

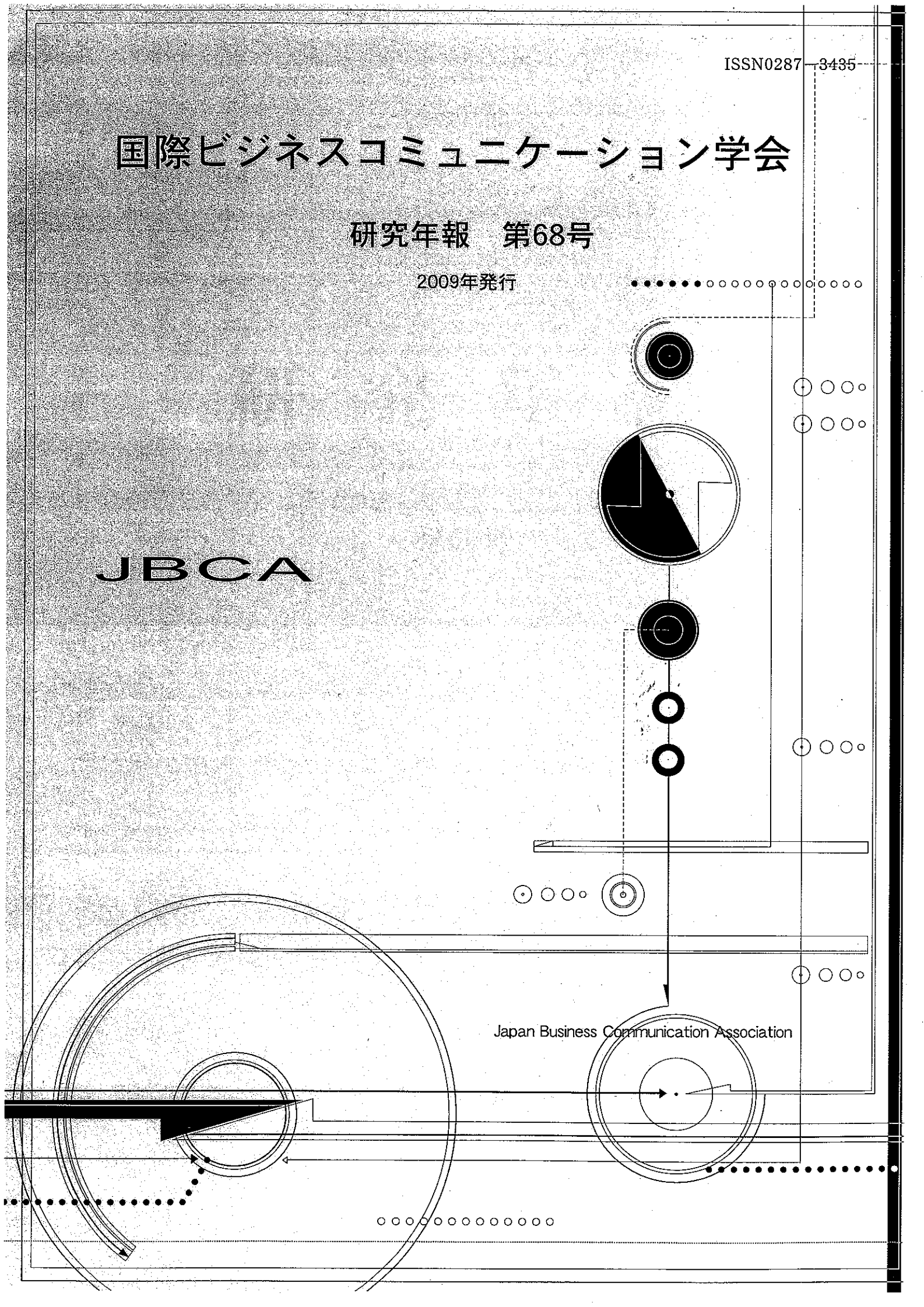
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Asian Business Communication: Country Perspectives (Hong Kong & China)

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Abstract

This paper describes different patterns of business communication in China. In particular, I concentrate on the language environments and business communication patterns in Hong Kong and the adjoining Pearl River Delta (i.e., Guangdong) in southern China. A tri-lingual communication environment is evolving as this region increasingly moves into globalization. To illustrate these trends, the paper provides contrasting examples of business communication in manufacturing and financial services industries. I conclude by suggesting how educational initiatives can be developed to meet the challenges of communicating in this tri-lingual communication environment.

I. Introduction

This paper describes the different language environments and patterns of business communication in China. In particular, I concentrate on the language environments and business communication patterns in Hong Kong and the adjoining Pearl River Delta (i.e., Guangdong) in southern China. This is the dominant economic area that has led China's growth. A tri-lingual communication environment is evolving as this region increasingly moves into globalization. In this paper, I first provide an overview of the language environment and communication patterns in the Greater Pearl River Delta (GPRD) which comprises Hong Kong, Macao and nine municipalities of the Guangdong Province in the mainland of China (see Appendix 1 for map). I also put forth a rationale explaining why language and communication competencies need to be developed and strengthened to communicate effectively in this environment. Second, I illustrate and provide examples of the communication patterns in the manufacturing industries which predominate in GPRD and the financial services industry which is the dominant industry in Hong Kong. Lastly, I conclude by discussing how educational institutions can provide educational programs that will help to meet the language competency needs of business communicators in Hong Kong and GPRD.

II. Language Environments

In this section, I provide an overview of the language environments in the Pearl River Delta. I will start with Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, English is one of the major business, governmental, and legal languages in an oral tri-lingual (English, Cantonese, and Mandarin) working environment. Cantonese individuals engage primarily in Cantonese language conversations as their fellow colleagues (about 95% or so) are Cantonese-speaking Chinese but they also must have English conversations with local expatriates, business travelers visiting Hong Kong, and overseas customers or suppliers via telephone and sometimes Mandarin conversations with Chinese individuals from China or Taiwan. This situation results in a multi-language environment in which Cantonese individuals switch between two languages (Cantonese and English) and possibly a third language (Mandarin) on a daily basis. Cantonese occupies the position as the dominant oral language; but English and possibly Mandarin as a third language also have a continuing presence in the oral communication system. With the languages existing side by side (so to speak), the Cantonese individuals monitor and unconsciously compare first- and second-language messages and are obliged to constantly transfer meaning between Cantonese and English or Mandarin.

The dominance of Cantonese oral communication is reinforced by a cultural norm dictating attitudes toward the use of English in conversations with other

Cantonese-speaking individuals (see for example, Bond & Young, 1982; Gibbon, 1987; Pennington *et al.*, 1992). Coupled with an educational system de-emphasizing interactive communication, even conscientious Chinese individuals have difficulty maintaining a proficiency balance between first- and second-language communication skills. Because of this societal pressure in the Cantonese dominant language environment dictating that Cantonese first-language speakers refrain from the use of English language communication with other Cantonese-speaking individuals (Bond & Youn, 1982; Gibbons, 1987), Cantonese bilinguals do not face a conducive environment in which to improve their second language competency in English. In addition, Cantonese bilinguals also have the challenge of mastering Mandarin.

Compared to Hong Kong, the language environment in the GRPD is less complex as the Mainland Chinese speak their national language of Mandarin and supplement this with English and maybe their local dialects. In internal communication within firms, the communication is in Mandarin as the work force has competence in this linking language. Some workers also may speak with each other in a Chinese dialect if they come from the same province and share competency in the dialect. In external communication with international customers, English is the major linking language with other languages such as Japanese, Spanish, and German playing a minor role. Consequently, in the predominately two-language environment, attention can be directed to the development of English competencies. The challenge is more straightforward than in Hong Kong where the concurrent development of English and Mandarin competencies is required.

III. Communication Patterns in Manufacturing and Financial Services Industries

In this section, I provide examples of business communication in manufacturing and financial services industries to illustrate the multiple language use and the contrasting communication patterns in these industries. I show how firms must develop additional communication competencies in order to meet changes in the external environment facing them.

My first example of a manufacturer describes and illustrates how language in a firm changes and expands over time. Figure 1 provides an overview of a Hong-Kong based manufacturer. I show how a Hong Kong-based manufacturer of PVCs developed multiple language competencies to adapt to a changing customer mix, more complex and diverse products, and to accommodate a move of its production facilities from Hong Kong to Dongguan, China (50 miles from its headquarters).

Early in its history when operations were located entirely in Hong Kong, all company communications were in Cantonese as this was the native language of management, the workers, and the customers. In addition, the production process was basic, so sophisticated technical language was not necessary. The manufacturer's service representatives spoke Cantonese, as did maintenance and repair individuals. With the introduction of some upscale products and some English-speaking customers, English was introduced into the company language mix. The marketing and production managers developed and utilized English language competencies in calling on customers (marketing manager) and in pur-

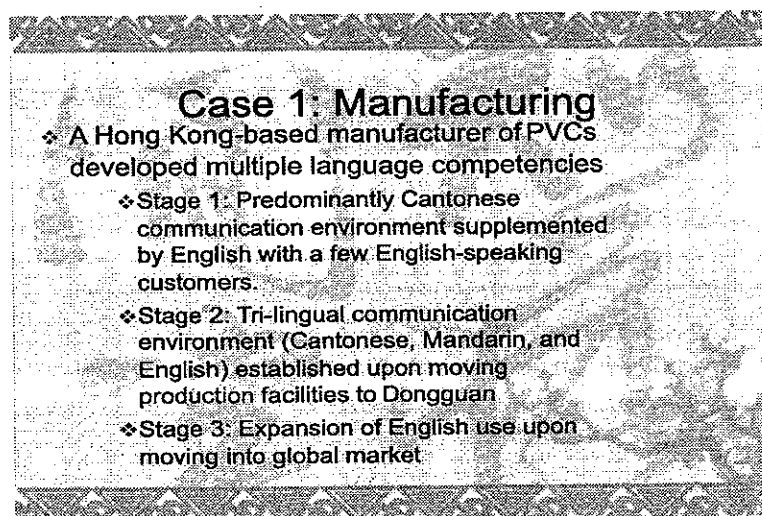


Figure 1 Overview of a Hong Kong-Based Manufacturer

chasing new machinery and repairing/maintaining of existing equipment (production manager). The technical company (engineering and production management) also increased in its complexity.

A trilingual communication environment was created upon moving production facilities to Dongguan, China, where multilingual managers switched among three languages in order to communicate with customers (English, Cantonese, and Mandarin), with the production staff and work force in Dongguan (Mandarin), and with the Cantonese headquarters staff in Hong Kong or among themselves (Cantonese). Again, the technical or professional genres became more complex but at an even more accelerated pace than the technical genres developed at headquarters. During the expansion period, the company had to manage the acquisition of multiple language competencies to match the communication required to operate in a multilingual communication environment.

At present, the company is marketing its products internationally, so English competency is increasingly more important. The challenge of this company is to develop and maintain competency balance in tri-lingual communication environment.

In the second example, I discuss language use and the contrasting communication patterns of three banks in Hong Kong; namely, HSBC, Hang Seng Bank, and Bank of China (See Figure 2 for descriptions).

A tri-lingual language environment of Cantonese, English, and Mandarin exists in these three banks, but there also are different communication patterns in each bank that relate to the customer mix of a particular

bank and its nationality. In the example, I contrast the language environments and communication patterns within these banks.

HSBC is an international bank headquartered in London that serves multinational clients as well as concentrating on upscale customers (such as expatriates) in its retail segment. To communicate effectively with these non-Cantonese speaking customers, the HSBC staffs possess high-level English language competencies and conduct a significant part of their internal and customer communication in English, especially written documents. The communication environment consists of a mix of Cantonese (with Hong Kong locals), English (with foreign and expatriate clients), and Mandarin (with mainland and overseas Chinese).

Hang Seng Bank is the leading domestic bank. Its customer base is focused on Hong Kong Chinese enterprises and less upscale retail customers as compared to HSBC. The English language competencies of the staff are comparatively lower than at HSBC and Cantonese is the primary language internally and with its customers.

The Bank of China is a mainland China bank that has expanded into Hong Kong and whose major source of business is mainland Chinese firms that have established export offices in Hong Kong. The bank also has started to expand its retail operations. The communication within the bank is in Cantonese and Mandarin, and there is relatively little English communication. There is frequent cross border communication in Mandarin within the organization and with the mainland client base in Hong Kong. The high-level Mandarin compe-

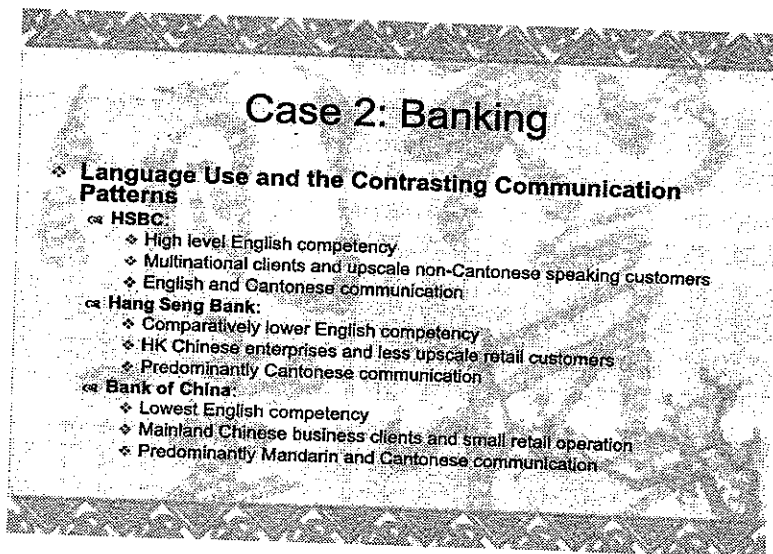


Figure 2 Overview of Language Use in Three Banks

tency of the staff facilitates this communication. The Mandarin communication skills are considerably higher than at HSBC or Hang Seng Bank, while the English language competencies are relatively lower.

In the next, I illustrate how language proficiencies enhanced or hindered the communication within these banks. My example contrasts the communication between investment advisors and a client in the three banks, and illustrates how language proficiencies affected the communication efficacy of their interactions.

In HSBC, a financial advisor provided sophisticated investment advice to a discerning but nonexpert investor. Figure 3 provides an overview of the communication episode at HSBC. Both interlocutors were fully bilingual (English) in the general language, while the advisor had a professional understanding and the investor an intermediate, but not professional knowledge of investment. In the conversation, the advisor was able to provide a comprehensive picture of the investor's financial portfolio so that she completely understood her options and financial position at the end of the meeting. Closure was thus achieved in this communication episode. Notably, the advisor addressed subjunctive "what if" questions systematically and adjusted to new issues as they arose. The interlocutors carried on an interactive discussion of various investment opportunities and options, in particular whether to sell particular investments. In this conversation, the advisor utilized her fluent general language competency to successfully execute the task and situation communication requirements.

In Hang Seng Bank, another financial advisor had a

conversation with the same investor about her investment opportunities. Figure 4 provides an overview of the communication episode at Hang Seng Bank. In this episode, the financial advisor had an intermediate general English language competency, but a full professional genre competency in financial analysis that was equivalent to the first financial advisor. Although the second financial advisor possessed a full professional genre competency in financial analysis, his intermediate general English language proficiency constrained him from engaging in a free flowing interactive dialogue, and specifically prevented him from fully responding adequately to the inquiries of the investor. The financial advisor kept responding to her inquiries, "Just do it." Unlike the first advisor, he could not achieve closure in the communication transaction and left the investor with unanswered questions. In this situation, the deficiency in English language competency of the Hang Seng Bank financial advisor constrained the communication effectiveness of the interactions. The financial advisor at HSBC had sufficient general language competency to communicate effectively in this situation, whereas the second financial advisor with intermediate general language competency frustrated his investor client.

In Bank of China, the investor met with a financial planner who was fully fluent in Mandarin and who had low-intermediate English competence. Figure 5 provides an overview of the communication episode at the Bank of China. The investor was bilingual with both English and Mandarin competencies, but did not possess understanding of technical financial genre terminology. The

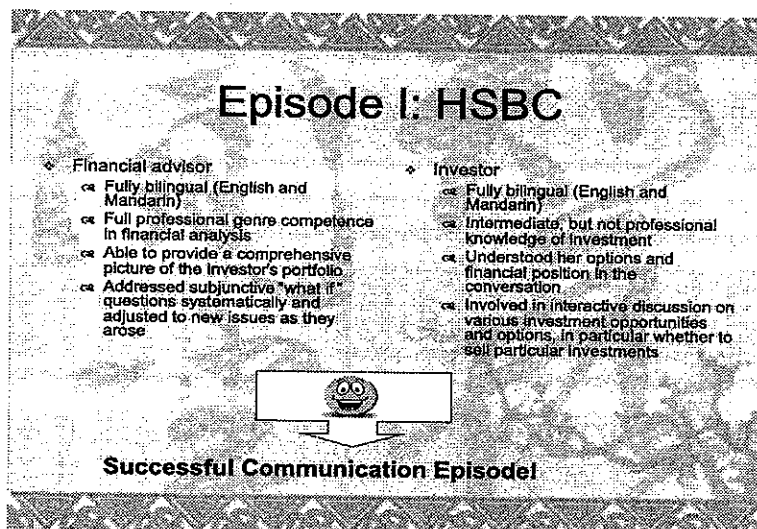


Figure 3 Communication Episode at HSBC

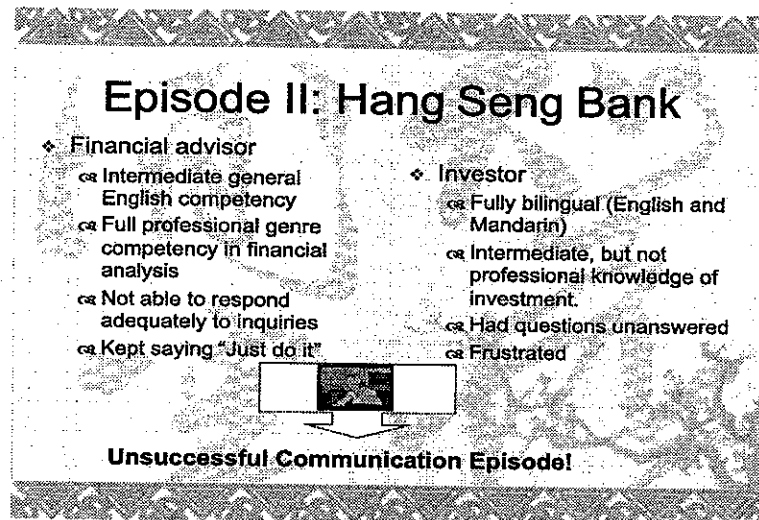


Figure 4 Communication Episode at Hang Seng Bank

conversation was mainly conducted in English as the site of conversation was in Hong Kong and the investor initiated the conversation in English. There was much difficulty in the communication process and the financial planner was not able to effectively explain the nuances of different investment options.

After attempting to communicate in English for 15 minutes, the investor switched to Mandarin and this made the financial planner much more comfortable. He then proceeded to explain the options in some detail but the investor understood even less than when he had previously used English in his explanation. The investor did not understand the genre terminology even though she was fully bilingual in Mandarin. From that point, the conversation switched back and forth from Manda-

rin to English to better attempt to communicate successfully. The overall result of the communication episode was unsatisfactory. The language competency match of the financial planner and the investor was such as to not allow the successful exchange of information.

In sum, these situations illustrate the need for interactive competency in English to successfully communicate in these situations. If the financial planners and the investor would have had different language competencies, the communication results would have been different. Since the language environment puts communicators in touch with speakers of different languages and who possess differing levels of competency in these languages, interactive competency in Cantonese, Eng-

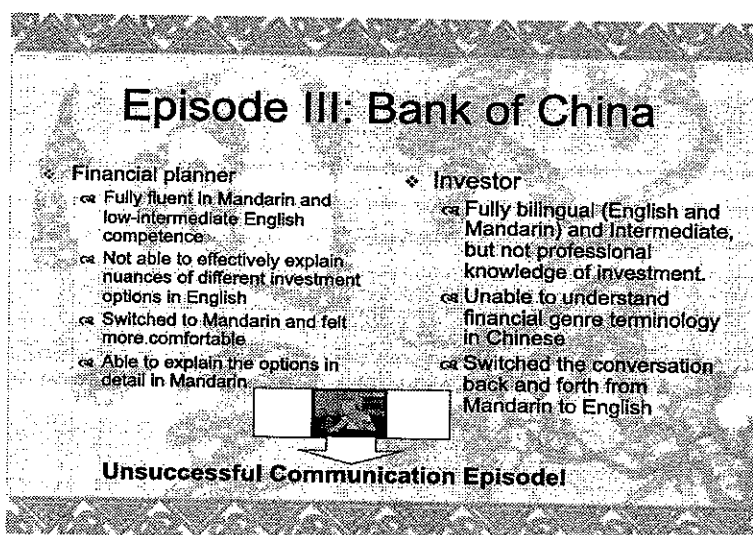


Figure 5 Communication Episode at Bank of China

lish and Mandarin is required to carry out professional communication in this tri-language communication environment.

As illustrated by this example, the language environment and patterns of business communication have become more complex and multilingual. My prediction is that these trends will continue and that Hong Kong and Pearl River Delta will increasingly require advanced English and Mandarin language competencies as firms expand globally, act as a service center for mainland China, and enter the Chinese market.

IV. Educational Initiatives to Meet Communication Challenges

The third part of the paper concentrates on how universities can develop educational programs for meeting the challenges of communicating effectively in this trilingual or multilingual communication environment. Specifically, I discuss some initiatives in which I have been personally involved.

An important program is the development of international exchange programs where foreign students are brought to study in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong/Chinese students are sent to study in overseas English-speaking environments. By bringing English-speaking exchange students to Hong Kong, the dynamics of the communication environment in and out of the classroom is changed. The Hong Kong Chinese students are encouraged to take an active part in the communication process, and the norm of restricting English communication is challenged. This has proved to be effective, especially when student groups are formed. In this situation, the Cantonese-speaking are forced to extend their English speaking to a wider variety of communication situations and to develop their interactive and spontaneous communication competencies.

The sending of students abroad provides an even more powerful method of developing English language speaking competencies. At City University, I have directed the exchange program and English Immersion scheme at the College level. The preliminary results in measuring effectiveness in increasing interactive communication skills have been very promising. Concerning the English Immersion scheme, the students have been able to overcome their cultural aversion to speaking spontaneously and have become more interactive in their English language communication.

In my teaching, I also have used teleconferences to put students in intercultural communication situations.

These teleconferences have been effective in raising intercultural awareness, but have not been able to raise competency levels. This one-off and short duration of the interactions did not provide the necessary sustainability to increase the language competencies.

The last program I want to mention is the student internship program where students are placed with international and mainland China Multinational Corporations. In this program, students are exposed to and take part in communicating in professional genre (contexts). Therefore, in their internship students are improving their interactive communication competencies and of special significance practicing their communication in work situations and with peers and superiors in an organizational environment. The overall thrust of these educational endeavors is to attempt to respond to the growing need of developing interactive language competencies of English and Mandarin in Hong Kong and GPRD.

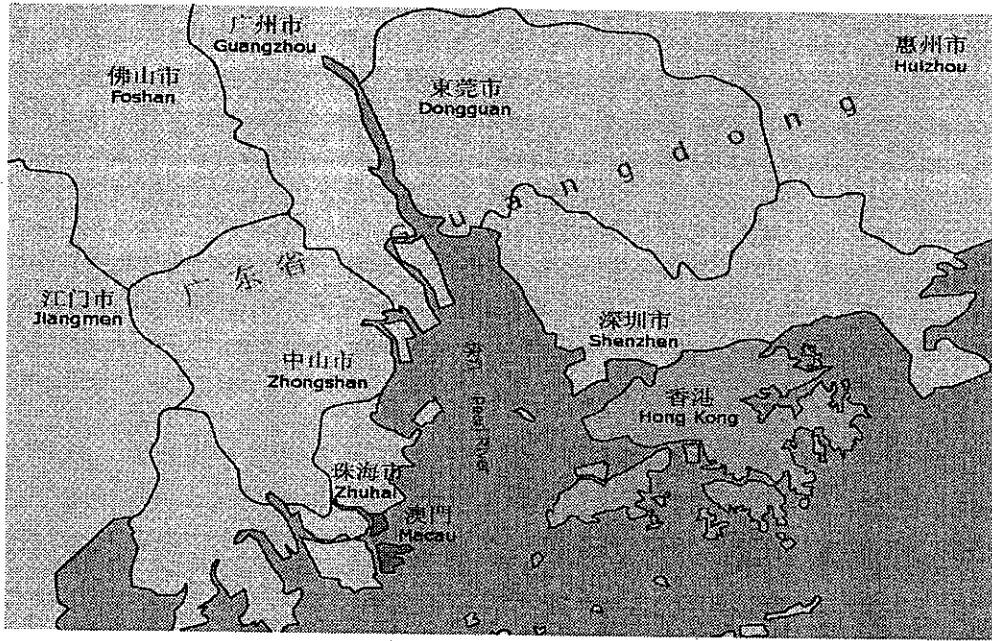
V. Conclusions

To conclude, I want to emphasize that advanced communication competencies in multiple languages will be required as Hong Kong and GPRD firms increasingly compete in a globalized competitive environment. The challenge in Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta is to concurrently develop a high level of both English and Mandarin language competencies while maintaining competency in Cantonese. In sum, communicators will need to switch among languages in their communication practice and will need to develop multiple language competencies in English and Mandarin as well as expertise in communicating in professional and business genres. However, the need to develop these competencies as demonstrated by my examples will vary by industry.

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Appendix 1: A Map of Greater Pearl River Delta (GPRD)

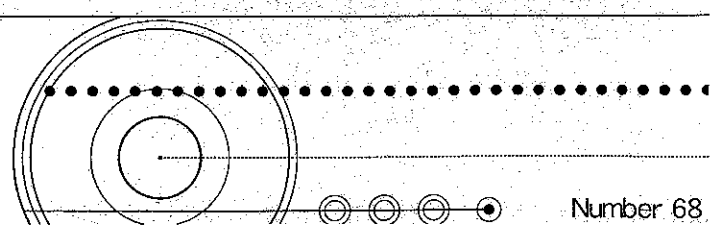


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