

Filipina Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong: Domestic Language Use, Attitudes, and Linguistic Awareness—An Empirical Survey

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Although the importance of the so-called *foreign contract workers* (alternatively *domestic helpers* or *maids*) from the Philippines in the linguistic situation in Hong Kong has been noted in the literature, little research has been devoted to this topic so far. Based on recent statistical surveys and a questionnaire study conducted in 2010, this paper tries to shed some light on the potential impact the Filipina domestic helpers may have on the acquisition of English by the (Cantonese-speaking) children of Hong Kong. The study found, inter alia, that 67% of the respondents reported speaking English with their employers, and 82% with the children of their employers. Also, the results showed that nearly all respondents deemed speaking English with the children as very important (87%) or important (11%) and that the Filipina helpers are aware of their role as informal language teachers. As a side-effect and an additional point worth reporting, the study revealed a striking awareness by respondents as regards the differentiation of English into distinct varieties in general and those spoken in Hong Kong specifically.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Filipinas, domestic helpers, English, informal language teachers

Introduction

Hong Kong is considered a highly multicultural city. The dominant ethnic group of Hong Kong's population is Chinese, including local Hongkongers as well as people from Mainland China. Yet there are also numerous other ethnic groups, such as Indians, Parsees, Eurasians, Japanese, Malaysians, Nepalese, Pakistanis, and Thais (see Bolton, 2003, p. 115). The two most significant non-Chinese minorities, though, at least in numeric terms, are the Indonesians and Filipinos.

In Hong Kong, there are hundreds of thousand foreign domestic helpers (FDHs), who work as so-called live-in caregivers or “maids”. Commonly, they reside in their employer's home and take over the responsibility for the employer's child or children and household. It is predominantly women from the Philippines and Indonesia who come to Hong Kong to seek employment as domestic helpers. The most important reasons for them to go abroad are bad employment conditions, dramatic underpay, or vast poverty in the FDHs' respective home countries. As Tyner (2009, p. 71) explains, Hong Kong is one of Asia's labor-receiving countries and has become a highly favored place for FDHs.

These *amahs* (Cummings & Wolf, 2011, p. 4)—another term for “maids”—are usually on a two-year, extendable contract. Besides their dutifulness and diligence, there is another criterion that plays an important role concerning the employment of a domestic helper: the ability to speak a foreign language. The Philippines

has one of the highest numbers of English speakers worldwide. The capacity to speak English fluently is certainly one of the biggest advantages of the Filipinos and considered one of the most important reasons for being hired as domestic helpers in Hong Kong or as overseas workers elsewhere.

Given the Filipinas'¹ linguistic capital in the sense of Bourdieu (1979) as well as the fact that many Filipinas are not proficient in Cantonese and therefore communicate solely in English to Chinese people, one can consequently assume that English-speaking Filipina helpers support the bilingual education of Chinese children concerned. Moreover, it is assumed that Chinese employers expect that their Filipina helper's proficiency in English can have a positive impact on the linguistic development of their children (and perhaps even their own).

In order to shed light on these assumptions, a field study was conducted in Hong Kong in 2010. The study was guided by the following general research questions: Does the presence of English-speaking Filipina domestic helpers support the maintenance or development of English in Hong Kong? Do the Filipinas contribute to the bilingual education of the children under their care? Do the Filipinas entrusted with childcare have a self-concept as "language teacher"?

Before the findings of this survey are presented and discussed, the literature on FDHs in Hong Kong will be reviewed, and a historic cum sociological perspective on the issue of FDHs in Hong Kong taken.

Review of Literature

Surprisingly, the dynamics of FDHs in the Hong Kong community is a vastly unexplored field, despite the fact that Filipina and Indonesian domestic helpers are more present in Hong Kong than elsewhere. One reason for this scarcity of literature might be the fact that the employment of live-in FDHs on a broad societal scale is a phenomenon restricted to Asia,² which may not have attracted much global attention. Yet even in Hong Kong, although the importance of the FDHs in Hong Kong society has been noticed, little research has been devoted to this topic so far.

A major economic study of the domestic helper market in Hong Kong is Constable's *Maid to Order in Hong Kong* (1997/2007), published in two editions. She evaluates socio-economic structures related to the FDHs and their labor market and reflects on changes and future developments.

Furthermore, there is also a study (published in electronic form only) by Ignacio and Mejia (2008) on *Managing Labour Migration: The Case of the Filipino and Indonesian Domestic Helper Market in Hong Kong*, which focuses on migration infrastructures within the sending and the receiving countries, limitations of the migrant workers' welfare and rights and exploitation of FDHs, especially in the domain of domestic labor.

From a linguistic point of view, to the best of our knowledge, the issue of FDHs in the linguistic situation of Hong Kong has only been addressed in Bolton (2003) and Crebo (2003). While Bolton (2003, p. 203) mentions the issue only in a short paragraph, Crebo's (2003) *Filipina Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong and Their Role in English Language Learning* is an MA-thesis exclusively dedicated to the topic at hand. Crebo's case study of three Chinese households investigated the linguistic influence that English-speaking domestic helpers from the Philippines have on Chinese children under their care. Her findings show, inter alia, that the FDHs spent more time outside the classroom with the children in care than the Chinese parents. Furthermore, the English proficiency of Chinese children who live with a Filipina domestic helper was better compared to

¹ All participants in our survey are referred to as "Filipina(s)" since the overwhelming majority of them are female.

² Other countries with a comparatively high number of FDHs are Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia (De Guzman, n.d.).

the proficiency of their Chinese classmates who do not have an FDH at home. Crebo's study highlights the role of the domestic helpers as teachers.

Outside of academia, the theme of FDHs has also been picked up in cinematic and literary works. There are the low-budget films *Wan Chai Baby* (2011) by Craig Addison and *Sunday Morning in Victoria Park* (2010) by Lola Amaria, which respectively depict the fates of Filipina and Indonesian domestic helpers in Hong Kong. The book *The Unwalled City* (2001) by Xu Xi features Filipina domestic helpers and their childcare in English.

In the following, we will briefly introduce the historical and sociological background in which our study is situated.

A Note on the Linguistic Situation in Hong Kong

From 1843 until 1997, Hong Kong was a British colony. After the Handover in 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. Although Hong Kong was annexed to China again, the archipelago tries to keep its autonomy. The struggle for independence and autonomy is reflected in language policy. Unlike in Mainland China, the vast majority of the population in Hong Kong speaks Cantonese, not Putonghua (i.e., Mandarin), as first language. Besides, and not only due to the colonial history, English is widespread in Hong Kong. According to Hong Kong's basic law, Chinese and English are the official languages of the SAR. "Chinese" is not defined, but de facto means Cantonese in spoken language, though the government strongly promotes a trilingual policy of Cantonese, Putonghua, and English.

As both English and Cantonese have coexisted throughout the colonial period, bilingualism in Hong Kong has a long history. Although the Chinese-speaking population constitutes the vast majority (with 93.6% of Hong Kong's population, according to the 2011 statistics (Hong Kong Government, 2012)), English serves as the lingua franca for the various groups in Hong Kong, such as the domestic helpers (many of whom had already come to Hong Kong before the Handover), expats, and tourists, and, in the linguistic landscape of the city, appears to be nearly as visible as Chinese.

Statistical Facts and Sociological Background

The global presence of Filipinos has been acknowledged for decades. During the colonial era, Filipinos moved abroad, mainly to the United States, for economic reasons. In the early 1990s, approximately one and a half million migrant workers from the Philippines labored legally overseas and another half million illegally (Tyner, 2009, pp. 12-20). In her book, Constable (2007, p. 32) adds a statistic from 2003, indicating that over seven million Filipinos were living abroad and half of them were signing contracts for temporary employment. Today, the presence of about eight million Filipinos worldwide supports even more the argument that the Philippines has one of the biggest *hypermarkets*³ of human labor transfer (Tyner, 2009, p. 35). Whereas 142,556 Filipinos were counted in 2001, "only" 133,018 Filipinos were temporarily resident in Hong Kong in 2011 (Hong Kong Government, 2012).

As to Hong Kong specifically, in the first quarter of 2001, 5.2% of Hong Kong's population consisted of ethnic minorities. Altogether, 343,950 people from ethnic minorities were registered in 2001. According to the figures of 2001, the two dominant ethnic minorities in Hong Kong were Filipinos (41.1% in 2001) and Indonesians (14.7 % in 2001). In 2011, 6.5% of Hong Kong's total population belong to ethnic minorities, with

³ In the context of the FDHs, the term hypermarket describes an economic market where labor recruitment is conducted in the process of globalization. It is an international migration industry that mediates overseas employment.

a total number of 365,611 (Hong Kong Government, 2013).

However, in 2011, according to the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (Hong Kong Government, 2012), the figures for Indonesians and Filipinos were almost identical: 133,377 Indonesians were counted that year, as compared to 133,018 Filipinos; each group constitutes 1.9% of Hong Kong's total population (6,620,393). In other words, while Indonesians still form the major of Hong Kong's ethnic minorities (though only by a very slight margin), there has been an increase of Filipinos living in Hong Kong.

The shift in numbers may have something to do with the image of the two ethnic groups in Hong Kong (who, to remember, are the two groups who constitute the vast majority of FDHs⁴) or the changing needs of Hong Kong society. In Hong Kong, Filipinas are popular because of their competence in English (cf. Crebo, 2003, p. 2).⁵ The "Westernized other[s]" (Lan, 2006, p. 77) or "Americanized [others]" (Constable, 2007, p. 39), are preferred by Chinese employers with small children. As Constable (2007, p. 40) has noted, due to their proficiency in English, they can speak and teach English to Chinese children. In contrast to the Filipinas, Lan (2006) describes Indonesians (or rather the way they are perceived) as "the traditional other[s]", as "docile women" who are "obedient, slow and living the simple life" (p. 77). According to Constable (2007), Indonesian workers are considered to be more submissive and hence "do not 'cause trouble' as Filipinas do" (p. 40). Additionally, they are preferred for the care of Hong Kong's elderly. Older Chinese people usually only speak Cantonese. Unlike the Filipinas, Indonesians acquire Cantonese in their training centers prior to their arrival in Hong Kong (Constable, 2007, p. 40).

According to the figures of Hong Kong's Census and Statistics Department (Hong Kong Government, 2014a), Hong Kong's population was 7,136,300 in mid-2012. In 2011, the number of domestic households was 2,368,362 and, in mid-2012, 2,382,000. As these figures show, the overall population of Hong Kong as well as the number of domestic households is increasing. According to the latest statistics, approximately every ninth domestic household employs at least one domestic helper from either the Philippines or Indonesia. People from other ethnic minorities are not included in this estimate. According to the data provided by the Census and Statistics Department (Hong Kong Government, 2014b), the average size of domestic households amounts to 2.9 persons. The stereotypical image of the nuclear Hong Kong Chinese family (two parents and one child) thus holds true.

The figures for 2013 indicate that 3,764,800 people are employed. Correlating this figure with the number of domestic households above—which is 2,414,800 by the end of 2013 (Hong Kong Government, 2014b)—indicates that the ratio of double-income families is high.

Due to the increase of double-income families, the demand for FDHs is growing.⁶ Since FDHs are not only responsible for housekeeping but also for child or elderly care, one can assume that they are mainly employed when there is a third family member who depends on home care—either a child or an elderly—while the employers of the FDH work full-time.

The Study

Methodology

This field study was set up with the intention to gather data on sociolinguistic aspects concerning Filipina

⁴ Other ethnic groups employed as FDHs include Sri Lankans and, recently, Bangladeshis (see below).

⁵ The Filipinas' competence in English has become a political issue in Hong Kong. It is feared that due to this competence, they would have a competitive edge over local Hongkongers if they were granted the right of abode (cf. Journeyman Pictures, 2012).

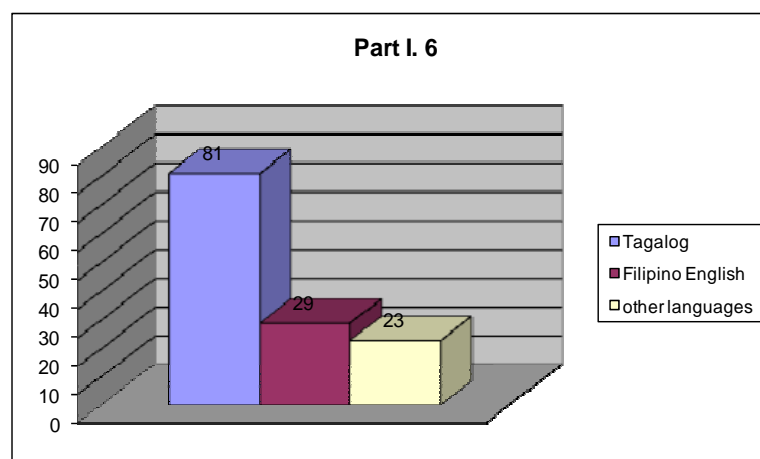
⁶ Recently, Hong Kong welcomed a first batch of FDHs from Bangladesh, a country with which a domestic helper agreement was signed, to alleviate the shortage of FDHs in Hong Kong (Ho, 2013).

domestic helpers in Hong Kong. For that purpose, given the scarcity of literature noted above, a fairly long questionnaire was developed. It comprised 48 questions (multiple choice and open). Furthermore, the questionnaire consisted of three different parts. The first part aimed at obtaining personal background information of the respondents. Questions about original descent and provenience, mother tongue, family status, and educational background were asked. The second part dealt with questions about the present employment situation of the respondents in Hong Kong, specifically about their duties, working hours, their linguistic potential, and their attitudes towards English. The last part was concerned with the use of English between the respondents and their Chinese employers. Among other things, the focus here was on parental demands, language learning, and the role of FDHs as informal language teachers. One hundred questionnaires were distributed in Hong Kong from October to November 2010, and the data here is based on results gathered from these questionnaires. The exact areas of research were Harbour Street, the HSBC Headquarter Building, and Statue Square. All three areas are crowded by Filipinas on Sundays, their only day off. On two Sundays (17th and 24th October 2010) and within a period of 11 hours, the data was collected. Together with a research assistant, we distributed the questionnaires to groups of five Filipinas each, in order to guarantee a “support service” for the respondents in case of content-related questions.

The results are represented in the form of graphs. In graphs with no specification below, the figures represent the answers of exact 100 participants. In graphs that have the value $n = x$, less than 100 informants answered a question, but the figures were normalized to 100%. Graphs which are tagged with $a = x$ represent the sum of all given answers exceeding 100. These figures apply to questions that allowed for multiple answers. For this paper, only the questions that immediately relate to the research questions mentioned in the introduction are represented in graphs below, but some findings are additionally referred to in the discussion.

Findings and Interpretations

Question 6 from part I of the questionnaire elicited data on the mother tongues of the informants.



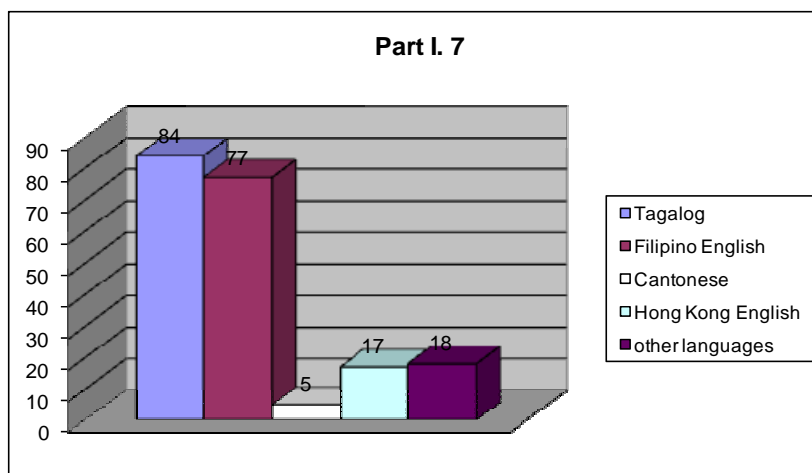
Graph 1. What is your mother tongue?

Respondents could tick “Tagalog”, “Filipino English”, and “other languages” as possible answers and were given the chance to specify the latter. In total, 133 answers were given by 100 respondents. The fact that multiple answers were given to this question indicates that the concept of “mother tongue” is a fluid one for multilingual speakers.

Eighty-one answers stated Tagalog as a mother tongue. In 29 cases, Filipino English⁷ was considered a mother tongue. In addition, 23 respondents opted for the category “other languages”. In the Philippines, more than 100 indigenous languages are counted. The respondents stated that they are speakers of, inter alia, Tagalog, Ilocano, Besaya (authors note: alternatively Bisaya or Visaya), Hiligaynon, Aklanon, and Kankana-ey. All languages named as “other languages” (with the exception of two) are indigenous to the Philippines.⁸

Some respondents, though, asserted that English, Filipino, or Cantonese is their respective mother tongue. The answers *English* and *Cantonese* were unexpected since these languages are not considered to be mother tongues of Filipinos. Furthermore, the answer *Filipino* (mentioned for the category “other languages”) was unexpected as well, since Filipino and Tagalog is considered one and the same language.⁹

After the respondents’ mother tongues had been established, the next question focused on their multilingualism.



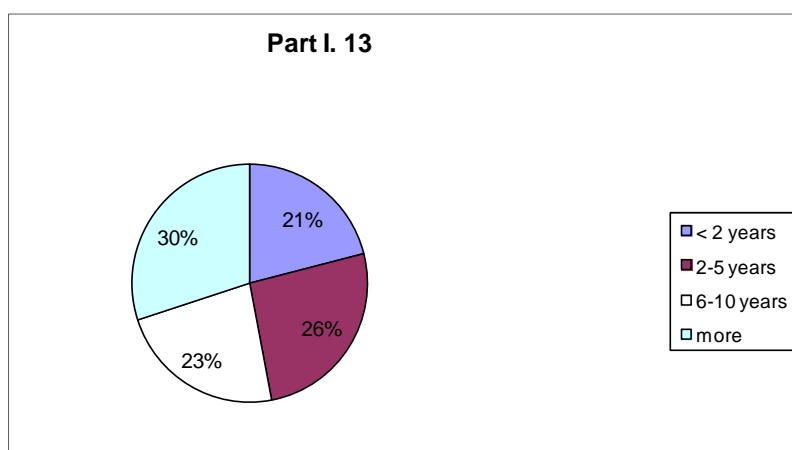
Graph 2. Which languages do you speak fluently?

This question was again designed with pre-given terms and allowed for multiple answers. In total, 201 answers were given by 100 respondents. Specifically, 84 answers referred to Tagalog, 77 to Filipino English, 18 to the category “other languages”, 17 to Hong Kong English (HKE) and five answers to Cantonese as a fluently spoken language. As mentioned above, other languages include, inter alia, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, and Besaya. While Cantonese was considered as a mother tongue by one respondent (cf. Graph 1, under “other languages”), Graph 2 shows that five respondents stated to be fluent in Cantonese. Not surprisingly, the ability to speak Cantonese correlates with the duration of residence in Hong Kong. Those respondents who ticked “Cantonese” have resided in Hong Kong for more than 10 years (one of them even for 28 years at the time of the interview). Still, given that 30% of our respondents have resided in Hong Kong for more than 10 years, the low number of responses for Cantonese is worth noting. Graph 3 captures the findings regarding the length of stay in Hong Kong.

⁷ “Filipino English” is the term commonly used by the domestic helpers themselves. We use it interchangeably with the more technical term “Philippine English”.

⁸ By means of the indigenous languages stated, the origin of some respondents could even be narrowed down. Ilocano, for instance, is a typical indigenous language of the northern Philippines.

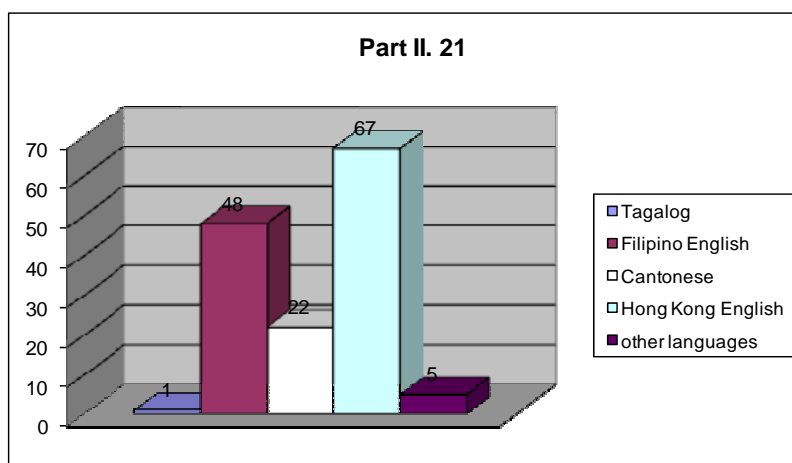
⁹ In the 1930s, Tagalog was made the official language of the Philippines. The term *Tagalog* was later changed to *Pilipino*, which in turn was then replaced by *Filipino*, for political reasons (see Gonzales, 2008, p. 21). Hence, the three names basically refer to one and the same language.



Graph 3. For how long have you been living here?

This question was answered by 100 respondents. Thirty percent, i.e., the majority of the respondents, have been resident in Hong Kong for more than 10 years. Another 26% have resided in Hong Kong between 2-5 years and 23% between 6-10 years. The remaining 21% have been living in Hong Kong for less than 2 years.

The low number of responses for Cantonese can be partly explained by considering the findings of the following question, shown in Graph 4, aimed at shedding light on the medium of conversation in communicative situations between the respondents and their Hong Kong Chinese employers.



Graph 4. Which language do you speak with your employers?

This question allowed for multiple answers; thus 100 respondents provided 143 answers. Again, the response options had been provided. Sixty-seven answers indicate the usage of HKE for communicational purposes between the respondents and their Chinese employers. In other words, the majority of the respondents stated that they use the local variety of English in conversations with their employers. As in the case of the questions II.23 and II.24, the responses to this question may be an issue of language awareness. We see three possible explanations (or a combination of them), assuming that the Filipinas still speak Filipino English with their employers. First, the sociolinguistic scenario—with HKE speakers involved—evoked by the question prompted the respondents to tick HKE. Second, the Filipinas may feel that they *are* speaking HKE with their employers because, as personal observations suggest, the Filipinas tend to (1) speak with a reduced speech rate

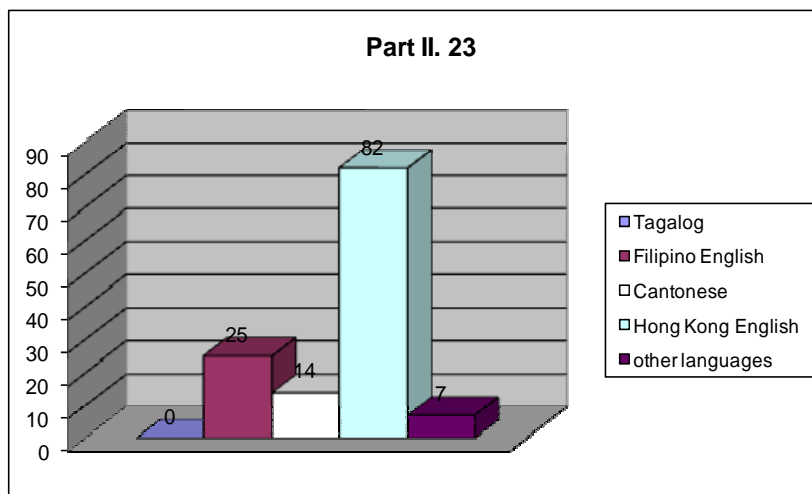
and (2) more politely or formally (as reflected in the address forms *Sir*, *Madam*, or *Ma'am*—a reference repeatedly used in the questionnaires) with the local Chinese than they do when they communicate with each other.¹⁰ Third, the Filipinas may feel that they are part of the HKE speech community, regardless of actual linguistic realizations. Apart from that, we cannot rule out that the respondents might have been influenced by the provision of “Hong Kong English” as a possible answer. The juxtaposition of Filipino English and HKE is specifically addressed in question II.24 below.

On the other hand, 48 answers confirm the usage of the Filipinas’ own variety, Filipino English, in conversations with their employers.

Unexpectedly, 22 answers (corresponding to 15%) indicate that Cantonese is used in conversation with the respondents’ employers. This figure is contradictory to the figures of question I.15, where only 6% out of 98 respondents state to be fluent in Cantonese. Leaving aside the possibility that this question was misunderstood by the respondents, it is conceivable that some employers use Cantonese when they talk to their FDHs, but the Filipinas would hardly be capable to competently reply in Cantonese.

English (category “other languages”) was counted with five answers. The remaining answers had been given to Tagalog, which, again, is a rather unexpected finding. Maybe there is a similar misconception as in the case with the usage of Cantonese. There might be one respondent who predominantly uses Tagalog in a communicative situation with the employer, but it is rather unlikely that the employer replies in Tagalog. To generalize, the answers to this question underline again a differentiation between HKE, Filipino English, and English on the side of the respondents. The reason for these differentiations, however, escapes the scope of the present study. To investigate the Filipinas’ language awareness would require another, more precise study.

The following question can be considered as the key question of the questionnaire. The findings in Graph 5 reflect the Filipinas’ behavior in communicative situations with Chinese children.



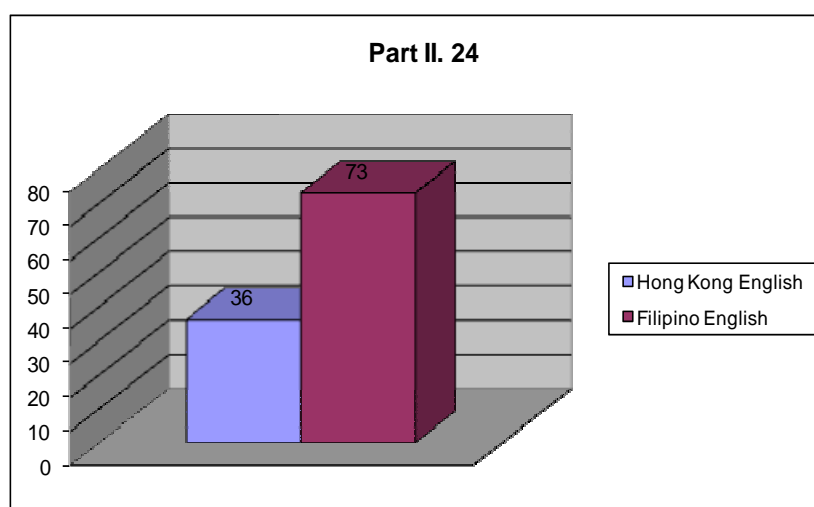
Graph 5. Which language do you speak with the children of your employers?

Question II.23 also allowed for multiple answers. Out of 128 answers, 82 refer to the usage of HKE in conversations with the employer’s child/children. Possible reasons for the reference to HKE have been

¹⁰ These forms of address that occurred in the responses confirms Constable (2007, p. 94), who claims that all FDHs from the Philippines are requested to address their employers solely by using the terms “Sir” and “Madam(e)”. Additionally, she states that they have to say “Good morning”, “Good day”, “Good afternoon”, “Good evening”, and “Good night” in the relevant situations.

discussed above. Twenty-five answers indicate the usage of Filipino English, 14 answers imply the usage of “Cantonese”, whereas seven answers had been given to “other languages” (“English”, “British English”, “American English”, and “Western English”). No answer was given to the usage of Tagalog. Here, it is rather less surprising that 14 answers had been given by the respondents for Cantonese as the medium of conversation between them and the Chinese child/children. It is possible that some Filipinas use elementary Cantonese in conversations with Chinese children until the latter have reached a certain age.

Another interesting observation is the occurrence of the term *Western English*. The differentiation of English into various varieties—apart from Filipino English and HKE—occurred for the first time in the survey. The answer shows that some of the respondents are aware of different English varieties, such as American English, British English, and “Western English”. Unfortunately, there is no answer, respectively explanation that specifies the term *Western English*. Obviously, the term refers to English spoken by “Western” people or implies L1-varieties of English.

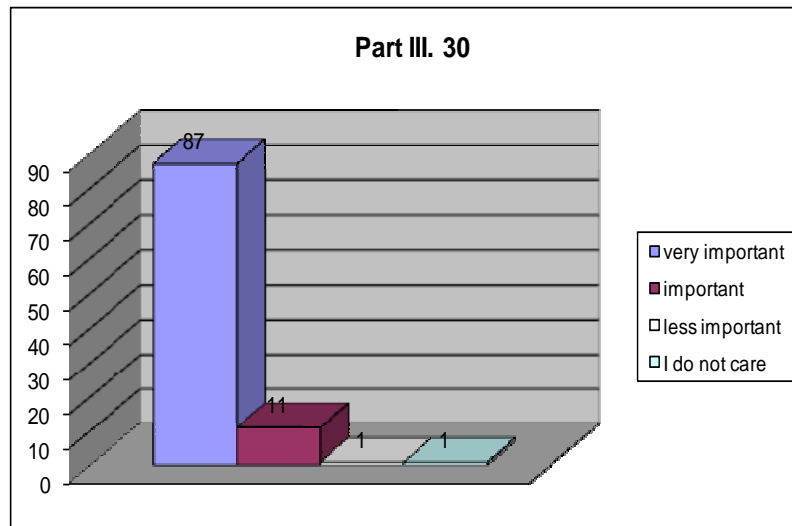


Graph 6. Would you consider yourself a speaker of Hong Kong English or Filipino English?

The present question received 109 answers, presented in Graph 6. In fact, this question was meant to be an either-or-question. Nine respondents, however, ticked both possibilities, i.e., refer to themselves as speakers of both HKE and Filipino English (perhaps due to the fact that they use, or think they use, HKE as well as Filipino English in their various communicative contexts; cf. the explanation for question II.21). It is tempting to consider the present question in relation to question I.13, *For how long have you been living here* and to correlated the answer “Hong Kong English” with the length of stay in Hong Kong. While it is true that most of the respondents who ticked “Hong Kong English” belong to the group who has been residing in Hong Kong for more than 10 years (12 respondents), all groups are represented (seven answers from those who have been in Hong Kong for less than two years, nine answers from those with two to five years of stay, and eight answers from those who have resided in Hong Kong between six and 10 years).

Since this study is not based on tape recordings, we cannot say whether the linguistic self-perception of our informants has a factual basis, i.e., whether there is evidence that they have taken on features of HKE or not, or whether some form of code-switching between HKE and Philippine English occurs.

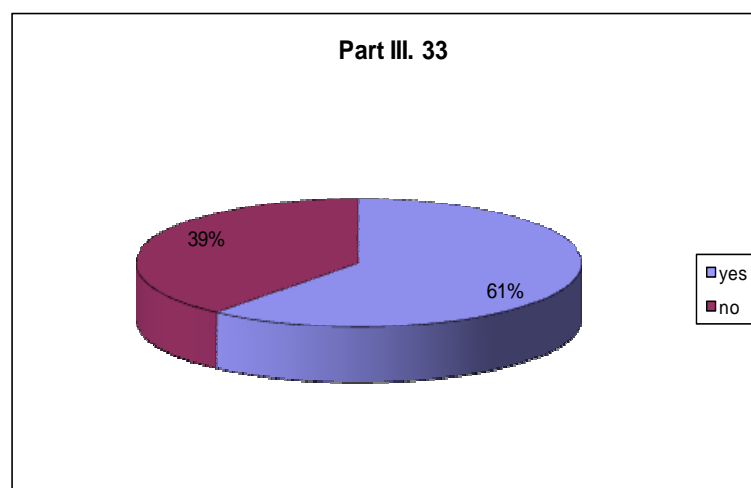
The following question focuses on the attitude of the domestic helpers towards the use of English in their daily interactions with the children under their care.



Graph 7. For you as a domestic helper, how important is speaking English with Chinese children?

The figures in Graph 7 show quite a homogenous attitude towards the use of English with Chinese children. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents find it *very important* to communicate in English to Chinese children. Another 11% finds it *important*, 1% finds it *less important* and 1% *does not care*. It is remarkable that five more respondents shared their opinions on this question than on question II.28, although the latter question also related to Chinese children. The vast majority of the respondents deem the use of English—which is intrinsically tied to their role as informal language teachers—as very important or important. The questionnaires of the two Filipinas who find it *less important* or *do not care* are not conclusive as to why they gave these answers (The respondent who ticked *do not care* is responsible for a one-year old infant, and speaking English may not be an immediate concern).

The following question concentrates on the respondents' attitudes towards HKE, which, originally, has been a foreign variety to them.

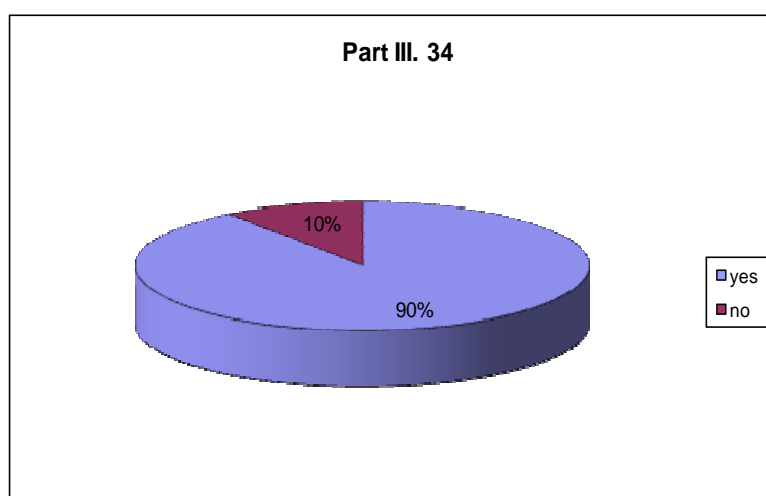


Graph 8. Do you feel comfortable with Hong Kong English?

All respondents answered the question, i.e., 100% (which could be an indication that this question is especially relevant to them; see Graph 8). Out of 100 respondents, 61% feel comfortable with HKE, whereas

only 39% feel less comfortable with HKE. Of the respondents who do not feel comfortable with Hong Kong English, 11 belong to the group who have stayed in Hong Kong up to two years, that is, more than 50% of that group (see I.13); whereas, in contrast, only one-third of the group of domestic helpers who have resided in Hong Kong for more than 10 years feels uncomfortable with HKE. These figures show that the longer the Filipinas stay in Hong Kong, the more comfortable they feel with the local variety of English.

On the other hand, several reasons could account for negative attitudes towards HKE displayed in the response. Amongst those reasons, national pride and solidarity with the respondents' home country or negative experiences with Hong Kong people could play important roles. As a truism, language can be a symbol of cultural distinction. Thus, some Filipinas might cling to their own variety of English in order to keep up their cultural distinctiveness; it is possible that they consciously differentiate themselves from the Chinese speech community by means of language choice or psychological rejection of HKE. This assumption is further evaluated in the following question.



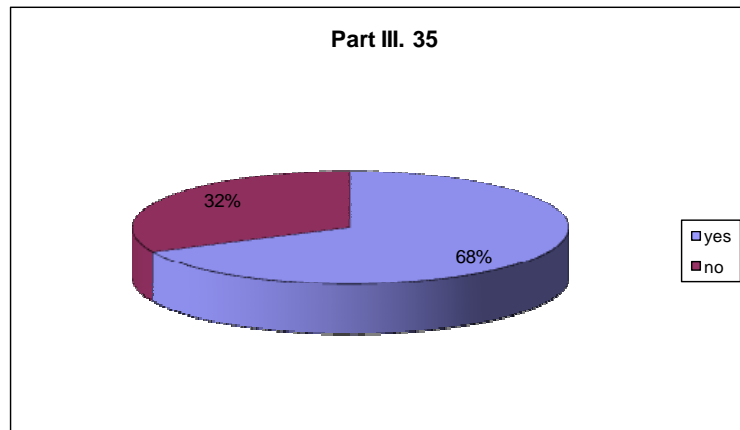
Graph 9. Do you identify yourself through language usage?

Ninety-one respondents answered the question. The results in Graph 9 show that 90% claim to identify themselves through language usage, whereas 10% do not. The figures demonstrate the symbolic importance of language use and language choice for individuals. As stated above, language functions as a cultural marker that helps to differentiate between ethnic groups. Speaking a specific language, a variety, or a dialect categorizes and defines people and helps in (self-)identification.

As regards the interplay between HKE and Philippine English, one could speculate that an awareness of the use of Philippine English in interactions with Chinese implies dissociation from Hong Kong's society. Since the vast majority of respondents cannot imagine staying in Hong Kong for the rest of their lives (question I.14¹¹), they do not have to adapt to Hong Kong's society—at least not through language (variety) choice. As already mentioned, it is an open question to what extent the Filipinas in Hong Kong linguistically adapt to HKE. Do they actually show features of HKE or do they only think they speak it?

The issue of language attitudes and awareness is also the concern of the following question, which tries to shed light on the respondents' position towards Hong Kong's predominant language, Cantonese.

¹¹ In total, 96 respondents answered the respective question. Out of them, 91 respondents want to leave Hong Kong one day.

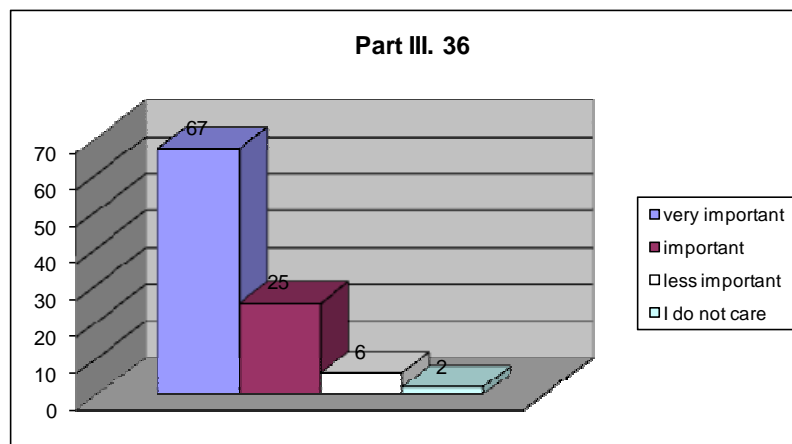


Graph 10. Do you feel more comfortable in Hong Kong when you are able to speak Cantonese?

The question was answered by 98 respondents. Out of them, 68% would feel more comfortable if they were proficient in Cantonese (see Graph 10). Although the figures of question I.7 indicate that only a small number of respondents speak Cantonese, the majority of the respondents feels that acquiring this language would facilitate their life in Hong Kong. In other words, for them, speaking Cantonese may be a desideratum. Some respondents gave reasons for their answer. Those who do feel more comfortable with Cantonese complained about difficulties and misunderstandings in conversations with Chinese Hongkongers. These responses can be related to question III.41, *Do you see a need for Hong Kong people to learn and speak English*, to which the vast majority of respondents (96%) answered in the affirmative. Therefore, communication between Filipinas who do not speak Cantonese and local Chinese who do not speak English (well) is virtually impossible. The Filipinas who do not have Cantonese language skills often reach their limits in communications with Cantonese speakers.

On the other hand, 32 respondents do not see an advantage if they spoke Cantonese (if that is implied in “feeling comfortable”). Either they did not experience difficulties in conversations with Chinese people or they simply do not care about limitations due to their lack of language skills.

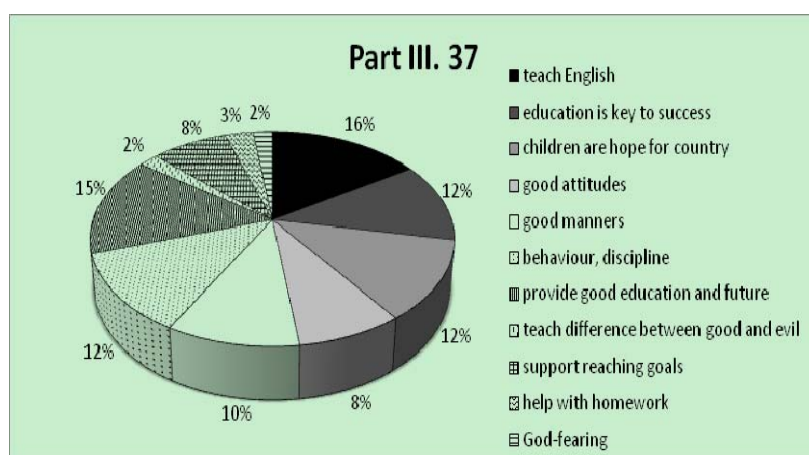
A major focus of this study lies on the potential linguistic influence the Filipinas have on the Hong Kong Chinese children. Accordingly, the next question concentrates on the respondents’ awareness of their role as linguistic agents in education.



Graph 11. To what extent do you see your role as a maid as an important factor with regard to children's education?

Ninety-two informants responded to this question. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents assess their role as *very important*. Twenty-five percent think that their role is *important*, 6% rate their role as *less important*, and 2% *do not care* about their role concerning children's education (see Graph 11). As the answers to question III.36 show, the vast majority of respondents see their role concerning children's education as *very important* or *important*. The respondents who find their role *less important* or who *do not care* live in households in which the children are 16 years or older (only one respondent who finds her role in education less important lives in a household in which the children are 4 and 6 years old). In this context, it is worth mentioning that 61 of our respondents live in families with school-aged children (6-18 years of age). Of these 61 respondents, 32 indicated that helping children with homework was part of their duties (question II.25 of our survey).

Subsequently to the question that requested the informants to state their attitudes towards their role as educators, the following question aimed to find out more about the different aspects of education they are concerned with.



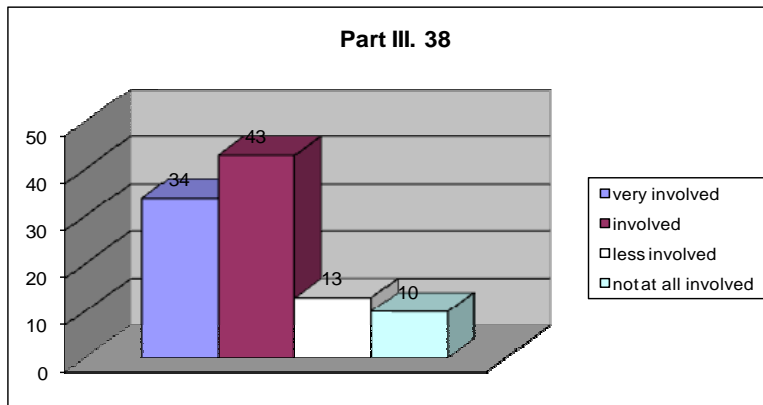
Graph 12. In your eyes, what are the main tasks considering child education?

The present question, reflected in Graph 12, is an open one, which means that no terms were provided. Sixty respondents replied to this question, and very diversely so. Admittedly, the imprecise formulation of the question turned out to be problematic. Since the respondents were not asked to either think about their own children or the Chinese children under their care, some respondents may have thought of their own Filipino children while answering this question. Still, 16% of the respondents—the highest number—want to teach the (Chinese) children English. Fifteen percent of our respondents regard the instilment of a good education and thus the assurance of a good future as their main task in child education, a response that ties in with *education as key to success*, stated by another 12% of respondents. The same percentage of informants wants to teach children *good behaviour* and *discipline*. Another 12% of respondents argue that the *children are the hope of the country* but did not point out which country they refer to. Ten percent define the instilment of *good manners* as their main task in child education. Teaching *good attitudes* and *helping children to reach their goals* is considered as main tasks by 8% of the respondents. Three percent of the 60 respondents see *helping the children with their homework* as the main task of child education. Two percent want to *teach the difference between good and evil* and another 2% want the children to become *God-fearing*.

For the purpose of this paper, the most crucial and striking finding is that the majority of respondents deem the teaching of English as a main task of education. So, from a different angle, the importance of the

English language in the duties of the Filipina domestic helpers is reiterated. Besides the importance of foreign language skills, the shaping of the character, i.e., the personality of the child, is held to be similarly important.

The following question was designed to shed light on the actual involvement of the Filipina domestic helpers in the education of the children under their care.

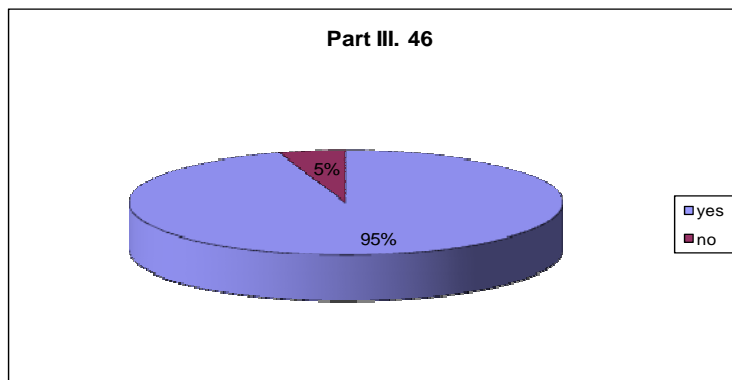


Graph 13. To what extent are you involved in children's education when you work as a domestic helper?

The possible answers were provided with the question. In total, 99 respondents rated their involvement in the education of the children they are entrusted with (see Graph 13). Out of them, 43%, which is the largest group, consider themselves *involved* in children's education. Thirty-four percent see themselves as *very involved*, 13% as *less involved* and 10% claim to be *not at all involved* in children's education.

Thus, the vast majority of the FDHs we interviewed is *involved* or *very involved* in children's education. Only one quarter is *less* or *not at all involved* in this task. The figures of the present question have to be considered in relation to question II.28 and II.29 of our survey, which are not discussed here in detail for lack of relevance. The results for these questions show that the majority of the respondents have to take care of one to two children, who, in the majority of cases, are between 0 and 17 years old. Those respondents who care for school-aged children are probably more involved in education than the respondents who are in charge of babies or school leavers.

The responses to the relevant questions so far reflect a predominantly positive attitude the FDHs have towards Chinese children's education and show the significant role the FDHs play therein. The next question highlights the intentions Chinese employers may have when employing an English-speaking Filipina domestic helper.

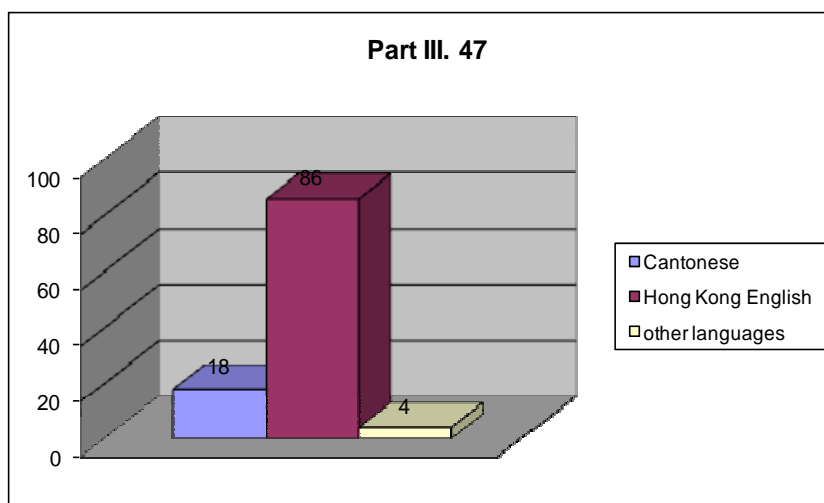


Graph 14. Do the Chinese parents encourage you to speak English with their children?

Ninety-four respondents reacted to this question. As Graph 14 shows, 95% feel encouraged to speak English with their employer's child/children. In other words, the vast majority of Chinese parents request their Filipina domestic helper to communicate in English with their children. Only 5% of the helpers are not encouraged to do so.

This question is the first one that touches upon employers' preferences concerning the choice of which FDH to employ. As mentioned in the theoretical part, Indonesians and Filipinas represent the two dominant ethnic minorities of Hong Kong. While there are many differences between the two groups, one of the most pertinent ones concerns language skills. On the whole, Indonesians are less fluent in English but in turn proficient in Cantonese. Filipinas are proficient in English since English has an official status in the Philippines, but less proficient in Cantonese. The use of English is widespread among Filipinos. Hong Kong Chinese who employ a FDH make strategic decisions. Parents who want their child/children to become a fluent speaker of English and consider employing a domestic helper will most likely opt for an English-speaking Filipina FDH. The proficiency in foreign languages is one of the crucial factors concerning the choice of a FDH. The engagement of a Filipina domestic helper implies a marked preference for English-speaking helpers. Since the survey questionnaires were not distributed to Chinese employers as well, we cannot empirically validate the argument regarding the nexus between employment and foreign language skills. Still, after the analysis of several questions that concentrate on English skills,¹² one can deduce that language skills are an important hiring factor (a point that has found confirmation in informal talks with employers and personal observation).

The following question shifts the perspective from the domestic helpers to the children under their care.



Graph 15. In which language do Chinese children respond to you?

As already implied in the previous question, Filipinas have an important role to play in Chinese children's acquisition of English. In this question, possible answers were provided, but multiple answers were possible (and "other languages" allowed for open answers). Out of 108 answers (see Graph 15), 86 state that Chinese children use HKE as the medium of communication in conversations with the FDH. Eighteen answers indicate that Chinese children respond in Cantonese. Four answers signal the usage of other languages, namely English.

¹² In questions of the survey focusing on the motivation of the Filipinas for learning English and the advantages of using English (not discussed in detail here), communication, success, prestige ("access to educated people and highest society") are recurrent motifs.

To repeat, Filipinas in general do not have a high competence in Cantonese. Consequently, Chinese children have to adapt to the language of their caregiver. This explains the high number of answers for HKE plus the answers for *English*. That *English* was mentioned for “other languages” was unexpected. Apparently, these respondents differentiate between HKE and (whatever other kind of) English. We do not want to speculate about the reasons for this differentiation, but it is again an indication of a certain kind of language awareness.

Given the fact that Cantonese is their mother tongue, the finding that some Chinese children respond in this language is not surprising.

Discussion

The main focus of our survey was on the language use of Filipina domestic helpers in the homes of Hong Kong Chinese employers and the potential linguistic impact on the latter’s children.

The findings show that English plays an indispensable role for Filipinas in Hong Kong and their interactions with the Chinese population. Only few respondents stated that they were fluent in Cantonese (five answers given to question I.7). In most cases, English serves as the medium of communication between the Filipinas, their Chinese employers and the latter’s children. Moreover, the Filipinas indicated that the vast majority of Chinese employers request their FDH to speak English with the former’s children (see III.46).

On the basis of the data collected here, there can be no disagreement about the fact that Filipina domestic helpers play an important role in the acquisition of English by Hong Kong children. The answers given to questions III.36–III.38 indicate that the Filipinas are important agents in the education of the children under their care, and that teaching them English is central to this job (a point that is also buttressed by the answers to question III.46). Moreover, the Filipinas show awareness of their role as (informal) language teachers.

As long as Filipinas do not acquire full-competence in Cantonese, English remains the exclusive medium of communication between them and the children (see answers to question III.47). As explained earlier, the FDHs generally work on a two-year contract, but in many cases, they work in one and the same family for longer periods of time (see I.13). Especially in such cases, a continuous linguistic influence of the FDHs on the Chinese children under their care can be expected. Answers to question II.22 (cf. Footnote 14) suggest that the majority of FDHs works for double-income families. If both Chinese parents are working, the *amah* is the primary caregiver and provides a major portion of the linguistic input, especially as long as the children do not attend educational institutions. Even at a later stage, the Filipinas’ linguistic impact on the children is arguably stronger and more intensive than that of teachers in preschool or primary school. On the basis of time alone, teachers simply cannot exert the same linguistic influence upon the Chinese children as the FDHs do.¹³ Furthermore, the acquisition of English by Chinese children through an FDH takes place outside of the classroom, i.e., in natural settings.

The Filipinas function as informal language teachers in a setting that is conducive to education in general. Two questions of our survey were aimed at clarifying this point, namely question III.39, *How would you characterize Chinese parents’ attitude towards education?* and question III.40, *How would you characterize Chinese children’s attitude towards education?* Seventy-two percent of our respondents stated that the Chinese parents are *very interested* in their children’s education, and another 23% that they are *interested*. The same

¹³ Yet this issue is a complex one, and depends on various factors, such as the school the children attend, the amount of additional tutoring in English they receive, etc.

attitude was observed for Chinese children; 57% of our respondents find that Chinese children are *very interested* in education, whereas 30% find them to be *interested*. It goes without saying that learning English is an important educational aim for middle class families in Hong Kong.¹⁴

Apart from the use of English and the role of Filipinas as informal language teachers, two additional, interrelated sets of issues transpired from the answers of our respondents. The first one concerns the self-perception of the Filipina domestic helpers as members of the Hong Kong English speech community or not. How do they position themselves towards HKE, and how would this positioning influence, for example, the perception of their own variety of English (see II.24) and that of the children under their care (see III.47)? As the answers to II.23 show, some respondents showed a remarkable awareness of linguistic varieties; surely, this awareness also pertains to these questions. The second issue is that of language contact and linguistic change. Does the English of the Filipina domestic helpers change over their years in Hong Kong, and if it does, to what extent? Does situational adaption in speech occur on the side of the Filipinas when they communicate with their employers? Or, in turn, given the significant impact of the Filipina domestic helpers on the acquisition of English by young Hongkongers, as suggested by this study, how does Philippine English influence HKE? These questions await further research.

Conclusion

This study highlighted, among other things, the eminent role played by Filipinas as informal language teachers and perhaps even linguistic models in the families of their employers. The data revealed a remarkable awareness on the side of the Filipinas of their linguistic role but also the varieties they encounter.

As the answers to several questions have shown, only a small number of respondents have the competence to communicate in Cantonese. The vast majority of the interviewed FDHs from the Philippines communicate in English in the home of their employers. Furthermore, the findings suggest that Chinese people employ an English-speaking Filipina to provide language training for their child/children and perhaps even for themselves. Many Filipinas consider English *the* world language and *the* language of success. Presumably, the same attitude holds true for Chinese people who employ an English-speaking domestic helper. However, the fact that the number of Filipina domestic helpers had been decreasing for some years runs counter to their importance as informal language teachers, but recent figures suggest a reverse in the downward trend (see section “Statistical Facts and Sociological Background”). Another study would be needed to investigate the views and motivations of the employers regarding language use and the employment of an FDH.

As mentioned earlier, the role of Filipinas in Hong Kong is an underresearched topic. From a linguistic perspective, the question of the structural influence of Philippine English on HKE is of particular interest. At least lexically, such an influence has already been recorded. The terms *kangkong* (“a leafy vegetable”) (Cummings & Wolf, 2011, p. 94) and *ya-ya* (“female domestic servant”) (Cummings & Wolf, 2011, p. 196) are listed in the *Dictionary of Hong Kong English* with Philippine English as source language. The impact of Philippine English on HKE specifically and the competence in English of the Hong Kong community in general will depend on the future development of the number of Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

¹⁴ Though not all respondents knew the profession of their employer(s)—and some were perhaps unwilling to state it—a clear tendency emerges from question II.22 *What are the professions of your employers?* The overwhelming majority of the Filipina helpers we interviewed work in middle to upper class homes, as their answers included “manager”, “director”, “business owner”, “medical doctor”, “bankers”, “engineer”, “teachers”, and “nurses” (which are well-paid in Hong Kong), though “hairstresser” and “bus driver” were also stated.

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