

## **Reimagined: Chinese Weekend School**

The goal of this project is to provide some lesson plans, lesson activities, and suggestions in changing the structure of Chinese weekend schools, which hinges on the research surrounding the language development of Cantonese. The research I will be using mainly draw on the fields of linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy. By using this research, it aims to address the question of how can we restructure weekend Chinese school so that it will allow the students to develop, gain, and maintain Cantonese proficiency? Furthermore, these suggestions also aim to encourage students to explore their culture and to potentially develop their Hong Konger/Chinese identity. This project will be separated into sections that focus on a problem that surround Chinese weekend schools. Then I will provide suggestions to amend these problems that are supported by research.

### **Cultural Identity**

A central issue for Chinese/Hong Kong-Canadians is the development of their cultural identity, namely, reconciling their Canadian identity with their heritage identity. Oftentimes, for children that are either born in Canada or have moved here, they desire to adapt to the dominant culture, which in consequence, leads to the relinquishment of their heritage culture. Using the framework of the bidimensional model of acculturation (Berry, 1997), these individuals are most likely in the 'assimilation' stage, where they identify with the dominant culture, but not with their heritage culture. In terms of language, this is exhibited through children wanting to only speak English and/or refusing to use Cantonese. The refusal to use Cantonese not only has detrimental impacts on their proficiency in the language, but it also has negative effects on their cultural identity. This can have downstream effects to their psychological well-being, as it has

been observed that those in the ‘integration’ stage, where individuals recognize both their mainstream and heritage culture, have better mental health outcomes in comparison to those in the assimilation stage since this stage “represents cultural loss” (Berry & Kim, 1988, p. 213).

A lot of children that had to attend Chinese school on the weekends resented going because it did not align with the activities that other Canadian kids were partaking in. There are many accounts, like Chow’s (2023), where they convince their parents to stop attending Chinese weekend school, resulting in their Cantonese skills to dwindle further. However, as they get older, they realize that not being able to speak their language has had negative impacts in being able to connect with their Chinese/Hong Kong heritage, leading to feelings of regret at not being able to speak their heritage language (Chow, 2023). In Dong’s interview with adolescent participants on the topic of identity, one of the students (out of four total participants) considered language ability to being essential to their Chinese identity, and another student did not consider language to be essential to their identity but recognized that it can help with identifying with their heritage culture (2022). Overall, this exhibits how language is intertwined with cultural identity, especially for bicultural/multicultural individuals. In Peirce’s (1995) research, she theorizes that an individual’s motivation to learn a language is a result of ‘investments’, which are closely linked to the learner’s social identity. In the space of Cantonese, there may be individuals that want to use their heritage language but are hesitant to use it in fear of being told their Cantonese is horrible and/or being labeled as a *juksing* (Yim & Clémont, 2019). This can result in less willingness to use Cantonese, which can also contribute to dwindling language proficiency.

Another essential factor in children’s difficulty in learning Cantonese is the mismatch in teaching. In other words, how their regular weekday teachers deliver their lessons differ from

how their Cantonese teachers deliver their lessons. Furthermore, there may be differences in teaching styles and learning styles (Wang, 1995). These differences can be connected to differences in culture, such that education in Canada significantly varies from how education is conducted and viewed in China or Hong Kong (Curdt-Christiansen, 2006). Curdt-Christiansen (2006) remarks how this is a major barrier in the children’s willingness to partake and engage in their language learning. One of the students that was interviewed in Curdt-Christiansen’s paper, Fengfeng, notes how in their Chinese school “there is no *action* in the class...I like *action*”, which contrasts with their French school where “we are allowed to make up stories, we can talk about our stories in front of the whole class, and the teachers are nice” (2006, p. 204). This student’s account reflects the need for Chinese weekend schools to reconcile with the cultural differences with everyday school.

### ***Learning Activities***

Table 1: Lesson plan for reading and writing.

Topic/Goal	Learning Objectives	Learning Activities
Reading and writing	1. Students will be able to apply previous reading and writing lessons. 2. Students will be able to creatively use Cantonese in illustrating and telling a story. 3. Students will present their picture book in front of other students in Cantonese.	Activity 1) Create a picture book written in Cantonese (Traditional writing) for a topic of their choosing (adjust expectations depending on grade level). - After the completion of their picture book, they

	<p>4. Students will work on improving their Cantonese comprehension.</p> <p>5. Students will be able to engage with their classmates in Cantonese.</p>	<p>are to present it to the class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The class will discuss the book together and make sure they master the comprehension of the story.</li> </ul>
	<p>1. Students will be able to apply previous reading and writing lessons.</p> <p>2. Students will be able to learn new vocabulary in Cantonese.</p>	<p>Activity 2) Translating an episode of your favourite tv show into Cantonese.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Other students will be able to watch the translated episode.</li> </ul>

The example lesson plan outlined in Table 1 is to demonstrate how teachers can have students actively engage in stimulating activities to improve their reading and writing. Furthermore, Activity 1 from Table 1 also exercises their speaking and listening skills in Cantonese. This lesson plan connects to a criticism that Fengfeng had on the lack of action and interaction with their classmates in Chinese weekend school (Curdt-Christiansen, 2006). It is noted that many Chinese weekend schools have the students memorize Chinese characters in a monotonous manner (Curdt-Christiansen, 2006). This exercise tries to have the students put into practice what they have learnt in reading and writing and are able to interact with their

classmates. The ability to apply what they are learning outside of exercises, like memorizing and essay writing, will be beneficial in allowing them to enjoy engaging with the material.

*Table 2: Learning activity for engaging with active activities in Cantonese.*

Topic/Goal	Learning Objectives	Learning Activities
Cantonese in action!	1. Students will be able to use Cantonese in contexts out of the classroom.  2. Students will learn new Cantonese vocabulary.	The students will have the opportunity to play soccer (or a different sport), but all spoken dialogue must be in Cantonese. This includes learning soccer terminology in Cantonese.

For Table 2, this lesson also connects to Fengfeng’s criticism (Curdt-Christensen, 2006) about the lack of action in their language learning environment. This activity attempts to combine the children’s Canadian and Chinese/Hong Kong culture together. On the MacInnes Field (outside of the Nest), I always notice soccer camps for little kids every Saturday, thus, there might be some kids in Chinese weekend school who are missing out on soccer camps or other extracurricular activities due to the conflict in time. Furthermore, the students will be able to learn how to use Cantonese in a context outside of their regular classroom and home environment.

Table 3: Cultural celebration

Topic/Goal	Lesson Objectives	Lesson Activities
Cultural celebration	<p>1. Students will gain a better understanding of traditions and beliefs surrounding cultural celebrations.</p> <p>2. Students will get the opportunity to engage with their heritage culture.</p>	<p>Activity 1) Lunar New Year celebration! Students will have the opportunity to engage with various activities (food, games, etc.) linked to the Lunar New Year. Furthermore, there will be a brief instruction time to educate the children on the history and information behind some commonly celebrated Lunar New Year traditions.</p> <p>Additional game: Red envelope scavenger hunt – searching around the classroom for hidden red envelopes.</p>

In Table 3, this learning activity focuses on encouraging cultural exploration among the students. This can set up opportunities to explore their heritage identity with their peers. This sets up a safe environment for these students to explore their culture without the fear of being judged by others.

## **Lack of Exposure**

Parents enroll their children in Chinese weekend schools in hopes of them becoming proficient in Chinese. Since these lessons occur once a week for a couple hours, many students have noted how hard it is to maintain or further develop proficiency in Cantonese and have attributed their low proficiency to the limited number of hours spent on the language. However, I believe what this sentiment is displaying is the lack of Cantonese use at home. In both language acquisition and language development, one of the key factors in being able to gain and maintain fluency in a language is both input and output. In other words, being exposed to the language and the opportunity to use the language are important factors in developing their Cantonese (Hammer et al., 2012). If parents were to simply put their children in Chinese weekend school with high expectations about the outcomes, but then do not use Cantonese in the home, then they have an unrealistic and misinformed understanding as to how language development occurs. In addition, growing up as a bilingual in Canada often results in the child's English abilities to far surpass their heritage language abilities because of the amount of time they spend at school and with their peers (Cho, 2015).

What if schools were to simply suggest increase Cantonese usage at home? For immigrant families, it may be easier to increase Cantonese usage in the home as both parents will be fluent in the language. This contrasts with families where the parents are 2nd generation or later, and already have a poor proficiency in Cantonese. Moreover, this further contrasts with families where only one of the parents have a Cantonese background and have poor proficiency. These different family arrangements can make it difficult for families to put in place a suggestion like "increase Cantonese usage". If parents want their children to succeed in learning Cantonese, then the parents must put in the work as well. An article by Kat Chow (2023) notes that when she

was younger, her older sister had insisted the family become an English-speaking household, resulting in Kat and her siblings' Cantonese skills to diminish. Interestingly, about three decades later, her older sister has her own children learning Mandarin in the household because of her in-laws. Her older sister is now able to recognize how important language is in connecting with their heritage culture. What is important to note from this article is how Kat Chow's (2023) older sister is also putting in effort to learn and use Mandarin, even if her skills are elementary. Thus, the first suggestion for this section is that if the parents' Cantonese skills are lacking, then have them learn alongside their kids. I think it would be interesting to hold parent-child classes where both the parent and child can learn the language together.

### ***Learning Activities***

*Table 4: Learning activities to increase exposure/usage of Cantonese outside of the classroom.*

<b>Topic/Goal</b>	<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Learning Activities</b>
Increasing exposure and usage at home.	1. Students are able to use Cantonese in contexts outside of the classroom.	Activity 1) WeChat voice messages.  - Students are to send a voice message to their teacher narrating their day in Cantonese.
	2. Students are able to remember the lessons learnt in class.  3. Students will become more comfortable in using Cantonese.	Activity 2) Storytime with parents  - Students are to read picture books in

		<p>Cantonese with their parents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Afterwards, the student will attend class and present a summary of the story to their classmates.</li></ul>
		<p>Activity 3) Ordering food in Cantonese (an activity for families that live in areas that have Cantonese operated food places).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The student will order their meal entirely in Cantonese (without the help of their parents).</li><li>- Afterwards, the student will create a diary entry on the food they ordered (and give a review of the food!).</li></ul>
		<p>Activity 4) The student will watch a movie or tv show that is in Cantonese with their parents.</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Afterwards, when they attend class, the student can give a review and a summary of the media they watched.</li> </ul>
--	--	--

In Table 4, there are four different learning activity ideas for increasing Cantonese exposure outside of the classroom. For learning activities 2 and 4, the student is to consume a form of media with their parent(s) and then provide a summary and review to their class in Cantonese. Particularly for children under the age of 5, it is especially important for parents to consume the screen media alongside their child and actively engage in the content with them (e.g., asking questions), which will allow them to learn from screen media better (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017). Research has also noted the importance of “informal language learning”, such as activities like consuming Cantonese media or texting friends, which have important implications in their heritage language learning (Cho, 2015, p. 36). All the activities outlined above allow students to engage with informal language learning.

**Impacts of Bilingualism: Classifiers**

As noted earlier, there is often a mismatch between the culture of the Canadian education system and the system put in place in Chinese weekend school. This demonstrates the lack of consideration the schools have in the students’ Chinese/Hong-Kong Canadian identity. This can also have impacts on their Cantonese abilities, namely, the impacts it has on their classifier knowledge. Children that grow up bilingual in Cantonese and English, specifically in an environment like Canada, where English is the dominant language, it can impact their acquisition

of classifiers. Typically, what occurs is bilinguals' classifier knowledge is smaller than a monolingual Cantonese speaker. In addition, bilinguals tend to either inappropriately use classifiers or overextend the use of the general classifier, *go3 個* (Wei & Lee, 2010). To elaborate, they will either use the wrong classifier or they will use the classifier, *go3 個*, in sentences that do not require it. An example of this would be:

Two **pieces of** paper.

\*loeng5 **go3** zi2 vs. loeng5 **zoeng1** zi2.

\***兩個紙** vs. **兩張紙**.

I highlight this issue of classifiers in bilinguals as I believe that Chinese weekend schools should keep in mind that they are teaching students that are bilinguals. Therefore, they should realize that there are grammar concepts in Cantonese, such as classifiers, that will most likely not reach the same proficiency as monolingual Cantonese speakers due to them being bilinguals in an English-dominant society. Thus, they should incorporate research like this into their lesson plans.

### ***Learning Activities***

*Table 5: Learning activity to help with Cantonese classifiers.*

<b>Topic/Goal</b>	<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Learning Activities</b>
Practicing different classifiers	1. Students will be able to recognize and use the appropriate classifiers with different nouns.	Students will put on a skit in Cantonese, using props (e.g., books, different clothing items,

		etc.) that require different classifiers.
--	--	---

In Table 5, this learning activity aims to have the students take note of different classifiers that are attributed to different objects. For example, for the word “book”, the associated classifier is *bun2* 本.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to explore the different areas that can be improved in Chinese weekend schools to allow students to actively engage with learning and using Cantonese. I highlight three areas that these schools need to consider: struggles with heritage cultural identity, exposure and usage of Cantonese at home, and the impacts of being bilingual on their Cantonese knowledge. In my exploration for this project, I think an underlying theme that has emerged is the lack of consideration these schools have surrounding the students’ bicultural/multicultural and bilingual upbringing in Canada. If these schools were to implement instruction that consider these important aspects of the students’ identity, students will be motivated to learn Cantonese, consequently resulting in their Cantonese to improve.

## References

- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5-68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Berry, J. W., & Kim, U. (1988). Acculturation and mental health. In P. Dasen, J. Berry, & N. Sartorius (Eds.), *Health and cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 207 - 238). Sage Publications.
- Canadian Paediatric Society (2017). Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 22(8), 461-468. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxx123>
- Cho, G. (2015). Perspectives vs. reality of heritage language development: Voices from second-generation Korean-American high school students. *Multicultural Education*, 22(2), 30-38. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1065385>
- Chow, B. (2023, August 7). T&T Supermarket is more than just a grocery store – it helped me learn the language I resisted as a kid. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/first-person-t-t-1.6928529>
- Chow, Kat. (2023, September 25). The parents trying to pass down a language they hardly speak. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/09/children-learning-immigrant-family-languages/675423/>
- Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2006). Teaching and learning Chinese: Heritage language classroom discourse in Montreal. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(2), 189-207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310608668762>

Dong, A. (2022). Exploring the effects of a Chinese heritage language school on the identity construction of its adolescent students. [Master's thesis, Western University]. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository.

[https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/8747/?utm\\_source=ir.lib.uwo.ca%2Fetd%2F8747&utm\\_medium=PDF&utm\\_campaign=PDFCoverPages](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/8747/?utm_source=ir.lib.uwo.ca%2Fetd%2F8747&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages)

Hammer, C. S., Komaroff, E., Rodriguez, B. L., Lopez, L. M., Scarpino, S. E., & Goldstein, B. (2012). Predicting Spanish-English bilingual children's language abilities. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 55, 1251-1264. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388\(2012/11-0016\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2012/11-0016))

Peirce, B. N. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9-31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587803>

Wang, S. C. (1995). Chinese community schools: The issues and the new directions. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED385159>

Wei, L., & Lee, S. (2010). L1 development in an L2 environment: The use of Cantonese classifiers and quantifiers by young British-born Chinese in Tyneside. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 4(6), 359-382.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050108667738>

Yim, O., & Clément, R. (2019). "You're a *Juksing*": Examining Cantonese-English code-switching as an index of identity. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38(4), 479-495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X19865572>