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Hong Kong's English Standards Are Now As Bad As Mainland China and Thailand, Lagging Far Behind Singapore

Leading English-language educator urges Hong Kong to improve proficiency and confidence through community-based effort

Hong Kong's confidence and proficiency in using English has deteriorated so badly that it ranks equal or worse than mainland China and Thailand on a number of indicators and lags way behind key regional competitor Singapore, according to the initial findings of a ground-breaking survey conducted by Wall Street Institute (WSI), the largest international specialist English language education organisation in the world.

The results of the survey – the first to compare usage of the language across Asia - suggest Hong Kong's international competitiveness as a key finance, trading and tourism centre relying on English as the international language of business is at risk, according to WSI.

While Hong Kong ranked #2 overall among seven Asian economies, English standards in mainland China and even Thailand now are similar in a number of areas to Hong Kong, the findings showed.

"It's shocking that Hong Kong's ranking is on a similar level to Mainland China and Thailand in a number of key areas of English usage," said Kristin Rogers, General Manager of WSI Hong Kong. "Hong Kong has for a long time enjoyed what was widely believed to be quite good English proficiency. Our English was viewed as better than places like Mainland China and Thailand which had previously been considered as generally lacking. Now that is changing - this should serve as a wake-up call for Hong Kong."

More than 16,000 people responded to the survey conducted via the Internet in mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. The survey was supervised by a panel of world-renowned language experts and educational survey professionals (see appendix for details).

Among the initial findings of WSI's first Asian Survey on Confidence and Literacy in the English Language are:

- Just 21% of Hong Kong people take every opportunity to interact with native English speakers which is lower than 23% for mainland Chinese. Thais were also more confident than Hong Kong people with 30% wanting to take every chance to speak English while 55% did in Singapore;
- Few Hong Kong people (19%) feel comfortable speaking English with native speakers – about the same level as Japan (16%) and Thailand (14%). The low HK level should read against the 60% of Singapore;
- In terms of reading English materials, Hong Kong people (51%) are at a similar level as Mainland Chinese (48%) in “sometimes reading English” – Koreans surprisingly perform similarly with 50%. Thailand performs better (56%) while Singaporeans are the strongest readers with 71% reading mostly English materials;
- Singapore is far ahead of the other Asian economies surveyed including Hong Kong. Half of the Singaporeans surveyed believe that they have **no problems** communicating in most situations with English and **make occasional errors** (scoring 4 out of 5 overall) while half of Hong Kong people surveyed consider that they have **no major problems** communicating with English but **make considerable errors** (scoring 3 out of 5). Thailand scored a 3, the same level as Hong Kong. At the bottom of the league table were mainland China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan (scoring 2 with most people having **frequent problems** in communication due principally to **errors** in language);
- The links between English and productivity for individuals at work are most pronounced for Singaporeans (78% believe English is always important in terms of productivity), followed by Thailand (58%). Hong Kong people view English as less important for their productivity in the workplace (49%), a level similar to Mainland Chinese (45%) and Taiwanese (38%). English is seen as least relevant for productivity by Koreans (29%) and Japanese (14%);
- While Singaporeans use English most with friends (31% use it all the time and 36% use it very often), Hong Kong people speak with friends in English just as often as mainland Chinese (6% use it very often and about 30% sometimes);

- English is used most widely for dating in Singapore (30% of respondents use it all the time) while only a small proportion of Hong Kong people speak English on a date. Surprisingly, one third of respondents in China used English to date potential partners.

“The survey provides strong evidence for the first time that our position as a leading trade, finance and business centre relying on English as the international language of commerce is under threat,” said Ms Rogers.

“If the people of Hong Kong don’t take action to improve our English, our international competitiveness which relies partly on English proficiency will continue to be eroded by the likes of Singapore, China and Thailand. The Hong Kong Government has been making some effort to lift English standards but it is now clear that more needs to be done. WSI believes the private sector, including businesses and language schools, can play a role to stimulate wider community interest in the importance of English for Hong Kong’s future.”

WSI Academic Director Dr Tony Lee, the team leader of the survey, said the extent of the problem was highlighted by findings demonstrating that Hong Kong people viewed English as critical for Hong Kong to compete in the global marketplace (61% said it was “always” important). “However, the seriousness with which Hong Kong people viewed English as vital for the city’s international competitiveness is not matched by their lack of commitment to using it in their daily lives or at work,” said Dr Lee.

Dr Lee is a former Senior Research Officer with the Education and Manpower Bureau who is well known in academic circles for his 25 years of work in language skills assessment and standards setting. He was responsible for developing the Hong Kong Workplace English Benchmarks.

WSI Hong Kong and Japan Chairman Peter Forsythe said the survey – which would be conducted every year – signalled the start of a wide program of community initiatives being undertaken by WSI to encourage Hong Kong people to improve their English in order to boost the city’s competitiveness.

“A lot of attention in Hong Kong in recent years has focused on the opportunities that Mainland China offers. WSI wants to remind the business sector and the community that while China means a lot for our future, Hong Kong should build on its historical advantage in English to enhance its position as a gateway to the mainland. As a city with two official languages – Chinese and English – Hong Kong can do a better job in developing proficiency in both languages which will give us a competitive edge over our sister cities on the mainland,” said Mr Forsythe.

The survey results were released on the fifth anniversary of WSI's operations in Hong Kong at a ceremony to relaunch new branding and company values as well as celebrate the opening of a Shatin learning centre.

Wall Street Institute, the world's largest international specialist English language education organization with 350 centres in 25 countries, opened its first Hong Kong centre in 2000 and has quickly become a leader in the English language education sector. Today, WSI has already helped nearly 30,000 Hong Kong people learn English successfully so that they can achieve goals in business, career and their personal life.

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Appendix

Asian Survey on Confidence and Literacy in the English Language – International Advisory Board

A group of world-renowned language experts and educational survey professionals comprises the International Advisory Board for the survey. They include:

- Dr Mike Milanovic
Director, University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations
University of Cambridge (UK)
- Prof Lyle Bachman
Professor and Chair, Department of Applied Linguistics & TESL
University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) (USA)
- Prof David Coniam
Professor, Faculty of Education
The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) (HK)
- Prof David Andrich
Professor and Dean, School of Education
Murdoch University (Australia)
- Prof. Patrick Griffin
Head, Department of Learning and Educational Development
University of Melbourne (Australia)