Putonghua’s Spread in Hong Kong: Four Teachers’ Experiences of Learning the National Language as Adults

Sam F. Cole
Centre for Applied English Studies
University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of four Hong Kong learners of Putonghua who did not begin learning the language until adulthood. The four informants teach Chinese and Putonghua at local sub-degree granting tertiary institutions. Teachers from this background were chosen by the investigator because they are agents of the spread of Putonghua and because a large number of Putonghua teachers in Hong Kong learned the language as adults. Based on the analysis of qualitative interview data, the study illuminates three themes common to informants’ experiences: contact with Putonghua, learning of Hanyu Pinyin and focus on phonological form, and attitudes about Putonghua in teaching. By providing a thematic account of informants’ experiences of learning Putonghua, this study paints a small part of the overall picture of the status and spread of China’s common language in Hong Kong.

Introduction

A national language movement has been in progress in China since the beginning of the last century. The purpose of the movement has been the promotion of a standard form of Mandarin known as Putonghua (common language) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Guoyu (national language) in the Republic of China (ROC), and a written language with similar grammar and vocabulary known as Modern Written Chinese (MWC). Ramsey (1987) and Chen (1999) give general accounts of the development and spread of modern Chinese, while Chen (1993) and D. C. S. Li (2006) cover developments in the standard written and spoken languages respectively. M. Zhou (2004) provides an overview of the policies towards topolect speaking and minority areas, while Lü and Dai (2000) give a general overview of the successes of and impediments to Putonghua promotion on the mainland with descriptions of the situations in a range of topolect areas. Tsao (1999) provides a thorough account of Taiwan’s experience with language planning. However, while the sociolinguistic literature on China’s language reforms has been strong on policy and the larger picture, it has been relatively weak in describing individual experiences.

In recent years, more attention has been given to factors affecting the acquisition of Putonghua by learners from topolect backgrounds. However, these studies either lean toward what Benson (2004) has referred to as a ‘universal account’ approach to the study of SLA (H. Y. Li, 2006; Xie, Cheng & Wang, 2006), or focus on narrow aspects of learners’ oral performance (e.g. He, 2004; Shi & Zhuo, 2002, 2004). Again, learners’ experiences have not yet been emphasized in the literature on Putonghua learning and the expansion of Putonghua. To the author’s knowledge, Lam (2002, 2005) is the only researcher who has collected extensive data on individuals’ experiences in learning Putonghua or other topolects and languages in China.
As a British colony and now a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the PRC where Cantonese has been the dominant Chinese topolect, Hong Kong has long stood at the sidelines of China’s language reforms. However, Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and the increase in social and economic contacts with the mainland since its opening have led to an increase in popular interest in Pǔtōnghuà, as well as academic interest in its place in society (Pierson, 1998) and potential role in education (Adamson & Auyeung, 1997; Leung & Wong, 1997; Zhang & Yang, 2004). Of particular relevance to the present study, in a report for the Hong Kong Center for Language in Education, Ho and Tong (1993) described the backgrounds, qualifications and language proficiency of Pǔtōnghuà subject teachers and made suggestions regarding future training and testing of Pǔtōnghuà teachers. Out of 171 respondents, 83.6% were from Guangdong Province (including Hong Kong), with only 2% coming from north China, where varieties of Mandarin are spoken natively. 75.4% of the respondents had never studied in a school where Pǔtōnghuà was the medium of instruction. Only 8.8% reported using Pǔtōnghuà at home. From this, one can reasonably infer that then, and likely now, the majority of Chinese and Pǔtōnghuà teachers in Hong Kong schools are non-native Pǔtōnghuà speakers who learned as adults.

None of the above studies have investigated the paths that individuals have followed to attain the level of proficiency required to serve as Pǔtōnghuà teachers, or teachers of Chinese in the medium of Pǔtōnghuà. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, a large number of Hong Kong Pǔtōnghuà teachers or teachers who teach Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà learned Pǔtōnghuà after reaching adulthood. While native Mandarin speakers typically dominate in university Pǔtōnghuà and Chinese enhancement programs and in schools that have traditionally taught Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà, the general profile of teachers in primary and secondary schools still seems to resemble that of the respondents in Ho and Tong’s (1993) study described above. Second, as Lam (2007) has stated, teachers are intermediary agents of the spread of the national language. As such, these learner-teachers’ stories provide a view of the status of Pǔtōnghuà’s spread in Hong Kong. The present paper investigates the Pǔtōnghuà learning and teaching experiences, which will be referred to as the ‘Pǔtōnghuà careers’, of four such learner-agents. The objective of this paper is therefore to highlight prominent themes in their experiences of learning and teaching Pǔtōnghuà, and teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà.

Pǔtōnghuà’s Status in China

During the past century of language reform in China, the spoken national language has been called Guóyǔ by the ROC government since 1912, and Pǔtōnghuà in the PRC since the 1950s. The official standards of the two differ in minor ways, and in this paper, they will be treated as the same and referred to as Pǔtōnghuà. This common language is officially defined by the PRC as ‘taking Beijing pronunciation as the foundation of its pronunciation, the Beijing topolect as its base topolect and the grammar of exemplary works of modern Chinese vernacular literature as its standard grammar’ (China, 1996).

While the pace of success in promoting Pǔtōnghuà by the PRC and ROC has differed, the methods used have been broadly similar. Both governments have had requirements for how much Pǔtōnghuà should be used in the media, and have
mandated its use in education and government since the 1950s. The use of Putonghua in the PRC is strongly encouraged in primary and secondary schools, as evidenced by signs around schools reminding teachers and students to speak it (Lam, 2005; D. C. S. Li, 2006). Although reality has not always followed policy in rural topolect speaking areas on the mainland (see Chen & Chen, 2003; Lam, 2002, 2005; Lü & Dai, 2000), it seems that Putonghua is now the dominant language at the great majority of the mainland’s teaching colleges (Xu & Cheng, 1989). Both the ROC and PRC have also implemented testing systems to ensure that all teachers or prospective teachers have attained a high level of proficiency in Putonghua. Under the ROC government, this testing has been done in teaching colleges (Young, Huang, Ochoa & Kuhlman, 1992), whereas since 1997, the PRC has used a national test called the Pǔtōnghuà Shuǐpíng Cèshì (National Pǔtōnghuà Proficiency Test, or PSC). It seems safe to conclude that teachers on the mainland and in Taiwan leave their basic teacher training programs with an ability to use a spoken language that approximates standard Pǔtōnghuà.

Regarding the use of Putonghua in society as a whole, research in cities where high prestige topolects are spoken demonstrates a High-Low diglossic relationship in attitudes toward Putonghua and the local topolect (see Bai, 1994; Kalmar, Yong & Hong, 1987; M. Zhou, 2001). Chen lists four factors that enable the spread of Pǔtōnghuà in a topolect area: the lack of a prestige topolect that rivals Pǔtōnghuà, a high degree of linguistic heterogeneity, a strong local economy (and thus a high degree of contact with the outside world), and a generally high level of educational achievement (1999). Research by Miao and Li (2006) in two economically vibrant cities in traditionally topolect speaking areas (Shenzhen and Guangzhou) has highlighted the particularly strong impact of linguistic heterogeneity. In Shenzhen, where no one topolect speaking group is large enough to dominate, Pǔtōnghuà is used to a much higher degree than in Guangzhou, where there is still a critical mass of Cantonese speakers.

**Pǔtōnghuà in Hong Kong Education and Society**

The education and teacher training situations in Hong Kong contrast sharply with the situations on the mainland and Taiwan with regards to the use of Pǔtōnghuà. Hong Kong students learn to read MWC, but unlike students on the mainland and Taiwan, they learn it through the spoken medium of Cantonese rather than Putonghua. Hong Kong Chinese are familiar with the vocabulary and grammar of Pǔtōnghuà since they learn a written language which uses similar vocabulary and grammar, but there is a wide perception that many Hong Kong Chinese do not achieve high levels of proficiency in MWC since the topolect they speak is linguistically distant from the one on which MWC is based (Ho, 2006; Snow, 2004).

Pǔtōnghuà was included as an elective in the school curriculum in the 1950s and early 1960s, but was discontinued in 1965 due to a lack of interest and teachers (Adamson & Auyeung, 1997; Leung & Wong, 1997). Aside from a handful of schools that have traditionally taught the Chinese language subject and some other subjects in Pǔtōnghuà, it was not taught in Hong Kong schools again until the 1980s, and only then through extracurricular activities (Leung & Wong, 1997). In 1998, Pǔtōnghuà became a core subject in all primary and secondary schools, and since 2000, it has been an elective exam in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. However, unlike the mainland and Taiwan, in Hong Kong spoken Pǔtōnghuà is
typically taught as a subject separate from Chinese lessons. In the past few years, some primary schools have voluntarily begun to teach Chinese in *Putonghua* in the belief that doing so will help students learn MSW more easily (see Ho, 2002; SCOLAR, 2008). However, as the government has followed a ‘market oriented’ policy (Ho, 2006) rather than directly mandating or managing such changes, the number of schools that have made this switch and to what extent they are implementing *Putonghua* as the medium of instruction are difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the long-term trend seems to be one of more schools adopting *Putonghua* as the medium of instruction in Chinese language lessons, and the government funded Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) has endorsed this trend (2003).

Though Hong Kong has a Native English Teacher Scheme that places one qualified non-local teacher in each school, there is to date no ‘Native *Putonghua* Teacher’ scheme to mirror this. SCOLAR has recently begun to advise some schools on the use of *Putonghua* in Chinese lessons, but has only recruited twenty consultants from the mainland for this purpose (Lau, 2007). Due to the historical lack of *Putonghua* instruction in schools, many of Hong Kong’s *Putonghua* teachers are unlikely to have had much instruction in it during their basic education. Though no recent statistics on teacher backgrounds have been published, Ho and Tong (1993) found that most *Putonghua* teachers in Hong Kong were not educated in the language. The teaching on the majority of Chinese degree courses is generally in Cantonese (Ho, 2006), and it seems that most *Putonghua* teachers have learned it through continuing education courses. As more schools decide to switch to *Putonghua* as the medium of instruction for Chinese lessons, much of the teaching will be done by teachers from such a background.

Whereas all graduates from teaching colleges are required to pass a *Putonghua* proficiency test in mainland China and Taiwan, only *Putonghua* subject teachers are required to do so in Hong Kong. Chinese language teachers or those being trained to teach Chinese are not required by the Hong Kong SAR government to attain any level of *Putonghua* proficiency, though the job market generally demands it since it is Chinese subject teachers who are expected to teach *Putonghua* lessons in most schools. *Putonghua* teachers can fulfill the government’s language proficiency benchmark requirements by taking the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority’s *Putonghua* Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT), which includes a speaking paper similar to the PSC plus papers on listening, Hanyu Pinyin (a system of phonetic symbols) and classroom language.

If judged by Chen’s (1999) four factors that enable the spread of *Putonghua*, Hong Kong is a society that is highly resistant to the common language. As Cantonese is used for more ‘high’ language functions in Hong Kong, it enjoys greater prestige than *Putonghua*. The local economy is well developed, but this initially came through contact with the world outside China rather than through contact with areas of the mainland where *Putonghua* is commonly spoken. The level of education achieved by Hong Kong people is relatively high, but much of this education has traditionally been through the medium of English, especially at the tertiary level. Most importantly, even though Hong Kong is an immigrant society, recent census statistics have shown that a large proportion of Chinese immigrants speak Cantonese as their first topolect, or their first topolect is another southern topolect and they speak Cantonese as an
additional topolect. Relatively few immigrants speak a variety of Pǔtōnghuà as their first language (see Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2006). Cantonese has essentially played the role of common language among Chinese in Hong Kong.

The Learning of Pǔtōnghuà by Topolect Speakers and Pǔtōnghuà’s Relationship with Literacy

As described above, adult Hong Kong learners of Pǔtōnghuà have some knowledge of the syntax and vocabulary of Pǔtōnghuà through their literacy in MWC. However, as many have noted, the emphasis on Pǔtōnghuà promotion and teaching throughout China has long been pronunciation rather than lexis and syntax (Chao, 1976; D. C. S. Li, 2006; Saillard, 2004; Sanders, 1987; Tsao, 1999). This seems to be the case because of the popular, questionable notion that the primary difference between topolects is pronunciation, and that China’s mutually unintelligible and largely unwritten topolects are merely different ways of pronouncing the same written language.

The popular emphasis on pronunciation is mirrored in the way that Pǔtōnghuà proficiency is tested. Compared to other large-scale language proficiency tests such as TOEFL, IELTS or the Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (a test of Chinese as a second language), the PSC is a highly prescriptive assessment of speakers’ oral performance. Rather than a speaker being awarded marks according to descriptors of communicative ability, a PSC candidate’s score is determined by his or her error rate on the five parts of the test, which consist of reading single characters aloud, reading multi-syllable words aloud, multiple choice questions on syntax and distinguishing topolect vocabulary from Pǔtōnghuà vocabulary, a read aloud passage and a topical monologue. 80% of the possible marks on the test are awarded for pronunciation (State Language Commission Pǔtōnghuà Training and Assessment Center, 2004).

In order to promote a common pronunciation, two major systems of phonetic symbols have been used in the past century. Zhùyīn Fúhào was promoted by the ROC government starting in 1930 and is still used in Taiwan. To the western eye, these symbols resemble Chinese characters, but in fact only indicate pronunciation. The second system, Hànyǔ Pīnyīn, uses the Roman alphabet. Pīnyīn has been in use since the 1950s in the PRC and has become the dominant system both internationally and in Hong Kong.

In mainland China and Taiwan, the use or at least attempted use of Pǔtōnghuà in the acquisition of literacy is seen as the norm. Children begin to learn Pǔtōnghuà phonetic symbols no later than the beginning of primary school. Teaching techniques are generally of a rote-learning nature and include reading and writing in phonetic symbols, character-to-phonetic symbol and phonetic symbol-to-character transcription, reading lists of words aloud and dictation (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999; Saillard, 2004). In early primary school textbooks, most readings are in Chinese characters with their corresponding phonetic symbols shown above or next to the characters.

Hànyǔ Pīnyīn and Zhùyīn Fúhào were initially intended to serve only as a way of checking or noting the pronunciation of characters. However, in recent decades they have been adopted as auxiliary writing systems in early primary education. By
beginning to read and write with these symbols first, young learners are able to express themselves in sentence and paragraph-length discourse sooner than if they had been taught to read and write through traditional methods that begin with a nearly exclusive focus on memorization of individual characters (see Du, 2002; Liu, 2005; Rohsenow, 1996, on the role of phonetic symbols in literacy).

Traditionally, Hong Kongers have not learned phonetic symbols for their own topolect. A few competing systems of Cantonese phonetic symbols exist (Matthews & Yip, 1994), but no one system has dominated or been adopted for use in schools. Since Cantonese romanization is not widely taught, most people cannot easily use the phonetic symbols found in Cantonese dictionaries (Ren, 2005). Until recently, phonics has not been taught in most Hong Kong English classrooms, so locally educated Chinese seem unlikely to have acquired substantial phonetic decoding skills from their experience of learning English. Unless a Hong Kong learner of Pǔtōnghuà has used phonetic symbols when learning another language, his first experience with decoding sounds from written script is likely to be when he begins to learn Pǔtōnghuà.

Although a great deal of the literature on the learning of Pǔtōnghuà by topolect speakers focuses on learners’ language, especially pronunciation (e.g. He, 2004; Shanghai Training and Assessment Center, 2002; Shi & Zhuo, 2002, 2004; Tan, 2004; Yang, 2003; L. Zhou, 2004) rather than their backgrounds or how they learned Pǔtōnghuà, there are however three notable exceptions. In a quantitative study, H. Y. Li (2006) examined the relationships between mainland PSC takers’ test results with a range of sociolinguistic factors. In a volume on language education in mainland China, Lam (2005) used questionnaire and life history interview data to provide an overview of language learning experiences in mainland China. Closer to the focus of this study is Ho and Tong’s (1993) study, mentioned above, which included data on the backgrounds of 171 Hong Kong primary and secondary school Pǔtōnghuà teachers who were serving in 1991. To this author’s knowledge, Ho and Tong’s survey is the most recent large sample investigation of Pǔtōnghuà teachers in Hong Kong. Their sample accounted for 10.4% of all serving Pǔtōnghuà teachers at the time. The picture painted by their findings is one of limited exposure to Pǔtōnghuà. As mentioned above, the great majority of these teachers came from Guangdong Province and had not been educated in Pǔtōnghuà. The most common contact these teachers had with Pǔtōnghuà aside from teaching it was while holidaying on the mainland. 61.4% of respondents reported having had such contact with Pǔtōnghuà, but only 22.2% of respondents reported that they travelled to the mainland once or more than once a year. Though Ho and Tong’s study gave a general picture of the backgrounds of Pǔtōnghuà teachers that is likely to still hold true now, it does not describe how such teachers had learned Pǔtōnghuà.

The Rationale for the Present Study

This study falls within a growing body of scholarly qualitative literature that focuses on individual language learners’ experiences. Unlike quantitative studies which seek to identify universal factors or processes in language learning, this body of learner-centered literature is concerned ‘not only with studying individuals acting on L2 input and producing L2 output, but also with how L2 learners are situated in
specific social, historical, and cultural contexts and how learners resist or accept the positions those contexts offer them’ (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 310).

Recent learner-focused research includes autobiographical accounts such as diary studies written during the learning process (e.g. Campbell, 1996; Jones, 1994) and holistic learner memoirs (Benson, Chik & Lim, 2003). Biographical studies form the larger branch of qualitative, learner-focused research. Some have examined short-term cases (e.g. Cotterall, 2004; Murphy, Chen & Chen, 2004; Sataporn & Lamb, 2004). More similar to the present study are biographical investigations of whole-life experiences, which can be divided into two categories: thematic and holistic. Thematic studies have focused on motivation (Lim, 2002; Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004; Spolsky, 2000), identity (Kanno, 2003; Norton, 2000) and autonomy (Benson, Chik & Lim, 2003; Malcolm, 2004). Like the present study, holistic studies such as Evan’s (1988) study of university students and teachers of language in the United Kingdom, Lam’s study of language learners in mainland China (2005) and Benson and Nunan’s (2004) research on university-level learners of English in Hong Kong have taken a more open-ended, life history approach.

Within this body of holistically-oriented literature also exists a number of what Belcher and Connor refer to as accounts by ‘linguistically informed’ language learners (2001, p. 3); Belcher and Connor’s ‘Reflections on Multiliterate Lives’ contains a number of language specialists’ accounts of their paths to advanced second-language literacy. Other linguistically informed accounts of learning include Campbell’s (1996) diary study in which she compares her experiences of learning two languages, Connor’s (1999) description of learning to write advanced academic prose, and Braine’s (1999) account of his journey from the ‘periphery’ to the ‘center’ of English language teaching.

The present study aims to provide a thematic, holistic overview of four linguistically aware adult learners’ experiences of learning, and then acting as agents of the spread of China’s standard spoken language. The intention is not to draw broad generalizations from these four experiences and make conclusions about the experiences of all such learners. Instead, the aim is to probe deeper into a few learner-teachers’ experiences in order to draw out themes that would not be easily discovered by quantitative methods, with the hope that the generalizability of these themes can be tested in later research.

**Informants**

The informants of this study were teachers of spoken Pǔtōnghuà and Chinese in the medium of Pǔtōnghuà (typically practical writing modules to students from a local education background) at the sub-degree tertiary level at the time of interview. Such informants were chosen because they were the most accessible for the investigator, who is also a tertiary-level language teacher. The investigator knew some of the informants, while others were recommended by colleagues. The investigator initially sought to include primary and secondary school teachers in the study, but it soon became apparent that such teachers’ work schedules would have made it difficult for them to be interviewed within the time during which data were to be collected. This, combined with the fact that the investigator enjoyed fewer contacts with primary and secondary school teachers, led to the decision that the study would
include only tertiary-level teachers who learned Pǔtōnghuà as adults. It should be emphasized that this study aimed to describe the experiences of teachers who learned as adults, rather than to pursue the more narrow research focus of tertiary-level teachers who learned as adults and any themes specific to tertiary-level teachers’ experiences. Tertiary teachers were interviewed as a matter of convenience and practicality, not because the investigator intended to focus the research specifically on teachers at that level. The main criteria when considering potential participants were:

1. No substantial exposure to Pǔtōnghuà in or out of a classroom during their basic education.
2. High proficiency in Pǔtōnghuà. The investigator initially aimed to interview only informants who had reached the government’s language proficiency benchmarks for Pǔtōnghuà teachers. Like all primary and secondary school teachers, tertiary-level teachers in Hong Kong are generally required to meet these benchmark requirements. In the end, one teacher who had begun teaching many years before benchmarking began and was thus exempted by her institution was included in the study. The author chose to include her in the study because her Pǔtōnghuà learning career began much earlier than that of other participants.

No attempt was made to identify informants who are broadly representative of teachers who learned Pǔtōnghuà as adults. However, while these informants’ teaching experience at the sub-degree level would clearly be different from that of primary and secondary level teachers who learned as adults, when compared to descriptions of the paths to proficiency followed by such primary and secondary level teachers’ (Ho, 2004a), it is apparent that these informants had followed broadly similar paths that included a range of courses in Hong Kong, as well as courses offered on the mainland. In order to collect data on Pǔtōnghuà learning experiences that might illustrate not only ‘what it’s like’, but also ‘what it was like’ to learn Pǔtōnghuà during different times in the period of the last 25 years when interest in Pǔtōnghuà in Hong Kong has steadily increased, the investigator tried to interview learners of different ages and different ‘starting dates’ for their Pǔtōnghuà learning and teaching ‘careers’ (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961).

After narrowing down a list of potential participants according to the criteria above and potential participants’ availability, six informants were interviewed. Of these, four were chosen for transcription, analysis, and follow-up interviews, based on their responsiveness. As noted above, the aim was to probe the experiences of a small number of informants for deeper themes rather than to interview a large number of informants and then draw broad conclusions. The ‘starting dates’ for their Pǔtōnghuà careers range from the early 1980s to around 2000. An additional, unintended differentiating factor that became apparent during the interviews was whether informants had mainly learned Pǔtōnghuà through a single, multi-term course, or were what I label here as ‘self-directed, semi-formal’ learners who studied a variety of short courses in different places as well as engaged in independent study.

Data Collection

All data used in this study were collected through formal face-to-face interviews in private tutorial rooms at participants’ places of work. Each of the six original
informants was interviewed for between 70 and 90 minutes in Spring of 2007 (see appendix for questions). Interviews were conducted in Putonghua and transcribed directly into English. Only in places where informants described specific grammatical, phonological or lexical features of Putonghua to illustrate a point were data transcribed in Chinese. Although it would have been ideal to have transcribed all interview data in Chinese and then translated it into English, this was not done for two reasons: the significant expense entailed in doing so, and the fact that interview data were not to be used for any sort of analysis of linguistic structure.

All informants were asked the same questions in their initial interviews (see Appendix). After transcription, the data were analyzed for any gaps in learning histories and for themes to pursue further in second interviews, which were conducted about a month after the initial interviews. These follow-up interviews were done in the same locations as the first interviews, and lasted between ten and thirty minutes. In places where informants’ recorded speech was unclear or idiomatic, the investigator sought clarification from the informant or the assistance of a highly proficient Putonghua speaker.

Data Analysis

The procedures used to analyze the interview transcripts were adapted from those described in Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Taylor and Bogdan (1998). The author read each transcript a number of times, each time noting possible themes that might be used to code and organize the data. Sections of the transcripts were color coded and then re-arranged so that information coded under one theme appeared together. This study reports on what the author believes to be the most salient themes common to all informants’ careers.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the interviews are divided into two sections here. The first section consists of a table giving informants’ general details, and then profiles for each informants’ Putonghua career in order to give the reader a sense of the general ‘when’, ‘where’ and ‘why’ of the informants’ experiences. The second section consists of a combined presentation and discussion of informants’ experiences according to the three most salient, common dimensions in their learning careers: contact with Putonghua, learning Hanyu Pinyin and focus on phonological form, and attitudes about teaching. To protect the anonymity of informants, pseudonyms are used, and details of their experiences that could be used to identify them have been omitted.

Table 1
Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Start of Putonghua Career</th>
<th>Learning Mode</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ming</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Early 1980s</td>
<td>Self-directed semi-formal</td>
<td>BA&amp;MA (Communications), MA (Linguistics), TCSL Certificate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yan

F Late 30s Around 1990 Multi-term tertiary course Higher Diploma (Translation), BA (Chinese), PGDE (Chinese Education), MA (Linguistics)

Li

F Late 30s Late 1990s Self-directed semi-formal BA&MA (Mass Communication), TCSL Certificate, MA (Chinese Language Education)

Feng

M Late 20s Late 1990s Multi-term tertiary course BEd (Chinese)

Ming

Ming has taught Chinese and Pǔtōnghuà courses to local students at a tertiary institute since the early 1990s, with about half of her teaching being in Pǔtōnghuà and the rest in Cantonese. She has also taught Chinese as a second language (CSL).

Ming first heard Pǔtōnghuà in the early 1980s while working as a clerk in a Hong Kong factory that employed Pǔtōnghuà speaking workers from the mainland. ‘Because I was interested in communicating with them, I would ask them “How do you say this word?” And they would write something in English. Well, this was actually pīnyīn.’ This first contact with Pǔtōnghuà sparked Ming’s interest, and she took a course at a private language institute. While working as a journalist a few years later, her employer paid for her to take an evening Pǔtōnghuà course at a local university. She later used her Pǔtōnghuà as a journalist when interviewing mainland visitors involved in the negotiations on the handover of Hong Kong, and then transcribing recordings of student leaders’ speeches during the democracy movement of 1989.

Ming believes that her learning progressed the fastest while studying at a university in Beijing for three months in the early 1990s, and then during a period of a few years in the mid-nineties when she worked with a non-Cantonese speaking colleague from the mainland. In the early 1990s, there were no Pǔtōnghuà courses in Beijing for Hong Kongers like Ming who were already fully literate in Chinese, so she took a CSL course with foreigners. Her main aim was to experience life in Beijing, but soon after arriving, she realized that her Pǔtōnghuà was not as good as that of some of her foreign classmates. She decided that the likely cause was not having mastered the use of pīnyīn. Doing so became her goal, and by the time she returned to Hong Kong, she felt she had been successful. Ming attributes her later confidence and naturalness in using Pǔtōnghuà to the daily interaction she had with her non-Cantonese speaking colleague in the mid-1990s.

Yan

Yan has taught translation, Chinese, Pǔtōnghuà and CSL at the tertiary level since 2000. The medium of most of her teaching has been Pǔtōnghuà. Her first substantial exposure to Pǔtōnghuà was while on a trip to the mainland after her matriculation exams in Hong Kong. During this trip, she could not communicate with Pǔtōnghuà speakers.
Yan describes herself as someone who has always been interested in languages, and she has also studied French and Japanese. In the early 1990s, she began a higher diploma in translation, which included two years of instruction in Pǔtōnghuà for about five hours a week. Pǔtōnghuà was her best subject in the diploma.

While working as a public relations officer at a local non-profit organization in the 1990s, Yan was able to maintain her Pǔtōnghuà skills by acting as host for groups of mainlanders who visited the organization. She took the PSC in the late 1990s and satisfied language proficiency requirements for teaching. After graduation from her higher diploma program, but before she began teaching in 2000, Yan was content with her Pǔtōnghuà skills. This changed after she began teaching. In her new career, she interacted daily with non-Cantonese speaking colleagues, which to her was different from previous experiences because it was sustained, ‘genuine’ interaction on topics common among teachers. Yan’s interest in improving her Pǔtōnghuà has also been increased by her desire to obtain better results on the PSC, which she has taken three times since the late 1990s. She had attended a PSC preparation course at a mainland university about a year before her interview.

Li

Li has taught Chinese and Pǔtōnghuà at the tertiary level since 2001. Like Ming, she is a relatively self-directed learner in that she has taken a variety of courses and engaged in a lot of independent study. Her first experience with Pǔtōnghuà was a false start of sorts: she enrolled in a private language institute while in university, but dropped out because she felt learning pīnyīn was too difficult.

Li did not begin studying Pǔtōnghuà again until after she returned to Hong Kong in the late 1990s from overseas postgraduate study. She enrolled in a short course on Pǔtōnghuà pronunciation for teachers who were interested in or already teaching Pǔtōnghuà. Although she felt that her Pǔtōnghuà was still poor after this course, she enrolled in a teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL) program. Though intended as a teacher training program, according to Li, this TCSL course helped improve her listening skills. Shortly after the course, Li went to Beijing for what would be the first of two study visits she would make there. In this first visit, she attended a three-week PSC preparation course at a university. After taking the PSC and returning to Hong Kong, she then decided to go back to Beijing just a month later. In her second visit, which she considers to have been the breakthrough in her learning, she studied one-to-one with a tutor every day for two months. Li says that before finally grasping the use of pīnyīn with the methods her teachers in Beijing used, she could not learn independently.

Feng

After finishing his Bachelor of Education degree (BEd), Feng taught Chinese (in Cantonese) and Pǔtōnghuà for a few years in a secondary school. He then left teaching for two years and worked in a local bank where he frequently used Pǔtōnghuà to communicate with customers from the mainland. At the time he was interviewed, Feng had been teaching Chinese and Pǔtōnghuà at the tertiary level for a few months. Unlike his secondary school teaching job, he uses Pǔtōnghuà instead of Cantonese to teach at his tertiary institution.
Like Yan, Feng learned Pǔtōnghuà through a multi-term course designed to take a beginner to a high level of proficiency. Feng and his BEd classmates enrolled in evening Pǔtōnghuà courses at their university’s school of continuing education on the advice of their BEd teachers. The four-year program entailed two lessons every week, with the final year of instruction focusing on how to teach Pǔtōnghuà. Feng describes the course as ‘monotonous’ and tiring, but ultimately effective. Feng and his classmates also attended a summer-long Pǔtōnghuà and Chinese culture course at a university in Beijing. After graduating from university, Feng did a preparation course for the Pǔtōnghuà LPAT at a local university.

**Common Dimensions and Discussion**

*Contact with Pǔtōnghuà*

As stated above, none of the informants had any substantial contact with Pǔtōnghuà until after secondary school. Most of their long-term contact with Pǔtōnghuà was through studying it, and then teaching it, and they had all studied it both in Hong Kong and on the mainland. Yan had spent the least time studying on the mainland, having only done a three-week PSC preparation course. Ming, Li and Feng each spent a total of between two to three months studying on the mainland. Additionally, all had done academic coursework taught in Pǔtōnghuà, ranging from a month-long TCSL course (Ming), a module on teaching Pǔtōnghuà as part of a longer course (Yan and Feng), and a certificate in TCSL and a master’s degree in Chinese language education taught mostly in Pǔtōnghuà (Li) (see Table 1).

Ming, Yan and Feng emphasized the benefits of personal, casual contact they had with speakers of Pǔtōnghuà during their careers. In contrast, Li’s contact with Pǔtōnghuà was more formal and academic. She seemed to place greater emphasis on the importance of self-study and one-to-one formal instruction than on interaction with Pǔtōnghuà speakers.

Though all informants said they traveled for leisure on the mainland every few years, this was not the type of contact they emphasized as being the most beneficial. Instead, Ming and Yan emphasized the importance of daily interaction and personal relationships with non-Cantonese speaking colleagues back in Hong Kong. Ming stated that this sustained contact helped her perform an activity she considered to be a good indicator of Pǔtōnghuà ability:

>[After returning to Hong Kong from Beijing] Sometimes I’d read books aloud in Pǔtōnghuà. I’d read a ton but have no idea what I’d just read … I couldn’t comprehend the content. That’s when you know you still haven’t grasped the language yet. But if you read it aloud in Cantonese, then, ah, I know what it means! Only after my colleague had worked here for about a year, only after I had spoken to her every day could I read aloud in Pǔtōnghuà and understand it.

Yan described learning colloquial language she had not been exposed to in formal study:
Through interaction with a native, you’ll notice words that you don’t know or that you haven’t heard before. For example, they like to say bie, the one with the mouth radical and then the bèi in bǎobèi. I didn’t know what that was before, because when you’re studying … you’re studying the most standard Pǔtōnghuà.

Unlike Ming and Yan’s interaction with colleagues, Feng described the benefits of speaking Pǔtōnghuà with university classmates, who began speaking the language with each other from year one on the advice of a Pǔtōnghuà instructor: ‘When you talk more, then you’ll discover things that you can’t express, so then you’ll go check a book to see how to express what you mean’.

While all informants had opportunities to use Pǔtōnghuà in non-teaching jobs they had held, only Feng emphasized such experience as having been substantially beneficial to his learning. He described how he had to learn a large number of financial terms in Pǔtōnghuà for his job at a bank. He also needed to adjust the register of his speech to fit the job:

When I talked to them [customers from the mainland], our speech usually wasn’t so standard. When we spoke, the topics we talked about, when I was introducing the banks services, it usually wasn’t so rigid because I didn’t want them to be so stern or serious. I’d try to be relaxed, so it was different from speaking Pǔtōnghuà in a classroom.

Just as important as the informants’ contact with Pǔtōnghuà was their lack of it. Feng described how few people in his life speak Pǔtōnghuà: ‘I don’t really have any other opportunities [to speak Pǔtōnghuà] because everyone in my family speaks Cantonese. My friends are mostly Cantonese.’ Li described the difficulty of using Pǔtōnghuà in Hong Kong in terms of social acceptability: ‘I rarely use it. If you’re in Hong Kong, then how can you speak it regularly? Everybody would think it’s strange.’ Li then described how she usually spoke Cantonese to classmates in her TCSL course:

I didn’t dare speak [Pǔtōnghuà], because … they were mostly from Beijing or Taiwan … When I heard them speak, I thought ‘Wow! They sound so good!’ And so then I was even shyer about speaking … So I spoke Cantonese … and they understood, so it didn’t matter.

All four informants described that the common language at work was still Cantonese even among colleagues who spoke and taught Pǔtōnghuà. According to Yan,

There are a few kinds of teachers from the mainland. For example, some came after they grew up. Another kind is those who came when they were really young. Both their Cantonese and Pǔtōnghuà are good. Pǔtōnghuà is their mother tongue, and then they acquired Cantonese in primary school, so it’s also like their mother tongue. So that kind, the kind who came when they were young, you’ll definitely speak Cantonese with them. That’s what they prefer.
Similar to immersion students’ experiences described in Ho (2004a), informants did not enjoy many opportunities to integrate among local Putonghua speakers while studying on the mainland. Feng described why he and his Hong Kong classmates had few chances to interact with their mainland counterparts while in Beijing:

We stayed in the foreign exchange students’ dormitory. We actually didn’t have opportunities to interact with local students… I’d have preferred staying with the local students … I think it would have helped my own understanding of the local situation and language more.

The course they attended was designed for Hong Kong teacher trainees; Feng had no mainland classmates. Ming also stayed in a dormitory for foreigners while in Beijing. Although Feng said he benefited from his efforts to converse extensively with taxi drivers and restaurant workers, he had little contact with people of a similar status to his own such as mainland university students.

On the surface, these informants’ contact with Putonghua seems similar to that of Ho and Tong’s (1993) respondents in that they enjoyed only limited exposure. Digging deeper, however, we find an emphasis on specific kinds of contact with Putonghua. Informants’ in other learner case studies (e.g. Lim, 2002; Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004) have emphasized the importance of exposure within the host environment of the target language. In contrast, Ming, Yan and Feng stressed the importance of long-term relationships or daily situations in which they spoke Putonghua in Hong Kong. Ming and Yan’s interaction with individual non-Cantonese speaking colleagues is notable for two reasons. First, as Hong Kong does not have a ‘Native Putonghua Teacher’ scheme, it seems unlikely that many Hong Kong Putonghua teachers would enjoy such long-term, intimate contact. Second, the single relationships enjoyed by Ming and Yan seem to have been crucial to their development of the ability to teach Chinese in Putonghua.

In informants’ stories, a lack of a Putonghua speaking culture among teachers who can speak it is evident. This contrasts with the more established culture of the use of Putonghua by teachers and teacher trainees on the mainland (see D. C. S. Li, 2006; Xu & Cheng, 1989). The lack of such a culture in their workplaces seems not so much due to a lack of Putonghua proficiency, but instead to the dominance of Cantonese in Hong Kong compared to the status of topolects in other areas in China. As illustrated by Yan’s description of ‘a few kinds of teachers from the mainland’, the draw and desire for what few Putonghua speakers there are to integrate is strong.

To further understand why these informants’ rarely use Putonghua, it is worth returning to Chen’s (1999) four factors influencing the spread of Putonghua in a given place to examine how these factors apply to individuals. Chen draws a correlative relationship between high education levels and Putonghua proficiency, implying that high Putonghua proficiency is itself a factor leading to wide use of Putonghua. In the cases of our four informants, though they were not educated in Putonghua, their Putonghua proficiency would be considered good in Hong Kong and in topolect speaking areas on the mainland where Putonghua is used as the language of education. This leads to the question of why teachers such as these do not speak Putonghua with other Putonghua speaking teachers. What is the tipping point for when Putonghua will be spoken? It seems that for these teachers, the tipping point is
defined not by proficiency, but instead by the need to use Pǔtōnghuà to communicate. For them, Cantonese satisfies all of their communication needs, and only when confronted with linguistic heterogeneity, i.e. a non-Cantonese speaking colleague, do they use Pǔtōnghuà outside the classroom.

Ming, Yan and Feng’s emphasis on contact with non-Cantonese speakers may have implications for the use of Pǔtōnghuà to teach Chinese at other levels in Hong Kong. Ming and Yan specifically stated that they only became confident in teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà after extended contact with non-Cantonese speaking colleagues at the tertiary institutions where they worked. This raises two questions regarding the use of Pǔtōnghuà to teach Chinese at the primary and secondary levels. First, do teachers at these levels have the proficiency, confidence and language awareness necessary to teach Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà? Second, if they do not, will they have opportunities to work intimately with teachers who were educated in Pǔtōnghuà and who do not speak Cantonese?

Learning Hànyǔ Pīnyīn and Focus on Phonological Form

All four informants strongly emphasized the impact that learning pīnyīn had on their learning, and all recommended that other learners learn it as soon as possible. Indeed, almost all of the informants’ responses to questions about favourite study materials, teachers or methods focused on the learning of pīnyīn. Yan recalled learning pīnyīn quickly, and attributed the ease with which she learned it to having previously learned to use the IPA when learning English. However, Ming, Li and Feng all found learning pīnyīn difficult. Ming and Li described how even after attending numerous courses in Hong Kong, they still had not grasped it and actually resisted learning it. Both said that they did not accept the necessity of learning pīnyīn until they went to Beijing for full-time study.

Both Ming and Yan said that their favourite study method involved the use of a character dictionary. While in Beijing, Ming wrote diary entries in pīnyīn and re-wrote newspaper articles in it; she would then ask her teacher to check her work. Yan was frequently given homework in which she had to re-write character texts in pīnyīn. Ming and Yan used character dictionaries to find the pīnyīn for any characters they did not know how to pronounce. Initially, they would look up characters by radical or stroke count, and then as they improved, they would guess the pronunciation and try to look up the character by pīnyīn. Ming showed the investigator the character dictionary she had acquired in the mid-1980s; after extensive use, it was tattered and held together by a rubber band.

Feng’s learning of pīnyīn was less dependent on dictionaries, but still of a rote nature. He describes his evening Pǔtōnghuà courses:

I think it was pretty monotonous because most of the time, you just practiced reading aloud vocabulary or essays … actually, every night for two hours we’d just read aloud non-stop. That was pretty boring. I knew the aim was to practice, to see more pīnyīn and make you pronounce it, but I felt that that kind of learning was pretty monotonous.
While preparing for the PSC, Li and Yan focused almost exclusively on phonological form. Yan describes the way she practiced with a tutor:

We mostly focused on the read aloud essays and the speaking topics … For the essays, we chose a few to record, and then afterward the teacher would listen and tell you how well you had read each part of the essay, and then tell you what the pronunciation should be and what feeling you should have when reading it.

Li’s favourite study resource was the Pǔtōnghuà Shuǐpíng Cèshidàgāng (State Language Commission Pǔtōnghuà Training and Assessment Center, 2004), which is actually designed more as a reference book of what is considered standard rather than a test preparation book.

I think it’s focused … I think it has its own system, including single characters and multi-syllable words and their pronunciation … the words they choose are all frequently used words … It’s suitable for me, I think. For example, you can read row after row [of single syllables and multi-syllable words], over and over again. Ha-ha. I think it’s a bit machine-like.

Li then vividly recounted how her one-to-one tutor in Beijing helped her finally learn pīnyīn:

He forbid me from looking at the Chinese characters [in the textbook] … For example, bēi. He’d spell out bēi, and then you’d try to sound it out. A single syllable. But he’d say ‘don’t worry about what it means. Just read it aloud.’ He wanted accurate pronunciation, not for you to understand what it meant … I thought it was really hard, but I think that it was a pretty good method because before, I had always relied on the Chinese characters to help me guess the pronunciation. Sometimes my pronunciation would be influenced by Cantonese. If you always look at the Chinese characters … then it’s really easy for the Cantonese pronunciation to come into your mind. It will influence your pronunciation, but if you don’t, if you just look at the pīnyīn, then there’ll be no influence … So when I covered them, I didn’t have anything to rely on, so I had to use my brain to try to sound out the pīnyīn.

As noted above, much of the literature on Pǔtōnghuà learning by topolect speakers focuses on learners’ difficulties with the language systems of Pǔtōnghuà, especially on pronunciation. In their learning, these informants were also very concerned with pronunciation. However, what these informants’ stories additionally bring to light is a difficulty in handling the learning systems of Pǔtōnghuà (specifically, pīnyīn and how it is used). The common theme exhibited by informants’ stories on learning pīnyīn is a nearly exclusive focus on form (Ellis, 2001), and in three cases, boredom with if not resistance to learning. None of them described or recommended the use of ‘meaning-focused’, communicative or task-based methods. Instead, they used many of the pīnyīn learning methods used in primary education (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999; Saillard, 2004). We might infer that this exclusive focus on form is what made learning pīnyīn, and thus Pǔtōnghuà monotonous or difficult for these learners.
That Chinese language learning and the learning of Pǔtōnghuà as a second topolect entail rote, form-focused learning is not new information. The germane question here is why learning pīnyīn seems to require so much focus on form. Li’s description of her experience provides a possible answer. According to Li, when she saw Chinese characters, she immediately knew what words they represented and how to say them in Cantonese. Since meaning was already clear, the only thing left to learn was form, but her ability to learn the phonological form of words was affected by her first topolect, Cantonese. For her, the solution to this problem was to look only at pīnyīn. Her experience in Beijing with the teacher who forbade her from looking at the Chinese characters in the materials was a process of discovering meaning by first learning form. In her case, she had to sound out the phonological form of words to discover the meaning of what she was saying. Li stated that she was able to recognize what she had heard because she had heard the words before in Pǔtōnghuà, or because of the cognates between Cantonese and Pǔtōnghuà. In this respect, for Li and possibly for a great many Pǔtōnghuà learners who first became literate in MWC through topolect medium education, focusing on meaning before form inhibits the learning of Pǔtōnghuà. It seems that the learner’s automatic reaction to the sight of already learned characters is to attach the phonological form of the topolect through which he or she became literate. Put another way, these four adult learners essentially re-learned how to read Chinese through the medium of pīnyīn. For the child learner in a place where Pǔtōnghuà is the medium of instruction, pīnyīn is the key to literacy. These learners’ experiences suggest that for the already literate topolect speaker, the initial purpose of learning pīnyīn is to learn pronunciation only, but to achieve this, it seems that the learner must learn again how to read Chinese, through the medium of pīnyīn, in order to reach a level of spoken proficiency that is commensurate with his or her level of literacy.

Attitudes toward Teaching

All four informants were confident in their abilities to teach Pǔtōnghuà as an independent subject, but their confidence in teaching Chinese with Pǔtōnghuà varied. Ming did not feel ‘natural’ when teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà when she began teaching, but after years of experience and interaction with mainland colleagues, she said it felt natural. Li also felt confident about teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà, but said that teaching Pǔtōnghuà as a subject for a few years before teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà helped her confidence. Though Yan felt confident about teaching the practical Chinese writing modules at the sub-degree college where she worked, she said she would be less confident about teaching secondary school literary Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà. Feng, who had the least experience teaching Chinese with Pǔtōnghuà, was less confident about it. He spent more time preparing for lessons when he needed to teach in Pǔtōnghuà. He believed that the evening Pǔtōnghuà courses he had taken prepared him to teach Pǔtōnghuà, but did not prepare him well to use Pǔtōnghuà to teach Chinese:

In [Chinese] class, a teacher needs to explain a lot of conceptual things to students. When I taught Pǔtōnghuà, there weren’t many situations like that. I would demonstrate, and when students said things wrong, I’d correct them … So when I need to explain these kinds of concepts to students, compared to when teaching Pǔtōnghuà, well, I think Chinese lessons are at a higher
level. The language usage is at a higher level. But during the evening courses I took, there was no specific practice in this area.

In the experiences and views of the three informants who had passed the governments’ benchmark requirements, we see a common thread concerning proficiency and confidence in teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà. Ho (2004b) has suggested that in order to meet demand for Pǔtōnghuà medium Chinese instructors, the government should lower its proficiency requirements. In contrast, the experiences of these three informants were that after meeting the benchmark, further experience and contact with Pǔtōnghuà were needed before they felt confident in teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà.

Li and Feng held different views about the effects of using Pǔtōnghuà when teaching Chinese. Li emphasized the benefits for students’ Pǔtōnghuà:

I think it’s better than using Cantonese. Even though some people think they [students] don’t understand and that it’s not useful if we use Pǔtōnghuà, I think that using Pǔtōnghuà in lessons is good for them. It definitely improves their listening skills, I think.

In contrast, Feng was concerned about the effect on the classroom atmosphere and student-teacher rapport when he taught in Pǔtōnghuà. ‘I’ve found that if I use Pǔtōnghuà to teach, well, it’s more serious. I think students also think that if you use Pǔtōnghuà, you’re more stern and serious.’

Ming and Yan both felt that teaching Pǔtōnghuà was boring, and both would prefer to teach other language subjects. Ming preferred teaching CSL: ‘For TCSL, you’re not just focused on pronunciation … so when you teach CSL, the scope is greater. It’s not so focused on standard or not standard [pronunciation].’ Yan said that she preferred teaching translation or Chinese composition to Pǔtōnghuà teaching because ‘I guess for those, I’m teaching knowledge.’

Ming and Yan’s boredom with teaching Pǔtōnghuà and interest in teaching other language subjects such as CSL, Chinese composition or translation seem to come from the same source as Ming, Li and Feng’s difficulty with learning pīnyīn: the exclusive focus on phonological form. This is part of an overarching theme that it is difficult and boring to learn or teach pīnyīn, and thus Pǔtōnghuà, when it has not been learned as part of the original process of becoming literate. When Pǔtōnghuà is not a part of acquiring literacy, and indeed when it is not a skill needed for acquiring more education as it is on the mainland, then for the literate learner, or for young learners who are becoming literate through topolect, it is reduced to a process of mainly learning pronunciation.

The solution to this problem espoused by many is to teach Chinese and other subjects in Pǔtōnghuà. Indeed, Li felt that even for her tertiary level students who had become literate through Cantonese, attending Chinese lessons taught in Pǔtōnghuà improved their listening skills. Feng’s concerns about the effect on student-teacher rapport and whether students learn as well in Pǔtōnghuà as in Cantonese represents the other side of the debate. These two teachers’ views highlight a Catch-22: as long as Pǔtōnghuà is taught independently from the core process of achieving literacy, the
potential for monotony will remain high, but as long as Chinese is taught in Pǔtōnghuà by teachers who learned Pǔtōnghuà after becoming literate, there will always be potential for problems with rapport and learning since such teachers may lack confidence and strong language awareness.

**Conclusion**

This being a qualitative study of only four teachers’ ‘Pǔtōnghuà careers’, its findings cannot be generalized toward the experiences of all Hong Kong teachers of Pǔtōnghuà or Chinese in the medium of Pǔtōnghuà who learned as adults. More specifically, the learning experiences of four people who became tertiary level teachers cannot be assumed to be representative of the experiences of teacher-learners at the primary and secondary levels. However, these four stories raise important questions for further research. Regarding exposure to Pǔtōnghuà, three of these informants emphasized very specific types of exposure that had not previously appeared in the literature. This raises the questions of how beneficial exposure to the target language is to local Pǔtōnghuà teachers and whether current and future teachers need more of it than they are getting. If they do need more of it, what would be the best way of getting it? Should Hong Kong establish a ‘Native Pǔtōnghuà Teacher’ scheme with one aim being to provide local teachers with more opportunities to use Pǔtōnghuà, or should teachers go to the mainland for extended study, or both? These questions can and should be investigated further with qualitative and quantitative methods.

Informants’ difficulty in using Hányǔ Pīnyīn suggests that in addition to investigating Hong Kong learners’ problems with the language systems of Pǔtōnghuà, future research should also look at such learners’ problems with Pǔtōnghuà’s key learning system. Perhaps future research and Pǔtōnghuà instruction to adults should give greater attention to the fact that Hányǔ Pīnyīn is not only a system of phonetic symbols, but is also a writing system in itself that may need to be mastered as such in order for the learner to achieve high proficiency. If the adult teacher-learner can do so, then he or she is more likely to be able to use pīnyīn in ways that will serve the literacy needs of young learners in schools where Pǔtōnghuà is used in Chinese lessons.

Informants’ experiences suggest that while the present modes of Pǔtōnghuà learning, teacher training and proficiency assessment ensure that teachers are able to teach Pǔtōnghuà as an independent subject, these training and assessment systems may not provide sufficient preparation for those who need to teach Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà. This raises two possible research questions. First, do current school teachers feel confident about teaching Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà? Second, if they do not, what level of proficiency and what sort of teacher training do teachers need in order to be able to teach Chinese in Pǔtōnghuà?

Finally, I would recommend that researchers with greater access to Hong Kong’s Pǔtōnghuà and Chinese teachers conduct more extensive learner-focused studies like this one. Such research could aim to identify common factors for successful teacher-learners of Pǔtōnghuà. To do so, high achieving benchmark assessment candidates who began learning as adults could be invited to be informants.
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Notes

1 In this paper, the word ‘topolect’ (Mair, 1991) rather than ‘dialect’ is used when referring to what is called fāngyán (local language) in Chinese. In Chinese, fāngyán is commonly used to refer to both mutually intelligible and mutually unintelligible spoken languages. In some cases, i.e. when discussing mutually intelligible varieties of Mandarin, use of the English ‘dialect’ is in order. However, as the discussion of fāngyán in this paper is mainly focused on the relationship between the mutually unintelligible Pǔtōnghuà and Cantonese, I use topolect instead of dialect in order to avoid misrepresenting the relationships among different forms of spoken Chinese.

2 There are two common types of modern Chinese dictionaries: zìdiǎn, or “character dictionaries”, and cídiǎn, literally, ‘word dictionaries’. The great majority of words in MWC and Pǔtōnghuà are bi-syllabic or multisyllabic and consist of two or more Chinese characters when written. These two-character and multi-character words, along with single character words, can be found in word dictionaries. Character dictionaries mainly include single characters along with their phonetic symbols and the different meanings or functions that they generally have when they appear in words. The few two-character or multi-character words that appear in character dictionaries are there to serve as examples for how single characters are used in words. Character dictionaries are often used by primary school students in order to learn the basic meanings of characters that appear in the words that they learn.

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Appendix  Interview Questions

1. What foreign languages and Chinese topolects do you speak? When did you begin learning them? Which language or topolect is your strongest for speaking? Which is your strongest for writing?

2. Can you tell me a chronological history of your experience of studying Pǔtōnghuà? Where have you studied it? How long? How many hours in class and outside of class per day?

3. Can you describe your motive when you first started studying Pǔtōnghuà? Has your motive changed over time?

4. What courses or materials have you studied? Were there any that were more useful than others? What methods or activities in and outside of a classroom have been the most useful? What has not been useful?

5. In the past, in what ways other than in formal study or teaching have you used or come into contact with Pǔtōnghuà? In what ways do you use or come into contact with Pǔtōnghuà now? Have you ever studied a course that used Pǔtōnghuà as the medium of instruction?

6. What factors do you think have been crucial to your success in studying Pǔtōnghuà?

7. Do you still study Pǔtōnghuà? If no: Do you plan to study it again in the future? Do you have any goals for studying Pǔtōnghuà?

8. If an adult Hong Konger who has never studied Pǔtōnghuà asked you for advice on how to reach an advanced level of proficiency, what would your advice be? Where and how should he study? What should a native Cantonese speaker pay most attention to when studying Pǔtōnghuà?