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Teaching Hong Kong English before Teaching Academic English: The Gateway to Effective Learning of College Writing

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the negative view of Hong Kong English (HKE) in popular discourse, few English lecturers in Hong Kong universities directly acknowledge or discuss the variety in a non-linguistic course. This paper illustrates an action research study of how HKE may play a role in an academic writing course of a sub-degree program in Hong Kong. Focusing on 8 representatives from an academic writing course with 100 students, it employed the qualitative experiment method to examine whether students who had possessed basic linguistic knowledge of HKE from an additional tutorial would perceive HKE and academic writing differently from those who had not. Student representatives from each group were invited to a focus group to explore ideas about the two subjects discussed in class. Their conversations suggested that prior knowledge of the syntactic features of HKE might raise students' awareness of the grammatical differences between the variety and the standard. The analysis also suggested that introducing the linguistic view of HKE to students might render them optimistic about their variety, helping them identify the situations where the variety would be tolerant of and settings where Standard English would be expected. The study suggested that such an intervention might facilitate students' learning of Standard English for academic purposes and practices of English in actual professional communication. Upon the improvement or advancement, they will position themselves more powerfully in the dichotomy between the standard and non-standard. More formal research on a similar or relevant topic is required to validate the impact of understanding HKE on learning academic writing.

1. Introduction

I began to teach academic writing in Hong Kong five years ago. One of the common topics of such a university course is “how to proofread an essay” or the like. In my first lecture of this topic, I mentioned Hong Kong English (HKE) in passing. Although it was not a

sociolinguistics course, I had thought that Hong Kong students' common mistakes in academic writing might originate from their own English variety, which was why I spent half an hour on it. After class, the students said that knowledge of HKE had facilitated their learning of writing. Nonetheless, when the course coordinator knew

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it in a casual conversation afterwards, she asked me not to discuss HKE in a non-linguistic course again.

It was actually after this lesson that I first became interested in HKE and academic writing. I wondered why she discouraged me from teaching something that should be beneficial to students and their learning. As a linguistics researcher, more importantly, I recognized that HKE should be a natural product of language in contact. I started reading scholarly works on HKE and academic writing respectively. Recently, I even conduct action research to examine any invisible links between them.

Just like other international cities, Hong Kong is a metropolis where English functions like a second language in many workplace settings. It is so widely used that Hong Kong people have developed their own variety of English, often called Hong Kong English (HKE). While the term often refers to the dialect (i.e. phonetic characteristics) of the English language spoken in Hong Kong, it also denotes the grammatical and vocabulary features of the English language used in different channels in the city. However, since English is not used as a *lingua franca* by the majority of Hong Kong people^[1], the variety remains not officially codified^[2]. The mass media, local commentators, and Netizens in Hong Kong usually criticize the phenomenon of HKE^[3]. Its grammatical characteristics, together with the pronunciation “mistakes”, are often considered “errors” from an English teaching perspective^[4].

In the past, higher education in Hong Kong was for the elite, who could be somewhat “grammatically correct” or “near-native” when writing in English^[5]. Nowadays, owing to mass tertiary education in Hong Kong, many secondary school graduates who do not have sufficient English proficiency are still able to have a place in a degree or an associate degree program^[6]. Their use of English may contain HKE, and they are likely to find academic writing, which is often a compulsory course for all year one students, exceedingly challenging. They can be discouraged in the learning process because they find it so hard to get rid of the HKE label. Sometimes even graduating students may not be satisfied with their academic writing skills^[7].

However, interdisciplinary studies on HKE and academic writing are scarcely found. The problem is that academic writing, compared to speaking, is not soft skills that can be acquired in an informal setting. There is clearly a need for more discussion on these two supposedly unrelated topics. This article illustrates an action research study of how basic knowledge of and linguistic discussions about HKE may help students learn English academic writing. It proposes that knowledge

of the grammatical features of HKE would indirectly assist students, especially those who are weak in written English, in learning the standard norms of using tenses and sentences in academic writing. The paper also suggests that a linguistic, descriptive discussion about HKE could be conducive to the development of a holistic, critical view of using English in different contexts in the digital, globalization era.

2. The Role of English in Hong Kong

Although Cantonese is the mother tongue of most Hong Kong locals, English has become essential in higher education and career development across all disciplines in the city. Hong Kong was under British rule for about 150 years. Before the transfer of sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on July 1, 1997, English was the official language of most formal settings, especially legal and governmental settings. This legitimated Standard British English to be a symbolic power that constructed a reality where different people in Hong Kong, regardless of their nationalities, had to agree on its superiority beyond question^[8]. The historical reality, which was best suited to the particular interests of British in the colony, has engendered the perception that English is critical for going up in the social hierarchy. In the 1980s, international trade in Hong Kong started growing rapidly, and since then English has also played a practical, commercial role in the society^[9]. People normally consider it an important (if not the most important) indicator of social mobility, career prospects, and economic opportunities^[10]. Even with the increasing importance of Putonghua after the turnover, Hong Kong people still believe that English will determine whether or not a person will succeed in life, which mostly means being wealthy and enjoying high social status. Since English is seen as a tool for making a living, few people in Hong Kong are emotionally or affectionately attached to English^[11]. As English is considered a tool for career development and social development as well, when it comes to education, the policy of English education in Hong Kong is rarely driven by educationists or applied linguists, but mainly by the business community, parents, and the upper or ruling class^{[12][13]}. Despite the differences among their vested interests, their forces jointly consolidate the pragmatic and ideological importance of English in Hong Kong. The aforementioned three stakeholders, who are not authorities, mostly support Standard English, and they tend to claim that, albeit without sound or strong evidence, the English used by Hong Kong people (i.e. HKE) is inferior and destructive to competitiveness and international trade^[14].

2.1 Negative Transfer and Hong Kong English

As the second language of Hong Kong people, it is not exaggerated to say that HKE is a product of transfer. The concept “transfer” denotes how new learning proceeds based on previous learning^[15]. In linguistics, “transfer” refers to the process in which a learner applies items or structures from his or her first language to speak or write a second language^[16]. When the L1 is greatly different from the L2, the transfer outcome will be “negative”, which makes the output deviant from the standard norms^[17]. Although negative transfer does not entail communication failure from a linguistic perspective, it often equals “errors” or “mistakes” in popular discourse. This is likely the case in Hong Kong, where citizens normally learn English as a second language based on their previous acquisition of Cantonese as the first language. The significant differences between the two languages make a negative transfer in general, followed by a criticism from the abovementioned three dominant groups.

Because of the British rule before July 1, 1997, Standard British English was seen the Standard English variety in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the long period of being a British colony and the increasing use of English in the workplace have also provided the city with an opportunity for the development of its own variety of English^[18]. It could be further classified as the educated HKE (native-like but locally distinctive with fewer negative transfers) and broad HKE (indicative of low language proficiency with more negative transfers)^{[19][20]}. Nevertheless, since HKE has never been codified in the official circle, nor has it been consistently defined in scholarly studies, its meaning sometimes overlaps with Chinese English, code-mixing of Chinese and English, and transliteration of Chinese in English texts. Some lexical elements of HKE come from interactions between Hong Kong indigenous people with other countries, such as India and Malaysia^[21]. In this article, Hong Kong English specifically refers to the non-standard English language carrying lexical and grammatical characteristics originating from Cantonese or Chinese, namely due to negative transfer. This understanding enables a discussion focused on the recurring structural patterns of HKE that permeate among the low-educated in informal conversation, especially in digital communication.

Applied linguists in Hong Kong have well discussed the pronunciation^[22], grammar^[23], and vocabulary^[24] features of HKE (also see the next section). However, HKE is frequently considered a plague outside the linguistics circle, and its features are often considered to be indicators of incompetence or the failure of English education^[25]. This phenomenon, which echoes the understanding of negative transfer, comes as no surprise:

- Parents know too well about Standard English as a form of economic capital that determines their children’s social mobility in Hong Kong^[26];

- The mass media keep imposing and amplifying the effect of HKE on youngsters’ “declining” English standards^[27]; and

- Business enterprises always stress the supposed importance of Standard English to maintain international competitiveness^[28].

The popular discourses about HKE are hardly neutral or positive, and the prescriptive criticisms of HKE permeate and are magnified on the Internet. The majority of Hong Kong people simply want to align or identify with the standard, without understanding the nature of language and the science of second language learning. Indeed, “[t]he local people have always also wanted to keep standards very high, refusing to admit the existence of features like a local accent or to treat local usages as normal or grammatical”^[29]. In particular in the writing domain, grammatical correctness is given top priority over meaning^[30]. Due to the prevalent negative view of HKE, few courses and few English teachers in Hong Kong universities directly acknowledge or discuss the variety. HKE seems to be a politically incorrect topic, except in a course on world Englishes or sociolinguistics.

2.2 English Learning in Hong Kong Universities

English is the official language in all Hong Kong tertiary institutions. It is used as the medium of instruction in most university courses (including sub-degree courses), and most students have to finish their written assignments (e.g., essays, projects), except for Chinese courses, in English^[31]. Underlying this situation is the traditional belief that college graduates are supposed to be elites in Hong Kong, whose English abilities and literacy levels should be distinctive from other lower-educated people. To empower them and their shared interests, they should face English on campus every day. Even students not majoring in English or language studies have to take English courses, often known as general education (GE) English courses, in the first year of study. These GE English courses usually teach students academic writing and reading. The former is to teach how to compose an essay in a particular referencing style (e.g., APA, MLA, etc.). In line with other local English teachers, who normally defer to guides produced upon the standard exnormative models^[32], university English teachers are also expected to teach the standard norms of academic writing. Students are in turn expected to write Standard English in their assignments. These expectations, unsurprisingly, have posed challenges to a considerable number of freshmen whose writing habits are influenced

by Cantonese or Chinese, especially on the Internet or smartphone. They may pick up forms from HKE, which is used in spoken interaction and informal online talk, in their academic assignments without realizing they are non-standard. Teachers, on the other hand, spend time on correcting students' mistakes at the expense of training their abilities to reasoning^[33]. The possible drawback is that some students keep receiving criticisms of their mistakes, feeling embarrassed, and unknowingly losing the passion for and confidence in moving up the academic ladder.

2.3 Summary of the Literature Review and Research Questions

The above brief review has delineated 1) the importance of English in Hong Kong society and higher education, 2) the negative label of HKE, and 3) its invisible impact on university students' learning of academic writing. As a linguistic capital, English represents not only the current interests of the adults who have the power to assess it but also the future interests of the youngsters who have the opportunities to reproduce it. However, the picture has been complicated by their attachment to Standard English, repulsion against HKE, lack of knowledge of negative transfer, and the societal move to mass tertiary education. While it is difficult to directly subvert the linguistic order or popular discourse, it is possible to effectively mediate between the dominant and suppressed voices. Scholarly voices have called for more space for discussing the local variety in the curriculum^[34]. Such discussion will encourage students to accept (at least partially) the non-standard and advance their learning of the standard^[35], cultivating the next generation of global citizens. Notwithstanding, virtually no studies in Hong Kong, an international and multicultural city, have directly explored the role of discussing HKE in higher education. In view of this knowledge gap, this action research is centered on higher education in Hong Kong, aiming at addressing two questions:

- How will a discussion about Hong Kong English benefit students in terms of grammar and essay writing?

- How will such a discussion benefit students in terms of English learning in general?

It is hoped that through addressing these questions could English teachers and applied linguists be motivated to examine possible approaches to teach Standard English and acknowledge the non-standard Englishes shared by students. Such ways will be alternatives to the traditional ways of teaching English in the classroom.

3. Methods

This study was conducted in a non-government-funded tertiary institution in Hong Kong (the college

henceforth). The college offered full-time associate degree (AD) programs for secondary school leavers and top-up degree programs for AD graduates. While English was the medium of instruction for most courses in the college, the AD students normally had obtained level 2 (i.e. marginal pass) in the English subject of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). The level reflects their low proficiency in English^[36]. In the college, approximately 85% of AD students were teenagers who had grown up in Hong Kong and tended to use HKE in daily English communication. All year-one AD students in the college had to take two compulsory courses, College Writing I and College Writing II. Both courses taught students English academic writing in APA (6th ed.) style. Compared to the former, the latter focused more on academic reading.

One hundred students from College Writing II were invited to participate in this study. It employed the qualitative experiment method to examine the possible impact of HKE on the academic writing classroom. The method has been conceptualized by Gerhard Kleingang's works on qualitative-heuristic methodology since the early 1980s^[37]. Unlike the traditional quantitative experiment, the qualitative experiment enables researchers to use a qualitative technique (e.g., interviews, non-participant observation, text analysis) to examine whether the participants who have been executed a treatment will behave and/or think differently from those who have not^{[38][39]}. If they do, the treatment is *arguably* correlated to such differences or transformations, subject to a follow-up and larger scale quantitative study to validate and structure the findings. This method aims at collecting unstructured and textual data, instead of numbers, to scrutinize the possible effect of an extra, intervening event that is difficult to immediately measure or objectively quantify. Although it lacks an authoritative code of practice and does not provide space for generalization to the target population, it has played an important role in the natural sciences^[40]. It is also frequently used in innovation research that involves the perspective of practitioners in the social sciences^[41].

The 100 participants were divided into two groups. In week 4 of the semester, Group A (n=48) learnt academic writing as scheduled, and the students were *not* given any additional knowledge of HKE in class. By contrast, Group B (n=52) was given an *additional* one-hour tutorial on the grammatical features of HKE and their deviations from Standard English. These features have been reported by sociolinguists in Hong Kong and are traditionally considered "negative transfers" from Cantonese, the participants' first language^[42]. The typical HKE variants discussed in the tutorial are summarized as follows:

- No tenses or incorrect tenses^[43] (e.g., *Last weekend I go to Lantau Island.*)
- Incomplete verb phrases^[44] (e.g., *He Ø arriving.*)
- Inappropriate linking verbs^[45] (e.g., *There have two trees.*)
- Zero relative pronouns^[46] (e.g., *Filial piety should be something Ø comes from heart.*)
- Zero conjunctions^[47] (e.g., *WhatsApp is an important tool for communication, Ø every teenager use it to interact with friends, Ø however we cannot over reliant on it, even Ø it is so convenient.*)
- Double conjunctions^[48] (e.g., *Although he is not my friend, but he helps me a lot.*)

The tutor who gave this extra session was an academic with substantial experience in teaching linguistics. At the end of the tutorial, the tutor also briefly discussed the *descriptive* linguistic view of such features (i.e. seeing them as “variants” vis-à-vis “errors”).

One week afterwards, all the 100 participants from Groups A and B were given a two-hour mass lecture on common learner errors in essay writing. It was a regular lecture scheduled in week 5 of the semester, and the contents covered were part of the endorsed syllabus of College Writing II. Using the traditional grammar-translation method, the lecturer *prescriptively* discussed the grammatical mistakes commonly made by Hong Kong students in academic writing. Students learnt the following topics in the lecture: 1) inappropriate use of tenses in essay writing, and 2) run-ons and fragments in essay writing.

One week after the mass lecture (i.e. in week 6), four students from Group A and four students from Group B were further invited to a one-hour focus group discussion *separately*. They were selected by the convenience sampling method, based on three criteria: 1) the same number of males and females, 2) a similar English background, and 3) a similar level of English proficiency. The data collection was aimed at reducing the impacts of the particular context and individual difference (as in traditional quantitative experiment)^[49]. The profiles of the students are summarized below:

Pseudonyms	Gender	Level in the DSE English examination	Mof of the secondary school	Participation in the HKE tutorial
Participant A1	M	2	Chinese	No (Group A)
Participant A2	F	2	Chinese	No (Group A)
Participant A3	M	2	Chinese	No (Group A)
Participant A4	F	2	Chinese	No (Group A)
Participant B1	F	2	Chinese	Yes (Group B)
Participant B2	M	2	Chinese	Yes (Group B)
Participant B3	M	2	Chinese	Yes (Group B)
Participant B4	F	2	Chinese	Yes (Group B)

The chair (the moderator) asked the participants to

discuss the following questions in a relaxed manner:

- To what extent have you understood the use of tenses in academic writing?
- To what extent are you comfortable with writing long sentences in academic writing?
- How do you think about HKE and the use of it in communication?

These questions were designed to elicit textual information about participants’ perceptions of academic writing and HKE. Any remarkable differences between the two groups would *discover* (rather than *verify*) a possible influence of the HKE tutorial on them; and by inference, would in turn *address* the two research questions. The chair did not intervene in the discussion, except when the participants were off topic or failed to understand the spontaneous questions emerging from the conversation. The focus group was conducted in a semi-structured manner; and mainly in English. The two groups had the discussion on different days in week 6. The process of each was audio-recorded and transcribed into written form for text analysis.

4. Results

To summarize the transcription result, the one-hour focus group for Group A generated approximately 3500 words of spoken discourse. Approximately 30 minutes and 2000 words were spent on discussing the first two questions about academic writing; approximately 20 minutes and 1500 words on the last question about Hong Kong English. The one-hour focus group for Group B generated approximately 3900 words of spoken discourse. Approximately 35 minutes and 2300 words were spent on discussing the first two questions; approximately 20 minutes and 1600 words on the last question.

The raw data contained obvious grammatical flaws, and for clarity purposes some of them were corrected when used as direct quotes in this article. The coding and cleaning stage generated two transcripts, one for Group A and another for Group B. The transcript of Group A was compared and contrasted with that of Group B for locating any obvious similarities and differences in the three aspects below:

- Ideas about using tenses in academic writing and the learning of it;
- Ideas about sentence length and grammar complexity in academic writing and the learning of them; and
- Ideas about HKE.

The two transcripts were read against each other several times. The analysis of Group A was especially centered on ideas surrounding common learner problems of academic writing; the analysis of Group B was especially focused on ideas relevant to the contents of the additional HKE

tutorial. Based on the overall analysis, a number of quotations were purposefully selected on two criteria: 1) the perspective showed a sharp contrast with that from another group, and 2) the perspective referred to the HKE tutorial, something stated in the HKE tutorial, and/or the mass lecture. Both criteria were directed at capturing the possible existence of qualitative changes in and new experiences with the tutorial. The selection processes involved inductive interpretation, rather than instruments or deductive calculations. The following subsections discuss the major findings from the preliminary data analysis.

Possible Effects of the HKE Tutorial on Learning Tenses in Academic Writing

When asked to share their learning experience in using tenses in academic writing, most participants agreed that using tenses was a challenge. They said that the future tense was easier to use, and that continuous tenses were not common in academic writing. However, the participants who had attended the HKE tutorial showed more confidence in switching between different tenses in discussing previous research. They demonstrated more awareness of the present and past tenses in English academic writing. For example:

"I am sensitive to (the) change between tenses when writing essays... At least I am comfortable (with) shifting between simple past (and) simple present... Unlike (in) Chinese, When we mention publish(ed) finding(s), we should change to (use) simple present, because they are already consider(ed) knowledge. But the action verb(s) in (the) citations should be in (the) past tense because they refer to other scholars' past behaviors like reporting, finding, suggesting, etc." (Participant B2)

"I pay attention to tense(s) when I borrow an external point... Time of event(s) is not shown in Chinese, but it (is) carefully shown in English... Each tense has (a) different meaning to the sentence. [This] is very different from Chinese. When I write Chinese essay(s), I don't care (about) tenses." (Participant B3)

By contrast, the participants who were not given the HKE tutorial seemed to be more confused by the use of tenses in academic writing. In particular, they tended to inappropriately simplify the use of tenses in the literature review. They also said that English tenses made them "puzzled" or "confused". For instance:

"Even (when) you allow me to use Chinese to think, I am still not sure how to use tense(s) to discuss other studies correctly. To me, they (have been) already published. But their findings (are) paraphrase(d) sometimes to (the) present tense and sometimes (the) past tense, and even (the) present perfect (tense). It's very

confusing to me. Why not just use (the) past tense all the time?" (Participant A1)

"It really puzzle(s) me (why) we have to change between tenses when we cite (previous studies). When I am writing the essay, the writing action is (ongoing) right now, so I think it should be in (the) present tense. When I refer to other people's research, they are all done, so I think it should be in (the) past tense... I also took the Chinese writing class. Their rules are easier." (Participant A3)

The results suggest that the HKE tutorial might render students attentive to the differences in tenses between HKE and Standard English. In the Oxford English Grammar, Greenbaum stated that "[g]ood English is good use of the resources available in the language."^[50] Tenses are important resources in English. They not only function as time referencing in an essay, but also indicate the status of the existing studies being discussed^[51]. On the other hand, Cantonese (Chinese) is a language without restricted rules of using tenses. In the Chinese language, time is often indicated by use of adverbs or inference from context. Although, from an ELF perspective, using no tenses or incorrect tenses in the English classroom may have become variants for Chinese^[52], teaching academic writing aims at socializing students into the scholarly world in the written setting – where Standard English is normally expected^[53]. This justifies the need to conform to the standard norms of utilizing tenses for time reference and stylistic purposes in academic writing^[54]. The findings suggest that knowledge of HKE seems to play a subtle role in drawing Hong Kong students' attention to such a need, raising their awareness of using tenses properly in English. A discussion on HKE will be helpful to facilitate their learning of using tenses in English academic writing. Such learning, if successful, may also increase their cognitive skills in analyzing the features of English tenses, then decreasing part of the negative transfers, enhancing their grammatical competence, and empowering them as an English user in the Hong Kong context.

Possible Effects of the HKE Tutorial on Using Sentences in Academic Writing

The second discussion question concerns the use of sentences in academic writing. When asked to state their understanding of sentence use in academic writing, many participants recognized that long sentences could indicate the writer's complex thoughts more effectively and the logical relations more clearly than short sentences could. Yet, those who had been given the HKE tutorial appeared to be more comfortable with long sentences. They seemed to be particularly aware of the use of conjunctions in compound and/or complex English sentences. For example:

"I think we need to use long sentence(s) in essay(s). We need to use long sentence(s) to discuss complex ideas... so I think I will not avoid long sentences but when I put (a) comma between two long sentences, I will think whether they should be connected by (a) conjunction... We always use (a) comma to separate sentences in Chinese, but we can't do the same thing to English. My grammar is not good but I know we should use a conjunction to connect two clauses. When I see two verbs in a sentence, I will be careful." (Participant B2)

"Long sentences may be bad in Chinese, but they are common in English... And there [are] logical relationships between ideas. For example, the meaning(s) of thesis statement and topic sentence are too complicate(d) to write in short sentences, and need to use one sentence to make a definition... of course we make (fewer) mistakes in short sentences but we can't always use short sentences like children." (Participant B4)

The participants who had *not* been given the HKE tutorial were more conservative of using long sentence in academic writing. Two of them even explicitly stated that they would avoid long sentences for the sake of not making grammatical mistakes. The use of conjunctions seemed to be the root. For instance:

"In the past, my teachers always (said)... the main verb (was) missing, the conjunction (was) missing, the conjunction should be delete(d)... Teachers often say I make a lot of mistakes when I write long sentences, so I prefer to use short sentences even (when) I talk about some complex things... Like (in) Chinese, we can use several short sentences together to describe the idea. When their meanings are combined correctly, they can still show complex idea(s). I think it's also okay in English." (Participant A2)

"I rather separate them (into) two to three sentence(s). In this way I can make sure that there (are) not many problems... Of course I (have) already learn(t) English conjunctions but I (am) unsure about (using) them correctly... When it is need(ed) (and) when it is not need(ed)... Anyway I was always wrong when I use(d) long sentence(s) in secondary school. I don't want to (lose) marks so I will use more short sentences for safety." (Participant A4)

The data suggest that the HKE tutorial might encourage students to use longer sentences when necessary in academic writing. In English academic writing, complexity and length of sentences often reveal academic maturity and ability to argue for or against a point^[55]. This stylistic feature of academic writing is sometimes even more important than grammatical correctness, as the latter can be achieved by proofreading and professional

editing. Students who are weak or unconfident in academic writing tend to separate a complex idea into different components^[56]. While the tendency to use simple structure is a feature of all learner language, for Hong Kong students, especially students with low proficiency in language, the origin of the problem can be three-folded. First, short sentences are preferable in idiomatic or traditional Chinese, which may influence their preferences of sentence length in English. Additionally, in Chinese communication, conjunctions are often omitted when the logical relationships among clauses can be drawn from the co-text or context. Moreover, owing to their experiences in incorrect use or inappropriate omission of conjunctions, they may blindly avoid using long sentences in academic writing, which restricts their ability to make sense of information or data and participate in academic work. The topic sentence, for instance, is one sentence that "carries one or more propositions that the remaining contents prove, explain, illustrate, elaborate upon, or carry out in some way"^[57]. The topic sentence of a sophisticated body paragraph, which frames the sub-argument, may be substantiated, and therefore, long and complex in terms of structure. To encourage Hong Kong students to deal with the difficulties in using long sentences or conjunctions correctly, probably one way is to let them understand the properties of their own variety but simultaneously teach them the standard norms of written English^[58]. When they know how their first language has influenced their use of conjunctions in English, they will become more sensitive to the correct use of English conjunction, through which they will consciously avoid the transfer from Chinese and be more willing to compose longer, more complex sentences in academic writing, thereby increasing the cohesion, coherence, and finally readability of their essays and power of their positioning in academic conversation.

Possible Effects of the HKE Tutorial on Forming a Critical but Open View of English

In the last 20 minutes, the focus-group participants were asked to share their views of Hong Kong English. The sharing concentrated on the grammatical issues surrounding it. Although all participants said that they felt inferior and disadvantaged because of the HKE label, those who had understood the descriptive view of HKE from the extra tutorial showed a more open and optimistic attitude to their own variety. Two of them pointed out the differences in using HKE between the written and spoken settings. For example:

"I think Hong Kong English is not good to formal situation(s) but it is okay to (be used) between friends especially in WhatsApp... On (the) Internet we Hong Kong people use Hong Kong English because the environment

is informal. And it shows (that) we are from Hong Kong. But in formal situation(s) like academic writing grammar is important... and so I think Hong Kong English should be accepted in oral, but we should not totally accept (it) in formal writing.” (Participant B1)

“When it comes to writing, it means we have time to proofread (or) edit (it) before submitting the work. It’s not like in oral... we have to continue speaking and we have no time to correct, so speak(ing) Hong Kong English is no problem if the listener understand(s)... But the mistakes should be avoided in academic writing because it is supposed to be read by foreigner(s), but sometimes they are not harmful in oral among Hong Kong people themselves. (Being) too worried about the mistakes will decrease our fluency.” (Participant B3)

On the other hand, those who were not given the HKE tutorial equated HKE and “grammatical mistakes” or “poor language skills”. They tended to emphasize that it was “incorrect”, “wrong”, and “impure”. Three of them even reported that there should be no space for HKE in all forms of communication. For instance:

“You read newspapers and you know the mistakes, the errors of Hong Kong English are reported again and again... The errors can be document(ed) and summarize(d), so from another point of view they are so common and shameful and should not appear in all situations. I don’t want other people (to) say my English is poor, my grammar is too bad, etc.” (Participant A1)

“Hong Kong English is incorrect and not pure. People laugh at Hong Kong English all the time... People more often laugh at my pronunciation (of English) but (my) grammar is also a big problem. It’s wrong. Then it’s wrong, no matter in oral or writing... I never see teachers or famous people accept Hong Kong English... sometimes I feel sad that I (was) not born as a native English speaker.” (Participant A3)

“I already try my best not (to) use Hong Kong English, because they always represent bad language skills. I try to listen (to) English songs and BBC (programmes) and I force myself to read English newspapers every week. But it seems (that) I am not successful... my pronunciation (is) still very bad and my grammar is always wrong.” (Participant A4)

The final discussion in the focus group postulated that the HKE tutorial, which allowed the students to understand HKE from a linguistic perspective, probably helped them to look at their own variety more positively and objectively. Regardless of educational levels and professions, people who are not trained in linguistics are often unwilling to accept English varieties other than Standard English^[59]. This affective factor makes them

believe that non-standard norms are always inferior and therefore unacceptable. Sociolinguists, on the contrary, seldom see the features of HKE as intolerant “mistakes”, but as the outcomes of negative transfer from modern Chinese structure and Chinese thought patterns^[60]. They are invisible mediators (i.e. interlanguage) between existing knowledge of L1 and the new language, namely English, being learnt. Although the non-standard features of an English variety need not be formally taught to the learners^[61], linguistic understanding of how those features are developed or fossilized may eventually help the users accept the variations that do not impede communication and take a less negative attitude to it. After all, no learner will feel pleasant when being criticized without knowing why. In addition, allowing students to address the linguistic view of HKE does not mean that the standard norms are given up^[62], but the knowledge will help them evaluate which settings enable the variety and which contexts require the standard. This can help to develop a holistic view of how English is used in actual communication, especially in the expanding circles. Only after that can the students build confidence in using their variety as a tool to master the standard norms. When they develop communicative competence to utilize HKE to learn, they are likely to see the symbolic power of English they can possess in the future.

5. Discussions, Implications, and Conclusion

The study examined the viability of introducing the discussion about Hong Kong English into an academic writing course. It concentrated on AD students who tended to use HKE in their written assignments. Results of the qualitative experiment incorporating a focus group suggested that prior knowledge of the grammatical features of HKE might raise students’ awareness of the grammatical similarities and differences between the variety and the standard, through which they might decrease negative transfer and become more confident and skillful in using tenses and sentences in English academic writing. The results also suggested that introducing the descriptive, linguistic view of HKE to students could render them more open to or less negative about their variations. It could help students to pay attention to written situations where the non-standard features would be acceptable or tolerant of and settings where Standard English would be expected. Such understanding would eventually facilitate their learning of Standard English for academic purposes and practices of English in actual communication, thereby powering up themselves as native-like English speakers.

In view of the preliminary findings and their implications, this action research proposes that linguistic

knowledge of HKE may be productive to students' learning and practices of academic writing. The characteristics of tenses and sentence structures, albeit often seen as mistakes, have their subtle roles in the curriculum. Compared to dwelling on such mistakes and the corrections using the grammar-translation method, teaching them why such mistakes will be easily made can be more efficacious and less demotivating. Penalizing learners on non-standard linguistic items is not always useful^[63]. By contrast, it often creates an unpleasant classroom surrounding that can be devastating to second language learning^[64]. While external intervention from non-linguists is unavoidable, learners' behaviors of "changing English should be respected instead of being criticized"^[65]. Thus, college teachers may describe the HKE features when they enter discussions about the academic register or style. Even for college teachers themselves, understanding HKE from a linguistic viewpoint will help them cope with English varieties and their students' home language^[66]. This research also advocates the co-existence of HKE and Standard English in English language teaching in tertiary education. While Standard English is preferred in most academic contexts, HKE is sometimes acceptable or even rhetorically effective in other informal settings. The dominant voices, which often despise HKE, are not necessarily the "reality". Rather than prescriptively rejecting the existence of HKE across all contexts, it appears more practical and realistic to raise students' awareness about when and where it is tolerated or not tolerated. One way to achieve this is to create a learning setting where the non-standard norms are acknowledged to some extent^[67]. College teachers may share with students how linguists or ELF proponents perceive the role HKE in the globalized society, so as to build their competence in evaluating use of English in context. This should be the ultimate goal of teaching English as a second language if college teachers are really concerned about the interests of the next generation and the symbolic power they will possess after graduation.

The above propositions and suggestions are based on analyses and projections of self-reports from the qualitative experiment, rather than a quantitative assessment of students' learning experience or performance. There were two weeks between the HKE tutorial and the focus group sessions; rather than the tutorial alone, there might be external variables (e.g., self-reading) beyond the classroom setting that had impacted on Group B representatives' perceptions of HKE and academic writing as reported in the focus group. Additionally, due to the administrative constraint, only eight representatives (out of 100 participants) from the dataset were invited to the

focus group. Further studies could determine the veracity and conditionality of the functional and/or pedagogical roles of HKE in teaching academic writing and speaking in university. A longitudinal text analysis of students' essays before and after a discussion about HKE would be particularly helpful in justifying the formal causal link, if any, between learning HKE and learning English academic writing. Researchers could also conduct similar research on the role of another aspect of HKE, namely the Hong Kong accented pronunciation, in academic speaking and presentation courses.

To summarize, this paper urges that an English academic writing course, where Standard English for academic purposes is taught, could reserve a space in which non-standard English plays an educational role. In the Digital Age, English has more or less become a *lingua franca* across the globe. People not only speak different accented Englishes face to face, but also write different Englishes on the Internet, where new words and new usage emerge easily. When negative transfer becomes so common, its label in folk theories may also become less negative than it used to be. Simultaneously, when there is more variation in language use because of the increasing diversity of speakers, students may find a gap between the English required in the classroom and the Englishes used in social interaction^[68]. The dichotomy between correct use and incorrect use blurs. In such a situation, it may be no longer persuasive to simply emphasize the standard and decline the non-standard as teachers did half a century ago.

But still, normative evaluations of good and bad English remain in place among non-linguists and in the academic world. Learning English as a second language for academic purposes is not only about grammar or pronunciation, but also background of the L2 learners, especially the features of their shared L1. If language teaching also aims at helping students become global citizens who acknowledge diversities of language^[69], the variety of the locals should not be totally excluded from the syllabus^[70]. It is unhelpful to "keep imposing a single restricted pedagogical model to the students while they actually have options to choose from"^[71]. There should be "a pedagogical value in incorporating the 'non-standard' into the curriculum as a variety to be discussed and contrasted"^[72]. To encourage students to learn the standard and simultaneously appreciate the non-standard, once more, English teachers should create space for discussing the students' variety (or varieties) in the English classroom, to promote a positive, global view of English and help them take a healthy, open attitude to the varieties – including the standard ones.

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