

HONG KONG ENGLISH: WILL THE ENGLISH TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS ON SEGMENTAL FEATURES OF HKE AFFECT THEIR TEACHING PRACTICES?

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Abstract

Hong Kong English (HKE) has been widely researched recently in the linguistics fields like phonology (e.g. Hansen Edwards, 2015a; Hung, 2000, 2012; Setter et al., 2010); however, there is a lack of research on teachers' perception to this new variety of English. In the present study, data is collected through 92 questionnaires and 23 semi-structured interviews with current teachers of English (both natives and non-natives) in Hong Kong who teach in primary, secondary and tertiary institutes. The aims of this study are to investigate the teachers' attitudes towards HKE and their perceptions in particular to the segmental features of HKE in order to answer the research question of whether the attitudes of English teachers towards HKE may alter their teaching practices. The findings suggest that the attitudes (especially behavioral attitudes) of the English teachers may affect their teaching practices in real life classrooms, for instance, the preferences of choosing a particular English accent as the norm or model for their students to follow. Further research has to be done on the feasibility of the implementation of HKE into the Hong Kong Education curriculum.

1 Introduction

Hong Kong English (HKE) is now a hot topic in the academia as it has aroused the interests of linguists of whether this variety exists and how far would this variety go in the future. Although various research studies had been done on the phonetics and phonology of HKE (e.g. Hansen Edwards, 2015a, 2016a; Hung, 2000 etc.), language attitudes (Lai, 2001, 2007, 2009; Zhang, 2015), comprehensive attempts on investigating how the Hong Kong teachers of English (HKTEs) view this variety of English and how would their perceptions to the segmental features of HKE alter their teaching practices have merely been done in the literature. Since segmental feature is regarded as the smallest unit in communication and language teaching in World Englishes (or more recently, Global Englishes), segmental feature is first chosen for investigation (Jenkins, 2015). Therefore, the present study, which employed a mixed method approach, served as an initiation to examine this part of study in the HKE.

2 Literature review

2.1 Research of Hong Kong English

The historical background of being an ex-colony of the British Empire has made Hong Kong a special place for language studies (Pennington, 1998, p. 20). The unique language environment in Hong Kong where the substratum language, Cantonese, contacts with English for over 200 years (Bolton & Lim, 2000), has aroused the interest of linguists on the localized form of English, Hong Kong English (HKE). While earlier research claimed that a distinctive form of localized English did not exist in Hong Kong (e.g. Luke & Richard, 1982; Hyland, 1997; Pang, 2003), recent research has already shifted from arguing the existence of HKE to investigating the features of HKE (e.g. Hansen Edwards, 2015a, 2016a, 2016b; Hung, 2000, 2012; Sung, 2015) which indirectly confirmed the status of HKE. The status of HKE is also strengthened by the increasing number of literatures available in the academia in recent years (Sung, 2015). The research on HKE ranges from phonology (e.g. Hansen Edwards, 2016b; Hung, 2000; Setter, 2003) to attitudes (e.g. Hansen Edwards, 2015a, 2016a; Zhang, 2015) and the intelligibility of HKE (Sewell, 2012, 2015). Since the foci on this paper are on the segmental features of HKE and attitudes towards HKE, the two will be discussed in details.

2.2 Previous research studies on segmental features of Hong Kong English

Both vowels and consonants of HKE have been investigated in the past two decades. Most of the scholars compared the phonological inventory of HKE with English from the inner circles like the Received Pronunciation (RP). Hung (2000) studied the speech of 15 university students in Hong Kong and summarized the first phonological inventory of HKE. In his claim, the numbers of vowels and consonants in HKE are far fewer than those in RP; there are only 7 vowels in HKE compared with 12 in RP (Hung, 2000). The reduced number of vowels is mainly due to the lack of tense-lax pairs in HKE, for example, /i:/ - /ɪ/, /e/ - /æ/, /u:/ - /ʊ/ and /ɔ:/ - /ɒ/ merge and become /i/, /ɛ/, /u/ and /ɔ/ in HKE (Hung, 2000). This claim is later confirmed by various studies in Hong Kong (e.g. Deterding et al., 2008; Kirkpartrick, 2007; Setter et al., 2010). Although there is a general consensus on the number of vowels in HKE, the number of diphthongs is still a debatable topic. In his pioneer work, Hung (2000) described that the phonological inventory of diphthongs in HKE is the same as the one in RP, which includes 8 diphthongs, namely, /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /oʊ/, /ɔɪ/, /ɪə/, /eə/ and /ʊə/. However, in recent literature, Chan (2014) argued that some of the diphthongs in HKE are different compared with RP, for instance, in his studies of the speech of teachers in Hong Kong, /ʌɪ/ and /ʌʊ/ were recorded and a tendency of reducing /eɪ/ to either /e/ or /ɪ/ were also discovered. For consonants, compared to the consonantal inventory of RP, the one of HKE is again much smaller because of absence of voiced and voiceless contrast (Hung, 2000, 2012). Various scholars have conducted research that supports the claim of Hung (2000) with different consonants, for example, omission of final /t/ and /d/ (Hansen Edwards, 2015a, 2016b), absence of voiced fricatives /v/, /z/, /ʒ/ and /θ/ (Hung 2012; Sung 2015), interchangeability of /l/ and /n/ (Deterding et al., 2008; Sewell & Chan, 2010), substitution of dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ with /f/ and /d/ (Chan, 2014) etc. Furthermore, the features of consonant clusters in HKE were also investigated, like the deletion of /w/ in /kw/ (Sung, 2015), simplification of consonant clusters such as /pl/ to /p/ and /fr/ to /f/ (Setter et al., 2010). All of these studies confirmed and expanded on the initial work of Hung (2000) and contributed to map out the phonological inventory of HKE.

2.3 Previous research studies on the attitudes towards Hong Kong English

Unlike the phonology of HKE that has been widely researched, attitude towards HKE is still new in the field. In her mass-scaled quantitative survey, Hansen Edwards (2015b) investigated the attitudes towards HKE of 300 university students in Hong Kong, which showed that in general, HKE is accepted by students in the tertiary levels. Zhang (2015) conducted a match-guised Test, in which two Hong Kong accents – Educated Hong Kong Accent (HKEd) and Broad Hong Kong Accent (HKBr) – were used as samples to be compared by 44 listeners with other Englishes like RP and General American English; the result showed that HKEd is perceived positively among the listeners even compared with inner circle Englishes (Zhang, 2015). The findings of these two studies were in line with previous study of Sewell (2012) in which 52 university students were asked to evaluate different HKE accents using a questionnaire; the result also supported that HKE is well accepted by students even for pedagogical teaching purposes in university. All of the above echo with Schneider's (2007) claim that HKE is in the third stage in his Dynamic Model that HKE shows a significant local accent with strong influences from the indigenous language and the language community has started to recognize and show signs of acceptance towards its localized form of English (Hansen Edwards, 2016b).

Although the research in attitudes towards HKE is limited, there are numerous studies on the general language attitudes of Hongkongers. In those earlier studies, Pennington (1993) had done a survey on the attitudes of English and Cantonese in Hong Kong and she discovered that English enjoyed a dominant status in professional domains while Cantonese was regarded as the most suitable language for intra-ethnic communications among Hongkongers. Later, Lai (2001, 2005, 2009) conducted a series of research on the language attitudes of Hongkongers and the result showed that even after the handover of sovereignty from Britain to Mainland China, English is still regarded as the language with higher status in workplaces. This claim is in line with later research like Poon (2011) and Cheng (2015). The prestige of using English in workplace as well as in the academia (given that English is the major medium of instruction (MOI) in all universities in Hong Kong (Kirkpatrick, 2011)) thus provides a solid foundation for English to take root in the lives of Hongkongers and the associations of English with higher social economic status seems very likely to be created in Hong Kong.

3 Research design

3.1 Objectives

The current study examined the attitudes of teachers of English in Hong Kong (HKTEs) towards HKE and their perceptions towards segmental features of HKE to understand whether the attitudes towards a variety of English may alter their teaching practices. The study is a mixed-method one that consists of two parts: i) a quantitative questionnaire and ii) a qualitative semi-structured interview. While most of the previous studies on attitudes towards HKE focus on a particular level, for example university students (Hansen Edwards, 2015a; Sewell, 2012; Zhang, 2015), the current study sought to investigate the differences of attitudes across three different levels of teachers (i.e. primary school, secondary schools and tertiary institutes). The study is conducted in hope of providing insights for English Language Teaching (ELT) as well as teachers' training by answering the two research questions:

- i) What are the attitudes of HKTEs towards HKE?*

ii) *Do the HKTEs' perceptions of the segmental features of HKE alter their teaching practices?*

3.2 The questionnaires

The monolingual (English only) questionnaire, which was distributed to teachers through an online platform, is divided into four parts, namely, i) the background information of the teachers; ii) their perceptions towards some segmental of HKE; iii) their attitudes towards HKE and iv) their teaching practices. All the questions are close-ended in order to get numerical data for triangulation, except for two questions in the last part that allow teachers to key in their comments on HKE in real classroom practices. Most of close-ended questions employ a 6-point Likert scale to prevent any neutral idea as researchers suggest that people in some part of the world prefer to choose a mid-point therefore an even number Likert scale (either 4 or 6) is preferable (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p.28). The questionnaire serves to elicit data to represent a general picture on how the teachers of English view HKE.

The questionnaire was completed by 92 HKTEs (Male: 37%; Female: 63%) through purposeful sampling. Local English Teachers (LETs) and Native English Teachers (NETs) (LETs: 78%; NETs: 22%) teaching in primary, secondary and tertiary institutes were recruited as participants (Primary: 32%; Secondary: 40%; Tertiary: 28%) (Fig.3.1). All of them were in-service HKTEs with teaching experience ranging from 1 to over 15 years.

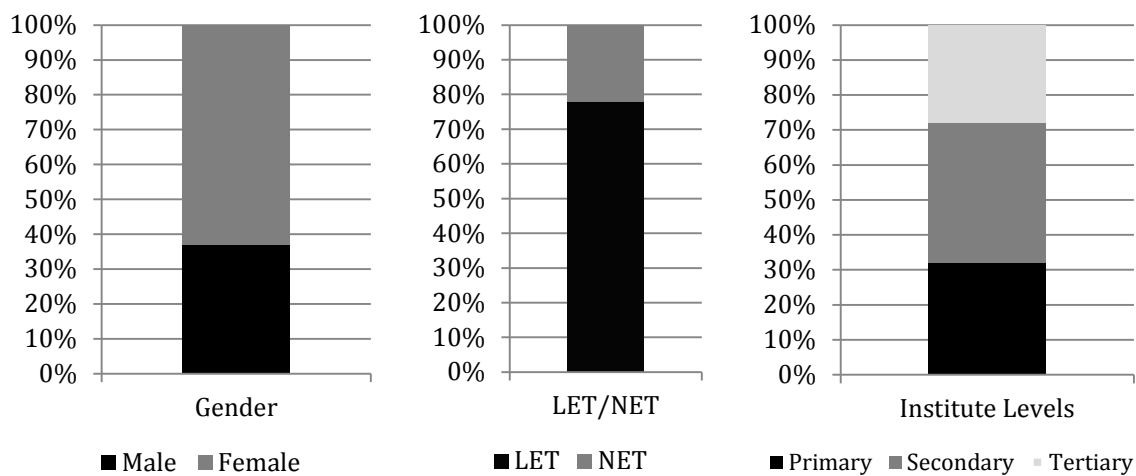


Fig. 3.1 Participants of the questionnaires

3.3 The interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English based on a pre-set interview protocol, which was made up of four parts: i) background information of the teachers and general comments on students in Hong Kong; ii) cognitive attitudes towards HKE; iii) affective attitudes towards HKE and iv) behavioral attitudes towards HKE. All the interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded using a Sony ICD-PX440 digital recorder, yielding 690 minutes and 40 seconds of interview data (30 minutes per interview on average). The data was transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed by selective-coding that leads to several different themes (Patton, 2015, p. 541).

Twenty-three in-service HKTEs were recruited to participate in the interviews via purposeful sampling to ensure a rather even number of teachers from different levels of institutes (Male: 43%; Female, 57% and Primary: 26%; Secondary: 35%; Tertiary: 39%) with an average teaching experience of 20.1 years. The teachers were from schools located in different parts of Hong Kong (i.e. Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories) and from a range of levels (i.e. from prestigious schools to normal schools or from world-ranked universities to local vocational tertiary institutes), which make sure that the data collected can somehow represent the whole picture in Hong Kong (see Table 3.1 for the bibliography of the interviewees, in order to protect the privacy of the interviewees, numbers were used).

Table 3.1 Bibliographies of the interviewees

Number*	NET/LET	Gender	Level of Institute	Teaching Experience (years)
T1-LS	LET	F	Secondary	4
T2-LT	LET	F	Tertiary	5
T3-NT	NET	M	Tertiary	9
T4-LP	LET	F	Primary	1
T5-LS	LET	M	Secondary	5
T6-NT	NET	M	Tertiary	13
T7-LP	LET	M	Primary	3.5
T8-LT	LET	F	Tertiary	12
T9-LP	LET	F	Primary	20
T10-NT	NET	M	Tertiary	24
T11-NP	NET	M	Primary	2
T12-NT	NET	M	Tertiary	2
T13-LS	LET	F	Secondary	19
T14-LS	LET	M	Secondary	2
T15-NS	NET	F	Secondary	15
T16-LS	LET	F	Secondary	20
T17-NP	NET	F	Primary	2
T18-LT	LET	F	Tertiary	2
T19-LP	LET	F	Primary	1
T20-LS	LET	F	Secondary	29
T21-LT	LET	M	Tertiary	32
T22-NS	NET	M	Secondary	11
T23-LT	LET	F	Tertiary	15

**The labeling system here is: No. + (L-LET/ N-NET) + (P-Primary/ S-Secondary/ T-Tertiary), e.g. T1-LS is the first HKTE who is a LET teaching in a secondary school*

The selection of participants was based mainly on two factors: i) whether they are NETs or LETs and ii) whether they are teaching in primary, secondary or tertiary institutes. The two variables were chosen to investigate whether they may have certain effects on the attitudes of teachers towards HKE across various levels of institutes and different L1.

4 Results & discussions

In this part, the qualitative data will be used as the main source with the quantitative data for triangulation. The quantitative will be presented as a back-up source that supports the themes that have been generated through selective coding.

4.1 Attitudes towards Hong Kong English

In order to answer the question of how the HKTEs view HKE, two questions – i) ‘*Do you think HKE exist? Why?*’ and ii) ‘*How do you define HKE?*’ – were asked during the interviews with follow-up questions.

While nearly all the interviewees acknowledged the existence of HKE, the interviewees seemed to have different levels of negative connotations on HKE. Interviewees suggested that HKE is somehow ‘*stigmatized*’ and it is regarded as a ‘*non-standard*’ variety of English that is not accepted in schools or at work places. In general, teachers normally regarded HKE as an English variety with lower status, what T2 and T4 mentioned well supported this claim:

T2-LT: “When I say (to my students) that, ‘oh, you are speaking Hong Kong English!’ It is not a kind of identification like you are speaking American accent, speaking with an American accent or British accent. It’s like you are making some mistakes [...] I think it (HKE) is neutral but I think people would perceive it as a lower variety.”

T4-LP: “There is a small recognition of Hong Kong English when compared to world-wide English.”

Interestingly, a difference between how LETs and NETs view HKE is noticed in this question. While most of the LETs (T1, T2, T4, T5, T14, T20) were quite skeptical about HKE, NETs (T3, T6, T10, T22) were relatively open to this new variety, they acknowledged that HKE is a natural product of language contacts and they treated HKE with a rather neutral or even positive stance:

T3-NT: “I think there is a lot of Cantonese that kind of flows into the English, and that’s to be expected of any... of any place that has multiple languages.”

T10-NT: “...whenever you have a community that uses a language, they will have their own variety. It did happen in any community.”

Almost all NETs are positive to or at least neutral to HKE and they treated the birth of a new variety of English as a normal thing whereas the LETs held a negative attitude to the new variety. It is in line with what T2 mentioned during interview, which when we come to the issue of how people in Hong Kong view different Englishes, “*Hong Kong people, especially those well-educated ones, they tend to be more harsh (to other’s accents)*”. The quantitative data was also in line with the qualitative data that most of the HKTEs (over 94%) acknowledged the existence of HKE (Fig. 4.1); however, at the same time, over 85% of them expressed that HKE is not a suitable variety in Hong Kong classrooms (Fig. 4.2) as they thought that HKE is not a ‘*Standard Variety*’ of English (58%) and HKE is not accepted in Hong Kong examinations (61%) (Fig. 4.3). It showed the interesting conflicts among HKTEs that on one hand they had internalized the existence of HKE but on other hand they denied the usage of HKE in both the academic field and the daily context in Hong Kong.

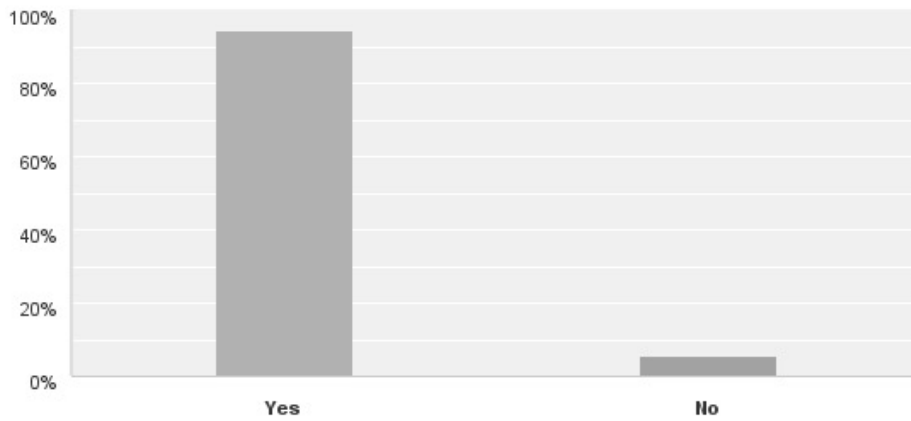


Fig. 4.1 The existence of HKE (Questionnaire)

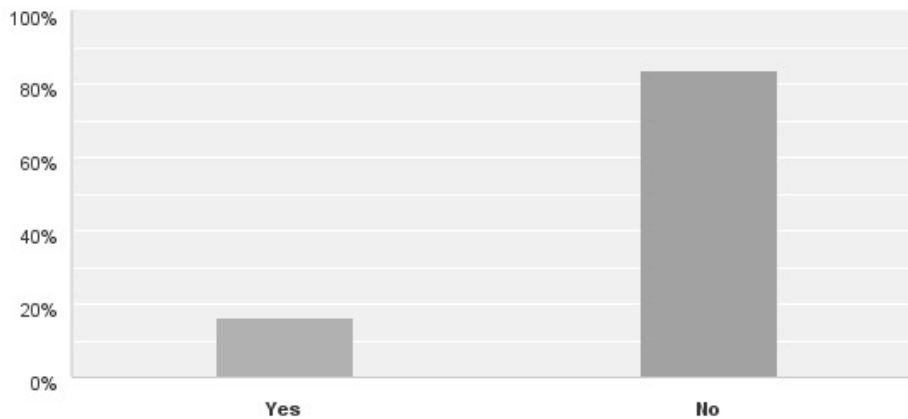


Fig. 4.2 The suitability of implementing HKE in Hong Kong classrooms

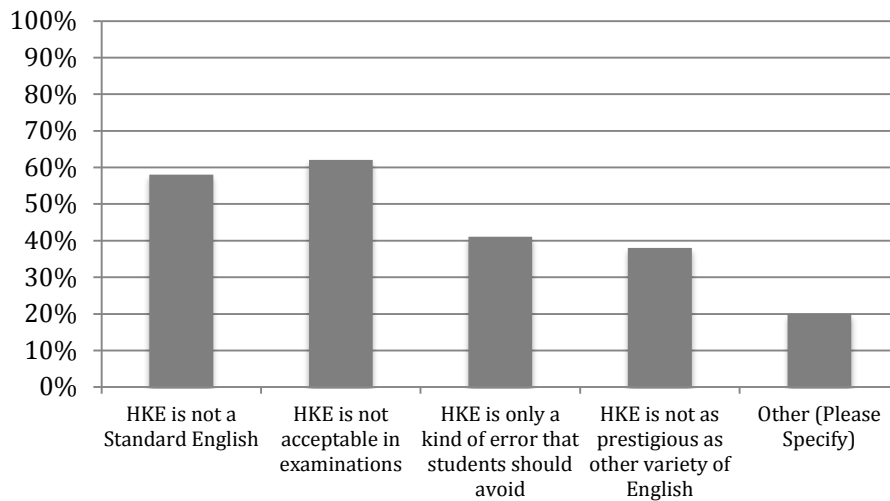


Fig. 4.3 The reasons why HKE is not suitable for Hong Kong classrooms

The attitudes of HKTEs towards HKE could also be reflected in their self-recognition of English accents and their preferred accents in lesson. Three questions were used to elicit the attitudes of the HKTEs. In the question ‘*What variety of English do you speak?*’, among the 14 LETs, only T5 agreed that he spoke HKE, and 5 of them (T1, T2, T7, T14 & T19) claimed

that they spoke a mixed accent (among HKE, British English (BrE) and American English (AmrE)); the rest of the LETs all claimed that they spoke a British accent (T4, T9, T13, T14, T16, T21) or an American accent (T8, T18, T20). In comparison, all the NETs reported that they spoke with an accent that is linked to their place of birth or place of education.

To the question, *'What variety of English do you teach in your class?'*, all of the interviewees responded that they taught either BrE or AmrE. BrE is the most preferred accent among LETs (T1, T2, T4, T5, T9, T13, T14, T16, T19, T21, T23) with only T7, T8 & T20 reported that they preferred to teach AmrE as all of them received their university education in the United States.

At last, in the question, *'What variety of English do you think your students need to learn?'*, similar with the previous questions, LETs preferred to stick with BrE because of the historical background, the status of English and the preferences in Hong Kong public examination:

T4-LP: "I think British English, because of, yes, the identity of Hong Kong, background of Hong Kong [...] they need to learn British English."

T9-LP: "British (English), (because of) the history of Hong Kong teaching environment and also the tradition (in English teaching)."

T13-LS: "British accent is still the main target in examination, [...] those examiners are just we, teachers, and we understand that the HKEAA (the examination authority in Hong Kong) still needs British (English), regards British as the core English accent that we need to teach at school, maybe because of the historical background."

Interestingly, again, the NETs were more liberal when it comes to the issue of variety of English, they generally expressed that their students have the right to speak any kind of Englishes that they want, as long as that variety of English is able to fulfill the communication purposes. The same mindset also applied to those LETs who taught in tertiary institutes:

T3-NT: "I would say any kind of English [...] they (the students) should speak in whatever English they feel comfortable."

T8-LT: "[...] as long as they are able to express themselves good enough, then it's fine"

T22-NS: "I don't think I have an opinion on this, um, just use one that they are comfortable with and stick to it."

In general, based on the results above, it shows that there is a contrastive difference on the attitudes towards HKE among LETs and NETs as well as HKTEs from different levels of institutes. NETs seemed to accept HKE to a wider extent than LETs; similarly, teachers from tertiary institutes tended to have a higher acceptability of HKE. The result is illustrated in Figure 4.4.

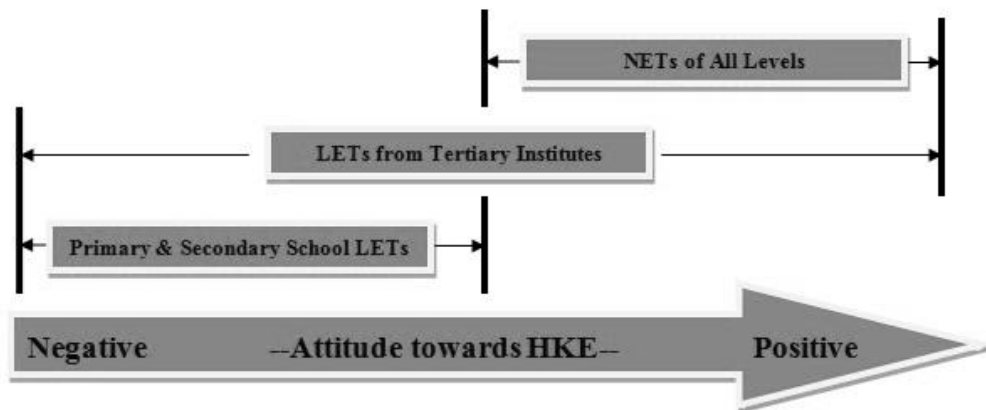


Fig. 4.4 Attitudes of HKTEs towards HKE

4.1.2 Perceptions of HKTEs to the Segmental Features of HKE

In order to answer the second research question that whether the teaching practices of HKTE is affected by their perceptions of the segmental features of HKE, several questions have been applied to collect their responses.

First, when they were asked to rise some common pronunciation features of their Hong Kong students, 6 main features were categorized in general: i) deletion of consonant clusters; ii) no long-short vowel; iii) voiced-voiceless consonant; iv) /θ/ sound; v) ending consonants and vi) /l/ and /n/ (See Fig.4.5).

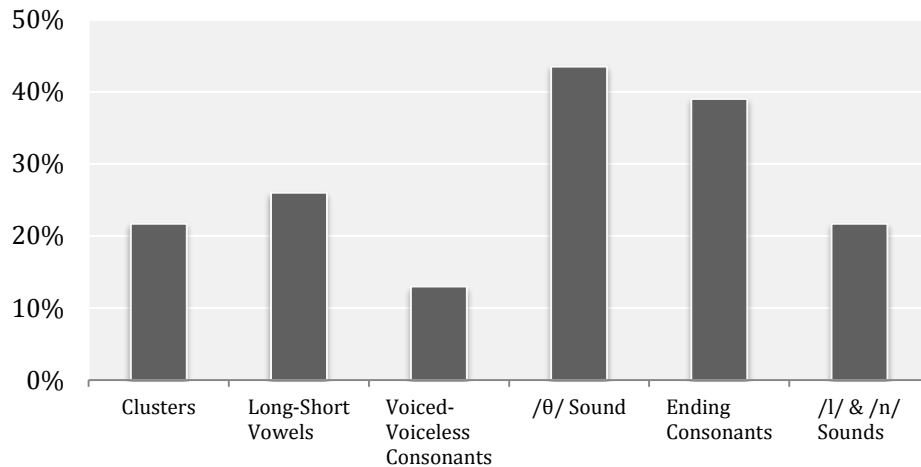


Fig. 4.5 Six Common features of HKE from HKTEs (interviews)

Although /θ/ sound and ending sounds were referred for 9 and 10 times respectively, it is important to note that only T3 and T22 mentioned the issue of /θ/ sound, the other were all mentioned by LETs while NETs were generally satisfied with the HKE features and they stressed more on the communication side. Also, many of them mentioned the suprasegmental features of HKE like stresses (T1, T4, T20), intonation (T1) and final particles (like 'la') (T3, T5, T17); however, since suprasegmental features are not the concerns of this paper, these would not be further discussed.

Their perceptions to the segmental features of HKE are also supported by the quantitative data. In the questionnaire, the HKTEs were asked to select the segmental features of HKE that they found salient in their students' speech. Similarly, /θ/ was ranked as the second most common features. (See Fig. 4.6).

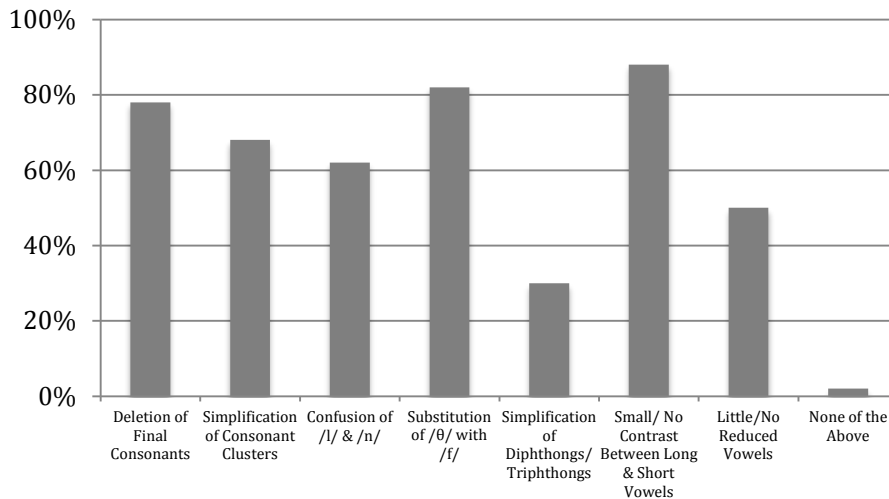


Fig 4.6 Segmental features of HKE (questionnaires)

The relation between the attitudes of HKTE towards HKE and their teaching practices can be reflected by the type of feedback that they provide to their students and the activities that they use. For the feedback types, when they were asked the question ‘what would you do if your students speak HKE?’, they were given choices of giving explicit feedback (e.g. giving immediate correction), implicit feedback (e.g. doing recast) or no feedback (simply ignore HKE). It was surprised that among all the HKTEs, only 3 of them (T9, T20, T22) would give explicit feedback:

T9-LP: “I will correct them, directly correct them.”

T20-LS: “I will correct them directly”

Most of the HKTE reported that they would give implicit feedback to address the HKE issues because they thought it would discourage the students from speaking English if explicit feedbacks were given; for those who chose not to give any feedback (T3, T7, T8, T11, T16, T17, T18, T21), they also wanted to encourage the students to speak and also, they would think it makes no harms if the communication purposes were fulfilled using HKE:

T8-LT: “I will just let go (of the HKE) if (I) don't really have problems understanding it.”

T16-LS: “[...] language is for communication, if they (the students) can get the message across, I think it's fine [...] I will accept it.”

T18-LT: “I will do nothing, that's the language that they speak.”

T21-LT: “I really don't mind if they speak HKE.”

More importantly, for those who tended to give explicit feedback were all primary school and secondary school teachers, which is very likely to show that in tertiary levels, HKE is more likely to be accepted by the teachers like T8, T18 and T21 did, as they tended to emphasize on fulfilling the communication purposes. This result mirrors the previous studies that were done in university contexts (e.g. Hansen Edwards, 2015a; Zhang, 2015) in which HKE was found to be generally accepted among university students.

At last, the activities that HKTE used to teach oral English can somehow show their preferences on pronunciation teaching. When they were asked “what activities would you use when you teach pronunciation?”, a range of activities were elicited. The activities can be divided into two types: direct teaching of sounds (Phonics or IPA) and interactive/communicative activity (e.g. drama, role-play etc.). Interestingly, all those who chose to use direct teaching of sounds were LETs ranging from primary schools to tertiary institutes (T2, T13, T14, T16, T18, T21):

T2-LT: “So I show them the IPA symbols in the right position of the vowel chart or something and I also tell them this is the front part of your mouth [...] so it’s like IPA symbols plus some sample words.”

T16-LS: “We have a book called ‘Sheep or Ship’ [...] and we teach the vowels, consonants, diphthongs, yes.”

T21-LT: “I spend time on, um, IPA symbols, I think it’s really helpful [...] I demonstrate (the sounds) and they follow.”

Nonetheless, while the LETs tended to use the direct teaching of sounds that is sort of adopting to the exonomative norms of either BrE or AmrE, the NETs were more fond of using interactive methods like debating (T22), drama (T3, T10), interview (T3, T22) and role-play (T3). This result is in line with previous studies such as Tsui and Bunton (2000) and Young and Walsh (2010) in which HKTEs were found to stick strictly to exonormative norms that make them unconfident in teaching English.

The above can be explained by the ‘Washback Effect’ from the Hong Kong Examination. Whenever there is an influence towards any examinations exerted on teachers or students that may alter the attitudes of them, ‘Washback Effect’ exists (Bailey, 1999). It is noticeable that although HKTE in general acknowledged and admitted the existence of HKE, they carried a negative or even repulsive attitude towards it as HKE is not ‘acceptable in the public examination’, which was one of the recurring themes found in the interviews.

5 Conclusion

The two research questions had generally been answered by the current mixed-method study. In general, HKTEs accepted the existence of HKE; however, LETs were found to have more negative attitudes towards HKE than NETs did. At the same time, there was a range of attitudes towards HKE found among the HKTEs. While primary school and secondary school LETs were found more repulsive to HKE, NETs in all levels were more open-minded with neutral or even positive attitudes. Also, LETs in Tertiary level had the widest range of attitudes from the most negative to the most positive. Next, the perceptions of HKTEs

towards segmental features of HKE did affect the teaching practices of HKTEs. While nearly most of the HKTEs were able to describe some of the distinctive features of HKE (e.g. deletion of final consonants, modification of consonant clusters etc.), they adopted different strategies in classrooms, which somehow shows the dissimilarities in attitudes towards HKE between LETs and NETs. Most of the LETs were keen on direct correction whereas NETs preferred giving implicit feedbacks. Also, the teaching activities that NETs used were more communicative that aim more at the development of fluency while LETs adopted direct teaching of individual sounds using IPA or Phonics in order to boost the accuracy of the pronunciation of on the word level.

Since the current paper is a trial attempt to link the attitudes of HKE towards teaching practices of HKTEs, there exists a number of limitations. First, the number of participants should be increased in both the qualitative and quantitative parts in order to elicit more data for triangulation. Second, the number of participants should be balanced in all the variables (e.g. gender, number of NETs and LETs etc.) in order to minimize the potential errors. Also, as only segmental features were concerned in the present study, the influences of suprasegmental features are ignored, which they may actually play a crucial role in the attitudes part. Therefore, further studies should focus on the both segmental and suprasegmental features of HKE and hence, examining the possibility of implementing HKE into the teaching curriculum of Hong Kong with regards to the 'Washback Effect' from the Hong Kong Examination authorities.

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