From Bad to Worse? - English language attitudes and proficiency in Hong Kong student teachers

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Preamble

This paper is the third in a series based on a longitudinal study carried out by Crew (1994a) between 1990 and 1993 and written up through 1994. Previous papers derived from this study have focused on observed changes in language proficiency and attitudes (Crew, 1994b) and on the implications and use of indirect attitude measures in language teaching (Crew, 1995). The current paper reports on the findings from the study insofar as they have indicated a possible specific Hong Kong language learner profile; possible implications for the teaching of English in Hong Kong teacher training institutions are also discussed. It has not proved possible within the confines of the present paper to include reference to the several notable Hong Kong attitude and proficiency studies and reviews which have been published recently (e.g. Pennington, 1994; Littlewood et al., 1995). A further paper now in preparation will attempt to do this.

Introduction

For some considerable time, the place of English in the Hong Kong education system has been a matter for keen debate, made even keener by the prospect of China resuming sovereignty over the Territory in 1997. A decline in standards of English has been generally perceived, perhaps not always accurately, but certainly vociferously.

In the mid-1980s the College of Education system began to receive its first students taught exclusively in Cantonese. These students had been taught English only as a foreign language and entered a Chinese-medium stream in Grantham College of Education. Regardless of medium of education, however, Government policy required that all students receive training in English language skills. It became accepted wisdom for many members of staff in the College of Education system that these Chinese-medium students did not want to learn English and...
accorded it minimal priority. At the same time, there was an unofficial swing toward teaching in the vernacular (Cantonese) on all courses, resulting in the vast majority of these students meeting English in their formal educational lives only in the context of English Language Skills sessions. Deprived of English as a meaningful everyday communication device, many began to feel that English was only of marginal relevance. The title of this paper is indicative of this viewpoint - *From Bad to Worse* - and is a comment made by a College of Education English lecturer when asked for his view on progress made in English proficiency by students in the Colleges.

Whether these perceptions of student attitude were accurate or not, it seemed likely that student attitudes might be reflected to some extent in their language proficiency and vice versa. Whilst considerable research had been undertaken in this field in a world-wide sense, and, especially in recent years also in Hong Kong schools and tertiary institutions, by 1990 no studies had been carried out in the Colleges of Education and as these Colleges then provided most of the teachers for Hong Kong schools, this seemed something of an oversight. The study described here, therefore, sought to investigate changes, both relative and absolute, which occurred in the English language proficiency and attitudes towards the English language of a notional complete year group of Hong Kong Chinese full-time teacher trainees as it progressed through Grantham College of Education.

**Methodology**

(i) *Overview*

The English proficiency of the students was tested three times (on entry to the College, at mid-course and on exit from the College), using parallel versions of an established standardised placement test (Allan, 1984). Attitudes were similarly and simultaneously tested, using a modified Gardner and Lambert (1972) Attitude and Motivation Index (AMI) based on Glikzman, Gardner and Smythe's 1982 version, together with additional sections based on the work of Pierson and Fu (1982), Spolsky (1969) and Oller et al. (1977). Analysis of the collated data, comprising in its final raw form three sets of responses by 198 subjects to 190 attitude questionnaire items, together with their related English proficiency (placement) test scores, was carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

(ii) *The Sample*

The design-stage sample for the study comprised the entire first year full-time student intake of Grantham College of Education for the academic year...
commencing in September 1990. Obviously, for the purposes of the study it was essential that all subjects included in the final sample database should have completed all three phases of the data collection process. This requirement resulted in an initial total sample population of 303 declining due to absence from one or other phase of the data collection process to a final total of 198, or approximately two-thirds of the original figure (65.35%). Most of the attrition occurred due to occasional absences by students. The size of the final sample was felt to be perfectly adequate to enable conclusions to be drawn from the data collected.

The sample population was subdivided for analysis purposes into several groups, but in view of the limited space available we shall only concern ourselves here with Group 1 - the entire sample, i.e. 198 students, both two-year English-medium (129) and three-year Chinese-medium (69).

(iii) The Proficiency Test

The test used to establish students' initial proficiency level and to monitor their progress in English proficiency through their College careers was the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1984). In view of the large number of subjects involved it was decided at an early stage in the design of the study that tests with time-consuming interview, tape-recording or other oral components were not practical with the limited resources available to the researcher. In addition, it was felt that a highly precise measure of English proficiency was not strictly necessary as the study took a broad approach to the concept of changes in proficiency level and in essence was concerned only with relative changes, not absolute determination of proficiency against external norms.

Three parallel (alternate form) versions of the Oxford Placement Test (1, 2 & 3), were administered to the subjects in order, i.e. OPT 1 on entry, OPT 2 at mid-point and OPT 3 on exit. Each test comprised two main sections, each of 100 items, the first part being primarily a test of reading and listening skills involving knowledge and application of the sound and writing systems of English in order to select the correct utterances (from alternatives provided relating to a cassette recording) for inclusion in written sentences containing appropriate blanks. The second part, again in written, multi-choice format, tested students' knowledge and application of grammatical function and structure. Both sections aimed to provide for a range of ability from beginner to near-native speaker and were designed to be completed concurrently, with ten minutes recommended for Part A and fifty minutes for Part B. In practice these recommendations proved quite satisfactory - although time limits were never overtly given during test administration, even the slowest
students never took longer than 55 minutes to complete the whole test on each occasion.

Administration of the tests was carried out on a year-group basis, i.e. all two-year students took the tests as a group, with three-year students as a separate group.

(iv) The Attitude and Motivation Questionnaire

As previously stated, this instrument was modelled on the Language Research Group National Test Battery as presented by Gliksman, Gardner and Smythe, (op cit) with additional content influenced by the work of Pierson and Fu (op cit), Spolsky (op cit) and Oller et al. (op cit) Effectively, the questionnaire may be divided into the initial Gardner-type direct measure test battery (subdivided into the Likert scale items - the majority - and the multiple-choice items) and the Spolsky-type indirect measure section which follows it.

Despite the tried and tested nature of the National Test Battery (vide, inter alia, Gardner and Smythe 1981 for a thorough treatment of its development process) in the French-Canadian and (to some extent) other settings, it was appreciated that its validity in the Hong Kong context could not be assumed, even though most modifications to the content were essentially very minor, largely involving the substitution of "English" for "French", "Westerners" for "French-Canadians", "Hong Kong" for "Canada" etc.. In addition to this, the researcher wanted to introduce an additional section investigating the notion of "English and Cultural Identity", a concept touched upon by Pierson and Fu in several of their studies and which seemed likely to prove fruitful. A draft version of the questionnaire was prepared, therefore, and piloted extensively, as a result of which it was then reworked and took its final form, as follows:

Direct Measures (Likert Scale +3 .... -3 : - 7 point scale)

A - Parental Encouragement (10 items)
B - Need Achievement (10)
C - Degree of Integrativeness (5)
D - Degree of Instrumentality (5)
E - Attitudes towards learning English (10)
F - English Class Anxiety (5)
G - Interest in Foreign Languages (10)
H - Ethnocentrism (10)
J - Attitudes towards Westerners (10)
K - English and Cultural Identity (5) (Total 80 items)

Multiple Choice Scales (1-3 : - 3 point scale)
L - Motivational Intensity (10)
M - Desire to Learn English (10) (Total 20 items)

Indirect Attitude Measures (Very well ... Not at all : - 5 point scale)
N - Self (30) (15 positive/15 negative)
O - Hong Kong (Chinese) people (30) (15 positive/15 negative)
P - Westerners generally (30) (15 positive/15 negative) (Total 90 items)

Total of all items: 190

Items 1-100 (the direct measures) were randomised within the questionnaire rather than appearing as blocks of obviously related statements. Items 101-190 (the indirect measures) were randomised in terms of "positive" and "negative" within the first block of 30 traits (applicable to Self), with the same item order then repeated for the second and third blocks i.e. Hong Kong Chinese and Westerners.

The AMI/OPT was then completed by the subjects of the study as follows:

Two-year English-medium students: 1. September 1990
2. September 1991
3. June 1992

2. January 1992
3. June 1993

Findings

A vast amount of data was generated by this study, resulting in a considerable number of findings. For the purposes of this paper it is obviously not necessary to report all these findings, only those relevant to the specific focus. Similarly, great detail is inappropriate. Statistical concerns are generally not addressed, for reasons of time and space.
(i) The Proficiency Test (OPT)

Table 1
Changes in English Proficiency Means as Measured by OPT1-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>OPT1</th>
<th>OPT2</th>
<th>OPT3</th>
<th>OPT1-2 % diff.</th>
<th>OPT2-3 % diff.</th>
<th>OPT1-3 % diff.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Whole sample</td>
<td>142.2</td>
<td>144.8</td>
<td>137.1</td>
<td>+ 1.8</td>
<td>- 5.3</td>
<td>- 3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OPT Gain/Loss

Table 1 (above) and its accompanying histogram summarise the relevant findings:

- The scores achieved by the students in the sample indicated, as expected, that the general level of English language proficiency varied between Lower and Upper Intermediate. (The OPT scale has a range of 0-200.)
- As measured by the OPT, there was a general pattern of slight gain, followed by a more marked decline and overall loss of English proficiency.
### AMI and Overall Findings

Table 2 (below) and the diagrammatic representations of the findings in the Appendix illustrate the overall points being made.

#### Table 2

**Changes in Item Means by Scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AMI/OP T1</th>
<th>AMI/OP T2</th>
<th>AMI/OP T3</th>
<th>Diff. 1-2</th>
<th>Diff. 2-3</th>
<th>Diff. 1-3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPT (0-200)</td>
<td>142.1870</td>
<td>144.8480</td>
<td>137.1220</td>
<td>2.6610</td>
<td>-7.7260</td>
<td>-5.0650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likert Scales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1-7 pos-neg)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A - Par. encouragement</td>
<td>3.2827</td>
<td>3.1970</td>
<td>3.3285</td>
<td>-0.0857</td>
<td>0.1315</td>
<td>0.0458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B - Need Achievement</td>
<td>3.0568</td>
<td>3.1402</td>
<td>3.1788</td>
<td>0.0834</td>
<td>0.0386</td>
<td>0.1220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C - Integrative</td>
<td>2.0202</td>
<td>2.0323</td>
<td>2.2320</td>
<td>-0.0121</td>
<td>0.1997</td>
<td>0.2118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D - Instrumental</td>
<td>2.8254</td>
<td>2.8424</td>
<td>2.8462</td>
<td>0.0170</td>
<td>0.0038</td>
<td>0.0208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E - Attitudes to English</td>
<td>2.9223</td>
<td>3.0185</td>
<td>3.1213</td>
<td>0.0962</td>
<td>0.1028</td>
<td>0.1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F - English class anxiety</td>
<td>4.3388</td>
<td>4.3182</td>
<td>4.1787</td>
<td>-0.0206</td>
<td>-0.1395</td>
<td>-0.1601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G - Interest in foreign languages</td>
<td>2.3168</td>
<td>2.3540</td>
<td>2.3990</td>
<td>0.0372</td>
<td>0.0450</td>
<td>0.0822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H - Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>3.7211</td>
<td>3.8278</td>
<td>3.8097</td>
<td>0.1067</td>
<td>-0.1810</td>
<td>0.0886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J - Attit to Westerners</td>
<td>3.2186</td>
<td>3.2361</td>
<td>3.2328</td>
<td>0.0175</td>
<td>-0.0033</td>
<td>0.0142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K - Cultural identity</td>
<td>2.9980</td>
<td>3.1586</td>
<td>3.1467</td>
<td>0.1606</td>
<td>-0.0119</td>
<td>0.1487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Choice Scales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1-3 pos-neg)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L - Motivation</td>
<td>1.7348</td>
<td>1.7909</td>
<td>1.8209</td>
<td>0.0561</td>
<td>0.0390</td>
<td>0.0861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M- Desire to learn Eng</td>
<td>1.6631</td>
<td>1.6884</td>
<td>1.7802</td>
<td>0.0253</td>
<td>0.0918</td>
<td>0.1171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Measure Scales</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1-5 pos-neg)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N - Self-rating</td>
<td>2.4356</td>
<td>2.5086</td>
<td>2.4441</td>
<td>0.0730</td>
<td>-0.0645</td>
<td>0.0085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O - HK people</td>
<td>2.7149</td>
<td>2.7778</td>
<td>2.6907</td>
<td>0.0629</td>
<td>-0.0871</td>
<td>-0.0242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P - Westerners</td>
<td>2.4847</td>
<td>2.6899</td>
<td>2.6269</td>
<td>0.2052</td>
<td>-0.0630</td>
<td>0.1422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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AMI/OPT1 - All Likert-Scale direct measures (mid-point of scale = 3.5) show positive attitudes, with the exceptions of F (English class anxiety) and H (ethnocentrism). The most positive scales are C (integrative orientation) and G (interest in foreign languages). The two multiple-choice scales (mid-point of scale = 1.5) are both marginally negative. The three independent measure scales (mid-point = 2.5) are borderline and cannot be definitively assessed as either positive or negative.

AMI/OPT2 - All Likert Scale measures continued positive apart from English class anxiety - slightly improved - and ethnocentrism - slightly more negative. The most positive scales remained C and G. Multiple choice scales, although still marginal, worsened. Indirect measure scales all became negative, as opposed to borderline.

AMI/OPT3 - Again, all Likert Scale measures were positive except English class anxiety and ethnocentrism, both of which recorded slight improvements, though remaining negative overall. Integrativeness and interest in foreign languages continued to be most positive. Both multiple choice scales worsened and became more definitely negative. Indirect measure scales improved but the Hong Kong people and Westerner scales remained negative.

Overall - English class anxiety was the only scale to show consistent positive movement, but remained throughout the most negative of the components parts of the AMI. Most scales recorded attitudes construed as positive, though the majority were not markedly so. To summarise:

- The data indicate that students' English language proficiency as measured by the OPT declined somewhat over the period of the study. The mean score recorded (141.4) was commensurate with Intermediate English proficiency levels.
- Students’ attitudes towards English and the language learning situation, as measured by repeated administrations of the AMI, were generally positive.
- Professed attitudes towards English and the language learning situation tended to become more negative overall, with the exception of English class anxiety which improved consistently but still represented the most negative factor throughout.

(iii) Further Findings

As previously stated, the focus of this paper lies in the basic profile of relevant student attitudes presented by the findings, rather than the changes perceived in those attitudes or in language proficiency. Proficiency is addressed, however, in
that attitudes and attitude sets are analysed in terms of their bearing on proficiency.

Certain AMI scales correlated quite consistently and significantly with OPT score, but there was a need to examine the data more rigorously in order to determine more precisely which of the AMI variables were significantly linked to OPT score and to what degree. Multiple regression ("...the strength of multiple regression lies primarily in its use as a means of establishing the relative importance of independent variables on the dependent variable." (Bryman and Cramer, 1990)) procedure determined that Attitudes towards Learning English (Scale E) was the only significant single factor consistently present in direct OPT/AMI relationships.

Overall contribution of attitude scales to OPT score varied between a low of nearly 26% (0.256) and a high of 30% (0.300). At first sight this may appear to be a somewhat low level of explanation for the dependent variable, but it should be borne in mind that attitudes and motivation in general (and in particular as measured by the specific AMI employed in this study) are far from the sole influences perceived as relevant to language learning success. The "Good Language Learner" model (Naiman et al., 1978), for example, distinguished in the learner in addition to attitudes and motivation, age, intelligence, aptitude, personality and cognitive style. Other factors, like variation in teaching materials, resources, methodology, syllabi, opportunities for use, social milieu, conscious and unconscious learning processes etc., also have input to the language learning situation. This being the case, an identified 25-30% contribution by the factors measured in this study appears most acceptable.

Still, in view of this rather less than definitive set of results, an alternative line of enquiry was pursued i.e. factor analysis, used extensively by Gardner et al. to identify groupings which appear to link sets of variables and to estimate the influence of each of these groupings, or factors.

Examination of the findings from factor analysis made it possible to identify three main factors, the contents of which varied slightly, but the consistent members of which were:

- Degree of Integrativeness (Scale C), Degree of Instrumentality (Scale D), Interest in Foreign Languages (Scale G) and Attitudes towards English (Scale E), representing, perhaps, an attitudinal dimension.
- English Class Anxiety (Scale F), Motivational Intensity (Scale L) and Desire to learn English (Scale M), indicative of what may be seen as a motivational dimension.
- Cultural Identity (Scale K) and Ethnocentrism (Scale H), forming a cultural orientation dimension.
Following identification of these factors, a further correlation procedure was carried out with the object of determining relationships between these factors and OPT score. The motivational dimension (MD) was the most consistently correlated at a significant level, with cultural orientation (CD) also noteworthy and the attitudinal dimension (AD), though usually the first factor "noticed" by factor analysis, correlating neither highly nor consistently. The inference from this appears to be that the motivational dimension is more influential in terms of language proficiency than the attitudinal dimension. Cultural orientation may also be seen to be influential in this context. The relative lack of clear and consistent links between the attitudinal dimension and OPT score is interesting, but not entirely unexpected given the degree of cultural influence, which is not unknown in other studies e.g. Gardner, Smythe and Clement's 1979 study commented on:

.... the strong role played by the individual's socio-cultural context in influencing both the effects of attitudinal/motivational characteristics on second language learning.... The differences obtained seem to be directly attributable to socio-cultural factors. (p.319)

In summary, therefore, from correlation, multiple regression and factor analytic procedures carried out on the data, variation in OPT score may be accounted for to a certain extent by factors measured by the AMI. These factors interrelated to varying degrees and in turn appeared to influence OPT score. Three consistently influential factors were indicated by factor analysis, which may be glossed descriptively as attitudinal, motivational and cultural. Of these three, the motivational dimension seemed most influential, though cultural aspects were also important. The attitudinal factor was not consistently related either to OPT score or to the other two main factors.

Discussion

The three relatively consistent factors identified by factor analysis are of interest and have some practical relevance in the Hong Kong context. The priorities assigned them by analytical procedures confirm impressions held by lecturing staff that students who are highly motivated, who are willing to take linguistic risks and to use English both in and out of the classroom and who possess personal desire to learn the language - for whatever reason, integrative, instrumental or a combination of both - achieve higher levels of proficiency. It has also been noted by many staff that motivation as defined above in terms of Scales L, F and M appears to be more powerful than attitudes as defined by the factor analysis grouping in that it is not uncommon for students to evince perceived negative personal attitudes towards both the English language and the culture associated
with it whilst still performing well in English as a subject and as a means of communication when required.

The cultural dimension (Ethnocentrism and Cultural Identity) identified by factor analysis appears at first sight to conflict with this to a degree, in that more "favourable" scores on these scales correlated rather better with higher language proficiency than "unfavourable" scores. As mentioned above, this has not always been the case with Hong Kong students of the author's acquaintance. Both students presenting as ethnocentric and students presenting as non-ethnocentric have achieved consistently creditable performances in English language skills; the same has been true of students perceived as "very Chinese" and of those seen as more culturally "open". However, Bond (1991) offers a solution to this paradox in identifying a class of Chinese people secure in their own culture and who thus feel free to give their best efforts to learning English whilst simultaneously holding negative attitudes towards that language and culture. These people:

...derive some measure of satisfaction from being members of an ethnic group and will resist any erosion in what they regard as the core elements of their cultural tradition... [They] believe they can modernise without Westernising. They consider it possible to industrialise, to embrace democratic institutions and to fraternise with those outside their own culture without compromising their strong family traditions, their self-restraint and their cultural pride... They view themselves as 'modern Chinese', as distinct from modern Westerners or traditional Chinese.

(pp.115-116)

Given this category of learner, it is possible to accommodate both positive and negative attitudes towards English to some extent, the essential criterion being security in cultural identity. This is a complex area in which definitive findings are few, but within the Hong Kong context it may well be sufficient in terms of practical application to note that students who appear negatively inclined towards English from a cultural standpoint are not necessarily likely to be those that achieve low levels of English proficiency. Equally, the conventional notion that positive cultural attitudes are linked to language proficiency is reinforced.

Of the significant variables which have emerged from the analysis of the data, some are probably amenable to modification, while others are unlikely to prove susceptible to external (i.e. institution/staff) influence, especially in the short term. The latter category would include cultural identity factors and ethnocentrism, parental encouragement and need achievement. Assuming the provision of appropriate time, resources and co-ordinated application, it might be possible to influence some factors to a certain extent, though within the existing constraints of
a two- or three-year course in which English is viewed as only one of an increasing number of academic subjects to be fitted into an overcrowded timetable, this may prove difficult. In an ideal scenario, English would be promoted as a true means of communication within the institution, both for staff and for students; there would be greater contact time between English subject staff and students; teaching groups would be smaller; culturally-sensitive, supportive courses would be designed and implemented by staff whose own cultural attitudes would be informed and influenced by the needs of students and the situation; non-threatening, risk-inducing classroom practices would be introduced and the benefits of maximising personal English language proficiency would be made apparent to all. Thus, it would be hoped, motivation would increase, anxiety would be lessened and attitudes towards English would be more likely to develop positively.

Conclusion

There is a need, as always, for further research and clarification. The possibility exists that the motivational and attitudinal dimension factors as exhibited in this study represent a different orientation model based on and interacting with socio-cultural factors - the "cultural dimension" - and providing some confirmation, perhaps, of Gardner, Lalonde and Pierson's (1982) view that "... the cultural milieu is of considerable importance in determining which factors mediate second language acquisition." The existence or otherwise of these factors and of correlations with language proficiency do not of themselves carry any implication of causality with regard to language proficiency, though this cannot be ruled out. Le Mahieu's (1984) cyclic schema - that attitudes/motivation cause variance in second language proficiency which in turn causes variance in attitudes which then cause variation in proficiency etc., etc. - may well represent as satisfactory a view on causation as possible and this remains the position at the time of writing. In addition, to repeat Gardner's (1988) observation:

.... the phenomenon [of second language acquisition] is so complex that it is unreasonable to think of single or strong causes of proficiency; many factors are obviously implicated.... (p.120)

From Bad to Worse, while perhaps an interestingly contentious title for a paper, does not accurately represent the situation. Though some negative trends are apparent, students' attitudes are positive on the whole and English class anxiety, the most negative aspect, consistently improved through the period of the study. Proficiency level fluctuation should be noted as a cause for concern which the newly-formed Hong Kong Institute of Education should address, together with formulation and operationalisation of policy to inculcate and enhance favourable language attitudes.
References


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