Chapter 7

Expatriate Cantonese Learners in Hong Kong: Adult L2 Learning, Identity Negotiation, and Social Pressure

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the identity negotiation process of adult L2 learners while they are learning a foreign language abroad. The study in this chapter used longitudinal study techniques. This longitudinal study lasted for two years. Learning diaries were used as primary data source and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to verify the diary data to elicit learning difficulties and learning needs. This chapter found out that learners’ learning experiences were influenced by identity negotiation process and the social environment around them. This chapter showed the expatriate learners came to Hong Kong with an enthusiastic motivation of learning the language of Hong Kong people and the willingness to assimilate into the local culture. However, there were puzzles and struggles in identity negotiation aroused while they were learning the language. The research presented in this chapter shows learners’ levels of success depended on many factors, such as the amount of time devoted to their learning, quality of language programs, as well as social attitude towards the target language (TL) and the language learners in the surrounding environment.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3814-1.ch007

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, Hong Kong has gone through different stages of development and adopted different international roles. With lassie-faire policy and low profit tax rate adopted in the early stage of development of modern Hong Kong, immigrants are coming from different parts of the world for different reasons. The language situation of Hong Kong is never simple (Luke & Richards, 1982; Cheung, 1984; Bolton, 2003). English and Chinese are used as official languages as stated by the law. Different varieties of Chinese, such as Cantonese, Hakka, Shanghainese etc. and their sub-dialects can also be found in Hong Kong people’s life. Cantonese is the major language variety use by people in daily life in Hong Kong (Matthews & Yip, 1994). Immigrants have different attitude and expectations towards the Cantonese language (Li & Richards, 1995; Boyle, 1997). Learners of Cantonese as a L2 in the 19th to mid-20th Century are mainly for practical reasons, such as engaging in missionary work, doing business, working in government and diplomatic services or involving in the educational field (Lee, 2005). Nowadays motivation of learners of Cantonese as a L2 becomes more complex (Lee, 2005).

BACKGROUND

Language Policy and Cantonese in Hong Kong

In the history of early modern Hong Kong, many expatriates in Hong Kong thought that learning Cantonese was not a must in Hong Kong although Cantonese was and still is a language commonly used by local Hong Kong people in their daily life, in the media and in education (Cheung, 1984). This kind of thinking mainly developed from the fact that English language had been the only official language of government, the language of law and in fact the more prestigious medium of secondary and university education before 1970s. The language situation started to change in 1974, The Official Languages Ordinance started to say that Chinese and English ‘enjoy equality of use’ and measures were taken by the Hong Kong Government to promote this policy. In the Sino-British joint declaration, which determined the arrangements for the Hong Kong 1997 handover issues, the position and status of Chinese was further strengthened. The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, Article 9 stated that ‘In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislative and judicial organs of the Hong Kong Administrative Region’. The language policy was summarized in a number of government’s statements as trilingualism and biliteracy
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