal free and compulsory primary and secondary education in which English plays a central role, with senior staff comfortable – perhaps even expecting - to operate in English while lower levels of staff operate solely or mostly in the medium of Chinese.

**Spoken workplace communication**

To this point, we have been considering issues of language choice in written communication. Results of the survey relating to spoken communication are shown below in Table 2.

### Table 2: Spoken Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Always English</th>
<th>Usually English</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Usually Chinese</th>
<th>Always Chinese</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job interviews</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal interviews</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with colleagues outside work</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the telephone</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing work with colleagues</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An interesting finding here, and one that squares with the earlier findings of Evans (1999b) in his study of building services engineers, is that the results are quite evenly balanced on the question of the medium of job interviews; respondents report that either English or Cantonese may be used in more than 40% of cases. Evans reports, in fact, that both languages may be used in the same interview and this view was supported anecdotally by five focus group members.
The other data in Table 2 tend to confirm expectations with focus groups reporting that Cantonese is indeed the dominant medium of workplace telephone communication and meetings unless, of course, the company employs non-Cantonese speaking expatriates in their Hong Kong offices or needs to communicate externally with non-Cantonese speaking contacts.

However, an interesting exception to the general rule that internal company meetings are conducted in Cantonese was provided by one of the focus groups whose membership included building service engineers employed by the Hong Kong SAR government’s Housing Department. These subjects reported that their departmental meetings were always conducted in English, despite the fact that only Cantonese native speakers now attend such meetings. When questioned on this surprising use of English, focus group members responded that if the chair of a particular committee commenced proceedings by speaking in English, then all present would follow this lead. Some focus group members felt that the use of English in meetings reflects long-term patterns of language behaviour developed in the colonial period. In relation to this point see, for example, Chan 1990; Cheung 1997; Harrison and So 1996. Others, however, felt that certain chairs – highly proficient in English – may use that language to exert control over the discussion and influence the direction of a meeting. The focus group also felt that since the minutes of most government meetings are written in English, it is logical and facilitative to use English as the medium of meetings.

Subjects who reported that they used both languages in particular speech situations were asked why they used Cantonese or English in spoken communication. They could give up to three reasons for using English/Cantonese. The main reason for using English (64% of respondents) was to communicate with non-Cantonese speakers, while Cantonese was mainly used because respondents (53%) felt they could communicate their ideas more effectively in Cantonese. Nearly 22% reported that they used English for business-to-business communication. Focus group feedback showed that this usually meant businesses located outside Hong Kong. A member of one of the focus groups explained her need to take instructions and confirm orders over the telephone from a Saudi Arabia-based company staffed by Saudis and a mixture of Pakistani, Egyptian and British expatriates. More than 17%, however, stated that they used Cantonese for business-to-business communication. Much of this communication is carried out on the telephone and is internal to Hong Kong. This finding coheres with the heavy use of Cantonese on the telephone as evidenced in Table 2 above.
A little under 40% of respondents reported that they used Cantonese to communicate with local juniors and slightly less than a quarter used the language to communicate with local superiors. An interesting finding here, and one which coheres with that for written communication, is that nearly 27% expressed the view that they used English in situations they perceived to be formal, whereas only 8% felt that they used Cantonese in formal situations. A tentative claim may be advanced, therefore, that English, as the unmarked language choice, is limited to formal and upward office-based spoken communication.

Perhaps the most interesting finding, however, relates to perceptions of the language of business in Hong Kong. Respondents were balanced in numerical terms between the two languages in question (around 16% each). This finding agrees with that for written communication i.e. English is not – as is frequently assumed – the predominant or “natural” (all-purpose) language of business in the Hong Kong workplace, although it is recognized by Hong Kong professionals as the global language of commerce.

**Relative frequencies of English language use**

**Writing**

To this point, we have been discussing language choice in relation to a range of workplace situations. The data we are now about to examine narrow the focus of the enquiry to English and, specifically, to the relative frequency with which English is used for the various types of written and spoken communication. In this section we will examine written communication; in the following section we will look at spoken communication. Table 3 below shows the frequency of the use of English for written communication tasks.
Respondents who reported that they need to write letters, memos, faxes and e-mails in English at work were asked to give up to three reasons for writing these types of text. The results of this enquiry are shown in Table 4.

It is not surprising to learn that e-mails are frequently written in English, as are faxes, memos, letters and reports. However, it is interesting to note that most of the subjects reported that they seldom need to write business-to-public documents in English; promotional materials and advertisements, for example. This may be explained by the fact that, since our data are derived from subjects working in the main for Hong Kong-owned companies, such documents are mainly for intra-ethnic consumption inside Hong Kong. E-mails, faxes and letters, by contrast, are more likely to be conveyed to business audiences both inside and outside Hong Kong.
Table 4: Main reasons for writing letters, memos, faxes and E-mail messages in English at work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>% response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reply to an enquiry/request</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask for information</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirm</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrange</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply for a job</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make an order</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruct</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complain</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As would be expected, responding to enquiries/requests and producing informative – mainly promotional – material on a company’s products and services are the most frequent activities performed by our subjects with respect to the text types in question here. Clearly, most of the activity is extra-company in orientation. It is not surprising that complaints are written infrequently since companies are normally the recipients rather than senders of such documents. More interesting is the fact that focus group feedback indicated that very few subjects ever write letters of adjustment (in response to complaints received) because of the risk of inadvertently admitting legal liability for disputed products and services. This may not, of course, be the case for front-line service industries such as tourism management and catering.

Since report writing always comes high on the list of corporate training priorities, respondents who need to write reports in English at work were asked to choose up to three types of report they were most frequently required to write. The results are displayed in Table 5 below.
Table 5: Main types of reports written in English at work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>% response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress reports</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposals</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation reports</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site reports</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation reports</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal reports</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility reports</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident reports</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory reports</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overwhelming dominance of the progress report here needs explanation and this was provided, in general terms, by the feedback received from the focus group meetings. Focus group participants offered the explanation that companies with their head offices outside Hong Kong demand regular updating on projects, and written reports (and to a much lesser extent, oral reports given over the telephone) are clearly a more economical means of checking progress than placing expatriate executives on site. This assertion supports Evans’s (1999a) finding that his building services engineering subjects were required to write progress reports in English more frequently than any other type of report.

Reading

The next section of the questionnaire aimed at discovering the frequency with which subjects need to read a range of business-related documents in English. The results are displayed in Table 6 below.
Table 6: Reading in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faxes</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agendas</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notices</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Journals/Magazines</td>
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<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
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<td>Forms</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Never: not required; Seldom: once or twice a year; Not very often: once or twice every 6 months; Sometimes: once or twice a month; Often: once or twice a week; Always: almost every day

E-mails, faxes, and letters need to be read most frequently in English and this finding displays a considerable and satisfying degree of congruence vis a vis the findings shown in Table 1. It is also worth noting here that 40% of subjects reported that minutes are always written in English and that nearly a third report that they need to read minutes in English on either a daily or weekly basis. About half the subjects need to read memos in English on a daily or weekly basis and more than 40% are required to read reports in English at this level of frequency.
Speaking and listening

The final set of data is displayed in Table 7 below and shows the frequency with which respondents need to speak/listen in English.

Table 7: Speaking and listening in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the telephone</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job interviews</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing work with colleagues</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with colleagues outside work</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal interviews</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Never: not required; Seldom: once or twice a year; Not very often: once or twice every 6 months; Sometimes: once or twice a month; Often: once or twice a week; Always: almost every day

It is interesting to compare the data in Table 7 with those in Table 2 (spoken communication). Both sets of data are comparable in some respects; for example, 5% of subjects in both sets report that English is always the medium of business meetings. Job interviews (11% in Table 2 and 7% in Table 7), and presentations (9% in Table 2 but only 5% in Table 7) are less comparable. Clearly, these findings will need thorough investigation in the next phase of the research, which will involve detailed statistical correlations of the data.

Conclusion

At this early stage in a multi-stage enquiry, conclusions must necessarily be extremely tentative. Certain broad trends, however, are clear enough. The
indications are that written English is utilized far more than the spoken form in the professional workplace in Hong Kong. This finding lends empirical support to the views expressed by Luke and Richards (1982) and Li (1999). Another pattern which appears to emerge is that Cantonese is used at least as much as English in job interviews and is used rather more than English for general telephone communication in the workplace. This pattern of spoken language use runs counter to the common assumption that English is mostly used in these situations.

Related to this is the interesting revelation that the majority of subjects appear not to perceive English as the language of business in Hong Kong. When Hong Kong’s colonial past and long-term connections with global markets are recalled this finding must appear surprising to those with an interest in workplace language use locally. It should be recalled, however, that senior ranks constituted only 11% of the research population and, if it is accepted that English is used more frequently and for a wider range of tasks in the upper echelons of business in Hong Kong, then it is perhaps not surprising that most of the subjects in this study (predominantly at junior and middle ranks) do not perceive English to be the natural language of business in Hong Kong.

There seems to be some evidence, then, that English is most used at the more senior levels of business and for essentially formal purposes with external or visiting audiences. However, when Hong Kong employers call for improved standards of English language proficiency, they are surely referring mainly to the need to improve the quality of English among the non-professional strata of employees and in particular those employed in Hong Kong’s relatively new service industries. Certainly the diversity and subtleties of workplace language use which are only just beginning to be uncovered in his study mean that any workplace language improvement initiative launched by the SAR government or the Hong Kong business community will need to be based on the results of rigorous research. Such initiatives will also need to be accurately targeted to help ensure cost-effective, high quality outcomes.

References


Appendix: Workplace languages questionnaire (Final Version)

1. Personal Information
Please mark the appropriate letter on the red answer sheet.

1. Gender: A Male B Female

2. Age: A < 25 E 41 – 45
B 25 – 30 F 46 – 50
C 31 – 35 G > 50
D 36 – 40

3. Highest academic level achieved:
A Form 5 E Diploma
B Form 7 F Higher Diploma
C Certificate G Bachelor’s Degree
D Higher Certificate H Master’s Degree

4. Years of working experience: A < 5 E 21 – 25
B 6 – 10 F 26 – 30
C 11 – 15 G > 30
D 16 – 20

5. Rank in current job: A Junior rank
B Middle rank
C Senior rank

6. Type of company / organisation:
A Government (e.g. civil service) ……………….Go to Section 2 on page 2
B Government-related (e.g. Housing Authority)...Go to Section 2 on page 2
C Private company …………………………..Please answer questions 7 & 8

7. Is the company you are working for…
A a HK-owned company
B a China-owned company
C a foreign-owned company

8. Is it …
A a small company (<50 employees)
B a medium-sized company (51-100 employees)
C a large company (>100 employees)

Go to Section 2 on page 2

2. Language use in the workplace

2A. Written communication

Look at the types of written texts in the list below (questions 9-25). Indicate which language(s) you use when reading or writing each text type at work by filling in the appropriate letter (A-F) on the answer sheet. Please use the scale below.

A - Always English
B - Usually English
C - Some situations English, some situations Chinese
D - Usually Chinese
If you have answered C for any of the questions above, please answer questions 26 and 27 on page 3. Otherwise go to section 2B on page 4.

Please think about the documents listed in questions 9-25 (previous page) that fall into the category Some situations English, some situations Chinese (i.e. category C). What are the factors that influence you to read or write these documents in English (rather than Chinese)? Please fill in no more than 3 options (A-J) on the answer sheet from the list below.

26. I generally use English …
   A when I am communicating with a local superior
   B when I am communicating with a local junior
   C when I am communicating with another company / organisation
   D because I can communicate my ideas more effectively in English
   E because it is the language of business in HK
   F because it is a formal situation
   G because it is an informal situation
   H when I am communicating within my company / organisation
   I when I am communicating with a non-Cantonese speaker
   J because it is company policy

What are the factors that influence you to read or write these documents in Chinese (rather than English)? Please fill in no more than 3 options (A-J) on the answer sheet from the list below.

27. I generally use Chinese …
   A when I am communicating with a local superior
   B when I am communicating with a local junior
   C when I am communicating with another company / organisation
   D because I can communicate my ideas more effectively in Chinese
   E because it is the language of business in HK
   F because it is a formal situation
   G because it is an informal situation
   H when I am communicating within my company / organisation
   I when I am communicating with a non user of Chinese
   J because it is company policy

2B. Spoken communication

Look at the speaking / listening situations in the list below (questions 28-36). Indicate which language(s) you use when speaking or listening in each situation at work by filling in the appropriate letter (A-F) on the answer sheet. Please use the scale below.
A - Always English
B - Usually English
C - Some situations English, some situations Cantonese
D - Usually Cantonese
E - Always Cantonese
F - Not required to speak / listen in this situation at work

28. Meetings
29. On the telephone
30. Seminars
31. Job interviews
32. Discussing work with colleagues
33. Presentations
34. Conferences
35. Socializing with colleagues outside work
36. Appraisal interviews

If you have answered C for any of the questions above, please answer questions 37 and 38 on page 5. Otherwise go to section 3 on page 6.

Please think about the situations listed in questions 28-36 (previous page) that fall into the category Some situations English, some situations Cantonese (i.e. category C). What are the factors that influence you to use English (rather than Cantonese) in these situations? Please fill in no more than 3 options (A-J) on the answer sheet from the list below.

37. I generally use English …
   A when I am communicating with a local superior
   B when I am communicating with a local junior
   C when I am communicating with another company / organisation
   D because I can communicate my ideas more effectively in English
   E because it is the language of business in HK
   F because it is a formal situation
   G because it is an informal situation
   H when I am communicating within my company / organisation
   I when I am communicating with a non-Cantonese speaker
   J because it is company policy

What are the factors that influence you to use Cantonese (rather than English) in these situations? Please fill in no more than 3 options (A-J) on the answer sheet from the list below.

38. I generally use Cantonese …
   A when I am communicating with a local superior
   B when I am communicating with a local junior
   C when I am communicating with another company / organisation
   D because I can communicate my ideas more effectively in Cantonese
   E because it is the language of business in HK
   F because it is a formal situation
   G because it is an informal situation
   H when I am communicating within my company / organisation
   I when I am communicating with a non-Chinese contact
   J because it is company policy
3. Use of English in the workplace

3A. Writing in English

Look at the types of written texts in the list below (questions 39-50). Indicate how often you write each text type in English at work by filling in the appropriate letter (A-F) on the answer sheet. Please use the scale below.

A - Never
B - Seldom (once / twice a year)
C - Not very often (once / twice every 6 months)
D - Sometimes (once / twice per month)
E - Often (once / twice per week)
F - Always (almost every day)

39. Letters 45. Minutes
40. Memos 46. Promotional materials
41. Faxes 47. Forms
42. E-mail messages 48. Circulars
43. Reports 49. Advertisements
44. Instructions 50. Notices

What are the main reasons for writing letters, memos, faxes and E-mail messages when you are at work? Please fill in no more than 3 options (A-J) on the answer sheet from the list below. (If you do not need to write letters, memos, faxes or E-mail messages in English at work, go to question 52 on page 7.)

51. When I write letters, memos, faxes and E-mail messages it is mainly to

A complain F apply for a job
B arrange G confirm (e.g. an order, instruction)
C inform H ask for information
D make an order I instruct
E request J reply to an enquiry / request

Please think about the different types of reports that you write in English at work. Which types of reports do you write most? Please fill in no more than 3 options (A-J) on the answer sheet from the list below. (If you do not need to write reports in English, go to section 3B.)

52. The types of reports I write most often at work are:

A Feasibility reports F Appraisal reports
B Progress reports G Situation reports
C Site reports H Laboratory reports
D Recommendation reports I Proposals
E Case studies J Accident reports

3B. Reading in English

Look at the types of written texts in the list below (questions 53-71). Indicate how often you read each text type in English at work by filling in the appropriate letter (A-F) on the answer sheet. Please use the scale below.
A - Never
B - Seldom (once / twice a year)
C - Not very often (once / twice every 6 months)
D - Sometimes (once / twice per month)
E - Often (once / twice per week)
F - Always (almost every day)

53. Letters 63. E-mail messages
54. Reports 64. Promotional materials
55. Faxes 65. Catalogues
56. Newsletters 66. Journals / Magazines
57. Agendas 67. Legal documents
58. Minutes 68. Records
59. Notices 69. Advertisements
60. Memos 70. Forms
61. Instructions 71. Manuals
62. Circulars

3C. Speaking and listening in English

Look at the speaking / listening situations in the list below (questions 72-80). Indicate how often you speak / listen in English in each situation at work by filling in the appropriate letter (A-F) on the answer sheet. Please use the scale below.

A - Never (once / twice a year)
B - Seldom (once / twice every 6 months)
C - Not very often (once / twice per month)
D - Sometimes (once / twice per week)
E - Often (almost every day)

72. Meetings
73. On the telephone
74. Seminars
75. Job interviews
76. Discussing work with colleagues
77. Presentations
78. Conferences
79. Socializing with colleagues outside work
80. Appraisal interviews