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HOW TO STUDY

A 7-minute read to help you understand the why and how of my methodology

The Experience of Learning Cantonese in Hong Kong

Before I share my methodology, I'd like to provide some insight on how I got to the point where I wrote and developed the lessons on this website.

In my 27 years in Hong Kong, I often heard it said that “Cantonese is too difficult (for you) to learn.”¹ I can tell you now that is utter nonsense!² If I can learn to sing, to the point where those around me do not jam their fingers in their ears and my pets no longer run for the door, I am pretty much convinced that *anyone* can learn *anything* given the right approach and practice.

The experience of learning Cantonese, in Hong Kong at least, is a challenge.³ It is not taught in the school system. Local schools teach “Chinese” - the written form of the language - using Cantonese - the spoken form of the language. Students, however, will not be given lessons in how to write the spoken form using traditional characters. Though it is entirely possible to write it down, there are no exams in writing in the vernacular and it is not considered proper to do so. Students are also not taught how to use the jyutping system, the way of romanising the script so that it can be pronounced accurately. Often students are presented only with the characters, but without the jyutping, which gives them the means to pronounce it, and without the English, which gives them the meaning.

For the non-native student this presents a huge challenge. Without the support of Cantonese in the home environment, learning Chinese becomes an academic endeavour from the early learning years onwards, with little in the way of practical application. Gaining insight by way of class observation in a local primary school, I witnessed that kids rarely had the chance to speak or interact in the language. The main instruction from the teachers was “Look at me, don't speak.”⁴ Teachers were not trained to teach Cantonese as an additional language, but simply to go through the book and set homework according to the curriculum.⁵

From primary one, kids are still given long lists of seemingly unrelated vocabulary and odd sentences, which they had to memorise and regurgitate. Hour upon hour of rote learning turns the acquisition of Chinese - a language of beautiful pictograms and infinite stories - into a chore. Sadly, many kids, my own included, end up hating it and families that can afford to give up on the local system.

Moving into the international system, Hong Kong has an abundance of schools catering to a variety of nationalities, learning philosophies and budgets. Parents pay a small fortune,⁶ yet oddly, these schools do not teach their students basic communication in the language of the city where they live and where some of them were born. In my mind, learning to be polite in the language spoken by people around you is a basic courtesy and it boggles my mind that Hong Kong's international schools do not share this view or care enough to set aside some time in their day to teach Cantonese.

You might be told that Cantonese is not a language, that Mandarin is the only Chinese language worth learning. Don't believe the hype! In fact, there are around 300 Chinese languages and Cantonese has around 80 million speakers, most of them living in Hong Kong and the neighbouring province of Guangdong. That's more than the population of many countries, including the United Kingdom.

Thanks to Hong Kong's international diaspora, you will always find the opportunity to speak Cantonese in pretty much every commercial centre worldwide and when you do so, you will always make a friend. I once surprised a pharmacist in a supermarket outside of Winchester by asking him if he was a Hong Konger in Cantonese.⁷ His hoot of pure joy still rings in my ears and we had a lovely chat in his mother tongue about all things Hong Kong, much to the bemusement of his non-Cantonese speaking British colleagues.

In the same way that Welsh, Cornish and Gaelic were pushed out of use by English speakers, Cantonese is undoubtedly under threat from policy that makes Mandarin the dominant Chinese language and does not allow Cantonese speakers to write language down in their own way. Though there are practical benefits to having all peoples of one nation read, write and speak in the same way, this is not how the world works. Imagine the whole of Europe only speaking Spanish! How much more do we lose when languages are allowed to die?

So how do you learn Cantonese?

Do you remember learning your own language? Of course not. Once we learn something at a young age, the struggle of learning is at once forgotten. You may only remember if reminded by your parents that you stuttered your words, or were unable to pronounce "truck." As a toddler, my son was enthusiastic in pointing out every truck he saw, but for a while his "tr" came out as a "f" - embarrassing at the time, but he got over it. I like to remind myself of that whenever I'm murdering the pronunciation of a foreign tongue.

We should keep in mind, therefore, that our early learning years hold the key to language acquisition and try to duplicate the experience when we approach a new language. Mimicry and tenacity are two skills that are not taught in schools, but they are essential for learning any language, including Cantonese.

Then we use stories, songs and rhymes. You often hear kids say, "Again!" at the end, as repetition helps us to embed our learning. It also helps if the contexts are meaningful to us, as we can then use our intuition to guess meaning. Hanging new learning on words we already know helps us to remember, which is why I teach the tones of Cantonese with food words that are all borrowed from English (and you immediately have a list of words that will ensure that you won't go hungry).

Humour most definitely makes learning fun and memorable, so each of my stories, rhymes and songs is designed to put a smile on the face of the learner and on the faces of anyone he/she meets to practice Cantonese with.

While some may argue that I have not used the "proper way" to write Chinese, I will argue back (from bitter experience) that it is super hard to learn a language when the written script and the spoken word do not match. It's a bit like starting an English learner off with Shakespeare without giving them the ABCs. Once the learner is confident enough to communicate with confidence, then they can progress to a more academic course of study if they wish.

For this reason it is very important that teachers of Cantonese provide their learners with the characters and that the jyutping is written directly underneath. As the learner gets more proficient, they can start to cover up the jyutping. Jyutping serves the same function as stabilisers on a bike. Remove them too early and your learner will fail. Presenting the characters in a light shade of grey means that the learner can trace over the top, which is a super useful way to learn, especially when they can read along at the same time and see the words in practical and useful contexts.

I watched how my own kids picked up their native language through stories, songs and rhymes and realised that is, in fact, how we all learn naturally. We start by hearing the spoken word and try to copy that, but it is not long before we want to follow along with stories. And there is a thrill

to being able to finish a sentence or grasp the meaning through context. It makes us feel smart and sparks interest. If something is ridiculous or funny, then it seems easier to remember. In my mind, this is much more effective than the methodology employed in many traditional classrooms.

So, after struggling for many years to learn Cantonese and drawing on the experiences of many other frustrated learners, I developed this course. I have been lucky enough to test it at the Hans Andersen Club on Lamma with the kind assistance of my co-teacher Fannie Ha. Our classes had adults from a wide variety of backgrounds: English, French, Spanish and Japanese, some of whom had tried to learn Cantonese before and others who were complete beginners. We ran three separate courses, each focusing on one of the three stories and at the end of the course, the students tested their skills by performing the stories to a group of local junior school kids.

The result was fantastic: students who felt at ease learning Cantonese and wanted to learn more and kids who loved the stories and, importantly, could understand what the 'gweilo' and 'gweipo'⁸ grown-ups were saying to them. Once you have enough language to speak to any 5 year old, *in any language*, you are well on your way to success in being able to communicate in that language.

Now, I am so happy to share my work as a *free resource*⁹ for learners of any age and I hope you enjoy it. In return, when you are ready, do make a little video of yourself reading the stories on Youtube. It's a great way to get feedback and support on your Cantonese learning journey (unless, like me, you're shy and feel you only have a face for radio!) No pressure, just enjoy it!

加油! gaa1 jau4¹⁰

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¹ 廣東話太難學 gwong2 dung1 waa2 taai3 naan4 hok6

² 屁話 pei3 waa6 (a lovely term literally meaning 'fart or buttocks speak')

³ 好麻煩 hou2 maa4 faan4 (literally 'a lot of trouble')

⁴ 望住我，唔講嘢 mong6 zyu6 ngo5, m4 gong2 je5

⁵ In Hong Kong, you can often overhear mothers asking their kids 做功課未呀？zou6 gung1 fo3 mei6 aa1 (have you done your homework or not?) It's a standard conversation opener in Hong Kong if you are talking to a child.

⁶ 好多錢 hou2 do1 cin4 (literally 'very much money')

⁷ 你係唔係香港人呀？nei5 hai6 m4 hai6 hoeng1 gong2 jan4 aa1

⁸ 鬼佬 gwai2 lou2 (literally 'ghost bloke') and 鬼婆 gwai2 po4 ('ghost woman')

⁹ Obviously, free for you to use. But please don't steal it, publish it, or make money from it without first seeking permission from me. It's my work and the copyright is with me.

¹⁰ Literally 'add oil' - the way to shout encouragement in Cantonese.