

## Understanding Cantonese in the Portuguese Classroom

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*Portuguese is one of the official languages in Macau, China, although most local residents speak Cantonese. Studies in language teaching by Auerbach (1993) and Cook (2001) have focused on challenging the monolingual English classroom. This article seeks to understand why Cantonese-speaking students use their L1 for Portuguese language learning. The data came primarily from a survey. Overall, the usage of Cantonese may help in learning Portuguese, improving motivation, and supporting students' identity.*

**Keywords:** Code-switching, motivation, Portuguese, identity, social networking

*El portugués es una lengua oficial de Macau, China, pero muchos residentes locales hablan cantonés. Estudios para enseñar inglés de Auerbach (1993) y Cook (2001) se centraron en estimular el aula monolingüe de inglés. En este artículo se busca entender por qué estudiantes que hablan cantonés usan la L1 para aprender la lengua portuguesa. Los datos se recogieron principalmente a través de un cuestionario. En general, el uso del cantonés puede ayudar en el aprendizaje del portugués, el aumento de la motivación, y el apoyo a la propia identidad de los estudiantes.*

**Palabras clave:** Cambio de clave, motivación, portugués, identidad, redes sociales

Macau, located in Southern China, was a Portuguese colony for 400 years until its recent return to mainland China (Chou, 2005). Currently, about 2% of the population are Macanese (mix of Portuguese and Asian descent). In terms of actual language use, 83.3% (449,274) of the population used Cantonese and about 2.4% could speak Portuguese, according to the Direcção dos Serviços de Estatística e Censos (2011). The limited number of people who speak Portuguese in this former colony has similarities in other former Portuguese colonies, in which locals were limited in their education on Portuguese cultural norms (Mendy, 2003; Fry, 2000).

Now that Macau has been decolonized, locals have continued to learn Portuguese despite Cantonese being the dominant language in daily life. Their motivations may vary, as some students needed to learn Portuguese as they worked for the Macau government, which uses the language for administrative purposes (Moody, 2008). Other students included those working at the tertiary level or in secondary school; lastly, others, like the researcher, studied Portuguese for cultural enrichment. Initially, the researcher, as an English language instructor, did not plan to research this topic. His intent was to learn Portuguese and to use it as an opportunity to reflect as a language learner. In order to achieve this aim, he became a

language student and placed in an A2 level class, per the Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages (Little, 2006). In the process of studying Portuguese for a year with local Macau students he became interested in understanding the reasons for the usage of Cantonese in the classroom and also in course-related discussions.

### Literature Review

Few studies have examined the impact of Cantonese as an L1 on Portuguese, although studies exist on the use of other L1s in language acquisition. For example, the use of the L1 in English is not surprising. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) explain that, “L1 may be a normal psychological process that allows learners to initiate and sustain verbal interaction.” Cook (2001) and Auerbach (1993) have also argued that an English only classroom fails to fully utilize the cognitive and linguistic resources of the learner and challenged the monolingual classroom. Perani and Abutalebi (2005) found that, in the process of learning an L2, the learner uses his “neural devices” involved with L1 acquisition. The parts of the brain that are activated in language usage are consistent even with different languages, although there is a variation, as every individual brain differs in age and mental development.

Research on participants’ perceptions on the usage of L1 in an L2 classroom have demonstrated mixed sentiments and results. Thus, Nazary (2008) studied students’ perceptions on the usage of L1 in an Iranian context and obtained mixed results, which also depended on students’ proficiency levels in their L2. Other studies looking at perceptions toward reading found that positive feelings toward reading in the L1 somewhat carry over into the L2 (Yamashita, 2004). Despite not being a Macau local, the researcher was an insider in this project, as he shared the language of Cantonese with his students; yet, he was also an outsider, as all of the students in the class were local Macau people, with the exception of one relocating from Guangdong (Irvine, Roberts, & Bradbury-Jones, 2008).

In a language classroom, elements of code-switching are likely to occur, particularly if all the participants share two common languages. Factors causing code-switching could be limited proficiency in the language or asserting one’s identity. Although there are limited studies about code-switching in Macau, in particular related to Portuguese and Cantonese, research has been carried out for Cantonese and English in Hong Kong. Tsang and Wong (2004) examined a Hong Kong comedian, Chan (2009) studied Cantonese pop music, and Chan (2007) researched the phenomenon in classrooms. In most cases, Botha (2013) found that students in Macau who claimed to use English mostly code-switched during extra-curricular activities, while San (2009) examined blogs that mixed Cantonese and English in Macau, as there were no Cantonese equivalents for certain words. Other factors leading students to code-switch include creating solidarity with other speakers. Even in supposedly English-medium universities like in Hong Kong, there will always be code-switching in Cantonese. In terms of social interactions between

Cantonese people, Cantonese is the most likely language to be used (Flowerdew, Li, & Miller, 1998).

### Methods

#### Design

Primary data came from a survey (see Appendix) in which 15 students voluntarily filled in the survey about L1 usage and from personal observations by the researcher. The survey was distributed during the Portuguese class with the permission of the Portuguese language instructor. Explanations were provided in English. Questions in the survey were stated in English, while the consent form utilized Chinese and English. Students were free to answer the questions in the language they felt most comfortable. In order to prevent students from pleasing the experimenter, a distractor question was included, “Why are you in this class?”

To protect the identity of the students, a single letter was put into the upper right hand corner. Responses were reviewed and organized by themes. Additionally, pseudonyms were used.

#### Participants

Most of the 15 students surveyed were female and ranged in age from teenagers in high school to the early 30s. Since the researcher had been in the class for a year with the students, he had come to know some of them personally. The students formed a WeChat group (a popular social networking program) as a means of communication and support for course assignments (Crampton, 2014). The researcher was part of the group. Due to the sensitive nature of these discussions, the WeChat conversations were not included in the paper.

#### Research questions

The surveys assisted in providing information about the following research questions:

- 1) Why do students use Cantonese (L1) in the Portuguese class?
- 2) Why do students use a certain language on WeChat for course related work?

### Findings

In general, students responded in English to the English survey. The overall findings indicate students’ perceptions that Cantonese plays an important role in language identity and assistance in language learning, although a few had negative feelings toward using their L1 (Cantonese) in the process of learning Portuguese. The chart below shows primary language use in the responses, but does not make a distinction between Mandarin or Cantonese; rather they are both referred to as Chinese. An interesting factor was how students responded in terms of language, as some wrote Chinese and others emphasized Cantonese; this could be related to the variations in Macau’s identity as a border city to the mainland (Breitung, 2009).

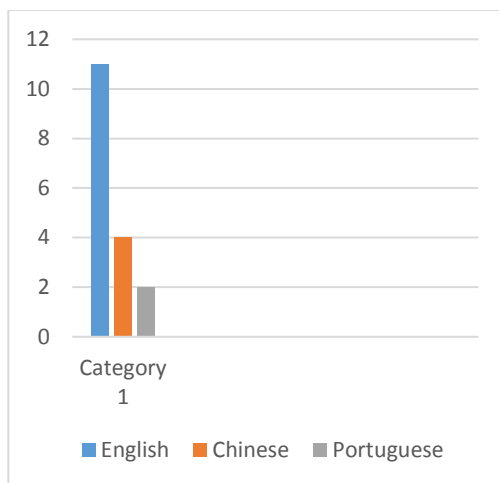


Fig. 1 Language used in the survey

## Identity

**Positive identity marker.** One major thread in the responses was related to students' comfort with Cantonese, as well as its social ties as their mother language. Thus, utilizing Cantonese as their L1 in class helped them to relax and feel comfortable in the Portuguese classroom. This was primarily in response to the research question on language use in the class WeChat. This research question yielded a variety of results. A second question, "Why do you or your classmates use Cantonese in class?" also reinforced the views of Cantonese as a marker of their identity. Student M responded, "大家廣東人" [they are all Guangdong people], as Cantonese is the most popular language and, for many students, the native language of Guangdong people (Wang & Ladegaard, 2008). Student Z 母語 also supported this view by stating that, "as a Macau person that is the mother tongue or native language." Another student, M, responded in Chinese that Cantonese makes them feel 親切 [warm].

The L1 also had a positive connotation for students, as it evoked positive home like images. These views were supported in response to the question, "How do you feel when Cantonese is used in class?" Student U responded, "Cozy"; Student S, "Very good"; Student D, "I feel delighted"; Student P stated "Comfortable," and for Student T, "We feel more familiar with it." This could be true for local Macau people who have a positive Macau identity; this could also happen with those with a strong Hong Kong identity, as they tended to engage more in Cantonese (Tong, Hong, Lee, & Chiu, 1999).

**Daily usage.** The reason why their primary language made students feel comfortable may be that the language is widely used in Macau society. Thus, a student responded that Chinese is used in their daily life, and another indicated that it was natural. This indicates greater Chinese usage for them in their own personal

life as illustrated by Student A, “Chinêse. Porque os meus amigos são Chineses” [Chinese, because my friends are Chinese]. This seems to make sense as most of the students are local Macau people who primarily speak Cantonese as their L1. Since the language was widely used in Macau, it would spill over into other aspects of their life, namely the WeChat group and the Portuguese language classroom.

**Oppositional identity.** Identity is not simply formed in solidarity with others, but also developed in contrast to others. The usage of Cantonese helped to form students’ identity in the Portuguese classroom. Student R wrote, “Cause here is Macao; not USA!” [sic]. The pride students felt in the language could be related to the colonial relationship between Portugal and Macau and as a matter of resistance. Amaro (2015) interviewed a number of Portuguese living in Macau and found they “do not wish to fully integrate into the Chinese community” and they “have a reputation of not trying to acquire Cantonese proficiency.” In the same study, one participant learned Cantonese in Macau as a child, but her mother would beat them during the colonial period for speaking Cantonese and referred to it as a “dog language.” Another participant even theorized the reason why the local Macau and Portuguese population have peacefully co-existed for so long was the fact that neither understood each other’s language.

**Perceived help with understanding.** The survey provided the perception that the L1 helps with understanding, which is perhaps why students used it in the class. Student Q explained that, “It helps me can understand the meanings” [sic]. Student O said that, “It is good when you don’t understand some questions or words.” In these cases, directly translated words could help with understanding; hence, the language instructor would translate at times some difficult lexical words from Portuguese into Cantonese. Additionally, students had gaps in their understanding and the usage of the L1 served as a supporting tool. Studies in Slovak found that students taught technical vocabulary in their L1 had better acquisition of the words than when taught in English only (Gablasova, 2015). In these cases, students feel they can better grasp Portuguese words if there is a Cantonese translation. This could also explain the usage of Chinese in WeChat discussions while trying to gain a better understanding of Portuguese.

**Detrimental in the classroom toward the acquisition of Portuguese.** Despite the fact that many students viewed Cantonese in the Portuguese classroom as positive, a few students viewed this negatively. Two students in the study felt that the usage of Cantonese did not help in the acquisition of Portuguese. For example, Student A wrote, “Não é bom” [it is not good], and Student N stated, “I think that is no good in learning foreign language” [sic]. It should be noted the only student to respond in Portuguese did not view the usage of Cantonese as positive for learning Portuguese. The usage of Portuguese to respond to the English survey seemed to be a very conscious choice for Student A. For Student N, it is not entirely clear why she felt the usage of the Cantonese would not be good.

**English and Cantonese usage on WeChat.** Students mentioned they used English to help with their Portuguese language study on the WeChat group. Student N explained that he used “Cantonese and a little bit English, because there are the basic language in Macau society” [sic]. This seems consistent with DSEC data (2011) showing nearly 20% of people in Macau speak English and have achieved a certain degree of proficiency in the language. Student Z mentioned, “英話, 廣東話” [English or Guangdong]; Student C wrote Cantonese and English, because it was “easy to know.” It should be noted that Student Z felt comfortable in English and Cantonese. Student P stated they preferred English in the WeChat group because “typing English is faster than Chinese.” This is not surprising due to the dominance of QWERTY keyboards, designed with English in mind nearly 100 years ago. This has become the international standard for most computers and mobile phone systems (Noyes, 1983). This tends to demonstrate a certain degree of penetration of the English language in Macau.

### Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study indicate the positive role of Cantonese in participants’ development of identity. They were familiar with the language, and a few found it useful in understanding Portuguese. A few students also felt English was useful in terms of communication on classroom issues. Finally, two students felt the usage of Cantonese did not assist in the acquisition of Portuguese.

Some limitations were identified in the study. The first one was the researcher being unable to utilize the “complete participant” observation technique as he was a student in the same course as those researched (Kawulich, 2005). Since students were not aware that their classmate was making observations of the class, they behaved more naturally before class and during breaks. Due to ethical considerations, the “complete participant” observations were not used and personal notes about the class discussions or interactions have not been included.

The researcher acknowledges not interviewing participants to flesh out their responses, since no one in class agreed to be interviewed for the project. The researcher would have wished having a local Macau person conduct interviews in Cantonese in order to gain more insight as to the reasons for the usage of Cantonese in the Portuguese class. The development of a questionnaire in English and Chinese would have helped students better comprehend the questions being asked, as some did not understand English. For example, Student C’s answer “Seldom” did not make sense in terms of the context of the question he was asked. Additionally, the survey form should have included a separate consent form as to avoid possible confusion on the part of the subjects. Finally, instructions for completion of the survey should have been presented in Cantonese or the L1 of the participants.

### Future Research

Interesting insights could be gained from researching how other languages impact the learning of a different L2. For instance, Cantonese and Mandarin. Another example would be using English in assisting with the acquisition of Portuguese. Additional research could explore the relationship between identity and language. This has implications for the researcher himself as a language teacher, as he is an English language instructor teaching mostly local Macau students who have Cantonese as their L1. While he originally enrolled in the Portuguese course to learn the language, he learned to reflect on his own language teaching. This has provided him with a better understanding of the student population he examined.

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### Appendix

I hereby give my consent for written (i.e. Wechat) or oral work from this class to be used for research, scholarly publication and/or conference presentations. I understand that, if any of my work is used, acknowledgement will be given generally to students in this class but real names will not be used. Photos may be used without identifying me by name. Participation in research will in no way affect my grade in this class. 本人，同意英語中心於學術研究 (i.e. Wechat)、刊物出版和/或會議報告中使用本課堂書面或口頭資料及作品;本人亦明白倘英語中心使用本人任何資料、作品或照片,將一律註明來源,但不具真實姓名。而同意參與任何學術研究亦不會影響本人在此班別的成績。 Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why are you in this class?
2. Why do you or your classmates use Cantonese in class?
3. How do you feel when Cantonese is used in class?
4. What language do you use in the class WeChat?  
\_\_\_\_\_Why?