

*A Critical Review of Three Current Cantonese Textbooks Published for Teaching  
Cantonese for Mandarin Speakers in Hong Kong*

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The European Conference on Language Learning 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Despite the growing importance of Mandarin, Cantonese has not died out in Mainland China. There are at least over 66 million Cantonese speakers in the world, and Cantonese is classified as a language in need of preservation. The dialect is still the primary language used in Hong Kong, and spoken in the Chinese communities in Asia and overseas countries (Kovacs, 2015; Lee and Leung, 2012; Wong, 2011; Chey, 2015). Recently, there has been a rising demand for Cantonese courses in Hong Kong by students, visitors and immigrants from Mainland China. This group of learners is very different from the non-Chinese learners in their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Nevertheless, there has been very limited research conducted on teaching Cantonese for Mandarin speakers in the field of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). In view of the developmental trend towards a more “conversational,” “situational,” “contextual” and “functional” teaching approach in TCFL (Lee, 2004, pp. 83-84), this paper aims to review critically the teaching materials and teaching approaches presented in three Cantonese textbooks published in the 2010s in terms of the current pedagogical methods. The three Cantonese textbooks studied were edited and published in Hong Kong respectively by Wu in 2011; Zheng, Zhang and Gao in 2014; and Kong in 2014. In addition to evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of these current Cantonese textbooks, the paper will also explore how the materials can be used and supplemented to teach elementary Cantonese courses more effectively to Mandarin speakers.

Keywords: current Cantonese textbooks published in Hong Kong, Cantonese teaching pedagogy

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## **Background of the study**

Despite the growing importance of Mandarin, Cantonese has not died out in Mainland China. According to the research and interviews conducted by US-China Today in 2016, the rise of Mandarin has been exaggerated, and Cantonese is still “influential and relevant. The voice to protect the local culture by Hong Kong people only reinforces them to use the language more (Harbeck, 2016). There are at least over 66 million Cantonese speakers in the world, and Cantonese is classified as a language in need of preservation. The dialect is still the primary language used in Hong Kong, and spoken in the Chinese communities in Asia and overseas countries. Recently, there has been a rising demand for Cantonese courses in Hong Kong by students, visitors and immigrants from Mainland China. This group of learners is very different from the foreign learners in their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Nevertheless, there has been very limited research conducted on teaching Cantonese for Mandarin speakers in the field of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL).

## **Purposes of the study**

In view of the developmental trend towards a more “conversational,” “situational,” “contextual” and “functional” teaching approach in TCFL (Lee, 2004, pp. 83-84), this study aims to review critically the teaching materials and teaching approaches presented in three Cantonese textbooks published in Hong Kong in the 2010s in terms of the current pedagogical methods. The three Cantonese textbooks studied were edited and published in Hong Kong respectively by Wu in 2011; Zheng, Zhang and Gao in 2014; and Kong in 2014. The study will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these three current Cantonese textbooks. It will also explore how the materials can be used and supplemented to teach elementary Cantonese courses more effectively to those who speak Mandarin as their mother tongue. The paper is divided into five parts. First is the introduction to the background and purpose of the study, as presented above. Second is a review of Kong’s (2014), Zheng’s (2014) and Wu’s (2011) work respectively. Following the book review section is a comparison and contrast of the three current Cantonese textbook reviewed. After that is the evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the three Cantonese textbooks examined. Finally is to provide suggestions on how the teaching materials of the three textbooks can be used and supplemented to teach the language more effectively to Mandarin speakers. The following first provides a brief review of Kong’s (2014) book.

## **A brief review of Kong’s (2014) *Elementary Cantonese***

Kong’s *Elementary Cantonese* (初學廣東話) was published by Wanli Jigou-Wanli Shudian in 2014 in Hong Kong. In the preface of the book, Kong (2014) mentions the purpose of writing the book and its intended target readers. She states that the book is intended and tailored-made for those who come from Mainland China and speak Mandarin as their mother tongue. It aims to introduce to them the language, life style and local culture of Hong Kong people, and to enhance their interest in learning Cantonese for daily communication in Hong Kong (p.3). The book introduces the phonetics, lexis, and syntax of Cantonese systematically. She particularly points out a few specific characteristics of Cantonese that make it different from Mandarin. First, there are many colloquial words in Cantonese that are not easy to understand for Mandarin speakers; for example, “傾偈” (聊天), “飲筒” (吸管), “火牛” (變壓

器) . Second, Hong Kong Cantonese is influenced greatly by English. It has its special style; for example, transliterations of English words are used such as “巴士” (bus) “多士” (toast), “士多啤梨” (strawberry) . Third, Hong Kong Cantonese is influenced less by Mandarin in the way Guangzhou Cantonese is. Misunderstanding is always caused by vocabulary that have specific meaning in Mandarin such as “主食,” (meaning rice, bread, noodles type of dry food); “改簽” (meaning to change the ticket). Fourth, there is vocabulary commonly mispronounced by the Mainlanders because of the interference of Mandarin sound system such as “幸福” is mispronounced as “辛苦”, “一個杯” as “一個碑”, and “歐洲” as “澳洲.” Finally, there is Cantonese vocabulary specially created by Hong Kong people such as “叻” (meaning intelligent), “慳” (to save), “𨋖” (lift), “諗” (think), “嘅” (the same as 的), “啲” (something), “嘢” (thing, matter). As for the Pinyin system, the book adopts the pinyin system introduced in the *Dictionary of Cantonese Sounds* (廣州音字典) edited by Rao Bing-cai 饒秉才 (Kong, 2014, p.3).

There are altogether sixteen chapters in Kong’s (2014) book, each focuses on a specific daily life topic. The sixteen topics covered in the book include numbers, bargaining for prices, self-introduction, shopping, asking questions, making phone calls, taking a bus, shopping in the supermarket, making order in a restaurant. As regards the contents and structure of Kong’s *Elementary Cantonese* (初學廣東話), each chapter of the book basically employs a similar structure as outlined below:

1. □ Passage
2. □ Vocabulary
3. □ Life in Hong Kong
4. □ Grammar (lexis, syntax)
5. □ Expression habits (common daily life habitual expressions)
6. □ Comparisons of Cantonese and Mandarin (lexis and sounds)
7. □ Phonetics (vowels and consonants)
8. □ Exercises (drilling on tones, pronunciation of individual sounds and phrases, phonetic transcription by listening to the audio, complete information gap activities)

Kong’s (2014) work has the following characteristics which distinguish it from the two other Cantonese textbooks studied. First, the book uses simpler vocabulary which targets at those zero beginners who have little prior background in Cantonese. Each chapter contains a short passage of about eight to fifteen lines between two speakers. Following that is a vocabulary list of about 30 phrases used in the passage. The vocabulary is explained side by side with its corresponding pinyin and a Mandarin equivalent for reference. The passages are longer in later chapters with more than twenty lines each and the vocabulary lists expand accordingly in later chapters. The vocabulary introduced is usually two-character expressions used in different daily life situations.

Second, there is much emphasis on cultural knowledge. The book introduces a lot of culture topics about Hong Kong. Other than the language, it describes interesting culture elements in every chapter such as festivals in Hong Kong, respect for privacy, taboo words, interesting street names, animal metaphors used derogatively in

describing humans, a shopping paradise, Hong Kong weather, transportation in Hong Kong, vegetarian food, relations with relatives and a food paradise. Learners are learning a lot of culture subjects related to history and the society at the time when they are learning the language.

Third, there is also a heavy emphasis on colloquialism. The book introduces a lot of colloquial expressions used for daily communication; for example, the words used specially to describe money and cash in Hong Kong (p.31). It pays particular emphasis on words mixed with English commonly used in Hong Kong such as “努力 keep fit”, “keep 住新材唔好走樣” (p.83), and words pronounced similarly but expressed differently in different characters between Cantonese and Mandarin such as “餛飩” in Mandarin versus “雲吞” in Cantonese.

Fourth, there is a great proportion of material on phonetics. There is much emphasis on learning the phonetic knowledge as revealed from the exercises outlined at the end of each chapter. Exercises include drilling practice on tones, identification and categorization of the Cantonese vowels and consonants, filling out the blanks in Cantonese words according to the pinyin given, transcription of the sounds after listening to the audios, etc.

#### **A review of Zheng's (2014) *Hong Kong Cantonese Course* (Revised Edition)**

Zheng's (2014) *Hong Kong Cantonese Course* (香港話 粵語教程) was published by Joint Publishing (H.K.) Company Limited in April 2014. In the preface of the book, Li Jia-shu mentions that *Hong Kong Cantonese Course* is intended for those who would like to learn Hong Kong Cantonese. There has been a long history in teaching and learning Cantonese in Hong Kong. But in the past, most learners were foreigners who lived and worked in Hong Kong. Therefore, the learning materials were mostly designed for this group of learners to meet their needs. In recent years, with close contact between the Mainland and Hong Kong, and with more and more immigrants coming from China to Hong Kong, the learners of Cantonese have been shifted from foreigners in the past to the Mainlanders who speak Mandarin as their mother tongue. The book targets at this specific group of learners.

According to Li (2014), because of different exposures between Hong Kong and Guangzhou, there are obvious differences between the two languages in terms of their phonetics, lexis and grammar. *Hong Kong Cantonese Course* was written on the basis of the development of Hong Kong Cantonese. There is much emphasis on translation between Mandarin and Cantonese as reference in the book. Compared to the existing teaching and learning materials of Cantonese, Zheng's book is more appropriate for teaching and learning Cantonese in the Hong Kong context. Li comments that the topic of every passage of the book is appropriate. In addition, there are Cantonese and Mandarin translations for cross-reference, explanations of Cantonese phonetics, lexis, and syntax as the learning materials. The passages included in the book are all created from daily social contexts. This can help learners understand better Hong Kong culture at the same time when they are learning the language.

Li (2014) comments further that the book integrates both linguistic and cultural knowledge as a whole. It aims to enhance the cultural awareness of the Mainland people in learning Cantonese. In order to master the language effectively, they must

be sensitive to the cultural differences between Hong Kong and China. In some chapters of the book, there is a special section on basic social language used in different communicative situations for different purposes. This reveals further the practical orientation of the book. It also systematically introduces the phonetics of Cantonese, different types of Cantonese vocabulary and the syntactic structures of the language. The book employs the pinyin system of Cantonese (廣州話拼音方案) developed in 1960 by the Education Bureau of Guangzhou.

Regarding the structure of Zheng's (2014) *Hong Kong Cantonese Course*, the book consists of three parts with a total of 30 chapters. Every chapter begins with a short daily life conversation with a corresponding line by line pinyin. It is then followed by a Mandarin translation of the text for reference. The daily life topics introduced include shopping (chapter 6), weather (chapter 8), opening a bank account (chapter 11), Hong Kong clean up (chapter 15), jumping to another job (chapter 18), Ocean Park (chapter 23), Ladies' Market (chapter 27), about immigration (chapter 30), etc. The topics progress from more individual to social contexts from earlier to later chapters. This helps learners understand better different facets of the Hong Kong society and culture. Following the passage, there are explanations of the main vocabulary used in the conversation and expanded vocabulary. The latter is further related vocabulary used in a similar context of the given passage. Each chapter basically follows a similar structure as outlined below:

1. Passage
2. Vocabulary in focus
3. Phonetics and syntactic structures
4. Interesting Cantonese anecdotes
5. Language used in social situations
6. Exercises
7. Identification of Cantonese characters
8. Listening tasks
9. Short prose reading

Zheng's (2014) work also possesses unique characteristics that distinguish it from the other two books reviewed. Firstly, it is the most detailed among the three Cantonese textbooks studied in providing the explanations of lexis, phonetic and syntactic structures. The book is informative and academic, and it is a resourceful reference for Cantonese research. It provides very detailed explanations of daily life expressions, phonetics, parts of speech and syntactic structures. For lexis, the book provides detailed information such as differentiation of pairs of daily life phrases that appear to be similar but in fact very different in meanings such as “早晨” versus “早啲”, “搵” versus “找”, “行開咗” versus “走開了.” For grammatical structures, it covers parts of speech and grammatical components such as the verb “行,” numerative “零,” interrogative “定係,” preposition “同,” locative phrase with the affix “邊,” modal particle at the end of a clause such as “囉,” directional complement “出,” “入”; and sentence patterns such as “……到死,” “好似……噏,” “有冇……先?,” “都係……好啲.” For phonetics, in addition to explaining different vowels and consonants, and identifying different tones, there are explanations of the entering tones in Cantonese (入聲字). For syntactic structures, it includes the core features of Cantonese such as pronouns (呢、個、邊), interrogatives, ditransitive construction, comparatives,

quantifiers “多” and “少” following a verb, negation, verb-result structure (動補結構), sentence connectors, idiomatic phrases, cultural words, four-character words, morphemes, loan words, etc.

Secondly, there is a strong emphasis on colloquialism and cultural elements. Zheng's (2014) work describes many Cantonese anecdotes related to the origin of Cantonese, time, quantifiers such as “粒”, “孖”, typhoons, food and eat culture, the origin of Lion Rock Hill, Hong Kong money, job hunting, crimes, and colloquial words such as “髒”, “有冇搞錯”, “生性”, “沙塵”, “阿燦”, “八卦”, “執生”, “颱風”, “辛苦”, etc.

Thirdly, there is an emphasis on the social functions of language. The book devotes a particular section from chapters 11 to 30 on language used in different social situations including expressing requests, preferences, likes, beliefs, agreements, complaints, regrets, apologies, possibilities, doubts, compliments, guesses, advice, consolation. This shows that the book puts emphasis on helping learners to master the language used in different social situations.

Fourthly, there is an emphasis on phonetics, pronunciation practice and speaking tasks. In every chapter, there are exercises designed to help learners review the materials learned in the lesson. The exercises pay much attention to the review of phonetics, pronunciation practice and speaking tasks. The exercises at the end of every chapter usually include identification of the Cantonese characters according to their pinyin provided, transcription of the Cantonese characters into their pinyin, differentiation of consonants such as ( h & s) and vowels such as (eo & ou), and pronunciation of different sounds. There are also translation exercises, information gap activities, listening tasks, questions and answers in simple daily situations to help learners understand the language better and engage them to do more speaking practice.

### **Wu's (2011) *Elementary Cantonese (Fast-track course)***

Wu's (2011) *Elementary Cantonese (Fast-track course)* (粵語速成) was published by Commercial Press in Hong Kong in 2011. In the preface of the book, Wu (2011) mentions that they adopt a pragmatic approach within a sociolinguistic framework to teaching Chinese as a Second Language since most learners aim to use the language they learn in real life situations. There are a total of three books in the series of Cantonese course books developed by the Yale-China Chinese Language Center of the Chinese University. *Elementary Cantonese* belongs to Category 1: Fast track program. It is designed for Putonghua or Cantonese learners of different cultural backgrounds who want to take short courses to master the language quickly because of various reasons.

In the introduction to the book, Wu (2011) mentioned that *Fast Track Elementary Cantonese* is tailored made for those who speak Mandarin as their mother tongue. It contains a series of three books. The book aims to improve the proficiency of beginners in learning Cantonese. It uses a lot of daily life situations, practical vocabulary, lively discourse, conversation practice, and intensive pronunciation practice as teaching and learning materials. The book adopts the Yale pinyin transcription system. It also provides comparisons of Cantonese and Mandarin

examples for reference. The phonetics exercises focus on drilling those difficult sounds in Cantonese.

The book adopts a “situation and functions” framework in designing the contents. It aims to train students to use appropriate language for different purposes in specific contexts. This can be achieved through the design of effective teaching plans, teaching materials, learning activities and assessments. The book uses colloquial language in all short and long texts taught in every chapter. Conversation practice is all situated in specific contexts to strengthen pronunciation training. (Introduction, p. x)

For the contents of the book, the book encompasses daily life topics and public speaking skills in different social situations. It progresses from easier to more difficult topics and contains various social functions including introduction, inquiry, providing information, description, exposition, complaining, comparison, giving advice, etc. The book contains ten chapters. The topics include self-introduction, campus activities, eating in the canteen, go shopping, entertainment, Hong Kong weather, introducing my home, visiting a doctor, introducing Hong Kong, lives in Hong Kong. Every chapter consists of the following parts:

#### Part 1 – Passage

Every chapter contains a conversation between two or more people in a specific daily life situation. Each chapter is provided with the Yale pinyin to assist students to learn the text. The Yale Cantonese pinyin, a Cantonese written text, and its Mandarin translation are outlined clearly and correspondingly in three different columns on a page for clarity. By so doing, the reader will be less likely to be distracted by the interference of the column of Cantonese pinyin or prevented from relying too much on the pinyin in reading the text.

#### Part 2 – Vocabulary

It introduces the vocabulary used in the passage, particularly highlighting those difficult words that are difficult to pronounce and very different from Mandarin. An English translation for every vocabulary is also provided for reference.

#### Part 3 – Examples and explanations

This part provides examples of phrases and sentences for further drilling practice. It includes explanations of the meanings and grammar of individual phrases.

#### Part 4 – Phonetics exercises

The exercises focus on drilling those sounds that are particularly difficult for Mandarin speakers to differentiate and acquire (for example, difficult consonants such as ng, ch, j, h, gw, k as introduced in chapter one).

#### Part 5 – Conversation practice in a specific communicative event

Students are divided into small groups for speaking practice. A few questions modelling real life situations are given to engage students to create interesting dialogues and interact with each other for conversation practice.

Wu’s (2011) work is also written in a specific style that differentiates it from the two other works. Firstly, it is integrated and uses a pragmatic approach to teaching. The

learning materials of all ten chapters are designed to integrate both knowledge and practice in teaching the language. Students will understand the language and be able to use it for daily communication through intensive pronunciation and speaking practice. The audio recordings of all learning materials are provided to help students prepare, learn and review the materials. Secondly, the book focuses on teaching the social functions of language including recommendation, inquiry, description, exposition, etc. Thirdly, the book particularly highlights the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin in their phonetic systems, use of vocabulary and expression habits and styles for helping learners to master beginning Cantonese more effectively. Fourthly, there is much emphasis on pronunciation drilling and speaking practice in specific communicative situations. The book pays much emphasis on designing effective exercises to achieve the learning objectives. The exercises highlight difficult points for drilling practice. There is a variety of intensive drilling practices of difficult sounds, phrases, and sentences designed to help learners master beginning Cantonese effectively. Speaking practice is usually closely related to specific social contexts. The final conversation practice exercises engage learners to actually use the language for communication in different real life situations. This shows the practical orientation of the book.

### **Evaluation of the three current Cantonese textbooks**

All three current Cantonese textbooks share obvious similarities in the design of teaching and learning materials and the approach to teaching Cantonese to Mandarin speakers from the Mainland. Firstly, all three Cantonese textbooks reviewed have rich teaching contents. They all provide quite detailed explanations of the phonetic system, grammatical and discourse structure of Cantonese with concrete and specific examples as illustrations. Secondly, there is much emphasis on colloquialism and socio-cultural knowledge. All three textbooks emphasize the learning of colloquial and daily language, and they also incorporate a lot of cultural elements into the content of every chapter. Kong's (2014) work devotes two parts in every chapter specifically on Hong Kong people's life style and expression habits to introduce Hong Kong culture. Zheng's (2014) work also introduces Cantonese anecdotes in every chapter. They are all funny stories about the lively and interesting expressions used in Hong Kong. Wu's (2011) work introduces Hong Kong and Hong Kong people's livelihood respectively in chapter 9 and chapter 10. There is much emphasis on socio-cultural knowledge and the integration of culture and language in teaching and learning the language. Thirdly, all three textbooks use a situational-culturally based approach to teaching the language. The core and expanded vocabulary, sentence patterns and grammatical rules taught in every passage are all situated in a specific context or communicative event for mastering the materials effectively. Fourthly, there is a heavy emphasis on understanding phonetic knowledge, drilling practice and explanations of grammatical points and cultural knowledge. A lot of the materials are designed for helping students understand and analyze the language, as revealed particularly from comparisons and contrasts of Cantonese and Mandarin in their sound systems, lexis and grammar among all three textbooks. There is also a lot of attention on phonetic knowledge, as revealed from the exercises designed at the end every chapter, such as identification of the pinyin following listening to the audio, transcription of Cantonese words, matching the pinyin with the right characters, etc. This is particularly noticeable in Kong's (2014) and Zheng's (2014) works. All three textbooks also design a lot of intensive drilling exercises on the pronunciation of



individual sounds, phrases, sentences and prose reading to help learners master the language. Overall, it appears that there is still relatively more emphasis on knowing the language than actually engaging learners to use the language practically in task-based communicative situations. This is more apparent in Kong's (2014) and Zheng's work (2014).

Despite the many similarities among the three textbooks in the approach they use to design the teaching materials, each of the three textbooks still has its own unique features that distinguish them from each other. Firstly, Kong's (2014) work is the simplest and the easiest among the three books. It is more appropriate for teaching zero beginners who have very little prior knowledge of Cantonese. Secondly, Zheng's (2014) work is the most academic one among the three textbooks. It provides very much in-depth and detailed description of the lexis and grammar of Cantonese in every part of all chapters. It is a resourceful textbook for Cantonese research. Nevertheless, some of the vocabulary taught may be a little bit difficult for beginners of Cantonese, and the style also appears to be a little bit formal, and not really very conversational in tone; for example in chapter 21 (p.253, p. 254), there are expressions such as:

- (4) 發生乜事,主要係通過大眾媒介去傳播,  
譬如講,報紙.
- (5) 喺先嚟香港嘅人,一般都會同意嘅睇  
法: .....
- (15)香港社會嘅生活特徵正啱都包容喺呢  
度.

Thirdly, Wu's (2011) work is the most communicative and task-based oriented among the three books. Wu's (2011) book pays more attention to interactive and communicative activities as there are situational role play dialogue practices between two speakers at the end of every chapter. The communicative activities designed by Zheng's (2014) work are mostly questions and answers between two people rather than long conversations in simulated real life communicative situations. Kong's (2014) work focuses more on word or sentence drilling practice or information gap filling tasks rather than engaging students in comprehensive contextual conversation practice.

### **Suggestions on the way to use the three current Cantonese textbooks**

The three elementary Cantonese textbooks are all substantial and resourceful materials for teaching the language. Nevertheless, overall there is too much emphasis on understanding the phonetics and transcription of Cantonese words into pinyin as a learning tool. According to the article – “The eight effective rules of learning Cantonese by the Mainland students”-- published by Hong Kong Mainland Student Association (p. 1), learning Cantonese pinyin system is not an effective way to acquire the language as it is a highly complex system that is very time consuming and not a necessary tool for learning the language. In fact, it is preferable to learn to speak the language first through actual communication rather than spending too much time on understanding the pinyin system before learners actually learn to use the language. Learners can reflect on their pronunciation mistakes made with the help of the

phonetic knowledge rather than being bound by it in learning to speak the language effectively (Hong Kong Mainland Student Association, p. 1) There is differentiation between “teaching” and “training” as suggested by Lee (2004, p. 159). Rather than teaching the language as passive knowledge by explaining its phonetic and grammatical structures, vocabulary and cultural elements, there should be more interactive and communicative task-based activities designed to engage learners to acquire the listening and speaking skills pragmatically since Cantonese is primarily a spoken language. Attempts should be made to use more authentic audio-visual sources and multi-media materials such as Cantonese songs, videos or movies, and computer assisted self-access learning materials for drilling practice, comprehension and listening exercises and conversation tasks. Some other lively and interesting learning activities like picture description, story-telling, role-playing, speech presentation, etc. can be included to help learners master the vocabulary, grammar, and communication strategies in a more lively and interesting way.

To conclude, all three textbooks cannot be used wholesale for delivering a beginning Cantonese course of 32 hours. Instead, a variety of supplementary authentic materials as mentioned above should be specially used to develop a curriculum that can meet the needs of learners. Most learners aim to master the skills of listening and speaking in a short time for them to communicate either in the workplace or with their friends or family members in Cantonese. Therefore, the teaching approach used should be practical and cost-effective. Among the three textbooks, Wu’s (2011) work is the most communicative and task-based oriented. There is a good balance between drilling and communicative activities in simulated real life situations. The final conversation practice part is appropriate. Nevertheless, the content can still be enriched further by adopting more authentic and multi-media sources as listed above to engage learners to acquire the language in an interactive, creative and interesting way.

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