

Abstract

In Hong Kong, the most commonly used oral language is Cantonese, the dialect of the local region, while the written Chinese language is based on the dialect in Beijing, Mandarin. There are differences in the construction of multisyllabic words as well as syntax between the two dialects. Some educators suggested that Mandarin should be used in teaching Chinese language in schools instead of Cantonese. This study investigated whether Mandarin or Cantonese as a medium of instruction facilitated literacy development. Twenty Grade 1, 20 Grade 3 and 20 Grade 5 students were recruited from each of the two participating schools, which use Mandarin and Cantonese as a medium of instruction respectively. A Mandarin test and a set of Chinese literacy tests were administered to the children. Significant differences in literacy performance between the two groups were found in the third- and fifth-graders. The differences were mainly in writing and reading comprehension skills. The author concluded that using Mandarin as a medium of instruction facilitates the understanding and effective use of written Chinese syntax.