



Department of English Language Education

Honours Project entitled

**The effect of teacher's Hong Kong accented English on students' perception of how  
professional a teacher is**

By

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## **Abstract**

Most previous studies about non-native speakers' perception on accents concluded that non-native speakers believe that only the native "standard" accents are the most preferred, and are regarded as "perfect" and "proper". Some studies show results that are inconsistent. Moreover, previous studies seldom focus on ESL classroom contexts. Therefore, the aim of the study is to explore the relationship between accents and the professional image of teachers, and whether stereotype happens. In this study, three accent samples with the same script will be used to study participants perception on the teacher's professional knowledge on the content and about teaching. The accent samples are broad Hong Kong accent (HKBr), Educated Hong Kong accent (HKed) with features of other native English varieties and native UK accent (RP), verbal guise techniques was used to provide samples. The study is a quantitative research using questionnaire which involved 52 participants who studied in local Hong Kong secondary schools.

The results of the present study proved five main findings: 1. RP accent is still more prestigious in ESL classroom, 2. HKed accent is ranked and rated almost as positive as RP in ESL classroom, 3. HKbr has a much lower rating and ranking in all areas compared to other accents, 4. Over half the participants believe accent is not related to teaching ability and 5. Opinions varies over individuals.

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## Introduction

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1941 to 1997. Only after 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred to China and Hong Kong become a special administrative region. English has been an official language of the government until now, and the status of English remains important in business, education and trades. Many professionals, and English learners in Hong Kong take the initiative to imitate the native accents of English. However, living and learning English in the expanding circle context (Li, 2017), such expectation is impractical. Therefore, this has raised the question whether English learners also have such expectation on their teacher, and how it will affect the professional image of teachers. Therefore, this paper will set out to investigate the relationship between the accent and professional image of English teachers in Hong Kong.

Teacher professionalism is defined in many ways, and its' definition is constantly changing due to changes in the environment, individuals, culture, and other factors (Sachs, 2003). However, according to Furlong (2001), there are three major dimensions in teacher professionalism, they are “professional knowledge”, “teacher’s responsibility” and “teacher autonomy”. In this paper, we focus on the “professional knowledge” in teacher professionalism when professionalism is rated, described and analyzed.

Hong Kong accented English is also the Cantonese accented English as Cantonese is the first language to most of the Hong Kong people. Although this paper will not discuss the accent features of the vocals used in the research, as it is beyond the scope, some information about the Hong Kong accent will be useful to the reader. According to Chan (2006), Cantonese ESL learners often pronounce words with a “devoicing of voiced obstruents”, “non-release of final plosives”, and the “deletion of /n/ after a diphthong”, which can be attributed to the mother tongue influence. Some other consonantal features include “TH stopping”, “TH fronting”, “L vocalisation”, “[n, l] conflation”, “/r/ substitution”, “/v/

substitution” and “Initial consonant cluster modification” (Sewell & Chan, 2010). These features can be more significant in some speakers and less in others.

Accent differences is commonly seen in ESL classrooms, due to individual differences of cultural and educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is always controversial whether one should use prestigious accent varieties as model or accept other varieties as lingua franca or one of the world Englishes. Many researchers have come to a conclusion that many non-native speakers of English tend to prefer native accents, believing that they are more “proper” or “perfect”, and native speakers have higher ability in English (Baratta, 2017; Kaur, 2014; Hu & Lindemann, 2009). Such beliefs are often described as prejudice, bias or stereotype (Baratta, 2017; Hu & Lindemann, 2009; Zhang, 2013), as it disregards the linguistic reality (Baratta, 2017). Also, researchers also found out that English learners prefer native English variety while not being able to identify the native varieties (Scales et. al., 2006; Timmis, 2002). These studies tell us that non-native accents are often labeled as unprofessional, less capable and less preferrable. Such biased and unconstructive ideas are impractical for English learning, and it is certainly an issue in education that worth investigate.

Luk (1998) studied Hong Kong students’ reaction to and awareness of accent difference. It was found out that an overwhelming majority of students preferred the native models (RP and American accent) instead of Cantonese accented English and almost all students were aware that the accents are from a Hong Kong speaker. Hu & Lindemann (2009) suggested similar findings, which suggest that Cantonese speakers of English often “idealise the speech produced by native speakers” and “stigmatise their own variety”. Such results are inconsistent with the similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997), which suggested that speech accommodation happens to reduce dissimilarities to seek social approval. Instead, it can be attributed to the historical and

socioeconomic context of Hong Kong. It is possible that English, more specifically British or certain types of varieties of English, is associated with the symbols of power, status and well-educated images (Lin, 1996). The above studies reveal that in ESL classroom or in other English-speaking situation in Hong Kong, there could be unrealistic expectations. Thus, the effect of accents of teachers has a critical role in exploring how students perceive teachers' professional image, it is especially important for English learning in the outer or expanding circle like places in Hong Kong. Only by understanding the issue can we eradicate such stereotype and provide teachers with fair opportunities in workplace.

Nowadays, many people and researchers believe that English does not only belong to inner circle countries (Kirkpatrick, 2008). English has a wide acceptance in the world and is used in different lingua franca contexts, for different functions and in different cultural backgrounds (Kang, 2015). Therefore, the native models in the inner circle should not be the only proper and perfect models; and learners should not always regard non-native accents as undesirable. English has to be seen as an international language with more focus on communication between diverse cultures and to establish “mutual intelligibility” (Yano, 2001). Mutual intelligibility is the situation when speakers of one language can understand another related variety, hence, the lack of acceptance of intelligible accents is inefficient and pointless as English is such a widely spoken language in the world. It is more essential that students have realistic expectation and learning goals on English accent and the language itself. It may also have effect on ESL learners' (with non-native accent) confidence in language output, especially speaking. This study is therefore of paramount importance to provide new insights about the symbolic relationship between accent and professional knowledge, and to reveal accent stereotype.

While most research mentioned above revealed that non-native speakers of English preferred native accents (Baratta, 2017; Kaur, 2014; Hu & Lindemann, 2009; Luk, 1998),

some research has indicated different results. Zhang (2013) classified Hong Kong accents into “HKed” and “HKbr”, which HKbr refers to the strong Hong Kong accent; and HKed refers to the accents that tend to have some features of other native English varieties. All the participants are University students from Hong Kong. While HKbr was ranked the lowest in status and solidarity among all other 8 varieties; HKed ranked fifth in status and third in solidarity. Such results lead Zhang (2013) to suggest that “HKed is perceived almost as positively as standard varieties of English” and it may have the potential to develop into a standard variety of English.

Another study from Sewell (2012) suggested similar results. In Sewell (2012)’s study, 12 accent samples were used, and there are 11 speakers from Hong Kong, one from the United Kingdom. 52 Lingnan University of Hong Kong students rated the accents according to their acceptability. The highest overall rating was a Hong Kong speaker with several North American accent features, and the UK native speaker was rated second. The third-highest rating was a speaker who was described as a “typical Hong Kong speaker” who “doesn’t sound like a native speaker”. The result has shown that Hong Kong accent is not necessarily rated lower than other native accents, and this is not consistent with the research mentioned previously. It shows that the acceptability value is positively associated to intelligibility, and is related to feature use. Although it has been shown that specific features of Hong Kong accents will affect acceptability and intelligibility (Zhang, 2013; Sewell, 2012), this paper will not investigate in the specific features as it is too broad for the current study. However, HKed and HKbr will still be used to represent the broad spectrum of Hong Kong accent features.

Reviewing the studies mentioned previously, the results are inconsistent and most of the studies did not focus on pedagogical settings. Also, many studies did not include samples to represent Hong Kong accent with different accent features. Therefore, there are still many

uncertainties on field and the current study is essential to provide better understanding about the topic.

The current study will explore the effect of teacher's Hong Kong accented English on students' perception of how professional a teacher is. The research questions are as below:

1. Do Cantonese ESL learners think that ESL teachers with native accents can teach better than that with Hong Kong accents?
2. Do Cantonese ESL learners think that ESL teachers with native accents have better professional knowledge than that with Hong Kong accents?
3. Do Cantonese ESL learners think that ESL teachers with native accents is more proficient in English than that with Hong Kong accents?
4. Do Cantonese ESL learners think that it is more preferable to be taught by ESL teachers with native accents than that with Hong Kong accents?

The main goal of the investigation is to explore the relationship between accents and the professional image of teachers, and whether stereotype exists. Therefore, the research questions are designed to be relate accents to teaching, professional knowledge, proficiency in English and teacher preference. It is hypothesised that RP will be ranked most positively related to proficiency and professional knowledge, since people tend to believe native speakers has better language ability (Lin, 1996). HKed and HKbr are expected to have similar result in questions 1, teaching ability, with a higher rating than RP since most local students were taught by teachers with Hong Kong accents, and their learning experience could affect their perceptions. For research question 4, it is hypothesised that teachers with HKed is the most preferable teacher, as it fulfils the similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997), it has a high intelligibility, and it may contain features of prestigious accents. Considering previous research, which people tend to



idealize native accents (Hu & Lindemann, 2009; Luk, 1998), it is believed that the UK accent will come second, and the HKbr will come last.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study involves 52 participants who are studying or studied in local Hong Kong secondary school. The participants are non-native speakers of English with Cantonese as their first language. It includes both male and female participants, and English learners with different levels of proficiency. Participants come from the age range of 18-25. Before the survey begins, the participants will be informed of the purpose and procedure of the study.

### **Research design**

The current study uses a quantitative research method. Three accent samples are given to participant before completing a set of questionnaire. When providing samples, instead of using a matched-guise technique, which one individual represents different accents, this research uses a verbal guise technique. Verbal guise technique involves different speakers with different accent reading the same piece of text. Although the matched-guise technique is more successful in eliminating other factors which affect the results (e.g. voice quality, breathiness, etc.), I believe that the verbal guise techniques is a more realistic approach. It is very unlikely to find a multilingual speaker who speaks 3 accents, even after training, it still may not be reliable. Therefore, the verbal guise technique may give samples which are more authentic. To reduce speaker differences, the speakers of accents are of similar age, same sex (Female) and they are encouraged to imitate the voice and pace of the other speakers. The speakers were provided the same script for recording, which an explanation of the usage of the first conditional.

The accents selected for the study are HKbr, HKed and the a native accent from the United Kingdom, most preferably the received pronunciation. HKbr and HKed accents are used to represent the spectrum of different accent features in Hong Kong accent. They are chosen as they are the most commonly heard English accents among local teachers. The UK

accent is selected because Hong Kong was colonized by the UK, thus UK accent is more likely to have symbolic representation of “professionalism”. Received pronunciation is more preferred as it is a prestigious and widely accepted accent.

### **Instrument**

The research instrument is an English questionnaire. The questionnaire will include multiple choice questions, and will also ask participants to rate on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) in order to avoid central tendency. After some questions, participants will be encouraged to elaborate their answers in written form. Open questions will also be included in the questionnaire.



### Data analysis

This section presents the data of participants' attitude and perceptions towards the 3 accents.

In the questionnaire, a set of descriptors were provided to the participants as checkboxes, and participants were allowed to pick 3 - 4 boxes to describe the accent. There were 4 positive descriptors, 1 neutral descriptor, and 5 negative descriptors in total, participants were allowed to add checkboxes. Table 1 shows the Top 5 descriptors used in describing the accents. Although there are other descriptors provided and added, since only a small number of participants chose those descriptors, it is ignored in this table to show a more organized result.

RP has the highest number of positive descriptors, while HKed have a very similar result. Notably, RP and HKed has the same number in "Standard", and HKed has 14 less in "Rhythmic". HKbr has the most negative descriptors and least positive descriptors, which marks a stark difference with the other 2 accents. Also, HKbr has the highest number in "local", and HKed comes second, which shows that the participants were able to identify the specific accent features in Hong Kong accents. A surprising finding is that 4 participants used the descriptor "Local" for RP. Since it is not likely to find RP similar to local Hong Kong accent, there is a possibility that the participants mean "native" by ticking the box.

Table 1: Top 5 descriptors used in describing the accents

	Positive				Neutral	Negative	
	Fluent	Standard	Rhythmic	Melodious	Local	Unclear pronunciation	Unprofessional
RP	48	33	29	15	4		
HKed	43	33	15	14	16		
HKbr	15	10			25	25	11

Table 2 is the mean score and standard deviation of the 3 accents in the different areas related to the quality of teaching. RP has the highest average mean score of 3.53, HKed comes second with an average mean score of 3.41, which is a very close number. HKbr was rated the lowest in all areas with an average mean score of 2.46. In all questions, HKbr has approximately 1 mark lower than HKed and HKbr, which marks a stark difference between HKbr and the other 2 accents.

RP has the highest mean score in all areas except “Approachability” and “Ability of teaching”. In these 2 areas, HKed was rated higher than RP. HKed and RP also have a similar rating in “Ability of explaining” and “Professionality”, which HKed is only slightly lower with a difference of 0.08 and 0.06 respectively. Noticeably, the standard deviation is high in many of the questions. HKbr has the highest standard deviation for all areas except “Preference for pronunciation model”, suggesting that participants hold dissimilar attitudes and perceptions towards HKbr.

Table 2: The mean score and standard deviation of 3 accents

	RP	HKed	HKbr
Intelligibility	3.73 (0.52)	3.62(0.53)	2.73(0.62)
Proficiency	3.81(0.39)	3.44(0.53)	2.48(0.69)
Familiarity with the content	3.65(0.52)	3.44(0.66)	2.71(0.74)
Preference for pronunciation model	3.46(0.66)	3.19(0.74)	1.92(0.675)
Approachability	3.44(0.69)	3.54(0.54)	2.5(0.82)
Ability of explaining	3.39(0.68)	3.31(0.67)	2.48(0.72)
Ability of teaching	3.33(0.64)	3.39(0.59)	2.48(0.77)
Professionality	3.39(0.56)	3.33(0.58)	2.39(0.74)
<b>Average of mean score</b>	3.52	3.41	2.46

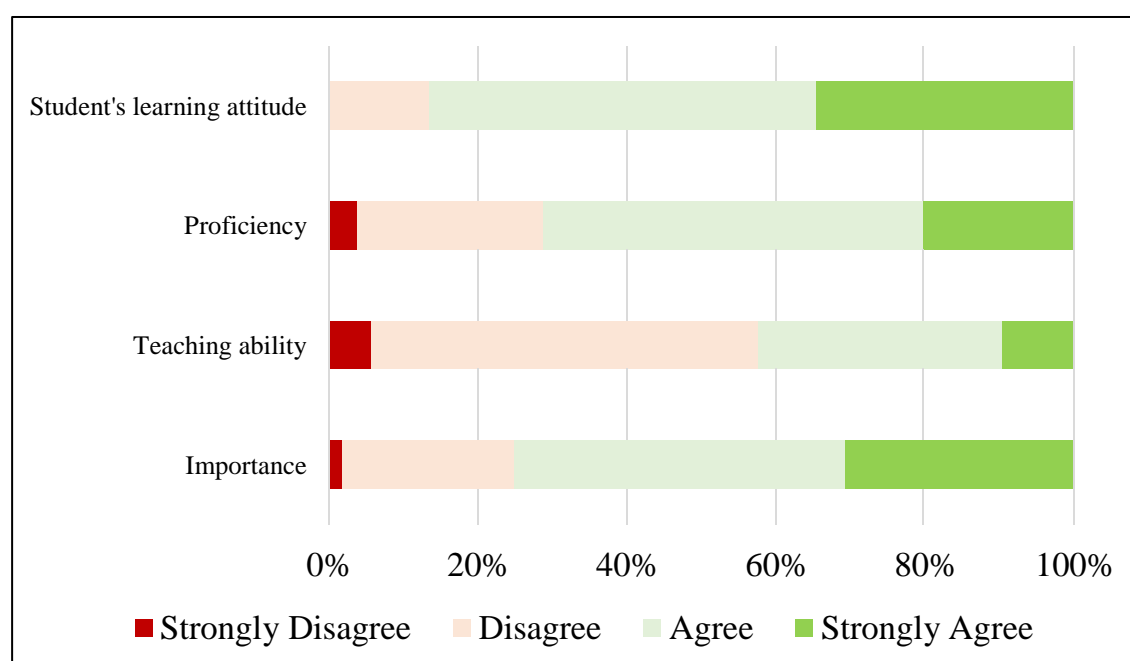
\*Participants are asked to rate 1-4 on these variables

\*1 is equivalent to least or lowest; 4 is equivalent to most or highest

\* Mean score (Standard deviation)

Apart from comparing 3 accents, this research also investigated participants' perceptions on whether accents are related to students' learning attitudes, proficiency, and teaching ability. It is expected that this relatedness between accents and these components are positively related to the importance of accent in teaching. 86% of the participant, which is 45 out of 52, agree or strongly agree that accent is related to student's learning attitude; and 71% (37 out of 52) agree or strongly agree that it is related to proficiency. Concerning teaching ability, the result is dispersed. 58% of the participants, which is 30 out of 52, disagree or strongly disagree that it is related to accent. Considering the overall importance, 75% of the participants (38 out of 52) think that accent is important in teaching.

Table 3: Participants' perceptions on whether accents are related to the components and the importance of accents in teaching



The last 2 tables are the rankings. Table 4.1 is the ranking for the most advantageous teacher in an ESL classroom. 38 participants believe that RP speaker will have more advantage in ESL classroom over the other 2 speakers. 36 participants ranked HKed the second and 49 participants ranked HKbr the third. A point to note is that none ranked HKbr

the most advantageous, and only 3 ranked HKbr the second most advantageous. Only 1 and 2 ranked RP and HKed the least advantageous respectively.

Table 4.2 is the ranking of the most preferred teacher for the participants, judging from the perspective of Hong Kong local ESL learners. RP is still ranked the highest, HKed the second and HKbr comes last. However, HKed has a comparable result with RP, which 22 participants, which is 42%, ranked HKed as the most preferred teacher. At the same time, 5 participants ranked RP as the least preferred teacher, while HKed has only 2. We can observe disputation in table 4.2 and it tells that participants have different attitudes and preferences for the three accents.

Comparing the 2 tables, although most participants think the RP speaker will have more advantage in ESL classroom, less participants chose the RP speaker to be their teacher. On the other hand, less participants think HKed is the most but more chose HKed as their most preferred teacher. 3 and 4 participants chose HKbr as their most and second most preferred teacher respectively while 49 participants (94% of the participants) think the HKbr speaker is the least advantageous teacher in ESL classroom.

Table 4.1: The ranking of the most advantageous teacher in an ESL classroom

	<b>1 (Least Advantageous)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3 (Most Advantageous)</b>
<b>RP</b>	1	13	38
<b>HKed</b>	2	36	14
<b>HKbr</b>	49	3	0

Table 4.2 : The ranking of the most preferred teacher for the participants

	<b>1 (Least preferred)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3 (Most preferred)</b>
<b>RP</b>	5	20	27
<b>HKed</b>	2	28	22
<b>HKbr</b>	45	4	3

## Discussion

The present study reveals the influence of both the similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997) and non-native speakers' attitudes that stigmatises non-native accents and idealize native accents (Baratta, 2017; Kaur, 2014; Hu & Lindemann, 2009). There are five main findings in this study.

### **RP accent is still more prestigious in ESL classroom**

The first and the most obvious finding of this study is that RP accent is rated and ranked the most positive throughout the study. In table 1, RP accent has the highest number of positive descriptors, which the positive descriptors are “Fluent”, “Standard”, “Rhythmic” and “Melodious”. Similarly, in table 2, RP has the highest overall rating of 3.52, while 4 points is the maximum. It also has the highest mean score of 6 areas out of 8, which are “Intelligibility”, “Proficiency”, “Familiarity with the content”, “Preference for pronunciation model”, “Ability of explaining” and “Professionality”. Without any background information or other proof like English proficiency level, occupation or educational level, the participants easily rated RP higher in most areas based on their perceptions. In table 4.1, most participants ranked RP to be the teacher who has the most advantage in ESL classroom; and in table 4.2, most participants preferred RP as their teacher over the other 2 accents.

The result is consistent with the studies carried out by Baratta (2017), Kaur (2014), Hu & Lindemann (2009) and Luk (1998), which suggested that non-native speakers of English tend to prefer native accents and find them more “proper” or “perfect”, and that native speakers have higher ability in English. The ratings and ranking in the present study is only based on the recordings of the three speakers. With an identical script (including the contractions), approximately same length of the recording, most of the participants not only described RP more positively, but also decided that the RP speaker is a more advanced English user, more professional and preferable teacher, etc. It is confirmed that the



participants' perceptions and attitude is affected by the prestigious quality of the RP accent, and this accords with the Standard Language Ideology. It is defined by Lippigreen (1994) that it is a set of biased beliefs towards "an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language" which is part of a "greater power construct". Similarly, with no difference in content, grammar and vocabulary, RP accent was seen as more standard for abstract reasons, and such perceptions construct power for RP speakers in ESL classroom. Quoting from an open response from the questionnaire, a participant elaborated the reason why she ranked RP the highest, "Speaker 1 sounds native, maybe she is more knowledgeable in teaching English"; another participant commented, " Society generally accept British/American accents more, so speaker 1 is the best accent model and teacher."

The idealization of RP in ESL classroom is an obvious finding of the present study. The effect on student's learning is still unknown, but it can be expected that students may have unrealistic linguistic expectation for accent, since most RP is also rated the highest for the "preference for accent model".

### **HKed accent is ranked and rated almost as positive as RP in ESL classroom**

HKed accent is ranked and rated second throughout the study with a very similar data compared to the RP accent. In table 1, HKed and RP have the same number of "Standard". Only 5 less participants chose the descriptor "Fluent" and 1 less in "Melodious" for HKed compared to RP. The difference in "Rhythmic" is more significant, 14 less participants chose this descriptor for HKed. Although HKed is still perceived as less positive, the data shows that most participants perceive HKed positively than negatively. Except "Rhythmic", HKed shares a similar set of positive and negative descriptors with RP.

Likewise, the average of mean scores of HKed (3.41) in table 2 is only slightly lower than that of RP (3.52). While the mean score of "Ability of explaining" and "Professionality" of the 2 accents only has a subtle difference, HKed has a higher mean score than RP in

“Approachability” and “Ability of teaching” with the difference of 0.1 and 0.06 respectively. The score in “Approachability” for HKed can be attributed to similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997), which speakers gain acceptances through accommodating their speech. Since the HKed speaker may have similar accent features with the participants, who are local Hong Kong people with Cantonese as their first language, the HKed speaker may gain more social approval among the participants, thus more approachable.

Comparing the ranking of HKed and RP accent in table 4.2, HKed was ranked second to RP with a slight distinction. In comparison to HKed, while 5 more participants ranked RP the first, 3 more participants ranked RP the least preferred. This suggests that RP is not necessarily superior for local ESL learners, instead, 22 out of 52 participants (42%) preferred HKed over RP teacher. With reference to the open-ended response of the questionnaire, some participants ranked HKed the highest since they find the RP speaker more “distant”, “too accented”, or “difficult to follow”, while HKed is natural, clear and easy to follow. Since local Hong Kong ESL learners are more frequently exposed to HKed accent from their English teacher, it is possible that they are more comfortable with HKed accent and find it easier to follow and more familiar to the ears.

Therefore, Apart from the similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997), the results could be associated with factors like individual learning experiences, educational background, English proficiency level, etc. For instance, participants’ learning experience with a NET teacher or a local teacher would interfere with their perceptions on the “Ability of teaching” of the HKed accent.

This finding of the present study echoes with what Zhang (2013) suggested, which “HKed is perceived almost as positively as standard varieties of English”. In the study of Sewell (2012), a Hong Kong speaker with North American accent speaker was rated even

higher than a UK native speaker. With regards to these, further questions are brought forward

– What specific features bring such positive perceptions to HKed? What makes the slight difference between HKed and the other standard varieties which people find “prestigious”?

Can HKed be developed into a standard variety?

### **HKbr has a much lower rating and ranking in all areas compared to other accents**

HKbr is rated and ranked the lowest in all the questions, with a significant difference in the data compared to the other 2 accents. As shown in table 1, HKbr has more 26 more negative descriptors than the other 2 accents, and it only has 25 positive descriptors, which is 80 and 100 less than HKed and RP respectively. Although HKed and HKbr they are also varieties of Hong Kong accent, it is shown that HKbr is perceived much negatively compared to HKed.

Table 2 shows similar result which HKbr is rated the lowest with the score 2.46. The mean score of HKbr in each area is lower than that of RP and HKed for approximately 1 mark or more, the difference is substantial. HKbr ranked the lowest in table 4, with 49 participants (94%) and 45 participants (87%) ranking it the least advantageous and least preferred teacher respectively.

While HKbr is one of the common varieties spoken in Hong Kong, it was expected that the participants would have a more positive perception towards the accent subject to the similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997). However, this finding is not consistent with the theory. Instead, participants perceive HKbr as the most negative accent among the three accents, and tend to “stigmatise their own variety” and idealize native varieties (Hu & Lindemann, 2009). The result is similar to that reported by Luk (1998) which an overwhelming majority of students preferred the native accents (RP and American accent) instead of Cantonese accented English. It is unclear why the similarity attraction phenomenon does not have the same effect on HKbr like HKed. A possible reason

is that HKed is more frequently spoken by local English teachers who have more exposure to English input with different accents, thus local Hong Kong ESL learners often listen to HKed instead of HKbr. Even in workplace, Hong Kong people tend to use Cantonese for verbal communication, English is mainly used for formal paperwork, emails, etc. Hence, outside classroom or workplace, local Hong Kong people seldom use English verbally for communication purpose, and local people rarely hear HKbr accent.

Furthermore, suggested by Sewell (2012), intelligibility is positively associated with intelligibility. HKbr could also be less acceptable due to the specific Hong Kong accent features which affect intelligibility (Zhang, 2013; Sewell, 2012). HKed has less Hong Kong accent features, thus, it also has a higher intelligibility and acceptability than HKbr. The standard language ideology (Lippigreen, 1994) is also a possible explanation for the result, since it suppresses other English variations and emphasises that there is a “standard” and “correct” way to use English. Under such circumstances, if HKbr continues to be discriminated and depreciated, it is inevitable that it will have adverse effect on students’ confidence in speaking English. Hence, is it necessary and reasonable to teach future generations that there is only one standard way to speak and use English? If it is impractical for students to learn a “standard” accent, should we start seeing other non-native accents as equal to the native accents? There is no doubt that there are rules in language like grammar, lexical structures or spellings, that are essential for higher intelligibility or better expression of ideas. However, a standard accent does not give us a more meaningful context. As long as the pronunciation is clear enough to understand, do we really need “standard” accents to enhance our speech? Not necessarily. Therefore, the main goal of oral or phonics lessons should be to deliver speech in a clear and understandable manner, instead of getting rid of non-native accents.

**Over half the participants believe accent is not related to teaching ability**

Apart from comparing the three accents, the present study also investigates the importance and relatedness of accent to other teaching-related components. As shown in table 3, most participants agree or strongly agree that accent is related to proficiency and students learning attitude. Regarding teaching ability, more than half of the participants disagree or strongly disagree that it is related to accent. The results in table 2 is also consistent. Although HKbr was still rated lowest, the difference between the highest and lowest mean score in “Ability of teaching” and “Ability of explaining” is 0.91, which are the lowest among all areas. The difference in mean scores of HKed and RP in these 2 areas and “Professionality” is also lower than all other areas.

It is clear that there is no evident that accent is directly related to proficiency and teaching ability, but more participants tend to think that accent is related to proficiency than teaching ability. This confirmed that some participants believed that although language ability can be reflected through accent features, teaching ability cannot. In reality, accent does not have absolute rules like grammar and spellings, but people tend to determine the speakers’ language ability by how “standard” his or her accent is. On the contrary, more participants realized that accent is not necessarily relate to teaching ability – a native teacher may not teach better than a non-native teacher. Although unintelligible accent may affect one’s teaching since it could be difficult for students to understand, teaching ability is not directly associated with accent. Educators, and other stakeholders to second language acquisition should be aware of this and avoid accent discrimination in workplace and schools.

### **Opinions varies over individuals**

Throughout the study, a notable phenomenon is observed – the dispersed data and high standard deviation. Shown in table 3 and 4, disputation is found in the questions and the results are not one-sided. The data implies that even the participants are from similar

backgrounds (local ESL learners with Cantonese as first language), not participants may hold dissimilar attitudes and perceptions towards the accents.

From table 2, most data has a high standard deviation of over 0.5, and HKbr has the highest standard deviation among all three accents in most of the areas except “Preference for pronunciation model”. It shows that participants may perceive the 3 accents very differently, especially for HKbr. While some participants tend to rate HKbr with a lower score, some perceive it more positively than others. Since HKbr has the highest standard deviation, it can also be concluded that the participants have the most conflicting attitudes for HKbr compared to the other 2 accents.

As discussed above, three main factors that are known to have possible effect on the perceptions and attitudes of HKbr are intelligibility, similarity attraction phenomenon, and standard language ideology. In addition, individual experience and exposure in learning and using English may also have a major impact, especially when HKbr is an English variety that the majority of local Hong Kong people speak. As a result, people could easily have contradictory opinions over this accent different consideration of the factors. It is yet to be investigate why HKbr have such a high dissimilarity in perceptions compared to HKed, and what specific accent features caused the difference.

## Conclusion

The result of the study does not entirely matches the hypothesis. Regarding research question 2 and 3, the hypothesis is identical to the result, which RP is the most positively related to proficiency and professional knowledge, HKed comes second and HKed the last. The result of question 1 is not as hypothesised. Although HKed and HKbe were assumed to have similar ratings and ranking higher than RP, it appeared that HKed is ranked top, with RP following closely, and HKbr the last. And for the overall preference for teacher in question 4, RP is the most preferable teacher, HKed is the second and HKbr the last. In most rankings and ratings, RP is perceived as the most positive with HKed following closely in the second. HKbr is always ranked the least positive while having the highest standard deviation, which implies dissimilar opinions.

The findings are consistent to many previous studies. To start with, RP and HKed are perceived more positively than HKbr. While RP is ranked and rated the most positive in most questions, HKed is perceived almost as positive as RP, and it even has a higher rating in the teaching ability. HKbr is perceived the least positive and has a rating and ranking much lower than the other 2 accents. The finding shares a similar result with other studies, which concluded that most non-native students preferred native models, and find native accents more standard and perfect (Luk, 1998; Hu & Lindemann, 2009), it also confirms with the standard language ideology (Lippigreen, 1994). The results of the perceptions towards HKed are also compatible with other studies from Zhang (2013) and Sewell (2012), that suggested that HKed is not necessarily perceived as a less acceptable than the standard varieties, it may have a similar or even higher acceptability value. The positive attitude towards HKed can be attributed to the similarity attraction phenomenon of the accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997). However, HKbr does not seem to have the same attribution to the theory. A possible reason is that HKbr lower intelligibility value, which is positively associated to

acceptability (Sewell; 2012) Individual experiences and backgrounds could also have great effect on participants' perceptions, shown from the high disputation of the data.

The findings of this research raises a several questions – how does the accent stereotype affect students' learning in ESL classroom? Can HKed be developed into a standard variety? What leads to the dissimilar opinions towards HKbr? What causes the discrimination towards HKbr, and how does the students react to it? While the present study made clear of the perceptions and attitudes that local ESL learners hold towards RP, HKed and HKbr, further work is needed to fully understand its implication to educators.





### **Limitations and future studies**

To begin with, if the research is to be moved forward, a better understanding of participants background will be required. More research into participants' educational background, such as whether they study in an EMI or CMI school, their English proficiency level, the accent they speak, etc. Furthermore, since the spectrum of Hong Kong accent is broad, researchers may also investigate in the specific features of the Hong Kong accents that caused the stark difference of the result of HKed and HKbr. More Hong Kong accent samples can also be used to represent the spectrum.

To begin with, the main weakness of the study is the small sample size of 52 participants. A bigger sample size will provide more valid and reliable data, thus, if more resources are available, an increase in sample size should be considered in future studies. Also, it is unfortunate that the study could not use the verbal guise technique instead of a matched guise technique. The present study failed to find a person who can speak 3 accents naturally, and it was believed that it would be impractical to train a person to speak the accent. If possible, a matched guise technique could minimize the difference in voice quality, such as breathiness, tone and pitch. This could bring a more valid result to the study, and the difference in the perceptions and attitudes towards the accents can truly be based on solely the accent itself. Thirdly, the study only included one native accent as sample, and it is RP, an accent which is often considered as the most prestigious. Thus, the results are unjust since RP cannot represent the full spectrum of native accents. When the research is repeated, scholars should consider adding a few more accent samples such as American accent, Cockney accent and Welsh accent so to provide a more complete insight. Last but not least, the absence of a control group is a great downplay. A controlled group with native speakers of similar educational background should be considered in further research, to confirm the effects of the independent variables.

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## Appendices

### Sample questionnaire

#### Basic information

Age: (Below 18/ 18-26/ 26 or above)

Sex: (Male/ Female/ Other sexualities)

Educational level: (Primary education/ Secondary education/ Bachelor's degree/ Master's degree/ Doctoral degree or higher)

#### Education background

Is English your second language? : (Yes/ No)

What is your first language? : (Cantonese/ Putonghua/ English/ Other)

Did you study in Hong Kong during your secondary education? : (Yes/ No)

Did you study in a local secondary school or in an international school? (Local secondary school/ International school)

Was your school EMI (English as a medium of instruction) or CMI (Chinese as a medium of instruction)? (EMI/ CMI)

#### Section A

Please listen to the recording before this section starts.

How would you describe the accent of speaker 1? (You may tick 3-4 boxes and add check boxes)

<input type="checkbox"/> Fluent	<input type="checkbox"/> Standard	<input type="checkbox"/> Rhythmic	<input type="checkbox"/> Melodious	<input type="checkbox"/> No intonation
<input type="checkbox"/> Not clear in pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> Weird	<input type="checkbox"/> Unacceptable	<input type="checkbox"/> Unprofessional

Rate the speaker 1's accent in terms of how understandable it is.	1	2	3	4
Based on your own judgement, rate the speaker 1's proficiency in English.	1	2	3	4
Based on your own judgement, rate the speaker 1's familiarity with the spoken content?	1	2	3	4



I will see speaker 1 as my English pronunciation model?	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 1 is an approachable teacher.	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 1 is good at explaining difficult concepts.	1	2	3	4
In general, I think speaker 1 is good at teaching.	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 1 is a professional teacher.	1	2	3	4

\* 1 – lowest score/ strongly disagree ; 4 – highest score/ strongly agree

### Section B

Please listen to the recording before this section starts.

How would you describe the accent of speaker 2? (You may tick 3-4 boxes and add check boxes)

<input type="checkbox"/> Fluent	<input type="checkbox"/> Standard	<input type="checkbox"/> Rhythmic	<input type="checkbox"/> Melodious	<input type="checkbox"/> No intonation
<input type="checkbox"/> Not clear in pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> Weird	<input type="checkbox"/> Unacceptable	<input type="checkbox"/> Unprofessional

Rate the speaker 2's accent in terms of how understandable it is.	1	2	3	4
Based on your own judgement, rate the speaker 2's proficiency in English.	1	2	3	4
Based on your own judgement, rate the speaker 2's familiarity with the spoken content?	1	2	3	4
I will see speaker 2 as my English pronunciation model?	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 2 is an approachable teacher.	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 2 is good at explaining difficult concepts.	1	2	3	4
In general, I think speaker 2 is good at teaching.	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 2 is a professional teacher.	1	2	3	4

\* 1 – lowest score/ strongly disagree ; 4 – highest score/ strongly agree

### Section C

Please listen to the recording before this section starts.

How would you describe the accent of speaker 3? (You may tick 3-4 boxes and add check boxes)

<input type="checkbox"/> Fluent	<input type="checkbox"/> Standard	<input type="checkbox"/> Rhythmic	<input type="checkbox"/> Melodious	<input type="checkbox"/> No intonation
<input type="checkbox"/> Not clear in pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> Weird	<input type="checkbox"/> Unacceptable	<input type="checkbox"/> Unprofessional

Rate the speaker 3's accent in terms of how understandable it is.	1	2	3	4
Based on your own judgement, rate the speaker 3's proficiency in English.	1	2	3	4
Based on your own judgement, rate the speaker 3's familiarity with the spoken content?	1	2	3	4
I will see speaker 3 as my English pronunciation model?	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 3 is an approachable teacher.	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 3 is good at explaining difficult concepts.	1	2	3	4
In general, I think speaker 3 is good at teaching.	1	2	3	4
I think speaker 3 is a professional teacher.	1	2	3	4

\* 1 – lowest score/ strongly disagree ; 4 – highest score/ strongly agree

Section D \* 1 – strongly disagree ; 4 – strongly agree

1a. To what extent do you agree that one's proficiency in English is related to one's accent?

(1/ 2/ 3/ 4)

1b. Why?

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2a. To what extent do you agree that one's teaching ability is related to one's accent?

(1/ 2/ 3/ 4)

2b. Why?

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3a. To what extent do you agree that a teacher's accent affects students' learning attitude.

(1/ 2/ 3/ 4)

3b. Why?

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4a. To what extent do you agree that accent is important in teaching.

(1/ 2/ 3/ 4)

4b. Why?

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5a. Based on your prediction, which speaker will be in a more advantageous position being a teacher in an ESL classroom? (1- Least advantageous; 3- Most advantageous)

Speaker 1	
Speaker 2	
Speaker 3	

\*Please compare the speakers and do not give the same rank

5b. What are your choices and why?

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6a. As a local student studying English as a second language, which speaker would you prefer as your teacher? (1- Least preferred; 3- Most preferred)

Speaker 1	
Speaker 2	
Speaker 3	

\*Please compare the speakers and do not give the same rank

6b. What are your choices and why?

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