THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL:
LEARNING CANTONESE AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
IN HONG KONG

John Whelpton

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements of the
degree of M A in Applied Linguistics, the University of Hong Kong
Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation represents my own work and that it has not been previously submitted to this University or any other institution in application for admission to a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

J. E. Whelpton
August 1998

Acknowledgements

I wish first to thank my long-suffering wife, Rita, and also the supervisors of this dissertation, Agnes Lam and Geoff Smith, for patient assistance. I am also grateful for help from many friends and colleagues in the University of Hong Kong and elsewhere, in particular Robert Bauer, Vivien Berry, Hoi and Kit Ho, Margaret Cheung, Professor Ruth Hayhoe, Eva Law, Steve Matthews, Dr. D.B. McPherson, Professor David Nunan, Lydia So, Carol Sze, Liz Walker and Virginia Yip.
This dissertation is a study of the author’s own experiences learning Cantonese in 1996/7 as a student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and in informal interaction with native speakers. Data was provided principally by a language-learning diary, by analysis of taped conversations with native speakers and by proficient speakers’ holistic assessments of performance. Analysis suggests that although there was some evidence for implicit learning of syntactic patterns, acquisition of vocabulary was normally the result of conscious noticing of new items. This noticing was generally brought about by formal study or at least by exposure to written material, though it was also possible when conversation outside the classroom took on lesson-like features such as explicit correction of errors. Problems of concentration in group classes and routine exercises also suggested that, even when a learner’s commitment to the general goal of increasing proficiency is high, securing the necessary attention to input probably requires intrinsically interesting subject-matter and clearly defined sub-goals. For a learner who is already at intermediate level, these are normally best provided by one-on-one conversation in which individual words or phrases are clearly perceived and matched with meaning, and/or by the detailed analysis of taped, authentic materials.
CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Language Acquisition - Some Reference Points 10
Objectives of the Study 15
Study Design 17
The Learning Environment 19
General Results 24
Aspects of the Learning Process 30
Social Factors 58
The Affective Dimension 64
Learning Cantonese in Hong Kong 71
Conclusion 74
Bibliography 77
The time will come when you can understand the natural conversations that surround you easily enough to make them the most useful means for further learning. Of course, you will often miss things, but you will reach the point where your misunderstandings are sufficiently infrequent to allow you to stop people and ask them to explain on the spot. This will be a point of great emancipation. (Burling 1984)

Our data must be drawn from the performance of students who have experienced considerable difficulty, as well as from the performance of learners who have attained a native-like command of their second-language. (Neufeld 1980: 297-8)

Introduction

This study is an analysis of my experiences learning Cantonese between September 1986 and December 1987 through classroom tuition at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)'s Chinese Language Centre and also through self-study and interaction with native speakers. The method of investigation was based on that of Schmidt and Frota (1985), viz. a combined analysis of the learner's own diary account and of taped samples of output. 'Auto-case-studies' using the researcher's own account of his or her learning experience have become an established research genre over the last twenty years and the most comprehensive survey is that by Bailey (1991), while general reviews are also provided by Bailey & Ochsner (1983), Matsumoto (1987) and Campbell (1996). The present project was unusual, however, in that I was not a complete or near-beginner in the language but had already been living and working in a Cantonese-speaking environment for nine years before enrolling at CUHK. During that time I had also attended various short Cantonese courses, receiving over 150 hours of classroom instruction and practice, and had spent additional time in self-study. I developed a very basic communicative competence but was normally expected to communicate in English and I never reached the goal of being able to communicate comfortably in Cantonese on a one-to-one basis or, most crucially, to get the gist
of conversations between colleagues, friends and family members going on around me. My intensified efforts in 1996-7 still did not quite bring me to the 'moment of great emancipation' which Robbins Burling refers to but they did help me to understand more fully the sources of difficulty and the ways in which continued progress would be possible.

Before attempting Cantonese, I had had considerable experience as a learner of other languages. As a secondary school student I studied French, Latin and Greek by the then-prevalent grammar-translation method, having already had some exposure to Latin (without actually understanding it) through its use in the Catholic liturgy. I was particularly fascinated by the classical languages and, from Form 2 onwards, was encouraged to work ahead on my own, meeting my teacher every ten days or so for a tutorial. I went on to specialize in Classics at 6th Form and university level. On graduating in 1972, I went as a VSO English teacher to Nepal, receiving an intensive introductory course in Nepali, an Indo-European language closely related to Hindi, and then making daily use of it for two years. From 1979 onwards, I continued to use Nepali in translation projects and research on history and politics, and also spent substantial periods living with a Nepalese family and communicating principally in Nepali. For most of the last twenty-five years I have kept my active command of the language on a 'care and maintenance' basis by writing a daily diary in it.

In addition to my four major languages, I had also dabbled in several others. I had a small number of German lessons as an extra-curricular option at school, and supplemented this with brief periods of self-study later on, particularly when my work with the U.K. Ministry of Defence in 1976 involved meetings with German counterparts. The same job also involved one or two
trips to Italy, which motivated me to learn Italian through self-study and attending a small number of evening classes. Whilst working in southern Nepal in 1972/3 I was often in a Hindi-speaking environment and so had begun self-study of that language, too, later making limited use of it on trips into India and in correspondence with Indian friends. Also in Nepal, I had begun self-study of Sanskrit, the classical language of Hindu civilization, and continued this on return to the UK, culminating by taking the first-year Sanskrit course at London University when beginning postgraduate work on Nepali history in 1981/2. In 1988, as part of a diploma course in TEFL/TESL, I spent six weeks teaching in Lisbon and prepared for this by self-study of Portuguese, making limited, largely instrumental use of the spoken language during my stay but also reading Portuguese materials to prepare some of my assignments. Finally, immediately before arrival in Hong Kong in 1987, I had read through some of the early chapters of a Putonghua textbook and listened to the accompanying tapes. Once in Hong Kong, I switched focus immediately to Cantonese because it was used so much more widely in the community, but I received some incidental exposure to Pinyin spellings whilst studying Chinese characters and also attended a brief Putonghua course, intended for speakers of other Chinese dialects.

Whilst this overall record looks quite respectable on paper, success in some aspects was balanced by failure in crucial areas. Except with Nepali, which I have had to use for daily communication over extended periods, reading is the only one of the four skills which is at all well developed. As will be emphasized in the body of this study, reading has the advantage that the learner can control the speed of input and is also free of the anxiety often accompanying interaction with native speakers. It is also in the written form that the learner can normally make full use of the similarities between
related languages which tend to be obscured in speech. A native speaker of English beginning to read French and Latin is helped enormously by the large proportion of cognate vocabulary and going on to tackle other Romance languages is then even easier. Since the relationship between Sanskrit, Nepali and Hindi is roughly the same as that between Latin, Italian and Spanish, I benefitted from the same kind of transfer effect in my study of South Asian languages. Where the relationship is a more distant one, as is the case with Romance languages vis-a-vis Indo-Aryan ones, there are fewer ‘free rides’ with vocabulary but structural resemblances, such as the system of tenses, are still a considerable help.

Despite all this, I still found that only with French did my reading begin to approach my fluency in English and that with more distantly related languages the process retained a large element of laborious decoding. Furthermore, extensive reading did not seem to guarantee a real ‘feel’ for a language when I had to write it: I had read as much or more Classical literature as any of the fellow students in my college but my tutor, worried by my lack of a sense of idiom or of a stock of ready-made phrases from standard authors, still had to urge me to give up translation from English into Latin and Greek.¹

With listening and speaking, the situation was worse. Even in Nepali, where I received by far the largest amount of aural input, my pronunciation was very poor: I basically seemed to employ English phonology, and could only modify this by consciously placing my vocal organs in a prescribed position,

¹. The notion of a ‘feel’ for a language with no remaining native speakers is of course problematic and the validity of translation into the classical languages is rejected by some scholars (e.g Thomson 1960:xi-xii), but the activity was still prevalent enough in universities at this time for some consensus to exist on the relative value of the translations offered.
not by relying on my ear. My problem was not just a matter of inability to perceive or reproduce unfamiliar sounds, since, even with Latin and Greek, conventionally read aloud by English-speaking students using only English sounds, I failed to acquire the correct stress pattern or to distinguish systematically between different vowels represented by the same letter of the alphabet. In addition, with modern languages my listening comprehension was in all cases woefully inadequate for following ordinary conversation between native speakers, though I could do better when listening to formal presentations (such as news bulletins) and, in Nepali, I could cope quite well listening to a single individual who was prepared to adjust his normal speech slightly for my benefit. However, as with most learners who have relied principally on visual input, I found speaking myself (however painful for the listeners!) was much less stressful and, again in Nepali, practice let me build up a fair degree of fluency.¹

All these experiences left me still immensely interested in language learning but dissatisfied with my performance. In Hong Kong I naturally started to study Cantonese and, particularly after deciding to renew the contract with my school in 1989, hoped that I would eventually achieve the high degree of listening comprehension and ‘colloquial ease’ (Burling’s felicitous term) which had always eluded me before. By 1988 I was aware that, unless I managed to make drastic changes to my methods, this objective was unlikely to be realised. There seemed to me then to be a number of factors

¹ F.R. Jones (1994) reports a similar problem when using the Hungarian acquired through self-study. The mismatch in my own skills was very evident when I acted in 1997 as bestman at the wedding of a VSO contemporary to a Nepali. I noticed that the ex-volunteer understood his bride’s rapid Nepali much better than I but that, when we both had to use some Nepali for sections of our speeches at the reception, I spoke much more rapidly. The groom’s agricultural extension work in the hills in work in 1972-4 had involved constant use of Nepali and he had clearly retained a very good receptive knowledge whilst his active command of the language had deteriorated. In contrast, my reading and writing and more frequent return visits to Nepal allowed me to marshal words and phrases more easily, even if the pronunciation may have been less accurate.
preventing success.

First, Cantonese is generally regarded as a 'difficult' language both for adult European learners and also even for speakers of other Chinese dialects.¹ This conception is well illustrated in the title of one recent survey: 'Learning Cantonese; how to succeed where thousands have failed' (G.P. Smith 1995). In particular, learners have problems distinguishing between the middle and lower tones and between the short and long (or 'lax' and 'tense') vowels. Since I had had so much trouble with languages phonologically much closer to English, I naturally had increased difficulty both in listening comprehension and in producing comprehensible speech myself.

Matters were made worse by the lack of visual support on which I had been so reliant before: the non-phonetic nature of the Chinese writing system (and the fact that most writing in Hong Kong is in standard Chinese rather than Cantonese) meant that written Chinese, which I was studying at the same time, was initially of little help. With hindsight, I should probably have spent more time reading as much Romanized Cantonese as possible, since here there would be more reinforcement for my deficient audio-oral skills (Bell, 1995); however, this would have gone directly against what is for me the most natural way of tackling a new language, viz. moving as quickly as possible to receptive mastery of the writing system which the speakers of that language themselves use.

¹ A former colleague, Fukien mother-tongue but now English-dominant, once told me how she had thought another teacher was asking everyone to bring chopsticks (fai jí) to school when the request was actually for waste paper (faai ji). The two vowels are different in both quality and length, but unfortunately the starting point for the similar diphthong in English and Putonghua lies in between those for the Cantonese sounds and the English is similarly intermediate in length between the two Cantonese diphthongs (R. Huang 1983; 62; Bauer & Benedict 1997; 61).
A second factor, and I think really the most important, was the simple fact that foreigners in my situation were not expected to learn Cantonese. I was working as an Expatriate English Teacher in the secondary school system, and the rationale behind the EET scheme was precisely that we should communicate with teachers and students in English outside as well as inside the classroom. ¹ Outside the school, standards of English in the community varied but amongst middle class Hong Kongers were generally much higher than my fledgling Cantonese and so English was normally the natural choice if I wanted to say anything at all elaborate. I did, of course, sometimes have to use Cantonese with less educated or older local people, particularly with the elderly amah responsible for cleaning my flat in the government quarters where I lived for my first four years in Hong Kong. However, in contrast to the Nepalese cooks who had helped my acquisition of Nepali fifteen years earlier, the amah's duties were laid down by the management of the building and I did not need to give detailed instructions, discuss pay or go over household expenses with her.

Reinforcing the simple lack of need to communicate in Cantonese were the prestige factors implicit in a diglossic situation with a colonial background (Pennington 1994, Gibbons 1987). As with Hindi in New Delhi, Farsi in Teheran (F. Schumann 1980: 54-5) or Amharic in Ethiopia (Krashen 1988: 124), foreign learners of Cantonese in Hong Kong are up against the fact that English remains a status symbol distinguishing the educated from the rest. In addition to wishing to assert their own status as competent users of English, many educated Hong Kongers also seem to find it difficult to understand why foreigners would want to learn to speak Cantonese other than

¹. For an account of the scheme and its results see Tang and Johnson (1993) or Johnson & Tang (1994).
for strictly transactional purposes (e.g. shopping in street markets); a small-scale survey (limited to tertiary institutions and a few businessmen) conducted by David Li and Jack Richards did indeed suggest that most expatriates (other than special categories such as missionaries and the police) reporting a wish to learn Cantonese gave transactional rather than interactional reasons (Li & Richards 1995: 4), whilst the motivation of Cantonese learning English is itself primarily economic. Of course, these factors do not prevent many highly educated Cantonese speaking in Cantonese to a foreigner who is already fluent in the language, but they make them less likely to provide the simplified input that the beginner needs.

A third difficulty which bedevils many well-intentioned learners is the simple lack of 'time on task'. Most people in Hong Kong, whether locals or foreigners, have heavy workloads and, during term-time, I was no exception to this. I did have the advantage of school holidays but much of these had to be devoted to Nepal-related research work; whereas 15 years earlier I had arrived in Kathmandu with my slate wiped clean of other commitments, my involvement with Nepalese studies had not ended in 1987, and, although things were not to work out that way, one reason for coming to Hong Kong was the possibility of transferring to work with the Nepali-speaking Gurkha soldiers then serving with the British army garrison.

There were, finally, features of my own personality which made it more difficult to acquire a language that, in purely transactional terms, I did not actually need. I have always been used to 'silently talking' to myself in English for long stretches of time, which reduced my motivation to overcome the hurdle of initiating and maintaining a non-essential conversation. Whenever I have, through accident or design, been cut off from aural English input, I am not really immersed in the L2 environment since a much greater
amount of time is spent heeding my own English thoughts rather than listening to messages from the outside. My hesitancy in initiating or sustaining communication was, of course, increased by the tendency of some Hong Kong people to react with ridicule or even anger when addressed in poor Cantonese. In Nepal, I benefitted from people around me taking the initiative in communication, but in Hong Kong it was usually the English-speakers who would do this.

The upshot of it all was that my Cantonese remained very limited even though, as the years went by, I was spending more and more time with Chinese people rather than with other westerners. For six out of the nine years from 1987 to 1996 I was the only non-Chinese at my workplace and, after marriage in 1992, I spent a lot of time attending family dinners where the conversation would normally be in Cantonese. My monolingual parents-in-law were not particularly good at adjusting their speech to my level, though my mother-in-law could do so to some extent when I was the only person available for her to talk to. With my wife I did practise Cantonese quite frequently but the temptation to revert to English for anything at all complex was always too strong.

By 1996, dissatisfaction with this situation, and also increasing discomfort in my teaching position, led me to resign from full-time employment and to spend most of my time in the 1996/7 academic year on the study of Cantonese and on beginning an M.A. in Applied Linguistics. In November 1997, two months after my course at Chinese University had started, the two strands came together when, at the suggestion of my M.A. course director,

1. Continuing to think in L1 may not, however, be as idiosyncratic as I once believed, since there is evidence that students in immersion programmes continue to do much of their thinking this way, even when hearing and speaking only the target language (Cohen 1998: 206-8).
David Nunan, I decided to undertake this acquisition case-study.

**Language Acquisition - Some Reference Points**

For a theoretical framework in which to place such research, the natural starting point is Krashen’s Monitor theory, with its rigid distinction between ‘learning’, the conscious study of rules and facts about language and ‘acquisition’, a natural growth of linguistic capacity as a by-product of understanding incoming messages (Krashen 1980, 1988). ‘Acquisition’ alone provides real command of a language and the results of ‘learning’ are available only as a ‘Monitor’, which, when time and inclination permit, allows the language user to edit an utterance already generated by his ‘acquired’ capacity. This theory must be taken into account not because it is necessarily correct but rather because Krashen’s ideas have become so well-known amongst language teachers, he himself being ‘viewed by some classroom practitioners as the high priest’ of applied linguistics (Nunan 1988: 81). I was myself originally among the devotees since when I first became aware of his work in the early 1980s it seemed to make sense of my own paradoxical experience with languages. I made rapid, gratifying progress as I studied the grammar and basic vocabulary of each new one that I tackled but fossilization then set in long before I reached the goals of near-native fluency and near-native listening ability.¹

Attractive as it is in some ways, Krashen’s formulation is open to serious criticism. There is first the imprecision of the terms used. Does ‘unconscious’ acquisition mean that one is unaware of the novelty of what one

---

¹. Near-native accuracy was never an objective. There are of course cases of adult learners who have achieved this (see, for example, Cross (1984), Birdsong (1992), Ioup et al. (1994)), but most are content to aim at effective communication whilst still remaining ‘the foreigner’.
hears or reads, that one acquires without meaning to do so or merely that
the subsequent integration of new features into one’s interlanguage is
automatic? Does ‘comprehensible input’ imply ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’
understanding: is it enough just to ‘get the message’ or must each individu-
al word be attended to? (cf. White 1987). And does a student not gain
comprehensible input when heeding his or her own utterances, in which case
the distinction between practising a structure learned from a textbook and
encountering it naturalistically breaks down (Gregg 1984: 67-68)?

Most crucially, the caveats added to the theory seem to render it unfalsifi-
able (McLaughlin 1987). Whilst insisting that true competence in a language
can only be gained by ‘acquisition’, Krashen readily admits that communi-
cation is also possible by using one’s L1 as an utterance initiator and then
operating on this with ‘learned’ vocabulary and grammar - the procedure
which he reports using himself with Amharic (Krashen 1988: 124). Now, then,
is one to determine in practice whether a performance results from ‘natural’
acquisition or ‘artificial’ learning, especially when Krashen allows that
particular individuals (‘super Monitor users’) ‘may be able to control
complex syntax and semantics, and may be able to apply such rules quickly
and accurately’ (Krashen 1980: 191-2)? It is thus hard to see what possible
evidence could either prove or disprove Krashen’s theory and most research-
ers would probably now agree that ‘a learning acquisition continuum is more
accurate than a dichotomy in describing how language abilities are devel-

Although Krashen’s claims are over-ambitious, his work nevertheless helps
draw our attention to two distinctions which are more solidly grounded:
implicit versus explicit learning and aural versus visual input.
The first of these has been the subject of extensive investigation in the cognitive sciences, and there is no doubt that explicit or declarative memory, which can be accessed by deliberate choice and stores information in propositional form, is 'neurofunctionally and anatomically different' from 'implicit memory', which involves only the modification of an organism's behaviour as a result of previous experiences (Faradis 1994: 383). The classic demonstration of their disassociation comes from the study of anterograde amnesia: sufferers typically lose the ability to form new explicit memories after the onset of the illness, but are still capable of learning implicitly. In a famous (if ethically dubious) experiment early this century, Claparède concealed a pin in his hand and then shook hands with a patient, who afterwards always refused the psychiatrist's preferred hand but was completely unable to give a reason for the refusal. In the acquisition of a first language, and to some extent in learning a second to a high level of competence, grammatical rules must, as Krashen argues, normally be learned implicitly, since speakers without formal education are normally unable to formulate the principles their output conforms to, whilst even the most subtle of grammarians have never succeeded in producing a complete, explicit grammatical description of a natural language. With the acquisition of lexis, however, things are more complex and N.Ellis (1994: 212) argues that 'the recognition and production aspects of vocabulary learning rely on implicit learning, but meaning and mediational aspects ... heavily involve explicit, conscious learning processes.' The importance of implicit processes must be greatest in the earliest stages of L1 acquisition, since

1. A second language acquired at school and not used extensively may, of course, be heavily dependent on explicit memory for all aspects. Paradis (1994: 400) suggests that this may explain cases of bilingual aphasics sometimes recovering a 'classroom language' better than their mother tongue. Aphasia is caused by dysfunction of the implicit memory structures underlying speech production and explicit memories of formal language learning may be left unimpaired.
with basic vocabulary there are direct links to concrete referents, whilst, in any case, explicit memory capabilities do not develop in the child until around age 1 and remain markedly inferior to implicit ones until age 3 (Paradis 1994). However, with the expansion of LI vocabulary, and with second language acquisition, words are understood in terms of other words and the role of explicit learning becomes crucial.

The second fundamental contrast is that between visual and aural input and associated memories, which are clearly distinct modalities even though learning is often most effective when the two are operating in tandem. Whilst for human beings generally the transfer of information to long-term memory and its retention may be more efficient with visual rather than purely verbal information, there are also important differences between individual learners in their preference for a visual and aural style and this is one of the key variables chosen for investigation in Naiman and his colleagues' classic investigation of Canadian schoolchildren studying French (Naiman et al. 1975). The visual/aural distinction may sometimes correlate with the explicit/implicit one, since, as already seen, the reader generally has more time for analysis: reading is an important source for vocabulary acquisition and, contrary to Krashen's belief that this is evidence for 'unconscious acquisition', such acquisition must often be due to the reader's deliberate 'search for meaning' even though there is no actual recourse to the dictionary (N.Ellis 1994: 219). However, we do also analyze what we hear, a fact underlined by the stress in recent years on encouraging listeners to employ 'top-down' processing in listening tasks.

Discussion of the whole issue of 'consciousness' in language learning has been bedevilled by a lack of clarity in the use of the term both by Krashen and some of his opponents. Here, the work of Richard Schmidt (e.g. Schmidt
1990, 1993) has been particularly valuable in clearing away some of the confusion. Drawing both on his own experiences with Portuguese (Schmidt & Frota 1985) and on the work of cognitive scientists as well as linguists, he suggests that the use of the term may refer to any one of three separate distinctions: noticing as opposed to subliminal learning, paying deliberate attention as against incidental learning and explicit as opposed to implicit learning. There is no hard evidence for subliminal learning and thus all language learning/acquisition is 'conscious' in that the learner must notice the relevant features of input (whether particular sounds, particular words, or particular grammatical features). Learning may or may not involve 'consciousness' in the sense of deliberately paying attention. Possibly incidental learning is more typical of small children because they have not yet learnt to direct attention selectively and are thus more open to the whole of the linguistic environment. Finally, as already discussed above, learning/acquisition may be either 'conscious' in the sense of 'explicit' or 'unconscious' in the sense of 'implicit'. Implicit learning entails awareness of individual items but not of the relationship between them: the language user eventually speaks or writes as if he was aware of that relationship but has in fact relied either on a distinct faculty such as Chomsky's 'Language Acquisition Device' or on the kind of automatic logging of associations postulated by connectionists and favoured by Schmidt himself. In either case, the deliberate search for a 'rule' impedes the operation of the implicit process, as is demonstrated by Reber's work on the learning of artificial grammars. However, as Reber himself has admitted, the analytical

---

1. The one exception to this general rule seems to be that unheeded information may have a slight effect on the interpretation of input to which someone is actually attending. Thus someone instructed to attend to sound played into one ear is more likely to interpret the same spoken input as 'fare' rather than 'fair' if 'taxi' is simultaneously played into the other ear.
approach may still be cost-effective for the learner if he actually finds (or is supplied with) the relevant rule (Schmidt 1983: 35).

Objectives of the Study

Since diary studies belong to the exploratory rather than experimental research paradigm, both some of their supporters (e.g. F.R. Jones 1994) and those who are more sceptical (e.g. Fry 1988) would see them as hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-testing instruments. Much of their value therefore lies in revealing unanticipated factors, for which the researcher needs to keep as open a mind as possible. Nevertheless, the combination of a diary study with analysis of the diarist's L2 output, reduces this difficulty and one objective of the study was to test two specific hypotheses.

The first, arising from Schmidt's analysis, was that learning results when the learner attends to something in input additional to or different from what he already knows and not from any subliminal process (Schmidt 1990:149). This is in fact a very modest claim. Logically speaking, it requires only that the learner notice new sounds, new words or words in new patterns, without necessarily registering the fact that they are new, though one might expect a linguistically aware learner to be aware of that novelty more often than not. In addition, those items actually recorded in a language learning diary, included in a textbook chapter studied for an examination or written out in a vocabulary notebook will in turn be a subset of what was at the time noticed as new. The hypothesis is therefore not necessarily discredited if, as perhaps in Altman's investigation of her own acquisition of Hebrew, it turns out that some items in the learner's output
items were not recorded as noticed. If, however, most of the output could be accounted for in this way, the hypothesis would be confirmed.

It is unclear if such confirmation would count as evidence against Krashen's 'unconscious acquisition', since an early formulation of the theory does use the phrase 'notice the gap' (Krashen 1979:7, quoted in Larsen-Freeman 1983:12) but it is unclear whether he is referring to 'noticing' in the literal sense or to a supposedly subliminal process. As Schmidt points out, however, the hypothesis is compatible with a number of other theories. For example, even though McLaughlin's approach (McLaughlin 1978, 1987; McLaughlin et al. 1983,) rests on a 'controlled/automatic' rather than a 'conscious/unconscious' distinction, McLaughlin himself allows that initial practice of a new skill normally involves noticing, or, in his own terminology, 'focal attention'.

A second hypothesis was that for the subject of this study and probably also for others used to learning languages formally, the learning of new lexical items or structures or improvement in pronunciation is normally the result of formal classroom study, of reading or of analysis of taped materials, rather than of conversational interaction with native speakers. This was suggested in the first place by my own previous language learning experience but also reflected Schmidt's contention that deliberately paying

1. In a study of five years' instructed/naturalistic acquisition of the language, she found that half the new verbs in a taped sample of her oral output were not amongst those found in her diary entries, class notes, underlinings in newspapers or marked as looked up in her dictionary. While she eventually decided that the unrecorded items could be accounted for by her application of productive morpho-phonemic rules (Altman 1997), she had apparently earlier regarded them as evidence for acquisition without noticing (Altman (1990), cited in Schmidt (1994)).

2. Unlike Schmidt, Krashen, does not carefully distinguish between the various meanings of 'consciousness' so his views are a little difficult to interpret on this point. His discussion of the acquisition of (predominantly L1) vocabulary and spelling, does seems to imply that the reader must pay attention to the features to be acquired (Krashen 1989: 462).
attention to linguistic features may be essential for an adult learner to acquire communicatively redundant features of L2 and that explicit understanding of linguistic rules facilitates learning. The importance of deliberate attention to form as well as to content seems to be borne out by case studies of individuals who have acquired near-native competence and the grammatical difficulties of Schmidt's own "Wes" (Schmidt 1983) can probably be linked to his disinclination to pay such attention. A focus on form is not provided exclusively by formal study and by use of written text but it can more readily occur in that context.

Finally, for the purely exploratory aspects of the project the plan was to focus particularly on questions of cognitive style and of learning strategies, on social factors and affective issues and on pedagogical aspects of learning Cantonese as a second language.

Study Design

The study focussed on the period from September 1996 to December 1997. During the first five months I attended 11-12 hours of small-group instruction weekly at the Chinese University of Hong Kong over two terms (24 weeks). From April to July 1997, I did not have formal lessons but exchanged Cantonese and English conversation with two friends and also a total of around forty hours recording and transcribing conversation with other learners. From mid-July till late August I was out of a Cantonese-speaking environment but made limited use of the language with my wife whilst travelling in Britain and Nepal. From September to December I was working full-time as a secondary school teacher in a New Territories secondary school, where communication amongst students and staff (other than in formal lessons) was almost always in Cantonese but I myself used English and (rather less often) Cantonese in one-to-one exchanges outside of the classroom. During this last
term I was still attending Chinese University classes for two evening sections each week, totalling four hours. Throughout the whole sixteen months (barring five weeks out of Hong Kong) I was also normally eating in the evening with my wife's family, at which time I listened to the Cantonese conversation around me and, though I spoke much less than I would have done in a similar, English-language setting, I tried to use Cantonese for my own contributions. A second source of input throughout the study period was TV and radio, which I listened to on average around one-and-a-half hours daily, though often while also engaged in another activity.

Data for analysis was provided mainly by the language-learning diary itself, which I wrote up daily in English and which amounted to about 50,000 words, and by about 15 hours of taped material, including lessons in progress, conversations outside class and reading from Romanized text. Some of the tapes were shared with one of the lecturers at the Chinese Language Centre who was herself doing a Master's degree in Chinese Linguistics and some transcribed extracts included in an unpublished term paper (Chan 1997). I myself found transcription extremely time-consuming, principally because of difficulties understanding other speakers on the tape. This reflected my own still inadequate comprehension of the language but also sometimes poor acoustic conditions during recording. I ended with around one and a half hours of fully transcribed material, mostly of conversations outside formal lessons and this was used to produce a list of words and idioms in my active vocabulary. In producing the list I excluded recordings of material which I had written out before delivering because I wanted to focus on spontaneous spoken performance. Because I only decided to conduct the acquisition study after the Chinese University course had begun I did not have examples of my pre-course standard to serve as benchmarks but I selected short extracts

18
(2-3 minutes) from ten recordings made between December 1996 and April 1998. I then paired these to contrast performance at different points during this period.

To supplement and provide a check on my own reflections in the diary, I also interviewed and/or received written input from native-English-speaking learners of Cantonese. These included a tertiary institution director who had been using the language for thirty years and had near-native competence, two linguists who had published extensively on Cantonese grammar and phonology, and two TEFL lecturers, one of whom had been in Hong Kong for ten years and used the language extensively with her Cantonese in-laws whilst the other was at a more elementary level.

The procedure adopted is open to a number of objections. The most fundamental is that, like all case studies, it poses problems of external validity (Nunan 1996: 356). There are also a number of well-known problems connected with the use of introspective data of any kind. These general issues are discussed by the contributors to Faerch & Kasper (1987) and the sceptic's view is well represented by Seliger (1983). Problems are, of course, compounded where the researcher uses his own diary account so that the boundary between observer and observed totally disappears (Fry 1988). However, as Fry and other critics allow, the element of triangulation provided by combining diary study with analysis of output offsets these difficulties and, if the exercise is seen basically as an exploratory one and as contributing to a bank of data including other case studies, I believe the effort may nevertheless have been a worthwhile one.

The Learning Environment

The New Asia-Yale-in-China Chinese Language Centre at the Chinese University
of Hong Kong runs the SAR's oldest and largest programme for teaching Cantonese as a second language, with 170 enrolled students during the first of my two terms there. The regular course lasts for two years, with six twelve-week terms, but students are allowed to study for shorter periods, starting at whatever level they and the Centre decide is appropriate. I was advised to start at either Level 3 or 4 and opted for the latter, but, since I had not covered all the vocabulary introduced at easier levels, I worked through the core material for Level 3 on my own in parallel with Level 4 lessons in the first part of my first term at the university. As I was not taking classes in Chinese characters I normally had eleven or twelve hours instruction weekly instead of the standard fifteen.

Within the Centre, instruction was in classes of a maximum of eight. Each class was assigned one instructor as co-ordinator but most of the timetabled lessons were taken in rotation by a number of other instructors to ensure that all students were exposed to a variety of accents and teaching styles. The core text for Level 4 was the second half (Lessons 13-24) of Parker Huang's *Speak Cantonese Book Two* (Huang 1985), in a version slightly modified by the Centre itself from the one commercially available. For Level 5 we used Lessons 1-12 of an in-house compilation, *Cantonese Three* (Man & Mak 1994). In autumn term 1997, when I was attending evening sessions for four hours weekly, I also read the reading passages for 13 to 15 and went through Lessons 16 to 19 in class. For each unit in the textbook, instructors presented the new vocabulary items (normally sixty or seventy 'headwords' which might be accompanied by related words or phrases), doing this almost entirely in Cantonese, although English translations were printed beside each item. The class would then read the comprehension passage aloud and answer oral comprehension questions in Cantonese. This was followed by a session
answering questions exemplifying the new vocabulary and, at Level 4, the textbook also contained English sentences to be translated into Cantonese. There were also discussion and role-play tasks at the end of each unit and students were regularly required to prepare and present in class a short speech on the theme of a recent unit or a more general topic.

This core programme, very lock-step and (except for the use of translation exercises) resembling the procedure in 'General English' lessons in many Hong Kong secondary schools, was supplemented with the use of audio-tapes and videos, the latter often being authentic materials (e.g. clips from documentaries) with handouts providing vocabulary help and exercises. At Level 4 the syllabus also included study of the situational dialogues in *Daily Conversations in Romanized Cantonese* (Mak 1985).

Assessment of students' progress in tests and exams was primarily thorough written tests, including multiple-choice vocabulary questions and a short composition incorporating a given set of words. It was possible to secure high grades on these simply through efficient memorization of the Romanized Cantonese in the core texts. However, there were also listening and oral components in the exams, the latter including delivery of a prepared speech from memory (5 minutes at Level 4 and 10 at level 5) and answering the examiners' questions, which again tested the coursebook vocabulary.

In the light of more recent trends in language teaching, the Centre's choice of material is open to criticism. *Speak Cantonese*, although revised from time to time, still reflects in some ways the Hong Kong of the 1960s and, while *Cantonese Three* is topically more up to date, neither book fully represents the colloquial speech most students really need to master. However, some aspects of the course, in particular the use of video in my second
term, was much more 'state-of-the-art' and, as will be discussed in more detail later, some of the classroom activities did allow us to use Cantonese in a relaxed and natural fashion. Also, as far as I myself was concerned, the passages in Speak Cantonese, centred on the activities in Hong Kong of an American research student who also taught English, were interesting to read, presenting information on local life and Chinese tradition, enlivened with flashes of humour. I enjoyed the contextualization of the phrase fànn gwailòu ('foreign devil'): a Caucasian (but China-born) missionary comes upon the central character reading and asks him 'What do those foreign devil magazines have to say?' (Huang 1995: 184). Another amusing touch is provided when a sociologist, holding forth at a wedding reception on the continuation of male dominance in the Chinese family, stops to look round for a moment:

At once a journalist spoke. 'Mr. Poon, are you looking for your wife? She's sitting over there far away from you. You can keep on talking. As loud as you like...' (P. Huang 1995: 143)

My classmates were drawn from many nationalities, including Filipino, Brazilian, (Chinese-)American and (in the third-term, when I was only attending two evenings a week) British. In both the first term (Level 4) and second term (Level 5) classes, when I was following the intensive course, four of my fellow students were Japanese. When I applied to the Centre I had in fact specifically requested to be put in a class with Asian rather than European or American students, but the number may just have been coincidental because of the proportion of Japanese students in the whole Cantonese section: 70 out of 170. In tackling Cantonese, the Japanese had as much phonological difficulty as most Europeans except for one of them who had majored in Chinese (Putonghua) at university and adapted well to the sounds of a new dialect. However, all of them were already familiar with the Chinese characters used in writing Japanese and were also more likely than Europeans to be
spoken to in Cantonese rather than English in Hong Kong.

During the 1997 summer term I was not in formal classes but spent some time at the Centre recording interviews for a small research project on the interlanguage of English-native-speaking learners of Cantonese and considerably more time at home listening to and transcribing tapes of these conversations and of others between the same students and an instructor at the Centre. I also practised speaking Cantonese with Chinese friends, including an instructor in Cantonese at Hong Kong University and listened to the tapes for some of the units in a collection of radio playlets he and a colleague were preparing for publication as a textbook for intermediate learners (Chow & Chan 1997). Throughout this time, as also when studying formally, I got input from my wife’s family and also from radio and TV.

At the school where I was working during autumn 1997, I was one of only two persons not fluent in Cantonese, the other being an Australian exchange student.1 I normally used English to speak to students and for formal business with colleagues but used some Cantonese in informal situations, particularly when lunching with other staff members. As in previous teaching posts, I was, of course, constantly hearing Cantonese conversation around me and Cantonese was also the language of formal meetings, other than those of the English Panel. In the mornings, I normally had a lift to work from a colleague living in my state and we regularly listened together to a Cantonese radio news programme (Sammahn Tinleih) on the car radio.

1. There were three non-Chinese students in the school. However, they were the children of American missionaries and had had all of their education in the Hong Kong system, so that they were fluent both in Cantonese and written Chinese. I did not myself teach them, but, as far as I could observe, they normally communicated in Cantonese both with other students and with the teaching staff.
General Results

As measures of progress achieved, I had firstly the formal assessment system at Chinese University. This graded me as A- (80-80%) for the first term and, in the second, as B (72-75%) for work based on Cantonese Three and A- for the video-comprehension section of the course. These grades are absolute, not norm-referenced, but my impression from results of some of the regular tests was that the best students in my class were frequently in the A (90-100%) band.

The key question, however, was how far I was able to improve on my own earlier performance. As already been explained, I did not have samples of my pre-Chinese University performance to serve as benchmarks but comparisons were made between the earlier and later sample recordings in each of five selected pairs of recordings. In one case (pair A) the earlier and later recordings were readings of an identical text which had been corrected by an instructor after I wrote it. In the other cases, conversations on roughly similar topics were selected. This procedure involved comparison of my standard after one term at Chinese University and at or after the end of the study period (pairs A-C), between the end of the first term and the end of the second (pair D) and between the end of the second term and the end of the study period (pair E). Nine native-speakers and one foreigner fluent in Cantonese, all of them working in tertiary institutions, were asked to judge holistically which of each pair was better quality; the sequence of pairs and the order within each pair on the tape was reversed for four of the judges to eliminate any effect of order of presentation.

The results, set out in the table below, do not show the dramatic improvement I had hoped for, but, where the comparison is over a full twelve months or longer, they suggest that there was some progress. It should also be
noted, however, that special circumstances may explain the apparent deterioration in pairs D and E. In the first case, the earlier recording was of a 'self-introduction' in class with response from a native-speaking instructor, while the second was a rather faltering conversation with another non-native speaker. With pair E, the contrast is between May 1997, just after I had ceased intensive study, and the end of 1997. In the meantime although I had plenty of additional input, the amount of intake may actually have been reduced because less speech was tuned to my level. An alternative explanation, however, and one that accords with my own subjective impression, is that fluctuations in my performance on particular occasions probably masked any long-term trend.

TABLE: NATIVE-SPEAKER ASSESSMENTS OF RECORDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Definite Improvement</th>
<th>Slight Improvement</th>
<th>No Difference</th>
<th>Slight Deterioration</th>
<th>Definite Deterioration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (speech reading) April 93 v. Jan 97</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (conversation) Dec 97 v. Dec 96</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C (conversation) Dec 97 v. Dec 96</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D (conversation) May 97 v. Jan 97</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E (conversation) Dec 97 v. May 97</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The judges who listened to the recordings were asked to give a single, holistic rating, thus not separating out pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy and fluency. I was, however, told by two of the instructors at Chinese U that my pronunciation in class had improved by the second term and my discrimination between tones, for which I was given additional training as part of another instructor's research project, also showed an improvement.
as measured by both aural discrimination and pronunciation tests: at the end of her experiment I generally distinguished between tones with different contours but still (like Europeans generally) had great difficulty with the different level tones. The tests for the same project (conducted in February and April 1997) also showed improvement in control over segmental phonemes.

In April 1998, over three months after the end of the study period, I took the So/Varley Cantonese Lexical Comprehension Test, which is primarily a test of tone discrimination. My score on this was 74% in a situation where random guessing should have produced around 50% correct\(^1\) and I failed to discriminate in several cases where the contrast was between tones of differing contour. The discrepancy with the earlier results at Chinese University will have been partly the result of testing methods: there I had been required only to recognize the tones (or to read from a phonetic transcript) whereas with the So-Varley test I needed also to remember what the correct tone for a particular vocabulary item should be. Also, in taking the latter test I deliberately opted for one of the pictures after a single hearing in order to replicate the ordinary situation in conversation. My command of the tones as part of the general communicative system thus remained weak, while my ability to distinguish tones in laboratory conditions had improved somewhat.

The continuing problems with tones, and also with other aspects of pronunciation did not in general stop me understanding speech at an appropriate level, nor getting my meaning across: with Cantonese, as with other natural

\(^1\) This test (So & Varley 1991) involves the subject selecting one of four photographs in response to the lexical prompt. However, two of the four are readily distinguishable segmental and semantic ‘distractors’ so that the effective choice is only a two-way one between a tonally-contrasted minimal pair (e.g., ḥaaḥ (crab) v. ḥ̄aah (shoe), which I got wrong despite full declarative knowledge of the difference. With native speakers, young adults regularly score around 98% correct but this declines to 85% for the over-sixties (Varley & So 1998).
languages, communication can continue despite the masking of many distinctive features of the phonology, especially where there is extensive help from context. As will be discussed in more detail later, I did nevertheless get into trouble from time to time through misinterpreting crucial syllables. Details of my own speech could also be misinterpreted, even when the listener was used to my pronunciation. Thus when one of my instructors at Chinese University independently transcribed some of my conversation there were occasional misunderstandings, such as fèi h Paahng (‘Fat Pang’) being heard as běi yǎn (‘by people’, ‘by someone’) or gōng shuǐ (‘speak facetiously’) as gōng syù (‘speak [about] books’) (S.P. Chan 1997: 18, 27). More usually, my pronunciation simply resulted in a heavy, but interpretable foreign accent. As one of the native speaker judges commented after listening to the recordings: ‘Understanding [i.e. comprehensibility] is good enough, but the tones are always wrong, so it sounds funny.’

The one area where I myself noted a marked improvement was in my listening comprehension. In February, I noted in my diary that I seemed to be catching a bit more of what people were saying to each other on the bus. The main progress, however, was not so much with ordinary, rapid conversation but rather with more formal speech such as lectures or TV and radio news bulletins. My understanding was still very incomplete but I was more likely than

---

1. This has importance for electronic communication also. Because tone is not essential for the comprehension of messages (as opposed to word lists), it is perfectly possible, for example, to communicate in Pinyin (Romanised Putonghua) without diacritics or tone numbers. Robert Bauer (personal communication) reports regularly communicating with a Japanese Professor of Chinese in this fashion.

2. The nickname of former Hong Kong governor Chris Patten, officially known in Chinese as Paahng Dihng Hōn. I had wrongly made the tone on the name high falling and also shortened the vowel, rendering the word unrecognisable. běi yǎn then became a plausible reconstruction since the phrase is regularly placed in front of a verb to produce a passive with unidentified human agent (Matthews & Yip 1994: 149). With the second phrase, the problem was my reducing the first element of the diphthong iu to a palatal on-glide. The resulting vowel, sounding like English ‘you’, was one I regularly substituted for the rounded front vowel yu.
before to know roughly what the speaker was talking about, because I was recognizing more words and phrases in the general stream of noise.

My active vocabulary, as represented by words used in about one-and-a-half hours of taped conversation and listed in the glossary, consisted largely of items known before the course began. However, out of the approximately 800 words or phrases in the list, I found thirty-five which I was reasonably sure I had not known before the study period and another eighteen which I thought might be new items. Of the items I felt most sure about, twenty-seven had been used in written course materials I had been exposed to before they occurred in my output, one (baahn yéh, ‘put on airs’) had been seen (with gloss) in an English-language academic article, two (peiyih, ‘for example’; tailmuh, ‘topic’ or ‘theme’) had been used by in class in a way which made the meaning clear, one had been seen in character-form on TV or in the newspapers (jângleuhn, ‘controversy’), three were words repeated after the other speaker (kënhnngdînh, ‘emphasize’; dîhnchîh, ‘battery’; fôléih, ‘subject-based’) and one had been heard at school and probably also seen in the newspaper (mënghsauh, famous school). Of the eighteen ‘maybe new’ items, fourteen were in the course materials, one had probably been looked up in a bilingual dictionary whilst preparing a speech (Hêihlíhpmahn, ‘Greek’), one had probably been seen in a newspaper in character form (fânlânh, ‘stream(ing)’), one had been frequently used in class but also previously seen in newspapers and probably heard pronounced on TV (Hohngwok, ‘Korea’), and one (baahn, ‘be disguised as’, ‘pretend’) was unaccounted for.

In addition to genuine words which appeared to have been newly acquired, there were a dozen-or-so ‘pseudo-words’ which I had coined myself, often by confusing the order of morphemes in one or more actual words.

An analysis of this sort is, of course, open to the objection that it relies
on my own recollection of what was new, and I might either have acquired some of the other items in the glossary during the study period but imagined I had known them all the time, or, conversely, have really acquired them at an earlier date but imagined they were new. The total figure for newly-acquired items is in fact more likely to be an overestimate rather than an underestimate since most of the other items are either words which I definitely recall knowing and using during my years as a school-teacher before September 1988, or they are high frequency words which any learner is likely to have come across on elementary courses and also probably to have encountered in simple conversations.

If we accept that these figures should at least provide a rough guide to the proportion of words derived from different sources, the result tends to confirm both of the original hypotheses in so far as lexical items are concerned: there is no evidence of 'subliminal' learning and progress seems to have been made predominantly through formal study and reading. However, some items were apparently learnt without being included in one of my textbooks. What seems to have been crucial was not so much the form in which I encountered the word but rather the fact that my attention was focussed on the item and that I clearly perceived its constituent parts. This is most likely to occur in formal study or in reading but can easily also happen in a conversation, for example when, as with kühngdiuh and dihmchih, these items were supplied to me as corrections of my own erroneous form. With acquisition on these lines, it was also important that the items were easily memorised because they were at least partly composed of morphemes I was already familiar with.

Looking at the results overall, the most striking thing is perhaps not that items used can be accounted for, but that so much of the material presented
in the coursebook and of the many words and phrases noted in my diary never seem to have been used outside formal classroom exercises. Some of the more obscure items were simply forgotten once tests on them were over, others remained in my passive vocabulary but very few actually became available for everyday use. The major exception seems to have been the deployment of 'party pieces' - highly conscious and deliberate use of some new items which struck me as particularly expressive. Thus I noted in my diary trying out phrases such as gwai jau ('run like hell') or proverbs such as Sahn jiang, gwai yihn ('gods hate, ghosts detest', i.e. someone (or something) is universally disliked).\(^1\) The reasons why relatively little was integrated into my interlanguage will be explored in the next section.

Aspects of the Learning Process

Language learning results from an interplay of explicit and implicit processes, but it is obviously the explicit side which is most open to introspective investigation. My diary was full of references to 'puzzle-solving' behaviour, in particular the formation and subsequent revision of hypotheses. There is most scope for this approach with the written language and, although my focus was on spoken Cantonese, the links between the two codes made it worthwhile documenting attempts at reading, or, rather, 'deciphering' the written messages surrounding me. A particularly elaborate example was recorded in December 1996:

While looking at the slogan on the side of a bus in Central, my eye was first caught by the character yeuk as it forms part of my own name in Chinese. I next saw the character sing (for 'holy' or 'saint') and guessed the reference was to St.John's Cathedral. But then I noticed characters meaning 'wounded' and 'team'. After puzzling for a moment, I guessed it referred to the St. John's Ambulance Brigade. This was confirmed as I noticed gau ('save') earlier on and then chaah plus chaam

\(^1\) The latter saying was used in the classroom but in an unprepared presentation.
('participate') at the end. I now understood it fully but still had no active command of the characters.

The same kind of technique can be applied to the spoken language but normally, of course, subject to the constraints of short-term memory of what has been heard. Some time before commencing the Chinese University course, I was listening as my wife answered a telephone call from her mother with the words Jing séung dā dihwa bèi léih ('I was just thinking of phoning you'). I initially heard the first two syllables as jingséungh ('normal'), a word already in my vocabulary for some time. However, since my wife had earlier mentioned to me she was going to call her mother, once I heard the whole sentence I immediately changed my interpretation. I now recognized the first syllable as the very common word for 'think' or 'wish' and the second as the character jī, deducing that here this must mean 'right now' rather than 'just, correct', the meaning I already knew. Although I did know (declaratively) that séung had a high rising tone I had no idea what tone I had actually heard on either syllable and had decoded the message as if Cantonese were a non-tonal language.

Particularly with aural input, sudden shifts in interpretation tended often just to 'come' rather than to be searched for: they were conscious in the sense that I was fully aware of them but did not seem to require deliberate effort. The same often also applied when what I was hearing caused me to revise my assumptions about the grammatical status of particular lexical items. The word kwannâahn functions both as a noun ('difficulty') and a stative verb ('(be)difficult') but, despite its dual status being clearly

---

1. When, much later, I asked about this phrase, my wife told me that the use of jing séung in this way was rather uncommon in speech and that the idea would more usually expressed as ngaàm ngaàm séung. I do not recall ever hearing or using the phrase again, but the vividness of the 'decipherment' seems to have kept it in my mind.
marked in coursebooks and dictionaries which I had used. I had thought of it only as a noun until I heard a speaker at school morning assembly use it after hóu (‘very’). I had a similar misconception about chànhchìk, my error this time being more pardonable as my coursebook (P. Huang 1995: 279) and a standard learner’s dictionary (Lau 1977) both list it only as a noun meaning ‘relative’. It felt like an exciting discovery in December 1997 when a classmate at HKU referred to the use of Cantonese as chànhchìkdì (‘more intimate’) in comparison with English. Another sudden reinterpretation occurred with the verbal particle dǒu, which I had assumed meant ‘succeed in doing on a particular occasion.’ Towards the end of my second term at Chinese University, I realized it could also mean ‘not have the ability to do something’ when an instructor, talking with me about my pronunciation problems, seemed to be using gòng cho (‘speak wrongly’) to refer to performance errors and gòng mdou (‘be unable to speak’) for competence problems. In this third case, however, effort was required. With my initial assumption about dǒu I got the performance/competence distinction the other way round and things only became clear after a lot of patient repetition.

Interestingly, I rarely noted down anything bearing on Cantonese pragmatics, perhaps because I was still struggling to pick up individual words and phrases. I do, however, remember one moment of realizing ‘That’s how they do it!’ at my previous school. Probably in my sixth year in Hong Kong, the vice-principal left her desk, walked round to another teacher’s and started off, Ngôh sëng maan léih... (‘I want to ask you’). Every individual word was familiar but I had never realised before that they went together to produce a standard opening to an enquiry. As very often happens when one notices or is told about an expression for the first time, I heard it again in a shop a couple of days later. Acquisition of this idiom resulted from
over-hearing a conversation, but the individual words composing it had originally been learned formally.

As well as the many instances when I realised unaided that my previous understanding was wrong, I also received explicit correction from my Chinese University instructors. This was done (not excessively) during conversation in class, with the traditional red pen for written tests and for the texts of our prepared speeches, and also through the 'Critique Sheet' handed to us after the speeches had actually been delivered. There is a large body of research findings suggesting that the correction of grammatical errors in written work is ineffective (Truscott 1986) and my own feeling was that I did not benefit greatly from the red ink, whether the errors were in tone marks, choice of vocabulary or syntax. A few particular corrections did, however, tend to stick and make a real difference. Early on in the first term I was corrected both orally and in writing for using jouh gamyeung instead of gamyeung jouh ('do (act) in this way'). The phrase was very common in my output, being useful for anyone struggling to express their meaning with an impoverished vocabulary, and for a long time I was highly conscious of the need to monitor for the error, usually managing to 'catch' myself before rather than after uttering the phrase. By the following May, I was having trouble because of internalizing the word order rule for gamyeung too well, and another instructor corrected my use of gamyeung goldak ('feel this way') to goldak gamyeung. I had been given a simple correction (during an informal conversation) without any explanation, but deduced that when the adverb referred to the contents of your thoughts or feelings, rather than to the manner in which you went about thinking or feeling, it must be in post-verbal position. Later the same month I recorded consequent self-correction from ngoh gamyeung yihwaih to ngoh yihwaih gamyeung ('I imagined [it was]
this way'). Over-generalization of a rule on pre-verbal placement of adverbial modifiers was probably also a factor in my producing gwaanyų nigo gông instead of the correct gông gwaanyų nigo ('talk about this') the same day. I made the mistake despite having at least twice had it corrected in written work early in the second term.

For a correction to have a lasting effect it had to be memorable in some way - to stand out from all the other red scribblings and rephrasing of my spoken sentences that I was regularly exposed to. One correction that definitely worked concerned the word for India (Yandouh), which in January 1997 I misspelled as Yandouh several times in the script for one speech. It was fixed in my mind shortly after I received the script back. At lunchtime I happened to come up the hill just behind my unfortunate instructor and overheard her complaining animatedly to a colleague about how much time she had had to spend going over my work the night before. I had not understood in detail, but deduced the general meaning from hearing my own Chinese name and the offending word and announced my presence with a mangled version of the Cantonese equivalent of 'Speak of the devil!', which we had been taught a couple of months earlier. The incident ensured that I afterwards remembered both the spelling of Yandouh and also the correct wording of the saying Yat gông Chou Chou, Chou Chou janh dou ('As soon as you mention Chou Chou, Chou Chou shows up!')\(^2\), which was supplied to me by a friend later that afternoon. However, on reading the diary entry some months later

---

1. Prepositional phrases do generally precede the main verb in Cantonese and other Chinese dialects, but yu, is an exception and its progressive loss of functions since the Old Chinese period is one of the factors creating an impression that Chinese is shifting from a typologically SVO to an SOV language (Sun 1996: 47-50).

2. Chou Chou is a villainous character in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. I had simplified the expression to Gông Chou Chou, Chou Chou láih ('Say "Chou Chou" and Chou Chou comes').
I realised that I had not remembered the correction of another regular misspelling/mispronunciation (wái for the classifier wāi) which the instructor reminded me of before we parted. There is a limit to the number of items which can become 'special' at any one time.

Determining the extent of my implicit learning would require an exhaustive analysis of much more of my output than the small sample actually transcribed but one or two apparent instances do emerge from this small corpus. In a speech written in February, I employed an example of the 'pivot construction' with one noun functioning simultaneously as object/complement of a preceding verb and subject of a following one: Yān̄ yatgō bāi Yinggwok lāuhgwo hohk ge yān̄ ngòqèn̄xīh...jītu mphk ('[There was] a person who had studied in Britain arranged the programme'). I noticed and recorded the usage in the diary on the day I delivered the speech, which was one week after I had written it. In the meantime I had read discussions of the construction in Yip (1995) and Yip and Matthews (1994: 76-77), who point out that the existential yān̄h is required because an indefinite noun phrase cannot be the subject of a Chinese sentence. As far as I could recollect at the time I had not been explicitly aware of the construction when I wrote the speech but the word order just seemed a natural one to use. As Yip discusses at length, this aspect of their L1 grammar predisposes Chinese students to produce anomalous English sentences such as 'There are people believe this.' I had, of course, seen such sentences many times in my own students' compositions and pondered how best to correct them and this exposure might have predisposed me to acquire the Cantonese structure. Another possibility is that the whole phrase yān̄h yatgō just felt to me like a translation equivalent of the indefinite article, and it is certainly true that in negative versions of the same sentence type (e.g. Mō̂uh nān̄bùyén
Another possible example of implicit learning preceding realization of the rule may have been with the use of beigaan to mean 'comparatively' or 'relatively'. I think because of something formally taught on a course some years earlier, I had been aware of the word only when used together with a standard of comparison, as in a sentence such as Tuhog Gwongdungwa beigaan Poutimgwa yungyihih ('Putonghua is easy compared to Cantonese'). In May 1997 I recorded in my diary noticing the use of the word without the preceding tuhng + NP phrase on TV news and I also remember (though did not note it in the diary at the time) that I had been struck by that usage in the speech of an advanced foreign learner that I was then transcribing. However, a recording made in class a month earlier (which I only listened to much later on) revealed that I had myself started using beigaan in the same way: Y&hgwo keuihdeih jikhak tuhog ngoh gong yeh, beigaan yungyihihi ('It's easier if they are talking to me directly'). This could, of course, have been simply a performance error, perhaps because the tuhng in the previous clause predisposed me to 'reach for' beigaan. However, I recorded in my diary in April that I thought my language in the class recorded had been particularly natural, and it may just be that I retained a conscious hypothesis about the language when my own interlanguage had ceased conforming to it.

1. I had been exposed to this particular sentence many times through a TV chewing gum commercial in which a mother cautions her daughter against the dangers of bad breath!
2. The word jikhâk properly means 'immediately' but at this time I often used it erroneously to mean 'directly' and it is clear from the context of the remark (discussing difficulties during family gatherings) that this was the sense here.
There were also cases where I was at one stage explicitly aware of a language point but then seemed to forget and needed to rediscover it. The latter operation was again an explicit process but it is of course possible that implicit memories of the earlier learning experience assisted me the second time round. In an evening class in October 1997, I was taught the structure geui ngôh/kêuih só ji ("According to what I/he/she know(s)", "As far as I/he/she know(s)") and I noted in my diary that this had been reinforced by seeing an example in the newspaper on the way home. In December, the phrase was actually used by a classmate at HKU with whom I recorded a short conversation but I did not catch the words and did not query them because the general meaning of the question she was asking was clear from the rest of her sentence. It was only whilst transcribing the tape more than a month later that I realised she had said geui ngôh só ji. However, by then I had completely forgotten previously learning this structure and noticing it in input and I thought I was encountering it for the first time. I was simply aware that I had come across sentences with só in post-subject position, that I knew the phrases nóuh só waih ("There is nothing that[I want to]say", "it doesn't matter") and Jing só waih ("That which is said is correct", "As is rightly said"). All of these were things I knew before the October 1997 lesson, which remained completely forgotten until I was reading through my diary the following summer.

A second example of having to learn something all over again was with the word gauging. This is conventionally translated as 'after all' but actually functions as an emphatic introduction to a question the speaker wants to ask following on from information just given and is perhaps best paraphrased as 'so, the question is...?' It was included in a unit of Cantonese Three I
studied in April 1997 and, although it was inadequately glossed in the printed text, my marginal note showed it had been explained properly by the instructor. I may have noticed it again in the summer when looking at draft sections of Living Cantonese (Chow & Chan 1997) and certainly must have done so after the book’s publication in the autumn: the word’s use is explained very clearly in Unit 1 with several examples.1 Nevertheless, when I started to notice the word on TV and the radio some months later it felt as if I now had to puzzle out something new. Again, an implicit memory may have helped but the explicit one had gone.

Oxford (1989) is among many who have pointed out that learners may try to maintain their own preferred learning style regardless of any changes in the learning environment and the recognition that an audiovisual, inductive course would not suit everybody led Wesche to design an alternative syllabus, with more stress on analysis and the written word, for some of the Canadian civil servants on a compulsory French language course (Wesche 1981). Whether in the classroom or trying to pick up things informally I found that I maintained the style to which I had become accustomed over many years. In the first place this meant an analytical approach, centred round grammatical categories which I had first been introduced to as a secondary school student. I tended also to feel most comfortable with a definite structure around me and noted in the diary towards the end of the first term that it was ‘much better when I have a written task with a definite right or wrong answer’ and that ‘I like the ‘railway track’ approach.’ I needed a clearly-marked route to follow rather than constantly having to search for

---

1. In the summer I heard the dialogue of Unit 1 on tape and also read through the script but cannot remember if I focussed on gauging itself. In the autumn, I remember reading carefully through the whole unit, including the discussion of language items, and so must have read the explanation and examples.
the way forward myself.

Those last comments were written after a rather uninspiring pair-work session and at other times I appreciated and actively sought out some kinds of oral practice. However, I also found that, despite realizing that inability to understand the spoken language was the crux of my problem, I still felt drawn towards reading as the most natural way of getting input. As already suggested above, this was partly to minimize anxiety but the written word also seemed to offer the best chance of both understanding and remembering input. Although I did make use of the tapes available with every unit of Speak Cantonese, I felt more comfortable when just reading the Romanized passage. I relied heavily on visual memory for tasks such as memorizing the speeches for presentation in class. In a January entry, I noted how in the slow recall process, I was thinking ahead to other phrases as I spoke and seemed to be `seeing' the written text at the same time as (or preceding) thinking of the sound. As will be discussed in more detail later, it was looking rather than listening which seemed to be the most efficient way of learning vocabulary, although a combination of sight and sound was probably ideal. In this, I differed from some of the other class members. The Filipino priest, for example, told me that he found listening to the tapes the most useful way of assimilating vocabulary, whilst some of the Japanese never really felt comfortable with the Romanized script, even though everyone had to use it for tests.

My own heavy reliance on Romanization, while letting me assimilate new material relatively easily, meant that I was in danger of activating the sound-symbol links of English orthography rather than automatizing my command of Cantonese phonemic categories. The danger was all the greater because, although the Yale system was always used at the Centre, I continued
to use reference materials with other systems, making it more difficult to establish new, unambiguous linkages. Nevertheless, the advantage of ease of memorization probably still outweighed the phonetic disadvantage. It is significant that even some people with an excellent 'ear for language' often still choose to rely heavily on visual memory: one particularly gifted learner, John Cross, who achieved native-like pronunciation in over a dozen languages, still needed the help of colour-coded vocabulary cards which he 'saw' in the mind's eye whilst speaking (Cross 1984). Chinese beginners in English often employ a corresponding strategy of remembering English vocabulary with the help of a transcription into Chinese characters. Three friends have told me that they originally used this method and all of them now have good or very good English pronunciation, one of them being a senior TESOL specialist at a local university.

The real problem I encountered was not with the visual method as such but with the fact that my visual memory worked much better with the symbols I was used to attending to - Roman letters in linear sequence. Thus the Yale system's use of 'h' to indicate the lower tone register made it relatively easy for me to develop both explicit and implicit memory of whether a syllable was high or low but the accents used to show tone contour did not 'stick' in the same way. Here again an old pattern was repeating itself. When I had studied Greek at school, our printed texts were almost always marked with acute, grave and circumflex accents according to the traditional system developed in the Hellenistic period. We were not required to use the accents in our own written work nor did they affect pronunciation, but I did try to learn the system when I got to university. I then found that I had developed very little implicit memory for the accented spelling even of very common words, and I had only limited success trying to learn explicitly five
years after I had begun study of the language. With French, things had been a little easier since accents were used more sparingly and we were required to write them from the start. Nevertheless I initially had great difficulty keeping acute and grave separate in my memory, an echo, perhaps, of my tendency to confuse 'b' and 'd' when learning to write English. 

Outside formal classes, when I did try to concentrate on listening rather than reading, I faced a continuation of the same problem which had bedevilled me ever since arriving in Hong Kong. The conversations constantly going on around me were still of very limited use. When people were speaking rapidly to each other and I was unaware of the background to the discussion I often had no idea what was going on. When I could guess the general meaning from key words and from context, the 'unknown' stretches were generally too long or insufficiently clear for me to learn from. The 'eavesdropping' strategy preferred by John Schumann (F.E. & J.H. Schumann 1977) was thus of limited value for increasing my communicative ability. As already suggested in the discussion of Krashen’s theories, a key problem was, of course, that I could not control the speed of communication with listening in the same way that I could with reading or with my own output.

Difficulty was partly because of my own poor listening abilities but also because of the lack of similarity between Cantonese and languages that I knew already. Even with languages closely related to English and written in Roman script, colloquial speech poses special problems because of the assimilations and truncations natural when those who already know the language thoroughly communicate informally with one another. Thus Burling (1981a &

---

1. Although I have no direct memory of this, my mother has told me that the b/d problem resulted from my originally trying to write from right to left, producing text which had to be viewed in the mirror. She ascribes this peculiarity to my left-handedness.
1981b) and Moore (1977) experienced great problems understanding the Swedish and Danish spoken around them, although both had quickly got on top of the written language. With non-Indo-European languages, matters will be even worse. Schmidt reached a high level of fluency in Arabic during several years' residence in Lebanon and Egypt but was still often unable to follow conversations between native speakers (Schmidt & Frota 1985).

In certain circumstances, particularly if I was with a group of friends or colleagues, I could, of course, try to 'negotiate' comprehensible input by seeking repetition or paraphrase either in Cantonese or in English. Some learners of Cantonese have found this a very useful way to make progress, but my own experience was nearer to that of F.R. Jones with Hungarian:

when I had the opportunity to interact with native speakers...understanding them proved difficult;...in contrast to speaking, this hardly seemed to improve over time....With listening...I had little direct influence on message speed: negotiation strategies, if used more than occasionally, quickly became tiring for both parties, as well as threatening my face as a conversational partner. (Jones 1994: 450-1)

Part of the trouble may simply have been that both Jones and I were too worried both about our own image and about not being impolite. There was, though, a limit to the number of times even a more naturally brusque person could seek simplification, especially since, in the Hong Kong context, this might prompt the group either to switch over completely to English or to continue at full tilt talking in Cantonese to each other with occasional sentences of explanation to me. This might keep me more or less aware of what was going on but would not help me acquire new language items. I therefore often just kept quiet and the others often assumed I understood more than I really did. This was partly because, on some occasions I could guess

1. Both Professor Ruth Hayhoe and one of the advanced students at the Chinese Language Centre mentioned that they had found participation in groups of this kind useful.
well, and partly because by smiling at the right time or just not crying out for help you naturally lead others to think that you are catching the gist. Precisely this point is made in Moore’s 1977 account of his experiences in a Danish university, written just over two years after he took up a professorial appointment there:

I watch the speakers’ faces, and probably my own expression to some extent mirrors theirs and gives the impression that I am following the meaning. Certainly when everyone laughs I invariably smile; it would feel stupid to sit poker-faced; but this must suggest that I understand more than I do. People usually seem surprised when they realize that I have not grasped the gist.... The sense of exclusion is greatest when everyone roars at a joke I have not taken in.... After trying in vain for some time to follow, one’s attention inevitably wanders. The effort of trying to understand is so tiring and yields so little return that one opts out, simply to conserve energy. (Moore 1977:110)

The same problem could also occur in one-to-one conversation, where the learner’s chances are normally the best. Arguing for learners to be taught techniques for maintaining meaningful interaction, Hatch suggests that ‘Nothing stops the opportunity to carry on a conversation quicker than silence or the use of yes and head-nodding when the learner does not understand’ (Hatch 1978:434, quoted in Richards and Schmidt 1983:140). However, I tended myself to be more worried that too many requests for clarification would cause an English-speaking Cantonese person to switch to English or a monolingual to become impatient and break off the interaction and I could also easily just become embarrassed by my own lack of competence. Pretending to understand did not necessarily stop the conversation, but it did make it rather one-sided and again made it difficult for me actually to learn anything new. With more skillful technique I might have been able to steer a middle way between inconveniencing myself and inconveniencing the other party. As it was, I rarely seemed to benefit unless it was accepted that the main purpose was to improve my performance—that is, if we were conducting a lesson rather than a conversation. I was still a long way from the ‘great
liberation' of understanding so much of normal conversation that just asking the occasional question was enough.

As already mentioned, over the study period I did find that comprehension of more formal Cantonese, for example news broadcasts, improved. This was partly because the textbook provided us with more of the formal vocabulary used in such situations and less of the more colloquial language heard on the street. It was also because delivery on such occasions tended to be slower and clearer whilst I was more likely to understand the background to what was being said. Authentic material of this type was first introduced as part of the Chinese University course in the second term and I was initially very enthusiastic:

(8/1/1997): ..going through vocabulary sheets for the weather forecast, then playing tapes (normal radio speed and slower), finally watching TV... Exactly what we need to help make the most of resources outside the classroom.

Nevertheless, radio and TV programmes, too, could often get me out of my depth and I later sometimes felt overwhelmed by the speed of unfamiliar words in other videos which were shown in class.

Listening to the instructors in class often provided me with material which I could understand but some of them did tend to speak a little above the level that was comfortable for me, making me wonder whether it might have been better to start at Level 3 rather than Level 4. When we were actually being told to do something I could normally work it out but I missed a lot of the general comments the instructors made. Structure drills, an important part of the first year course, did not form a major part of the second year syllabus but, when they were used, I had problems following the instructor's cue sentence. There was a similar problem for other oral repetition exercises. This occasioned a rather despondent entry in the middle of the second
4/3/97: [the instructor] got us to repeat some of passage 8 without looking in the book — as usual with this kind of exercise I either didn't hear properly or couldn't retain the syllable sequence in active memory even when I was already very familiar with all the words and I feel worried I seem to do worse than the others at the chanting — most of them will have done a lot of this in year 1, of course!

I often had problems recognizing specific sounds unless visual support was provided at once. Because we had a Korean in the class, the word for Korea - Hohngwok - cropped up frequently. When we discussed the use in Korea of Hohng jih ('Korean characters', 'the Hangul script') and Hon jih ('Chinese characters') I could not distinguish the two phrases. I thought the problem was simply one of tonal discrimination and it was only much later that I realised there was also a difference of segmental phonemes: I had heard the final sound of Hohng as n! This contrast is, of course, normally reckoned a phonemic distinction in English but it was only allophonic until the Middle English period and there is still some dispute amongst linguists whether /ŋ/ has now attained full phonemic status (Roach 1981: 63-65).1. For English speakers learning Cantonese there is the additional complication that the n/ng distinction is disappearing from the speech of younger native speakers of Cantonese. Whenever I had a problem with these two sounds I was never sure if it was my receptive or the Cantonese speaker's productive ability which was the problem!

In the more usual case of Cantonese phonemic distinctions cutting across English ones I always had — and continue to have — severe problems. In minimal pair exercises in the language laboratory, I could normally hear the

---

1. Majority opinion would accept that /n/ and /ŋ/ are separate phonemes in RP because of minimal pairs such as 'sin' v. 'sing'. Unless pronounced very clearly, they can, however, easily be confused even by native speakers.
distinctions, but this was because I had a short-term memory - a kind of mental echo - of one sound to contrast with the next one presented. When hearing words in normal use I often made mistakes because I had not been able to set up long-term mental representations of the sound against which to judge the input. Anything I heard in normal communication was automatically assigned to whichever of my English phonemic categories it most closely corresponded. This was the same problem I had had with every other language I had had to learn and I wondered whether my extensive use of L1 silent speech might have something to do with it. Even when neither hearing nor speaking, I was constantly reinforcing English phonemic categories inside my head and limited input from an L2 had no chance of competing against this to set up alternative categories.

In this situation, I only had a real chance of hearing distinctions if special circumstances mapped them onto English ones and, fortunately, this was sometimes the case. Although English is not a tonal language, it certainly makes extensive use of intonation and lexical tone in Cantonese sometimes coincides conveniently with English prosody. Thus, while I normally could not detect a rising tone on a Cantonese syllable immediately followed by another, I could often hear it quite clearly before a pause. The sound pattern then closely resembled that on an English monosyllable functioning as a complete sentence, as in ‘Yes?’ At a stage when I could not remember whether chingchó (clear) had a falling-rising or rising-falling contour, I happened to hear it spoken in sentence-final position by a politician debating on TV. The rise at the end was unmistakable and the pattern was fixed in my mind as a piece of declarative knowledge.

It was also sometimes possible to hear tones when they formed a sequence with a recognizable tune. My favourite example was Jünggwokyähn (Chinese
person), where the pattern (high falling - mid-level - low falling) reproduced the standard intonation for a definite statement in English. I also found in a special coaching class for pronunciation at the Chinese Language Centre that I could quite often keep track of the tones over several words if I was sure which one had been used at the start. Discussion with other learners confirmed that this approach may be of help to many people and preferable to concentrating too much on single syllables. The leading non-Chinese authority on Cantonese phonology still recalls the phrase in which he originally learned a word if he is ever unsure about the tone (Robert Bauer, personal communication). Drills with phrases and sentences, and listening exercises where vocabulary is familiar enough for the student to be able to concentrate on individual sounds are probably the best way to make progress, though complete success is not guaranteed.

When I was 'under fire' (Robbins Burling's useful term for being addressed at normal speed in a language you do not know properly), I generally could not rely on this kind of help and this meant that Cantonese as I heard it contained many more homonyms than it did for a native speaker. Assuming I was aware of all the alternatives, I would automatically assume I had heard whichever one was primed by the context or by recent exposure. Whenever I did not turn off the water heater in the bathroom after taking a shower, my wife normally said to me мgeidåk sik jai ('You forgot to turn off the valve'). If I was in or near the bathroom, or still thinking about it, I would hear the message as intended. But when I had just learned the expression сhkjaíh (have indigestion) that was what I 'heard' her say, and if she gave me the message when I was eating I would understand it as сhkjāái (eat vegetarian food).

Closely linked with the problem of listening was that of pronunciation.

47
Whether or not one attributes it to differences in innate ability, it is an obvious fact that adult language learners' performance shows enormous variation. Some people find it much easier than others to imitate new sounds and also tend to assimilate to a new accent with little or no conscious intention. Because this comes quite naturally to them, the more adept sometimes feel that those who pronounce very inaccurately are lazy or perverse in some way. When I was undergoing Peace Corps language training in Nepal, one of my fellow trainees originally believed that I pronounced badly in class as a kind of joke and she was genuinely surprised to learn I was doing my undistinguished best! She was herself an accomplished modern linguist, with a degree in French and Russian and spoke English with a broad London accent while able to switch into flawless RP whenever professionally required. Much more recently, a native-English-speaking fellow student at Hong Kong University remarked that she herself could pronounce the name of a Spanish friend more accurately than the friend's own English husband of twenty years' standing, and she expressed surprise that some people could live in a country for many years without 'picking up' the local accent. To all those who have suffered from precisely that problem, the surprise is rather that other people do manage to pick it up.

Failure to 'pick up' pronunciation to some extent simply follows from failure to hear key distinctions. If I usually did not notice any difference between sikjai, sikhjaih and sikhjâai, then, unless one invokes the dubious concept of subliminal learning, there was no way my production would improve by listening to normal input. In contrast, implicit learning of word collocations was perfectly possible because I recognized the individual words as I heard them. Where the distinctions were ones which I could perceive, then I could in principle improve by trying to pay special attention to them,
though, with normal language learning, hearing correctly is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of pronouncing correctly. My failure in such cases might be linked with personality factors if one accepts some such theory as Guiora’s concept of ‘ego permeability’: to pronounce accurately you must be willing to pay close attention to details of another person’s behaviour, be willing to converge with it and not feel alarmed at the threat to your own core identity which this might represent. Although Guiora’s theory has proved difficult to operationalize, its intuitive appeal remains very strong (Schumann 1978: 92-3) and his assumptions underlie the construction of some relatively successful attempts to correct fossilized mispronunciation (e.g. Acton 1984).

With speaking as with listening, it was possible to achieve distinctions normally beyond me if I resorted to artificial exercises rather than relying on ordinary communication. If I imitated a sound immediately after hearing it pronounced clearly, I had a chance of getting it right and it generally seemed important to imitate holistically rather than analytically. Any attempt to ask myself ‘Is this going up or down?’ only served to confuse matters, bearing out the notion of ‘competing cognitive systems’ in language acquisition (Felix 1985). What was important was repeated practice, the factor which presumably lies behind the success of some of Neufeld’s novice subjects in producing one to eight-syllable phrases in native-like Chinese and Japanese (Neufeld 1978). However, the problem, as with listening, was retaining the pattern when the stimulus was no longer supplied. I never seemed able to get to the point where the un-English sounds were fully acquired, whether as a phonetic representation against which to judge my future performance or as an implicitly learned motor routine. Perhaps success would have been possible if I had persisted for long enough, but my
time and patience seemed insufficient.

Whilst there is a strong body of opinion that students should learn to produce sounds simply by listening to them (Scarcella & Oxford 1994), this is not enough if there are severe problems (Acton 1984: 77). I relied largely on combining the nearest corresponding sound or sound pattern in my L1 with explicit instructions on how the Cantonese sound was produced. Thus, for the vowel in seun (letter, believe) I started with English /e/ and rounded my lips, whilst for ch and j I tried to make English /t/ and /d/ but move my tongue position forward and suppress voicing with the second sound. For individual tones I told myself to make my voice go ‘down’ or ‘up’, sometimes getting more or less the right result but not being able to monitor it myself by ear! For syllable sequences I tried to rely on English intonation ‘tunes’, as in the Jumggwaeymn example already discussed. As with imitation drill, it would in theory be possible to automaticize the muscular movements involved but I never seemed to reach that point. If I did not want to lapse back into L1 habits I had to pay constant attention to pronunciation which was virtually impossible if I was struggling to retrieve vocabulary at the same time. When vocabulary was not a problem, however, I could occasionally hit the target and once in the second term I was told that a young boy had not realised I was a foreigner when he answered the phone and heard me ask for his elder brother. My immediate reaction was to write in the diary ‘He must have a hearing problem!’, but perhaps I was being too harsh on both of us.

Because I felt that my pronunciation was always likely to remain a problem whilst I already had a basic grasp of Cantonese structure, I regarded boosting my vocabulary as my most important task. This is in any case the most vital element for any language learner since, given some background knowl-
edge, one can generally communicate despite poor command of phonology and grammar. The importance of vocabulary becomes even greater if one accepts that much of the native speaker's competence is based on learning phrases and stock sentences as if they were lexis (Pawley & Syder 1983; Lewis 1997).

During the Chinese University course we were presented with a great many vocabulary items, since as well as the sixty or more in each week's unit in the core textbook more was given in supplementary books and handouts for videos and instructors would often also introduce new words in class, with or without writing them on the blackboard. I regularly wrote out the words from the coursebook in a vocabulary notebook and added some of the supplementary words but eventually gave up trying to collect every item together, though I did normally scribble down in class most words written on the blackboard or pronounced clearly enough for me to guess the transcription. I revised for tests usually by just going through the glossaries in Speak Cantonese Two or Cantonese Three and sometimes also looked back through the notebook.

As mentioned already, I had some problems remembering the tone markings and I also often forgot the classifier that should be used with new nouns. However, in tests and classroom consolidation exercises I could generally recognize new words in their spoken form and spell them correctly. Getting them into long term memory was more difficult. Items tended to be retained best if I noticed them several times in input shortly after I had first learned them. This applied whether words were formally taught (the majority

1. These are normally required between a noun and a numeral or demonstrative. Non-native speakers often overgeneralize the commonest (go) and as this seldom causes misunderstanding there is little communicative pressure to learn the entire system. My classifier problem may have resulted partly from lack of attention when memorising words. With tone markings, I certainly did pay attention but simply found that these 'extra' markings were less easily assimilated into long-term memory than were linear sequences of Roman letters.
of cases), or I had asked about the meaning of a word I happened to hear for the first time in ordinary conversation. A prime example was köhhsaht (‘in fact’, ‘actually’) which I encountered early in the first term and then heard constantly on the radio, each time wondering how I had managed to live ten years in Hong Kong without noticing it before! Another was syūnjaahk (‘choice’, ‘alternative’), learned from my wife in a supermarket queue and then heard on T.V. the following day.

It was also possible to use TV to learn the spoken form for words I had learned to recognize from newspapers or signboards but could not pronounce. Many Cantonese TV broadcasts are sub-titled, principally for the benefit of immigrants who read Chinese but cannot yet fully understand Cantonese. When the programme is in colloquial Cantonese the written standard Chinese on the screen is more like a translation than a transcription but with news bulletins, which are in a much more formal register, sound and characters correspond very closely.1 Generally, I still found I was depending more on the characters than the spoken word, but, since my Chinese reading is far from fluent, occasionally I found myself concentrating on visual decipherment only to have the solution burst in on me from what I had heard a moment before and retained in working memory. Putting sound and sight cumbersomely together, my vocabulary did increase but, as Gabe found when learning to read Portuguese in Brazil (Gabe & Stoller 1997: 113-114), heavy reliance on the news media leaves one without much of the vocabulary used in other genres. Helped also by the kind of vocabulary presented in the Chinese University coursebooks, I was strengthening my knowledge of one particular

---

1. Snow (1994: 129) analysed the text of two Cantonese radio news broadcasts and found that only 10-15% of the words used were distinctly Cantonese and that half of those were accounted for by three function words (haah (copula), hia (‘in’ or ‘at’) and ge (possessive marker). In contrast, purely Cantonese words in ordinary conversation will normally be at the 30-50% level.
variety of 'High Cantonese', but still lacking many of the words picked up by native speakers in early childhood. Thus when I took the Lexical Comprehension Test in April 1998 I needed to have a basic item like cheol (the verb 'blow') explained to me.

Realizing that I was failing to fix in long-term memory many of the words I was exposed to, I kept making slight adjustments to my memorization methods but was unable to set up an effective routine. In December 1998 I accepted my wife’s suggestion to learn two phrases daily from a book of idioms but did not keep this up. In the second term I wavered over whether to write out neatly in my vocabulary notebook every word which I jotted down in class, but soon realised this would be unmanageable. In April I decided to pay greater attention to the Chinese characters in the glossary. Instead of just glancing at them as before, I experimented by writing some of them down beside the Romanized version but this was a difficult task as I had never learned the proper stroke order and so was effectively just drawing a picture of the printed character. I sometimes tried listening to the vocabulary list on tape whilst reading through the printed version but found that this, like reading the passage whilst listening to the tape, made me drowsy. Simply reading through and perhaps recopying the list made for better concentration but this effect would vanish if I copied items out too often. In June, when my intensive course was over, I tried to use flashcards to learn further words but found the combinations did not ‘stick’. Attempts at devising mnemonics did not seem to work either. I tried at one point to follow Burling’s advice to associate a new word with a similar sounding one in LI, but found this difficult for the involved phrases we were trying to learn. I combined it with translations of commoner Cantonese words which resembled parts of the target phrases, coming up with cumbersome formulae like ‘Gee
joy! - two heads’ for jichéi sèungtāuh (‘having similar aspiration and interests’) and ‘from lambs singing a melody to the moonlike ears’ for yānhyéángyùnyíh (‘melodious and pleasing to the ear’). Not too surprisingly, this did not prove much help!

In general I found that remembering the words was not something I could ensure by any particular method but something that happened to me or not. Sometimes an association for a word or phrase was created by the situation in which I learnt it, as when we were taught dèngjó (slang for ‘died’) at about the time of Deng Xiao Ping’s death. More usually, I remained dependent on recycling through occurrence in normal input or on myself feeling a need to use the word in production (cf. Altman 1997).

When trying to speak Cantonese I would often need to search my memory to find the required word or phrase, but a few came to me spontaneously. This resulted in some very well-known words becoming overused, particularly yùhwó (‘if’) and the third-person pronouns kêuīh and kêuīhdeih. I frequently inserted the latter after a noun, producing openings like Hèung Gông yành kêuīhdeih.. (‘Hong Kong people, they......’). This topic-comment structure is sometimes found in native-speaker Cantonese but my over-use of it was perhaps simply a device to gain extra planning time.

Sometimes as I struggled to speak – or planned what I was going to say – what ‘came’ to me was completely inappropriate. I would often produce the intended word with the syllables in the wrong order. I had a particular problem with yùnhchyūhn (completely, entirely) which almost always emerged as chyūnyūhn. I had built a firm association between two syllables but the order in which they occurred had not ‘stuck’. The difficulty was perhaps increased by learning the word over-analytically: the two Chinese characters
were very common ones and each on its own conveyed to me the idea of comple-
tion so I had less need to process the word as a complete unit. In addition, I also knew a number of other common words or phrases (such as chyūn sin-
gaan, full-time) in which chyūn did come first.

Another source of disruption was interference from my other second languag-
es. The brain often seems to register that a language other than L1 is called for but then select the wrong member of that category (Cohen 1996: 184-5). Before the period of this study I had frequently found that Nepali, the second language I had used most frequently, interfered in this way. This very often occurred when I had to use Nepali and Cantonese in quick succes-
sion, and I regularly found myself addressing Cantonese-speaking taxi-driv-
ers in Nepali when I was bringing a Nepali friend from the airport. When my wife and I were in Kathmandu in summer 1997 the confusion was two-way as I sometimes started speaking to members of our host family in Cantonese and to her in Nepali. I also produced mixed utterances, once asking a computer programmer if the work he was doing would be finished in sāam ghanta (i.e Cantonese ‘three’ plus Nepali ‘hours’). Perhaps the strangest incident was a purely mental one that occurred earlier in the summer in Hong Kong. I was browsing in an English-Cantonese dictionary and came across the word ‘sun-
burnt’, which immediately brought into my mind the French words ‘Le soleil l’a attrapé’ (‘The sun has caught him.’) I had heard the sentence in 1968 when hiking, with beetroot-red face, in the Seine valley and it had been many years since I had last thought about the incident.

A final puzzle about my spoken performance was the fact that there were many words which I did learn and remember but which I never seemed actually to use. In some cases, of course, the appropriate occasion simply never arose but it seems strange that, as far as I am aware, I never used either
keihmeht (actually, in fact) or gam (well, so) in conversation outside the classroom. I constantly noticed these in the speech of native speakers and of more advanced foreign learners and I fully realised that they would add a "natural" touch to a sentence as well as gain me more planning time. The reason I did not use them was perhaps that I was constantly preoccupied with searching for appropriate content words and that, in my own interlanguage, the "stalling for time" function was already performed in other ways, for example by simple hesitation and fresh starts and the "echoing" use of pronouns. There was thus no natural gap in the system which the more authentic words could fill.

Whilst many of the problems encountered during the study period were ones I had anticipated, I had not expected the boredom, poor concentration and fatigue which sometimes plagued me. Fatigue in lessons in autumn 1997 could be partly explained as a result of returning to full-time school teaching, but in general the problems resulted from simple "overload" - input too complex for me to process - and also from lack of interest in some of the learning activities. Translation of written English sentences into Cantonese in the first term was irksome because, as I had found with Greek and Latin "prose composition" as an undergraduate, I was having to produce language beyond the level which I could comfortably cope with; I also particularly disliked having to continually look up words in the dictionary because I had forgotten the tones. Although I valued the structured environment provided by formal classes, I found that listening to fellow students answering display questions or reporting back on pair work was often tedious and reflected in March that I really preferred tasks like reading or translating from the target language into my own because a foreign language text was "a genuine monolingual." Despite starting off with a theoretical commitment to role-
play (and calling for more of it when I completed an evaluation form at the end of the first term), I found in practice that I disliked it and wanted instead opportunities to discuss topics I was actually interested in. The inability to enter fully into all kinds of new roles has been seen by at least one study as characteristic of less successful learners (Wesche 1979). I am not, however, alone in my reservations about the role-play. Richards and Schmidt (1983: 150) cite Jackobovits and Gordon (1980) for the argument that such activities are of limited value 'because the cues of actual talking spring spontaneously from involvement in real relationships and because individuals can learn to talk only by being treated as talkers.'

There were, however, plenty of times in the classroom when I did feel engaged and interested. Frustration was banished when we managed a reasonable discussion about something of genuine interest, whether our own experiences as language learners in Hong Kong or the status of women in Hong Kong and Japan. Introducing a note of humour, which several instructors were adept at, also helped and even role-play could be enjoyable if turned into a comic sketch. I was generally happier when I was playing a central role in the conversation myself: this might just have been a carry-over of ego-centric speech habits from L1 behaviour, but it also reflected the fact that in previous language learning I had normally used self-access methods and not had to keep in step with the rest of the class. Finally, I repeatedly noted in the diary that I felt more alert when the teacher's manner was brisk and authoritative. Too much gentleness was another inducer of drowsiness!

Did I make the most of the learning opportunities presented both inside and outside the classroom? Ways in which the student can do this have been the central concern of the 'learning strategies' approach, which was inaugurated with work by Rubin (1975) and Natman et al. (1975) and has reached its
fullest development in recent monographs by Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1998). Some months after the end of the study period I completed Oxford’s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and calculated my overall average for strategy use as 3.5 (on a scale where 0 represents minimal and 5 maximal use of all strategies). I sometimes felt unsure what rating to give myself on individual items, which perhaps confirms doubts some have expressed about the validity of the instrument. However, results for the different strategy categories generally reflected the pattern I would have expected: I scored highest (4.3) on the cognitive processing section and lowest (2.2) on memorization strategies, whilst the rating for co-operative language learning was just below average (2.9).

The techniques which I was myself most conscious of using included inferencing, silent listening (despite its frequently low effectiveness!), initiation of conversation in class (rather less so outside), mental rehearsal and steering conversation towards topics of interest to me. In order to open a conversation I tended to need some kind of cue, either inherent in the situation itself or provided by someone else’s question. I could then talk for some time but was less skillful at developing a balanced dialogue. Though constrained by lack of competence, I had also consciously tried to use jokes, which had the advantage of seeming natural even in contexts where my speaking Cantonese might seem odd: if I was going to ‘sound funny’ to the native speaker anyway, why not make it deliberate?

Both Oxford and Cohen include ‘thinking in the target language’ as a strategy. Whilst I had always been aware of this as a desirable outcome I felt that this was only partly under the learner’s control. Sometimes there was indeed a definite choice: if I was given a telephone number in Cantonese I could choose to translate it or to ‘hold’ the memory of the original sounds...
until I had written down, and I knew that the latter method was safer. In
general, however, thoughts crowded into the mind by a process of association
and tended naturally to be in English, except where particular words or
phrases had become so familiar that they were almost like extensions of my
English vocabulary:

(10/1/97): 'I was thinking during the class about the sheer speed of my
thinking in English - another language can't begin to compete with this!
I feel most comfortable when I fully recognize all the Chinese words and
then (I think this is right - can't be sure ...) I'm simultaneously aware
of the English translation.'

Introspection on this point was difficult because I had a problem distingui-
shing between 'propositional awareness' and verbalization and before
reading Ericsson and Simpson's 1987 account I had assumed all thought was
'silent speech.' The distinction is perhaps not so important after all
because, especially with my own, highly verbal thinking-style, 'proposition-
ally awareness' could instantly 'tip' into English. Deliberately chosen
strategies have their role to play, but thinking remains to some extent
something that happens to us rather than something we do.

Social Factors
Although language learning can in some ways be seen as an intellectual
struggle undertaken by an individual, the social context is obviously of
crucial importance. The learner needs to be interacting with people who
accept him or her as a speaker of the language and are willing to make
allowances if his or her performance is below that of an adult native speak-
er. Middle-class Hong Kong society does not normally provide the English-

1. Long ago, William James (1890) wrote of the intention of saying a thing, which we can only discuss using
words but which is itself largely non-verbal: 'Linger, and the words and things come into the mind; the
anticipatory intention, the divination is there no more ... and yet what can we say about it without using
words that belong to the later mental facts that replace it?' (quoted in Leeson 1975: 33-35).
speaking expatriate with such an environment and a key task is to find a setting in which Cantonese is the expected medium of communication for everybody. The Chinese University classes I attended usually managed to meet this requirement. This was particularly true of the intensive classes in the first two terms, helped by the fact that most of the students were not native-speakers of English. The immersion experience was not so complete in the autumn 1997 evening classes but the amount of English used was still much less than the Cantonese.

Outside the classroom but within the Centre, teaching staff generally stuck to Cantonese but switches sometimes occurred when we were discussing complex matters such as our respective research projects. Staff in the Centre office initially tried to speak to me in English, possibly because I was a new face and therefore assumed to be a beginner. When I made it clear I preferred Cantonese they obliged me, though they would use English words or phrases sometimes if they thought I had not understood something.

Things got more complicated when I was with teaching staff outside the Centre building. They then faced a conflict between the expectations that, as Cantonese teachers they should talk to students as far as possible in Cantonese and that, as educated Hong Kong Chinese, they should use English to foreigners, which was both conventional and more efficient. When I was discussing the problem with one instructor, she told me that they were aware of it and that some of them tried to avoid meeting students outside so as not to have to switch into English. Attitudes among the instructors varied and I sensed that some of them felt comfortable continuing to use Cantonese and others did not. Among those who seemed most at ease in the situation were two who had married former students and who regularly used Chinese with them at home. On one occasion, after I had run into another instructor in a
canteen elsewhere on the campus and we had spoken a little in Cantonese, I decided not to try to join her and some of her colleagues at their table to avoid putting any of us in an awkward position over language use. Ironi-


cally, in the library the same afternoon, I read Cheryl Campbell's account of 'socializing with the teachers' (Campbell 1996). Faced with a similar situation in South America, she had been able to join the teachers' group with confidence that Spanish would be the natural language of communication.¹

I also wanted to ensure that Cantonese became the lingua franca among members of our class when we were in the corridors or the common room. I was counting on the Japanese in particular to help me in this as Japanese volunteers I had known in Nepal had often been more comfortable talking to me in Nepali than in English.² On the first day when we went together to the office to complete some formalities, one Japanese classmate did start speaking to me in English but, after I had explained (in Cantonese) that I was trying to avoid this, she accepted the arrangement. Everyone else in both my autumn term and spring term classes fell into line, except for one Chinese American who very definitely wanted to use English once the lesson was over. In contrast, another Chinese American, who replaced her in the group the following term and who, like her, had perfect English, seemed to find keeping to Cantonese completely natural. On one occasion out of class, when I

1. Fields (1978) and Schmidt & Frota (1985) similarly make clear that communicating in Spanish or Portuguese with an Anglophone foreigner is considered normal in South America.

2. Although educated Japanese can usually read and write English tolerably well the lack of emphasis on the spoken language has in the past left many uncomfortable when listening to or speaking it. Convenient as this state of affairs is for the Anglophone language learner, there are signs that expectations are changing. In a classroom discussion which touched on the phenomenon of 'Harshita divorce' (newly-weds splitting up as soon as they return from honeymoon to Tokyo's international airport), one Japanese student said that the bride's discovery her husband could not cope in English at the hotel was sometimes a factor in her disillusionment.
did not understand her saying she had a tooth extracted, she used gesture rather than translation to explain.

All these arrangements were, of course, rather artificial and trying to maintain the 'Cantonese-only' rule outside the Centre was more of a problem. In the absence of anyone totally fluent in Cantonese it was sometimes difficult to keep conversation going and, as everyone was maintaining ample social contacts in their first (or stronger second) language off-campus, we did not do much socializing as a group. However, the overall effect was to increase everyone's exposure to the target language and, particularly with the Japanese I was able to keep my Cantonese-guise more or less intact. On one occasion in class the instructor, illustrating the use of bāung jiu (banana) to refer to a Chinese more at home in western culture, told the first of my Chinese-American classmates Lēih haih bāung jiu ('You are a banana'). One of the Japanese responded by saying that I was gāidān ('[chicken] egg' - the parallel term for a Sinicized gweilo). At a Chinese New Year party hosted by the same instructor and attended also by many elementary-level students, I did use some English and was told by another of the Japanese that it felt strange to hear me speak it. When three Japanese and I took the instructor out for a meal at the end of the second term the conversation remained totally Cantonese without any sense of strain except for my sometimes feeling slightly out of my depth as the least aurally proficient of the group. I normally kept my language-learning diary in English but, in recording the occasion later that night, spontaneously switched to Romanized Cantonese. As I had found with my regular Nepali diary, you write more fluently in a language after you have been listening to and speaking it intensively.

I found it almost impossible to insist on Cantonese in the Centre with
native-English-speaking students from other classes. However, since I was involved in taping Cantonese interviews with such students for an interlanguage project I did get some opportunity to talk with some of them in the target language outside the classroom. Once the tape-recorder had been switched on the whole procedure felt quite natural. The project itself did, after all, provide us with a rationale for speaking other than the simple objective of getting more practice. Particularly with students more advanced than myself I found listening to them and then analyzing the tape provided me with input at about the right level even if there were some inaccuracies.

In autumn 1997 when I joined a new secondary school I was presented with a potentially more natural environment for speaking Cantonese. The school had not employed an expatriate teacher before and staff therefore were uncertain how they would communicate with me. I found many colleagues willing to use their own language to do this, perhaps helped by the fact that the three American children studying in the school and also their missionary parents were all fluent Cantonese speakers. My problem was no longer failure to get input but rather the constant danger of getting out of my depth. At informal occasions such as eating lunch together I found several people willing to explain things to me in simplified Cantonese but when we were actually at work I frequently had to initiate switches back to English myself to find out what was going on. This paralleled the situation with classmates at Hong Kong University. I found them increasingly willing to speak to me in Cantonese but that I tended myself to stick to English so that I could communicate more effectively.

With the students at school, I had at first decided to try to conceal the fact that I knew some Cantonese and to speak only English myself whilst listening out carefully to what was said around me. I soon realised that
this would be unworkable because students would inevitably hear me talking with technical assistants and other school workers in Cantonese and I soon started telling the truth - that I could understand and use some Cantonese but still had a lot to learn. I continued to use mainly English with them but with a limited amount of code-switching.

Overall, in my new situation I felt less often those around me were blocking my access to Cantonese because of a wish to maintain their own dignity as speakers of English, but I still lacked the full competence to take advantage of the theoretically open door.

The Affective Dimension

The learner's social setting affects his progress largely through his own emotional reaction to that environment. In this respect a key factor is that of motivation. Discussion of this issue was for a long time dominated by the instrumental/integrative distinction introduced by Gardner and Lambert (1972), but there has been an increasing realization that the dichotomy is an over-simplification, particularly when applied to English which to some extent functions as an international lingua franca divorced from specific national cultures (H.D. Brown 1992, cited in Nunan & Lamb 1996: 211). My own experience suggested that it was in any case better to operate with a three-way distinction: instrumental, integrative and performative.¹ In the last case, the learner is concerned with mastery of the language as a goal in itself, implying both an extensive declarative knowledge (which might be both acquired and displayed whilst still operating in English) and, more importantly, the ability to use the target language competently in communication.

¹ This classification correspond roughly with D.M. Smith's (1972) distinction between communicative, integrative and expressive functions of language.
cation. The goal may be especially important for 'language professionals', as 'being good at languages' is a part of their self-concept. My own performative motivation was heightened by a fascination with words and their manipulation, including great enjoyment of translation whenever the task was within my competence, and by earlier academic success with language learning.

Although this issue is not always dealt with directly in the diary literature, the theme can be discerned in many of the accounts. References to a 'craving' for 'colloquial ease' (Burling 1981a), annoyance when one's fledgling abilities are slighted (Schmidt & Frota 1985) or pride in making exceptional progress (Altman 1987) exemplify it. Its importance in the parallel case of speakers of other languages learning English is particularly well brought out in Medgyes' discussion of the role of non-native-speaker TEFL teachers:

"..for the majority of us, the English language is not only a professional tool. For some, it is even more than a means for conveying messages - it is an end in itself. The process of tackling newer and newer aspects of the English language is a rewarding job for its own sake. The desire to reveal the intricacies of English is a hobby for many and a passion for a few. The way some respondents express their longing to possess the English language has an almost sensuous overtone. The love-hate relationship is expressed vividly by this respondent:

I build up a dream-world where in the end you only talk to yourself. So instead of communication, you make language into the main isolation tool. You dream, you live in English, you think, you create in English - and you wake up in an 'autistic' world driven by its own rules."

(Medgyes 1994: 91)

Performative motivation is an immense spur to effort but, in extreme cases, it carries with it the risk of obsession.

Integrative motivation may sometimes be intimately linked with performative since acceptance by a particular group is sometimes conditional on achieving a particular level of competence. There is nevertheless also a clear contrast between the two, since integration means fitting in with others around
you rather than concentration on individual achievement. For me, integration was an important goal since both at home and at work I was almost always with Cantonese speakers and, even after many years, it felt disquieting not to understand what was being said around me. Moore, as a faculty member at a Danish university, found the situation particularly stressful:

I had not realized before how importantly a satisfactory working life depends on being able to take part in casual discussion. Without it, one loses touch with events and never becomes aware of the currents of opinions among one’s colleagues. One cannot contribute to the ongoing dialogue, let alone take any initiative, and increasingly feels isolated and debarred from playing one’s proper part in the corporate life of one’s working group. One may feel incompetent, resentful and depressed by turns, or may simply elect to withdraw from the fray and pursue one’s own interests. The latter course may free time for productive work, but at the cost of social and professional isolation. (Moore 1977: 110).

Whilst becoming a full member of the Cantonese language community was important as a long-term goal, this did not always translate into intense motivation in particular circumstances. I nearly always had the option of settling for immediate integration into the small English-speaking ‘community’ constituted by myself and another individual or small group with whom I started a friendly conversation. There was also the option of ‘withdrawal from the fray’ into my own mental world. For many years these two strategies had, in fact, been the way I adapted, however imperfectly, to my linguistic environment in Hong Kong. Given I wanted to ‘break out’ there was still the issue of exactly what group I was trying to join and in what capacity. Despite the friendliness and support of many colleagues in autumn 1997, I felt that I could not wholly belong in a Christian school, when I was not myself a Christian and my real interests were in research and academic discussion rather than guiding the education and personal development of children. And as a relatively inarticulate speaker of Cantonese, I was likely to remain a subordinate member of a group unless I had some very
special authority or expertise to offset this handicap.

The third member of the trio, instrumental motivation, was, of course, conspicuous by its absence. Not having fluent Cantonese sometimes made for inconvenience but it was never disastrous in the way that lack of fluency in English would be for many Hong Kong Chinese professionals. Despite my strong non-instrumental reasons for wanting to learn I still perhaps needed the spur of necessity. The dilemma remained fundamentally as it had been before I enrolled at Chinese University: my motivation was too strong for me to give up striving to learn but seemingly not strong enough to push me through to success.

This state of affairs resulted in a vicious cycle because continuing failure generated anxiety that reduced the likelihood of further success. Particularly important were the feelings of competitiveness and associated anxiety generated by performative motivation and discussed by Bailey (1983, 1991). Working in a bilingual, but predominately Chinese environment for many years had heightened my feeling that second language proficiency brought status. I saw the school community as a kind of pyramid with fluent bilinguals at the top, monolingual Chinese at the bottom on one side and non-Chinese-speaking staff or visitors at the bottom on the other. Those who lacked Chinese did not suffer the economic consequences brought by lack of English but they shared a similar linguistic inferiority. I had hoped to ascend my side of the pyramid - or (to use the metaphor in this study’s title) to climb the hill - and failure to get near the top left me sometimes irrationally resentful of the bilingualism of both colleagues and students. This way of looking at things resulted partly from the fact that in normal Hong Kong schools it is, quite rightly, bilingual Hong Kong Chinese, not expatriates, who are in managerial positions. Perhaps, however, the main factor was
awareness that, had my own earlier ambitions to become a classicist or South Asianist in an English-speaking university been fulfilled, I myself would have been in a (relatively) bilingual position against a monolingual background.

Status concerns of this type were not always foremost in my mind but they tended to come to the fore if my incompetence as a bilingual was not balanced by a feeling of competence in other ways. Thus both before and after my year out of the school system, I sometimes felt momentary anger if anyone used fluent English to criticize me or point out a mistake I had made. My problem was not unwillingness to acknowledge my mistakes but a feeling that my nose was being rubbed in a double failure. In contrast, when a Chinese University instructor told me at length of my continuing shortcomings in pronunciation I felt perfectly comfortable because my success in understanding her Cantonese balanced the fact that I was being criticized.

When someone was actually using Cantonese with me I felt the normal anxieties of anyone communicating in a language they were not totally at home with. If the speaker was actually a competent user of English there was not only the temptation to switch for convenience but also the feeling that I was in some sense in the child's position to his or her adult. This is, of course, exactly what the language learner needs but I sometimes felt an additional degree of discomfort if my conversation partner was someone I felt it inappropriate to be subordinate to. Together, of course, with my

---

1. My attitude if the speaker is really good perhaps ties in with feelings of territoriality about my own language. As Hedgyes (1994:31) puts it, 'there may be a point on the scale of proficiency beyond which a non-native speaker risks evoking a belligerent attitude in the native speaker.' I never felt this reaction with 'overseas Chinese' who I knew had been brought up in an English-speaking society, since they, like me, had learned their English natively.
professional obligation to stick mainly to English, this kind of anxiety probably led to me practising less with my students at school than I could have done. In the same way, I felt comfortable using my sub-standard Nepali with an old Kathmandu friend five years my senior, even though he spoke excellent English, but I felt less at ease doing so with his English-speaking sons. This problem is removed when you speak with monolinguals or with fellow learners.

I was struck by the fact that when in the Chinese University classes feelings of competitiveness towards classmates were rare and much less than towards Chinese speakers of English including even the instructors if they made their own bilingualism too obvious! This was partly because I quickly started to feel my fellow students and I had complementary strengths. Several of the others were better than me in the width of their vocabulary and their performance in tests but I tended to be more assertive in speaking up and shifting the topic in class. In fact, even when meeting or reading about extremely successful native-English-speaking learners of Cantonese before September 1996, I had usually felt pleased. They seemed not so much rivals as role-models giving me hope that it was not, after all, hopelessly unrealistic for gweilo to aspire to move back and forth across the language barrier in the same way that educated Cantonese could do.

Competitiveness and anxiety when dealing with local bilinguals, on the other hand, was a continuing problem. One incident where I did a particularly bad job of controlling my emotions, occurred on the day I started keeping the diary:

(18/11/97): At the Post Office on my way home I was rehearsing in the queue how to say 'I want to send a letter to Nepal.' I started badly, not being sure which counter the bell was ringing from and being directed 'That way!' by a person behind me in the queue. I fumbled the Cantonese
sentence, saying something like *Ni fung seun hau Neihbohkyih* (this letter goes to Nepal). The counter clerk, male and in his 20s, quite thick-set, responded coldly and firmly. 'To Nepal? $2.20.' I was cowed into switching to English to ask for local stamps. Neither of us were smiling and I was actually very angry and thinking *You f***ing b****.* Having got the stamps I walked away (initially going in the wrong direction) but leaving the airmail ones behind. The clerk called me back, 'Your stamps, sir!' I retrieved them and moved away mumbling something like *Hooh geising gamyaht* ('No memory today'). The clerk meanwhile seemed to be laughing with a Cantonese customer behind me.

Obviously, I handled this very badly and it would have gone much more smoothly if I had been more relaxed and able to joke (whether in Cantonese or in English) about my own performance but the anxiety of the situation got the better of me. I persisted for some time trying Cantonese on other clerks but later reverted to English though trying to listen to what the clerks said to other customers. I did, of course, get occasional transactional practice in other ways (e.g. with taxi drivers) and, in fairness to the Hong Kong postal service, I should also mention an earlier occasion at another post office when one counter clerk, though himself perfectly proficient in English, had smilingly asked me in Cantonese if I spoke the language. However, the small amount of extra practice I got from trying to insist on Cantonese myself did not seem worth the psychological price.

Anxiety was also generated even when dealing with people who I knew well and was on good terms with:

(12/4/97): 'At lunchtime I went to the HKU library. Came across J. and exchanged a few words in English on the difficulty of getting books...I ended up just saying *tânhông ge mahnâih* ('The problem's a headache') and she said *tânhông - very good!* I said something like shaih - sin-sin ('No, [I only know] a little') as I moved away and only then remembered I had previously discussed with her the problem of locals' reaction to foreigners' efforts with Cantonese. She maybe now feels that whatever she does is wrong as I didn't appear particularly pleased at the compliment - in fact it struck me as rather contrived and patronising! I made a mental note to explain next time that the best method is just to accept my use of Cantonese as natural!

The whole problem of talking with [Cantonese proficient in English] is a
real headaches. I think on Friday R. had proposed to me trying 'a new strategy' at family dinner of talking sometimes in English to L. and S. because they find it a strain trying to think of simple things to say to me in Cantonese. I explained that the whole thing I'm trying to avoid is that kind of situation - Chinese speaking Cantonese to other Chinese and then English to gweilos. R. asked if I'm then not bored having to remain out of the conversation and I said I prefer this to being talked to in English and can anyway 'talk to myself' as much as I want. In fact what I really want is for people to make the effort to communicate with me directly!

This problem was never completely solved, since it was rooted in the inherent unnaturalness of not using the most effective method of communication available to my conversation partner and myself. The difficulty did, however, abate during the period covered by this study. I did not in fact directly tell the classmate encountered in the library how I wanted to be spoken to but she was using Cantonese to me quite naturally a few months later, leaving me only with the worry of what to do when I did not fully understand what she said! I would, however, have made quicker progress had I been better able to keep my emotional temperature down.

Learning Cantonese in Hong Kong

Although I did get something for my efforts in 1996-97, it is the problems thrown up which loom the largest. These were partly the result of factors outside my control, but many of them stemmed from my setting a very broad and general goal (being able to understand whatever was said around me) and then failing to set achievable sub-goals or to focus sufficiently on activities which I found interesting in themselves. Reflection and discussion with successful learners suggests some ways of overcoming the obstacles.

First, while participation in a class provides a 'language community' of a kind, for someone in my position one-on-one instruction or conversation exchange might be preferable. It gives the learner more chances to speak but also a better chance of hearing suitable input.
Second, there needs to be more of a focus on the language of informal conversation. This would ideally be done by recording examples of authentic language from the learner’s daily environment. In my own case this might be family conversation around the dinner table or meetings or informal discussions at school. Where this is not possible, the soundscripts and recorded versions of TV drama or talk shows would be suitable. The Chinese University course has already begun using some of this material but the intermediate learner needs a full analysis of the script, as found, for example, in the recent edition of the ‘John and Mary’ radio playlets (Chow & Chan 1997).

Third, the learner should ideally have some definite use to which he or she can put the language without having to wait until global competence is acquired. This is one of the reasons behind the success of many missionaries (and, before 1997, expatriate police officers) in learning Cantonese. Ruth Hayhoe, who joined a mission in Hong Kong in 1987, began teaching Sunday school three or four months after arrival, although still unable to understand much of what the children were saying, and was soon afterwards involved in counselling drug addicts. Not everyone is well suited to the social work (particularly with young children) for which a learner could most obviously use Cantonese but another possibility would be with research projects of various types. The most ‘authentic’ use of Cantonese I made during the study period was probably an interview with a school Chinese teacher for a survey of language use in one of my previous schools.

For those interested in current affairs, an alternative might be a focus on the language of TV and radio news, another technique which Chinese University has now begun to use. As with the use of drama, it is important to reduce the problem of vocabulary overload with adequate glossing and possibly the
initial use of specially produced, simplified bulletins.

If learners are continuing in group classes then it is important that teacher-talk does not become excessive and that there are ample opportunities for students to talk themselves. Discussions and presentations on topics chosen by students would be preferable to conventional role-play. Written translation from English into Cantonese should not be part of the syllabus unless specially requested by the students. Also unless students are likely to need to make formal speeches in future, the emphasis should be on speaking from an outline rather than on writing a composition and memorizing it. If detailed correction of a speech is required it might be better to record the student’s extempore presentation and then have students transcribe and correct it themselves under the teacher’s guidance.

In an institution teaching Cantonese the importance of maintaining a Cantonese atmosphere outside as well as inside the classroom needs to be more heavily emphasized. At Chinese University the teaching staff are already doing this to a large extent but students need to be aware that this is their responsibility also and that, once they get used to it, talking to other learners in Cantonese is a low-anxiety method of getting more practice. It might also be helpful to follow the example of the former Hong Kong Bible Language Centre and employ a number of monolingual Cantonese teaching assistants on the same logic as the employment of expatriate teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools.

Finally, at the micro-level, pronunciation practice remains important but, as argued above, should not involve too much drill of individual sounds. Concentration on phrases and sentences—chosen if possible for humorous content—would be more effective. The use of authentic recordings, edited
to leave gaps for the student to 'shadow' the speaker's voice, would also be helpful. Because visual support to the ear is important for so many, learners should consider making at least some effort to get a recognition knowledge of the commoner characters. This will never give the comprehensive support that reading Roman script provides for a learner of a European language but, after a while, it will definitely help.

Conclusion

'I feel rather offended when people ask me where I picked up my Chinese. You don't 'pick up' a language like Chinese.' This comment by Professor Ruth Hayhoe probably applies also to adult learning of any language which is not very similar to one already known. To learn a language implies the detailed matching of words and phrases to meaning and, while top-down processing and compensation strategies help, there is no avoiding the fundamental task. Meaningful communication is often the best way forward simply because it is the best way of maintaining interest and therefore concentration, but the learner can only acquire those words or phrases which are distinctly heard (or seen) and are remembered. Ordinary conversation overheard by the learner rarely meets this criterion, especially when that learner has not mastered the phonemic contrasts of the language. Even with one-on-one conversation, progress is not automatic, since one can often understand the gist of a message by relying only on words already known and on knowledge of the context. What was unknown will therefore remain unknown, though items already learned may be reinforced and the learner's own fluency may be boosted.

It is this situation which explains why the two hypotheses initially proposed seem to hold true. At least with learners of my own type, you learn what you pay attention to and you learn more easily from formal study and from reading than from ordinary conversation because the former provide more
natural opportunities to focus attention on particular items. At the same time, it has to be remembered that the line between 'formal study' and 'conversation' is not a hard-and-fast one. If, by accident or design, a conversation consists almost entirely of words or phrases already well-known but one or two new items are used repeatedly or highlighted in some other way, then these items may be understood and remembered. In such a situation there might be no external evidence of this process taking place, but learners would very likely think to themselves, 'Ah, so X means Y!' It can be argued, however, that conversation promotes learning particularly well when it does take on observable, lesson-like features such as a slowing down by the native speaker, repetition, overt correction and explanation, possibly including limited use of the learner's own mother-tongue. Whether or not these features are present, the literate, adult learner who notices new language items in conversation is likely to look them up in a dictionary or to write them down shortly afterwards. If this is the way in which progress is made, it is clearly hard to establish a clear boundary between 'acquisition' and 'learning' and between 'focus on form' and 'focus on meaning.'

Whilst the rigid distinctions which Krashen sets up have to be rejected, there is obviously a role for conversational input at the right level and it is important that the learner is placed in an environment which naturally provides this. Attention has already been drawn to the reasons why Hong Kong does not readily provide such an environment for the Anglophone learner of Cantonese, but something of the same difficulty also afflicts the Cantonese learner of English, since although learning English has clear, long-term instrumental value, his or her immediate communicative needs can normally be met more effectively by sticking to the mother-tongue. As suggested
before, one way of alleviating this problem is by the introduction of monolingual or near-monolingual speakers of the native language. However, since it is hardly practical to do this on a large-enough scale, the bilingual teacher is faced with the responsibility of acting the part of a monolingual or at least of someone who may understand the L1 but does not speak it. Teacher training programmes perhaps need to emphasise the psychological preparation of teachers for this role, not just equipping them with conventional pedagogical techniques.

The final conclusion has to be the importance of the motivation of the learners' themselves. Whether one is climbing the hill from the English or the Cantonese side, commitment to the ultimate goal of reaching the summit will often not be enough to secure success. Boredom and fatigue have to be combatted with interesting scenery and with satisfaction gained from milestones along the path.
REFERENCES


Felix, S.W. 1985. 'More evidence on competing cognitive systems.' Second Language Acquisition Research, 1:1, 47-72.


Johnson, R.K. & Tang, G. 1993 'Engineering a shift to English in Hong Kong Schools.' In T. Boswood et al. (eds.), Perspectives on English for Professional Communication, Hong Kong: City Polytechnic of Hong Kong.


Larsen-Freeman, D. 1983. 'Second language acquisition: getting the whole


Li, D.C.S. & Richards, J.C. 1993. Cantonese as a second language?: a study of learner needs and Cantonese course books. Hong Kong: City University.


Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong. (Research Report No.36).
Rubin, J. 1975. 'What the good language learner can teach us.' TESOL Quarterly, 9: 41-51.
Smith, G.P. 1995. 'Learning Cantonese: how to succeed where thousands have failed.' Hong Kong Linguist, 15: 29-32.
Truscott, J. 1996. 'Review article: the case against grammar correction in L2