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Bad influence? – an investigation into the purported negative influence of foreign domestic helpers on children’s second language English acquisition

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Abstract

This paper explores the purported negative influence of foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) on child second language acquisition (SLA) by studying Hong Kong Cantonese children’s listening ability in second language (L2) English. 31 kindergarten 3rd graders aged 4;6 to 6, and 29 1st year secondary students aged 11-14 who have had a Filipino domestic helper at home took part in the study. In addition, 34 youngsters (20 in kindergarten, 14 in secondary) who did not have a Filipino helper participated as controls. Results from two listening tasks (picture choosing task, sound discrimination task) suggest that informants do not differ from the control in their abilities to listen to American-, British-, and Hong Kong- English, and that they are better at listening to Filipino accented English than the control. These findings cast doubts on the anecdotal belief of the harmful effect FDHs have on children’s language acquisition including an L2. Moreover, the additional effect of being familiar with another variety of English is arguably a desirable outcome given that English is used as a lingua franca among non-native speakers on a daily basis in this highly globalised world.

Keywords: L2 English, L2 perception, Hong Kong Chinese, Filipino domestic helpers, Filipino English

Introduction

In countries where both parents are out for work during the day, it is common to employ domestic helpers. Examples of such phenomena can be found in countries ranging from Canada, Singapore to South Africa (Constable 2007). These domestic helpers are often the main caregivers in households with children. They interact with the children while parents are away, hence, their language becomes one of the main sources of linguistic input for these children. The situation becomes more interesting when a second language (L2) is involved, i.e. in cases where the two parties do not share a common native language (L1), even more so when a different variety of an L2 than is taught in school is implicated. Despite the prevalence of such situations, very little research has been done to investigate child language acquisition in these circumstances.

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Hong Kong (HK) employs foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) who mainly come from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.¹ These FDHs, with the exception of Indonesians, communicate with their employers in English as they do not share a common language.² For Filipinos and Thais, English acts as a lingua franca that facilitates the functioning of the household despite being the L1 of no one. This creates a linguistic environment with the presence of various languages and multiple varieties of a language (vis-a-vis English). In other words, children are getting English input from these housekeepers in addition to the varieties of English they can occasionally hear from the ambience (i.e. Hong Kong English), and the institutional model which often represents either the American or British norm (Bolton 2000; 2002a; b; So 1992).³ Notwithstanding sometimes being regarded as auxiliary English teachers (Constable 1997; 2007; McArthur 2002; Poon 2006), FDHs' role in the L2 English acquisition of children has not been studied widely, or at best has only been noted in passing (e.g. Afendras 1998; Yeung 2007). This under-researched area has remained dormant even after Crebo (2003) brought the scarcity of research pertaining to FDHs' (Filipino FDHs in particular) influence on children's acquisition to attention despite the emergence of studies that look at bilinguals' mental representations (e.g. Yip and Matthews 2007; Matthews and Yip 2009).

In spite of the dearth of research in areas related to this issue, it is sometimes assumed that these FDHs affect children's acquisition of a second language (both production and perception) because they speak in an accented manner. A survey of online forums such as <http://hongkong.asiaxpat.com> and <http://www.baby-kingdom.com> reveals this widespread sentiment.⁴ Although learners normally acquire the language to which they are exposed be it accented or not (Young-Scholten 1995), this belief in the current context with FDHs in Hong Kong has not been substantially proven. Crucially, the limited studies available on the topic seem to come to the opposite conclusion, i.e. the presence of a FDH in the household appears to be facilitative to the acquisition of English as an L2 (e.g. Chan and McBride-Chang 2005; Tse, Lam, Loh, Ip, Lam and Chan 2009). Yet, it is noteworthy that one study (Cheuk and Wong 2005) has attempted to associate the presence of FDHs with specific language impairment found in young children. The current study aims to further explore the issue by investigating influences Filipino FDHs have on HK Chinese children's L2 English listening ability.⁵ Filipinos were chosen not only because they constitute the largest group of FDHs in Hong Kong, but also because most of them had not received any formal training in Cantonese (the community language of Hong Kong) prior to their arrival at Hong Kong unlike their counterparts from Indonesia. Therefore, by focusing on Filipinos

the aim of investigating the acquisition of L2 English can be ensured as opposed to the influence on learners' first language for instance. The effect of this group of helpers, too, received sparse attention, even though they are claimed to be the main agent who brings English into Hong Kong Cantonese households (Yeung 2007). Focusing on a number of phonological variables that are instantiated differently in Filipino and the various Englishes available in Hong Kong, namely the stops, /p, t, k/, which are often unaspirated in onsets of Filipino English (Bautista 2000; Tayao 2008),⁶ and fricatives /f, v/, which are sometimes rendered as [p] and [b] respectively in this variety of English (ibid.) (see table 1),⁷ this study looks at the acquisition of English phonology by HK Chinese in the context of choices of varieties including Filipino-, HK-, American-, and British- accented English in the media and the society due to the presence of expatriates. The paper takes the following structure: section two reviews a few studies that have look at the L2 English of children in relation to Filipino domestic helpers. Section three explains the data collection procedure and the study design. Section four lists the findings of the present study. A discussion will be provided in section five which is followed by some concluding remarks in the final section. [table 1 near here]

Previous studies

In a study that aims to investigate bilingualism in Hong Kong, Afendras (1998) collected questionnaire data on language choice at home during mealtimes from four primary schools in Hong Kong. A total of 1,360 students participated in the study, of which 34.8%, amounting to 473 households, have reported employing a foreign domestic helper. The majority of the FDHs employed are Filipinos. Afendras suggests that these Filipinos contribute to the increase of English use in the otherwise Cantonese dominant families.⁸ At the same time, Filipino FDHs are emerging as "live-in English tutors for middle-class children" (Afendras 1998, 137), though their English is often stigmatised.

In a related study, Crebo (2003) is interested in gauging people's perception about Filipinos' roles in English language learning in Hong Kong. She conducted case studies with three Chinese families who have a Filipino housekeeper. Each of the participants (the father, the mother, the child, and the Filipino helper) was interviewed individually to elicit qualitative data for analyses. However, the youngest child who was three years old did not take part in the interview. Through the various comments obtained, it is found that Filipino domestic helpers are often expected to and do take on multiple roles in the household including the role of a language teacher in addition to being responsible for the household chores. They take part in both informal and

formal activities in helping to build the child's English ability (e.g. watching English TV with the child, teaching the child English vocabularies through formal lessons). However, only one of the three Filipinos in the study was credited for the role they play in assisting the child's English acquisition.

On the other hand, Chan and McBride-Chang (2005) compared English and Cantonese vocabulary knowledge as well as Cantonese grammar of 50 3rd grade kindergarteners (mean age 5:6) who were separated into two groups depending on the presence/ absence of a Filipino helper in the household. This study offers insight to the effect of Filipino helpers on aspects of children's L2 English acquisition by including concrete measures to assess the receptive vocabularies of informants. Participants took part in tests which measure their respective English and Cantonese vocabularies knowledge as well as a task that taps into their comprehension of Cantonese grammatical structures. Results indicate that the 28 informants who have a Filipino helper at home did not differ significantly in their Cantonese grammar from the 22 controls. However, the experimental group "demonstrated significantly better English vocabulary knowledge and significantly poorer Cantonese vocabulary knowledge" (Chan and McBride-Chang 2005, 187). These results hold true even after other factors such as parental-engagement time and children's cognitive ability have been controlled for. These findings paint a complex picture regarding children's language acquisition under the influence of a foreign domestic helper. Yet, of particular relevance to the present investigation, Chan and McBride-Chang's study points to the superiority in English vocabulary knowledge of children who are cared for by Filipino domestic helpers, i.e. a positive effect in this aspect of English acquisition has been brought about by live-in Filipino helpers.

Looking at another aspect of English acquisition of children in Hong Kong, Tse et al. (2009) examined English reading abilities of 4,352 grade four children between the age of 9 and 10. 42 percent of these children have a domestic helper at home; the majority of these helpers are from the Philippines (47.75 percent). They found that students who have English speaking domestic helpers at home performed significantly better in the reading test than those students who do not have such a helper at home. The effect of the presence of Filipinos remains significant even after eliminating the factor of parent's language use. Even though the authors caution against associating FDHs as the sole cause for the better reading scores among children with FDHs, since other factors such as parent's language use and socio-economic status do play a role as well, these results largely support their hypothesis that the presence of English-speaking domestic helpers in the household is conducive to children's

acquisition of English as a second language. The findings of this study contrasts with a study done in Singapore (Cheo and Quah 2005) which fails to find a significant impact of FDHs on the academic achievement of 429 grade eight children. It is noteworthy, however, that the language situation of Singapore is quite different from Hong Kong; while English is commonly used as a first language in the former location, the majority of the Hong Kong population speaks Cantonese as their first language. Hence, the positive effect seen in a context involving English as a second language might have been masked in the study by Cheo and Quah.

The acquisition of English second language phonology under the influence of Filipino domestic helpers was the focus of a series of small scale studies by Leung (2010; 2011a). Also set in Hong Kong, his exploratory studies look at Hong Kong Cantonese speakers' L2 English production alongside their perception with regard to the Filipino variety of English. The five participants in the production study (2010) aged between 12 and 23 were divided into two different groups according to their language profile, i.e. their exposure to Filipino English. None of the informants, both participants in the experimental group and the controls who have not been exposed to Filipino English, produced any Filipino accented speech in the paragraph reading task targeting the same five onsets as the current study does (i.e. plosives /p, t, k/, and labio-fricatives /f, v/). Moreover, they did not produce any Filipino accented English in the semi-structured interview. Their production differs from the two Filipino participants (55 and 52 of age) whose productions resemble features characteristic of Filipino English reported in the literature.

The perception study (Leung 2011a) investigates learners' ability to perceive Filipino English. In line with the production study, the five sounds, /p, t, k, f, v/ were also chosen to be the subject of scrutiny. Informants aged 2;6 to 25 in the perception study were classified into three groups according to whether they were receiving ongoing Filipino English input (group A), or they have received this variety of input but no longer do at the time of testing (group B), or they have not been exposed to Filipino English at all (group C). In various listening tasks (word spelling task, picture choosing task), participants had to identify the word which was spoken in Filipino accented English. "The results show a cline of varying capabilities in recognizing the sounds" (2011a, 88) with group A performing the best, group C performing the worst, while participants in group B performing somewhere in between the other groups. The gradual decline in sensitivity towards Filipino English among different groups suggests that the quantity and recency of Filipino English input affect people's ability to listen to this particular variety of English.

Cheuk and Wong (2005) employed a retrospective case-control study design to analyse the demographic data collected and previous medical records of 237 children in Hong Kong (mean age 2.51) who were reported to have “various neurodevelopmental or behavioural problems” (2005, 715). 259 controls (mean age 2.89) were included as a comparison. It is found that foreign domestic helper employment is associated with a higher chance of developing specific language impairment (SLI) among the sample, though the authors acknowledge the presence of other confounding factors such as gender, the presence of older siblings, family history, etc which have interacted with the results. Crucially, the retrospective design - post-hoc data collection from cases that are already known to have SLI - made the findings questionable. Such a methodology falls prey to the potential of motivated reasoning whereby one “think[s] about and evaluate[s] information in a way that supports a particular directional conclusion” (MacInnis and de Mello 2005, 6). It could be argued that variables selected in such a design are targeted so as to prove ones’ assumptions. In addition, no details regarding the initial assessment of the SLI cases are given. In fact, the authors have iterated the lack of consensus as to how SLI are defined. Furthermore, conventional assessment criteria often fail to capture the language abilities of bilinguals (since most of the assessment is only done in one language); abundant studies have indeed shown that when the overall language capacity of children is taken into account (i.e. the sum of all languages they know), children who are previously diagnosed with SLI indeed fall within the range of normal developing monolingual counterparts (see Genesee, Paradis and Crago 2004 for an overview). Therefore, without knowing the diagnostic criteria employed in the initial assessment of the sample, findings reported in Cheuk and Wong’s study have to be taken cautiously.

The current study

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, very little has been done to explore learners’ L2 English acquisition in the presence of Filipino domestic helpers. More importantly, only a minority of researchers have included language data in their studies. For instance, the studies of Afendras and Crebo have both identified live-in Filipino FDHs as important sources of English to the household though their contributions have largely gone unacknowledged and un-ratified by employers. Specifically, these FDHs have led to the increase of English usage in the household, and they have also acted as language teachers in assisting children’s acquisition of English. Yet, these studies did not include language data that can directly verify the effect these Filipinos have on the acquisition of L2 English by their young employees.

Other studies reviewed above (Chan and McBride-Chang; Cheuk and Wong; Tse et al.; Leung) did include various measures to inspect the actual effect of foreign domestic helpers on learners' L2 English acquisition. By and large, they unanimously suggest that FDHs play a positive role in the second language acquisition by children who are cared for by these domestic helpers. In particular, the presence of English speaking FDHs seems to facilitate various aspects of children's L2 English acquisition including the areas of vocabularies, reading abilities, and phonology. The present study aims to add further understanding to Filipino domestic helpers' potential influence on children's L2 English perceptual ability. Leung's (2011a) study informs us that Hong Kong Chinese who are exposed to Filipino English can perceive this variety better than those who have not received such an input. However, whether or not the presence of Filipino domestic helpers will affect learner's ability in listening to some other varieties of English in the ambience is a question that remains to be addressed. By expanding the scope of inquiry to cover various varieties of English that can be heard in Hong Kong, namely American-, British-, and Hong Kong-English, this study complement the earlier study on the area in attempting to answer this question. The answer to this question bears on the purported detrimental effect of "accented" Filipino English speakers on children's L2 English acquisition. Furthermore, another aim of the study is to validate Leung's (2011a) findings on the observed disparity in sensitivities toward Filipino English among different participants. This is achieved by using a different method than used in Leung's study to test participants' perception regarding Filipino English, details of which will be given in the following section.

The data collection and study design

The data for the study was collected from 4 kindergartens with comparable curricula and 2 English as a medium of instruction (EMI) secondary schools in Hong Kong between June 2010 and January 2011. Participants were also recruited via the "friend of a friend approach". These give a sum of 31 kindergarten 3rd graders aged 4;6 to 6, and 29 1st year secondary students aged 11 to 14. These youngsters who had received Filipino accented English some point in their life or were still receiving ongoing input of such English at the time of study form the experimental groups. Filipino workers are reported to be the main caregiver of these children during the time they were employed in the households. Moreover, 20 kindergarteners aged 4 to 5;11 and 14 secondary students aged 11 to 13 of the same grades, who had not received Filipino English input, were included as controls. The estimate amount of English exposure participants obtained from the various sources is shown in table 2.⁹ Controls in the

study will essentially have been primarily exposed to English input from the institutional source. It is important to bear in mind that these data are subject to individual variations as Tse et al 2009 have illustrated that the hours of interaction between FDHs and their grade 4 (primary school aged) informants can vary from 0 to 144 hours per week. All participants in the study are ethnic Chinese (Hong Kong SAR) from middle class families. They have all reported using Cantonese as the medium for communications with their parents; Cantonese is also the main language used for conversations with their peers. English, on the other hand, is used with the Filipino helper or during English lessons in school with local Hong Kong teachers or native English teachers (NETs) (see McArthur 2005). Informants took part in two listening tasks which are outlined below. [table 2 &3 near here]

The picture choosing task

In the picture choosing task, participants listened to 25 words – 5 with each of the onset /p, t, k, f, v/ read in four different accents (American-, British-, Filipino-, and Hong Kong- accented English) along with 13 distracters which are used to mask the purpose of the task (i.e. testing the five onsets in question). They then selected the picture corresponding to the word they heard among a choice of three and an option of “do not know/ did not appear”. A sample of the task layout is given in the appendix. It is noteworthy that the potential confusion pair was included (e.g. for the word “fan”, the picture of both “fan” and “pan” were included) wherever possible. Minimal pairs or close minimal pairs were included otherwise. Target words included were: /f/- feet, fish, food, fork, fan; /v/ - vet, vegetables, volcano, van, vase; /p/ - peach, pear, police, park, plate; /t/ - tea, two, ten, taxi, table; /k/ - key, cup, cat, car, cake. Words were chosen after considering factors such as age-appropriateness and the possibility of the potential effect of the vowel quality on the relevant onsets. Thus, selected words were mostly mono-syllabic with vowels of various +/- high, +/- low; +/- front, +/- back/ features so as to minimise the chance of results being affected by the following sound. This set of instrument was piloted with 2 kindergarteners and 1 secondary school student of the same grades as the participants in the study. No major problem has been identified apart from the initial picture chosen for vet, which was replaced before the administration of the actual task reported here. A training phase was included where participants were trained with words that are not targeted in the study. The actual task did not start until participants are familiar with the procedure.

The Filipino English materials used for this task was recorded by a female Filipino English speaker who works in Hong Kong through an Olympus WS-series recorder. Three Filipino FDHs who work in Hong Kong have confirmed that the speech of this

speaker is representative of the general accent of Filipino housekeepers working in Hong Kong.¹⁰ Likewise, words for the Hong Kong English set were recorded by a female Hong Kong English speaker using the same device. Some studies (e.g. Zhang 2010) have distinguished between a broad and an educated accent of Hong Kong English, but this issue will not be addressed here. Suffice to say, the Hong Kong recordings used represents speech sample that can be heard in the general institutional setting with which participants in this study will be familiar. The American-, and British- English words, on the other hand, were taken from the Cambridge dictionary online (Heacock 1999).¹¹ All the words were normalised for intensity (i.e. loudness) through using the freely available program Audacity.¹² The performance of each participant is converted into a percentage score; the score is subsequently inputted into SPSS for statistical analyses. Data obtained through this task allows us to see whether the presence of Filipino English input will affect learners' listening ability in the four respective Englishes, i.e. American-, British, Filipino-, and Hong Kong-English.

Sound discrimination task (AX³)

The AX³ task is an alternative to the commonly used AX sound discrimination task where informants have to decide whether the sound in X is equal to or different from the sound in A. In AX³, informants picked the odd one out in 15 triads, each of which contained only one set of Filipino English sounds that differ. The order of the target and the foil were randomised to avoid systematic answering. A sample of the play sequence is shown as follows: AA, AX, AA. Each block in the sequence of three was separated by 1500 milliseconds (ms). A and X were separated by an inter-stimuli-interval of 1500 ms so as to tap into participants' phonological knowledge as opposed to abilities in phonetic/ acoustic differentiation (see Strange and Shafer 2008). All sounds included were monosyllabic to avoid phonetic effect. In accordance with the previous task, vowels of different qualities are included. In this task, participants' perceptual knowledge of the Filipino English confusion pairs was put to test, i.e. [f], and [v] were contrasted with [p], and [b], while [p], [t], [k] were aligned with [b], [d], [g] which have similar voice onset time (compared to the long lag in aspirated sounds [p^h, t^h, k^h]). The sound pairs tested were: /f/ - feet, peat; fan, pan; far; par; /v/ - veep, beep; van, ban; var, bar; /p/ - peep, beep; pan, ban; par, bar; /t/ - tea, d; tan, dan; tar, dar(k); /k/ - key, gee(se); can, gan; car, gar(den).¹³ Participants took part in a training phase in order to familiarise themselves with the procedure prior to the actual task. Data collection only started when participants know what is required of them in this part of the study.

The Filipino English speaker used in the previous task also recorded the materials for this task through the same Olympus recorder. Parallel to the picture choosing task, the performance of informants is transformed into a percentage score which is then fed into SPSS for statistical analyses. Data gathered through this method will allow us to see whether children who are exposed to Filipino accented English are more sensitive to sounds in Filipino English, thus serves to validate Leung's findings (2011a).

Findings

Picture choosing task

The data obtained for the 13 distracters were not included for analyses. A two-way ANOVA (Filipino-FDH employment and school group) was run for the test score of the four respective accents in the picture choosing task. Significant results (i.e. $p \leq 0.05$) are yielded only with the Filipino accented set for the two factors Filipino employment ($F= 7.394$, $p= 0.008$, $\eta_p^2= 0.078$) and school group ($F= 8.125$, $p= 0.005$, $\eta_p^2= 0.085$). School group is also a significant factor for the scores of the British set ($F= 25.557$, $p= 0.000$, $\eta_p^2= 0.223$) but Filipino employment is not ($F= 0.003$, $p= 0.955$). The F values in all the other sets are not significant with either of the factors. Figures for the factors with respect to the score in the American set are as follows: school group: $F= 0.699$, $p= 0.405$, Filipino employment: $F= 1.237$, $p= 0.269$. While the values for the HK set are: school group: $F=0.132$, $p= 0.717$, Filipino employment: $F=0.187$, $p=0.666$. No interaction between the two independent variables is observed in any of the set. The group means are as shown in table 4. The table in combination with the F values shows that participants in the experimental group (with Filipino-FDHs) perform better than students in the control group in the Filipino set. Yet, their performances do not differ significantly in the other sets. [table 4 near here]

Sound discrimination AX³ task

On a par with the picture choosing task, a two-way ANOVA with the same independent variables (Filipino-FDH employment and school group) was run for both the target and the foil in the AX³ task. The group differences for the target Filipino sounds in AX³ are significant with respect to both independent factors (Filipino-FDH employment: $F=5.332$, $p=0.023$, $\eta_p^2= 0.056$; school group: $F=10.934$, $p=0.001$, $\eta_p^2= 0.108$), though disparities regarding the foil are not statistically significant with F values of 1.653 ($p= 0.202$) for the Filipino employment factor and 0.084 ($p= 0.773$) for the factor school group. There is also no interaction effect observed between the two independent variables in either the target set or the foil. The group means are shown in table 5. In conjunction with the F values, it can be seen that the experimental

group performs better in the task than the control. But the two groups do not differ significantly in their scores regarding the foil. [table 5 near here]

Discussion

The results from the first task suggest that children who have employed Filipino helpers at home are no different from controls in their performance regarding the American and Hong Kong English set of words. In addition, the kindergarten group performs in a similar fashion with participants in the secondary school group in these two sets. These are supported by the insignificant statistics yielded for both school group and Filipino-FDH employment as independent variables. On the other hand, though Filipino employment makes no difference in informants' performance on the British set, the secondary school group is better than the kindergarten group in their performance regarding this set. These can be seen by the fact that school group as a factor reached significance, while Filipino-employment did not. Moreover, learners who were exposed to Filipino accented English scored better in the Filipino English set than those who had not received Filipino English input. Also, kindergarteners performed better than secondary students in this set. These again find support from the statistics obtained for both independent factors regarding the Filipino set of English words. The results of the second task further reveal that participants with Filipino FDHs are better at listening to English sounds spoken in this variety than those who do not have Filipino helpers. This finding concurs with Leung's study (2011a) which employed a slightly different methodology. Furthermore, secondary students in the current study are more advanced compared to their younger counterparts in the kindergartens.

These results point out that the employment of a Filipino helper does not affect children's ability in listening to a number of varieties of English that this study targets, namely American-, British-, Hong Kong- English. More importantly, the presence of a Filipino helper has the additional effect of familiarising participants with the Filipino variety of English. That is to say, they have helped participants in the experimental group to build a perceptual knowledge of this variety of English. Hence, informants in this group are better able to identify the relevant sounds when compared to the control. Given that learners normally acquire the language/ code they are exposed to (e.g. Frieda and Nozawa 2007; Young-Scholten 1994; 1995), these findings are perhaps not surprising. Since the children in both groups receive Hong Kong English input from their peers or local teachers, native English input (American or British) from NETs and the teaching materials (see Cook 2008), it is logical that they are able to complete the picture choosing task with more or less a similar success. This seems to suggest

that children's acquisition of English (with regard to the standard variety in question) will not be jeopardised by the presence of Filipino accented English alone as long as the availability of other varieties of English is guaranteed.¹⁴ These corroborate with findings of research reviewed above which are done in similar contexts, all of which suggest a positive effect of live-in Filipino helpers on the acquisition of L2 English by children in various realms (e.g. vocabularies, reading abilities, and phonology). The learning outcome, however, may be quite different if Filipino accented English is the only input that the children get (e.g. Flege 1995; Young-Scholten 1995). In fact, based on previous findings of second language speech research, the prediction is that learners under such circumstances will have trouble perceiving other varieties of English including the native varieties (e.g. American, British, etc) due to their lack of exposure to the various Englishes in question. The current findings also have the potential to add to the debate of whether to employ native or non-native English teachers to teach English. The findings of this study and various others which show a positive link between having non-native English input in the environment and English attainment might have a major impact on how the proponents for native English teachers construe their arguments against the use of non-native teachers (see Cook 1999). Similarly, this point can also be upheld when research fails to prove the claim that non native English teachers will have a bad influence on students' L2 English acquisition.

Furthermore, the additional outcome of participants having superior abilities in listening to Filipino English compared to the controls can also be seen as a welcoming benefit in a society where there is a continuous upsurge in numbers of non-native English speakers. The population of speakers who speak English as a second language is rising rapidly and has long exceeded the total number of native speakers (Crystal 2008). In other words, it is highly likely that English is used as a lingua franca among people who do not share a native tongue to communicate with each other instead of being used to converse with native English speakers (Graddol 2006). Against this backdrop, the command in other varieties of English is an asset that will allow people to communicate effectively despite being dissimilar to native English speakers' norms. In fact, researchers such as Derwing, Rossiter and Munro (2002) and Jenkins (2000) have advocated the need and desirability to educate native English speakers about other varieties of English so as to facilitate efficacious communications in the global arena as successful communications depends on abilities of both the speaker and the listener to understand each other. Others have also made similar suggestions regarding the need to "revise the importance of 'the' native speaker model" (Hundt and Vogel 2011, 162) in a globalised world where non-native varieties of English is starting to

impinge on native varieties. Returning to the context of Hong Kong, Filipino English continues to be viewed as inferior as shown by the low ranking it receives in an accent rating study (Zhang 2010) despite the fact that Filipinos are actively sought by middle class families to provide extra English input for children. As a matter of fact, parents often find themselves in a dilemma as field notes taken through the data collection process of this study unveil. Most parents acknowledge the fact that the presence of a live-in English speaking FDH will increase the opportunity for their children to practice English. Yet, they are somewhat reluctant to admit that these FDHs have a positive effect on children's L2 English acquisition. Many parents have indeed expressed concern over the potential of FDHs' accent permeating into their children's English. This worry, though plausible, is not borne out in the study of Leung (2010) and another study of a larger scale (Leung 2011b) that shows minimal traces of Filipino influence in children's L2 English speech. It will be interesting to find out how parents reconcile with these findings from emerging scientific inquiries.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the potential influence foreign domestic helpers have on children's L2 English acquisition in the context of Hong Kong. In particular, it focuses on the aspect of listening abilities (i.e. word identification and sound discrimination). Through a picture choosing task and a sound discrimination task, it is found that children who were exposed to Filipino English do not differ from controls in their abilities of listening to various Englishes including, American English, British English, and Hong Kong English. Additionally, these children who received Filipino accented English input are better at identifying sounds of this variety of English. These findings dispute the purported negative influence FDHs have on child second language acquisition with regard to English. In fact, this study alongside studies done on other aspects of L2 English acquisition have shown quite the opposite to be true, i.e. the presence of an English speaking domestic helper often has a positive impact on children's L2 English. In relation to that, some implications with regard to the employment of non-native English teachers have also been briefly alluded to. The paper further argues that the increase in awareness towards Filipino English or more generally other varieties of English as a consequence of the live-in English speaking domestic helpers can be constructive to international communications where English is used widely by non-native speakers. Although, more should be done to examine other aspects of language acquisition in the presence of live-in domestic helpers (e.g. writing abilities, cognitive abilities) ideally with a larger sample size, the findings of the study reported in this paper do provide some evidence to content the anecdotal "bad influence myth". As the employment of domestic helpers is commonplace in

many developed countries, it remains to be seen whether findings of this study can be generalised to other places that share a similar acquisition context, i.e. language acquisition in the presence of FDHs. In addition, the interplay of the immediate sociolinguistic environment and code choice in this unique acquisition context with the existence of FDHs will also be an interesting area to pursue in the future.¹⁵

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	Filipino English (Bautista, 2000; Tayao, 2008)	Hong Kong English (Deterding, Wong and Kirkpatrick, 2008; Hung, 2000, inter alia)
.#_ (/p/,/t/,/k/)	Not aspirated	Aspirated
/f/,/v/	/f/ realised as [p], /v/ as [b]	/f/ realised as [f], /v/ as [v]/ [w]

Table 1: Relevant comparable contrasts between FE and HKE

Period	Source of input	
	Filipino domestic helpers	Institutional means
Pre-school	35 - 45 hours	rare
Kindergarten	30 hours	4 hours
Primary school	20 - 30 hours	4.5 - 30 hours (depending on EMI/CMI ¹⁶)
Secondary school	~15 – 25 hours	30 hours

Table 2: Informants' weekly exposure to English from the two main sources

Groups		Number	Age range
Secondary	Without_F-FDH	14	11 - 13
	With_F-FDH	29	11 - 14
Kindergarten	Without_F-FDH	20	4 – 5;11
	With_F-FDH	31	4;6 – 6

Table3: Details of the participants

Groups		Filipino	Hong Kong	British	American
Secondary	Without_F-FDH	54.72	89.82	92.37	94.09
	With_F-FDH	62.54	89.50	95.07	95.50
Kindergarten	Without_F-FDH	62.77	89.29	88.34	93.18
	With_F-FDH	68.98	90.66	86.11	94.48

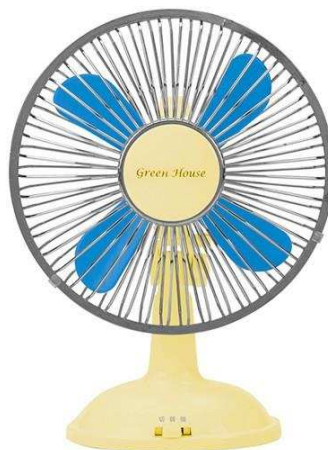
Table4: Group means in the picture-choosing task

Groups		Target	Foil
Secondary	Without_F-FDH	50.47	99.23
	With_F-FDH	57.01	98.33
Kindergarten	Without_F-FDH	34.92	99.16
	With_F-FDH	46.00	98.61

Table5: Group means in the sound discrimination AX³ task

Appendix

A sample layout of the picture choosing task



Notes

- ¹ FDHs constitute approximately three percent of HK's population with Indonesian and Filipino workers being the largest groups (Visa and policies 2007).
- ² Prior to their arrival in HK, Indonesian FDHs are required to attend mandatory Cantonese (the language spoken by the majority of HK Chinese) courses. One of the reviewers has highlighted the fact that some Indonesians do communicate with their employers in English. However, since this study as explained in later sections focuses only on the influence of Filipino domestic helpers, suffice it to say that controls whose families have employed an Indonesian helper all reported using Cantonese exclusively to converse with them.
- ³ One of the anonymous reviewers have rightly pointed out that other native varieties of English such as Canadian English, Australian English are also represented in Hong Kong due the presence of expatriates and native English teachers.
- ⁴ Interested readers can browse the following website for the comments made by concerned employers who lament the apparently inadequate English abilities of FDHs.
<http://hongkong.asiaxpat.com/forums/hong-kong-domestic-help/threads/95419/english-lessons-for-domestic-helper/>. See also
<http://www.baby-kingdom.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=1142802&extra=page%3D1&page=1> for anecdotes shared by parents who had employed FDHs.
- ⁵ One of the anonymous reviewers has pointed out the value of investigating children's production under such acquisition circumstances. However, due to the limitation of space this study only focuses on children's listening abilities. Readers interested in the topic can refer to Leung (in prep.) which investigates both production and perception as well as their interface with sociolinguistic factors in the presence of FDHs.
- ⁶ The onset position normally flavours aspirations (Carr 1999; Davenport and Hannahs, 2010).
- ⁷ It should be pointed out that the [p] resulting from phoneme /f/ differs from that resulting from phoneme /p/ in acoustic terms. But since acoustic properties of the respective sounds are not foci of the study, this issue will not be commented on hereafter.
- ⁸ It should be pointed out that Afendras has included families of other dialects/ languages in the study (e.g. Hakka, Mandarin, etc) apart from Cantonese families.
- ⁹ This is calculated using data from the syllabi collected from the schools as well as the typical interaction pattern between FDHs and children. Note back that the time is calculated on a 5-day week basis as children interact with the helpers less during weekends when the parents are off work. Likewise, since the children are not required to go to school during the weekend, the same measure has been used to estimate their institutional exposure. Although the reviewers have raised issues regarding extra tuition lessons that the participant might have enrolled in and other input from the media such as TV and films, they are however not considered here because they are not the main source of English input that informants get.
- ¹⁰ It is important to note that accents among different speakers can vary. This is in fact not unique to non-native varieties of English, but it is also true of native speakers as can be observed through the high degree of variations within a native speaking country (e.g. Hughes, Trudgill, and Watt 2005). To include detail descriptions (e.g. demographics and speech sample) of individual FDH will require a completely different research design (i.e. case studies) which will contribute interesting follow-up studies complementing the current paper.
- ¹¹ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
- ¹² <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>
- ¹³ The portion in parentheses was not pronounced. Also notice that some of the sounds were nonce words as there were no ideal confusion pairs readily available. Since the purpose of the task is to test subjects' ability to discriminate the sound in question, informants' knowledge of the actual word used (be it real or nonce) can be ignored (Strange and Shafer, 2008).
- ¹⁴ This touches upon the issue regarding what models should be assumed in teaching English which is a topic beyond the scope of this paper. For the sake of our argument, the target to be acquired is assumed to be the native norms, hence attainment is viewed against such terms.
- ¹⁵ Implications of the current findings on other areas of studies such as pedagogical reforms and language policies will also be meaningful to pursue as noted by one of the reviewers.
- ¹⁶ CMI stands for Chinese as a medium of instruction.