

A study on the Use of Language in the Workplace of Hong Kong

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings on a large-scale survey of languages in the Hong Kong workplace, which was carried out between 2012 and 2013. The survey covered both employers and employees across five major industry sectors in Hong Kong: Banking & Finance, Hospitality, Import & Export, Transport & Logistics and Retail. A total of 2,260 employers and 621 employees from companies with more than 10 employees answered the questionnaire. The most important results that emerged from this survey included the following:

- (1) The three most important languages in the Hong Kong workplace are Cantonese, Putonghua, and English, while the results for 'other languages' indicated that these were of relatively minor importance in the industry sectors surveyed.
- (2) For spoken languages, a distinctive pattern of language use emerges across all industry sectors. Locally, in Hong Kong, Cantonese is very much the dominant language of choice, whereas, in Mainland China, the default language is Putonghua, while, internationally, English is the majority language of choice for international communication.
- (3) For written languages, one important finding is that, overall, English remains an important language of written communication for emails and reports in the Hong Kong workplace. Indeed, according to employer reports, across all five industry sectors, the frequency of use of English in emails to customers (44%) and staff in Hong Kong (32%) is significantly higher than the use of Chinese for similar tasks (23% and 21%). Similarly, overall, English was also used with greater frequency than

Chinese for the purpose of writing internal and external reports. This broad pattern of written language use was pronounced in Banking & Finance, Import & Export and Transport & Logistics, but somewhat less so in Hospitality and Retail, where written Chinese is more frequently used.

(4) In terms of employers' responses, the expectation that employees should have a native-like command of languages was most pronounced in the case of Cantonese and written Chinese. Otherwise, it was generally accepted that a reasonable target norm for employees using spoken Putonghua and English was one that could be described in terms of a level of competence capable of producing 'effective communication' in relevant workplace activities.

(5) Employees across the five industry sectors identified their major areas of weakness as spoken Putonghua and English skills, as well as written skills in the English language, while only a relatively small percentage of employee respondents reported difficulties in written Chinese for workplace purposes.

Recommendations

(1) Given that many employers stated that there should be more support for language training (and the fact that many employees were open to improving their own language skills), it is recommended that the government should consider subsidising employees' external training in Putonghua, English, and other languages;

(2) Following (1) above, the government should also consider promoting a positive attitude to language learning through the mass media, in parallel with increased support for employees' language training in the workplace;

(3) More broadly, it is recommended that the government should utilise the results of this research in order to consider how well the needs of the Hong Kong workplace may be integrated into the wider educational system, taking into account that employers in most industry sectors expect employees at least to be able to communicate effectively in oral Cantonese, English and Putonghua and written Chinese and English;

(4) If this research is continued, it is recommended that SCOLAR should consider widening the coverage to other major commercial sectors and the civil service; and

(5) In further research, it is also recommended that the researchers should also simplify the questionnaire by (i) replacing open-ended questions with closed-ended questions; and (ii) combining reading and writing domains, which should increase response rates and hence improve representativeness.
