HONG KONG TEACHERS' ENGLISH ORAL INPUT IN KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

Research Article

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Abstract

Oral input has long been recognised as a key factor influencing second language acquisition in early childhood. Children rely heavily on oral input to learn new words and develop phonological awareness of a language. However, in the context of English teaching in Hong Kong kindergartens — which feature diversity in language use in the classroom — little work has been done on the oral input given to children. This study examined the English oral input of teachers in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms. It investigated the amount and features of teachers' English oral input, and how the input affected the conditions for English language learning. Classroom observations were conducted monthly for three months with one native speaking (NS) and two non-native speaking (NNS) kindergarten teachers together with a total of 44 Chinese-speaking children. The research used the Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme developed for systematically collecting oral input and output data from the teachers and children respectively. The results show that the learning activities did not seem to be hindered by the different pronunciations of the NS and NNS teachers. However, the NS teacher tended to use a broader variety of vocabulary and a richer amount of English than the NNS teachers. Both the NS and NNS teachers demonstrated limitations in pedagogical skills in teaching the children English pronunciation. The implications of the results are discussed in relation to the context of English teaching in Hong Kong kindergartens.

Keywords: oral input, oral output, kindergarten education, English teachers, English pronunciation, second language teaching, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The spoken language input to learners has long been recognised as a key factor in second language acquisition in early childhood. Oral input refers broadly to the "second language (L2) vocal utterances the learner has heard and comprehended, including his own, regardless of whether these utterances have been produced correctly by L2 native speakers, or incorrectly by other non-native speakers of the L2" (Flege, 2009, p. 175). Its theoretical position has been established in early work such as the Input Hypothesis of Krashen (1981), who postulated that language input is fundamental to language acquisition. Children rely heavily on oral input to develop L2 phonological awareness, which is also regarded as one of the key indicators of

early literacy development (Chow, McBride-Chang & Burgess, 2005; McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003; Yeung, Siegel & Chan, 2013).

In Hong Kong kindergarten education, children receive oral input mainly from teachers in the classroom setting (Kirkpatrick, 2007a). This input includes the verbal utterances from teachers, as well as feedback from them when the children produce outputs, including positive feedback with praise or repetition of the children's utterances, and negative feedback with error correction. Children can attain proficiency when appropriate oral input is provided.

Against this background, there is however a dearth of research studies that look into the English oral input as a second language from kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. In particular, it was found that only 15.2% of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers had qualifications in early childhood education and English language training (Ng & Rao, 2013). Also, similar to many other non-English speaking regions, there is a tendency in Hong Kong to prefer a native speaker model in English language teaching (Kirkpatrick, 2007b). There are therefore various English teaching contexts in Hong Kong kindergartens, including native speaking (NS) and non-native speaking (NNS) English teachers, as well as different choices of medium of instruction, i.e. English only or English supplemented by Chinese.

This study examines the features of English oral input as a second language from Hong Kong kindergarten teachers in the classroom. It investigates the second language oral input, in terms of quantity and quality, in different English teaching settings covering NS and NNS teachers. Classroom observations were conducted for systematically observing teachers' oral inputs and children's oral outputs in kindergarten classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Oral Input for Children's Second Language Development

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) postulated that language input is crucial for language acquisition and that, by and large, comprehension precedes production; and Swain (1985) claimed that learners acquire native-like speech through producing the target language. In the classroom context, language learners first receive instructional oral input during class activities and further input is given as feedback and comments by their teachers and peers as they utter the target language outputs. Learners can thus attain proficiency when appropriate language input is provided.

Perrotta (1994) compared different bilingual programmes to probe into how young children's reading and writing skills can be effectively developed when the children are capable of expressing their thoughts and opinions in classroom exchanges. The age factor is particularly critical for second language acquisition to achieve high-quality early education (Halle, Hair, Wandner, Mcnamara & Chien, 2011; Yazejian, Bryant, Freel & Burchinal, 2015). It is generally agreed that the earlier pronunciation is introduced to learners, the better they can master it (Carr & Purdy, 2008; Parker & Riley, 2009). Early studies (e.g. Lenneberg, 1964) found that the critical period for language acquisition is between years 2 and 12. The learner's age was found to be the most important predictor of the degree of foreign accent (Piske, MacKay & Flege, 2001), with the ability to acquire native-like pronunciation decreasing after the age of about 6. Early exposure, especially to oral language, helps to lay a good foundation for language learning.

At the initial stage of language acquisition, it is recommended that children begin by developing phonological awareness of the language (Yopp, 1992). Many studies have highlighted the importance of phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge in English

word recognition to reading literacy among Chinese children (e.g. Chow et al., 2005; McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003; Yeung et al., 2013). The better they are trained phonologically, the more likely they will become competent young readers. Yopp (1992) argues that phonemic awareness is both a prerequisite for, and a consequence of, early literacy development, so that language learning takes place in a setting in which children are exposed to a rich array of sensory stimuli through interactions with an authentic environment in which they acquire new language concepts. In the kindergarten years, children's ability in language learning depends heavily on a solid oral language foundation (Snow, 1999). Oral language input, which may be in various forms, provides a platform for teachers to generate rich conversations with a range of vocabulary, from simple to unusual words (DeTemple, 2001). To put it briefly, spoken language can be seen as one of the main sources of language input for young children.

In children's acquisition of the pronunciation of a second language, therefore, proper pronunciation or quality oral input by kindergarten teachers plays an extremely important role (Kirkpatrick, 2007a). Poor pronunciation by teachers affects the quality of input and, subsequently, may adversely affect the language output of young learners (Tang, 2011). Yu, Wang and Teo (2018) reviewed various types of oral input from teachers, particular on oral feedback to children for recognising their language performance and suggesting ways for improvement. They proposed a conceptualisation of oral feedback as an instructional input to help learners repair their language errors; a dialogic process through which learners interact and cooperate with teachers; and an internal process of learners processing and acting on oral feedback. Based on that conceptualisation, they emphasised oral feedback as an integral part of instruction and the importance of involving learners in negotiating feedback information.

2.2. English Teaching in Hong Kong Kindergarten Education

The Hong Kong government has a keen interest in enhancing the standards of kindergarten teachers to ensure a high quality of kindergarten education for children (Education Bureau, 2017a). For English teaching, the Education Bureau in Hong Kong emphasises the desirable English standards of kindergarten teachers as follows:

> "As models of language learning for children, teachers should possess good proficiency in spoken English, speak with accurate pronunciation and use language correctly." (Education Bureau, 2017a, pp. 42–43)

The English learning and teaching in Hong Kong kindergarten education focuses on a broad oral language exposure. The Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Draft) stresses the priority of oral input as noted below:

> "When children are first exposed to English, we should provide them with plentiful and appropriate listening and speaking experiences, rather than reading and writing experiences too early or too much." (Education Bureau, 2017b, p. 131)

However, recent findings indicate that less than 30% of Hong Kong kindergartens have teachers who received formal training in teaching English as a second language (TESL) and 13.7% of the kindergartens even have untrained English teachers (Ng & Rao, 2013). Currently, kindergarten English teachers do not need to take the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) (a prerequisite qualification for primary and secondary school English teachers in Hong Kong) and are not required to undergo formal TESL training. As a wealth of research studies have suggested that teachers with English language training and/or early childhood education qualifications tend to be more positively oriented to better language outputs for young children (Ling, 2003; Masters, 2009; Moon, 2005), the quality of English language input from the kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong is worth further examination.

Concern about the weak language standards of English teachers in kindergartens has been raised for years (e.g. Tsui et al., 1994; Gao & Ma, 2011, Tsang 2017). Fischer (2013) argues that it is unlikely that teachers who do not speak a language well themselves can teach students to speak that language.

Therefore, as in other non-English speaking countries (Butler, 2007), there is a tendency in the Hong Kong kindergarten sector to prefer a native speaker model for English language teaching (Kirkpatrick, 2007b). This tendency has possibly led to the diversity of kindergarten English teachers' national and professional backgrounds — including native English speakers; non-Chinese speakers with English as a second language; Chinese speakers who have returned from English-speaking countries; local or mainland Chinese teachers with or without an English major; and local early childhood teachers (Ng & Rao, 2013).

2.3. Teachers' Oral Input

Over the past two decades, there has been ample research on the relationship between teachers' language input and learners' language output at primary and secondary schools (Coniam, Falvey & Xiao, 2017; Masters, 2009; Wilson et al., 2008). Teachers' oral input has a direct impact on the development of children's language skills, which encompasses various skill sets. According to the NICHD Early Childhood Care Research Network (2005), children's language skill sets, such as oral comprehension and vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, and phonemic and phonological awareness, have an effect on their literacy achievement. Graham, Courtney, Marinis and Tonkyn (2017) examined the impact of teaching and teacher factors on language learning outcomes, and found that the amount of oral input, teachers' language proficiency and their level of language teaching training have strong correlations with students' language performance. They generalised that teachers need to provide an adequate model for language learning, especially for young learners.

For involving learners in language learning, Nava and Pedrazzini (2018) raised the importance of interaction process through which learners "encounter input, receive feedback and produce output" (p. 117). Strategies of oral feedback were also suggested, such as repeating students' erroneous utterance with or without highlighting the errors, and explicitly indicating and correcting students' errors. Similarly, Glover (2018) stated that interaction and providing information are two key aspects of teachers' input in classroom.

However, there has been little awareness of the English oral input of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. Among the few relevant works, Ling (2003) demonstrated teachers' perception of good practices in early childhood education. Also, without properly addressing the essential qualities of English teachers' language input, Moon (2005) claims that it is hard to establish adequate English language exposure for young children.

The overall inadequate professional training of the kindergarten English teachers is reflected in their teaching. Ng (2013) observed that some Hong Kong kindergarten English teachers focused on drilling the phonic forms with children with minimal explanations of vocabulary and, as a result, the children's engagement level and attention dropped and many were frustrated when they had to repeat words that they couldn't make sense of. There is thus a strong need to examine further how the teachers' input influences children's English learning in Hong Kong kindergarten education.

2.4. The Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme

For systematic observation of input quality in classrooms, Weitz et al. (2010) proposed the Input Quality Observation Scheme (IQOS) that captures the major factors which have been identified as significant in affecting children's L2 development. The factors cover various categories: the quantity of a teacher's input, the input characteristics, promoting

comprehension, and reacting to children's output, as well as children's reactions. The IQOS features the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, and focuses on lexical and grammatical input.

Based on the IQOS, Wong, Lai-Reeve and Li (2018) proposed the Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme (see Appendix) to observe the potential influence of teachers' input. Its effectiveness of systematically collecting oral input was examined in Lai-Reeve, Wong and Li (2018). The observation scheme adapts the factors from IQOS, and includes other factors reported in the literature, to cope with the observation of oral input in classrooms. Its factors include the following:

Teachers' input

a) Quantity
   - L2 amount — the extent of L2 oral input offered to children
   - Direct L1 use — the extent of L1 use in the classroom
b) Input characteristics
   - Pronunciation — the features of a teacher's L2 pronunciation (e.g. whether it carries over the teacher's L1 intonation)
   - Varied input — the extent to which a wide range of vocabulary and syntactic structures are used
   - Ritualised phrases — the recurring phrases/expressions used frequently by the teacher
   - Verbal reinforcement — whether the teacher verbally appreciates children's attempts at L2 use
   - Focus on form — whether the teacher explicitly attempts to raise children's phonological awareness of L2
c) Promoting pronunciation
   - Fun repetitions — different ways to arouse children's interest in practising pronunciation
   - Individual practice — whether chances for practising pronunciation individually are provided to children
   - Explanation and comparison — whether the teacher further explains or rephrases his/her own utterances
   - Diagrams — whether diagrams are used as visual aids (e.g. illustration of mouth movement)
d) Reacting to children's output
   - Encourage and maintain L2 output — whether the teacher encourages and/or maintains children's L2 use
   - Corrective feedback — whether the teacher, implicitly or explicitly, corrects children's L2 utterances

Children's output

e) Quantity
   - L2 amount — the extent of L2 oral output produced by children
   - L1 amount – the extent of L1 oral output produced by children
f) Output characteristics
   - Pronunciation — the features of children's L2 pronunciation
   - Associated words — whether the children use associated words in L2 (e.g. words with similar pronunciations) for interaction
   - Interaction with others with the new words — whether the children use the new words just learned in a lesson for communication

The Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme was adopted in the present study. One main difference of this adapted observation scheme from IQOS is the focus on children's output, so that the potential influence of a teacher's input on children's output can be examined.

3. Method

3.1. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine and analyse the characteristics of the English oral input of kindergarten teachers and the oral output of children in classrooms. It seeks to respond to the following research questions:

1. What is the amount of oral input in kindergarten classrooms in Hong Kong?
2. What are the features of teachers' oral input in classrooms?
3. What are the features of children's oral output in classrooms?

3.2. Participants

This study involved teachers and children from three classes with diverse profiles in a kindergarten in Hong Kong, including a total of three teachers and 44 children. Table 1 presents the basic information on the classes. Class 1 and Class 2 belonged to the English stream which was taught by an NS teacher and an NNS local Chinese teacher, respectively. Only English was used in the classes. Class 3 belonged to the local stream which was taught by an NNS local Chinese teacher. Both English and Chinese (Cantonese) were used in the class — with English used as the main medium of instruction and Chinese as supplementary. The three classes represent the typical contexts of kindergarten teaching in Hong Kong (Ng & Rao, 2013). In the classes, there were one or two teaching assistants who were not involved in giving teaching instruction.

The three teachers were all female. From the information provided by the kindergarten, they had not received a formal academic qualification in the English language or English language teaching.

The children were from the K2 and K3 classes, i.e. about four to five years old. All of them were local Chinese with Chinese (Cantonese) as their first language.

Table 1. *Basic information on the classes*

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Year of study	K3	K2	K3
Class size	17	8	19
Teacher	1 NS teacher	1 NNS local Chinese teacher	1 NNS local Chinese teacher
Medium of instruction	English	English	English and Chinese (Cantonese)

3.3. Instrument

The Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme (Wong et al., 2018; also see Appendix) was used to collect data for the study. It was adapted from the IQOS (Weitz et al., 2010), based on which it further included the variables related to teachers' oral input and children's oral output in the classroom (see the section above on The Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme). The observation scheme featured the collection of both structured and open data. Variables covered in the scheme included (1) general information on an English learning class, such as the number of native English speaking teachers and the focus of the lesson (i.e. form, communicative

context and meaning); (2) features of the teachers' input, including quantity, input characteristics, promoting comprehension and reacting to children's output; and (3) features of children's output, including quantity and output characteristics.

3.4. Data Collection

Classroom observations were conducted on a monthly basis for a three-month period. In each classroom observation, the investigator took field notes using the observation scheme and following the procedure specified in Weitz et al. (2010). The classroom observations included both the collection of general information which did not involve any judgement but only fact-based information, as well as variables which require the investigator's judgement and interpretation (e.g. the amount of the teacher's L2 input and children's output, categorised as 'poor', 'average' and 'rich'). The judgements were made by comparing the teachers with each other, according to Weitz et al. (2010). The duration of each lesson was about 45 minutes. The teachers were informed beforehand about each class observation, but they did not need to make any adjustments to their lesson plans and teaching. As the kindergarten adopted a 'learning through play' and thematic teaching approach, there were interactive learning activities in each lesson which promoted the teachers' oral input and children's oral output. The investigator acted as a non-participant observer and did not have any interaction with the teachers and children during the class observations.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the study are reported below and discussed in relation to the research questions. In addition, findings of related studies are presented and comparatively discussed in relation to the present study.

4.1. Amount of Oral Input in Kindergarten Classrooms

For question 1 on the amount of oral input in kindergarten classrooms in Hong Kong, Table 2 summarises the teachers' oral input for the classes. Overall, the oral input was rich for all three classes in terms of the amount of English spoken by the teachers. Only English was used in teaching. For the local Chinese stream (Class 3), Chinese was used only on matters of class discipline, e.g. asking children to sit down and not to shout.

Table 2. *Summary of oral input in the three classes*

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Amount of English oral input	Rich (only English was used)	Rich (only English was used)	Rich (English was used in teaching)
Use of first language	Nil	Nil	Chinese was used only on matters of class discipline.
Example of learning activity	Artworks (Focus of lesson: communicative context)	Fun phonetics (Focus of lesson: form)	Show and tell (Focus of lesson: communicative context and meaning)

The learning activities were shown to enable children to acquire the knowledge of English pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as promoting their use in a communicative context. For example, the learning activity in one Class 1 lesson was to make artworks of a planet chosen by the children. The teacher gave instructions on the steps (e.g. glue papers around a ball and paint it with the right colour) and the children needed to share the reasons for their choices of the planets after making the artworks. Through this activity, the teacher also taught new

vocabulary related to planets and the children used the vocabulary immediately in their sharing. In Class 2, one lesson involved the introduction of an English phoneme (/k/) and the children were asked to pronounce the relevant vocabulary following the teacher's pronunciation. For Class 3, an example of a learning activity was 'show and tell', in which selected children gave cues about what items they had brought on that day and other children guessed what they were. The teacher thus gave oral input on the vocabulary and expressions to describe the objects found in daily life and the children used them immediately.

4.2. Features of Teachers' Oral Input

For question 2 on the features of teachers' oral input in classrooms, Table 3 summarises the features of the teachers' oral input. In terms of their English pronunciation, the teacher of Class 1, as a native English speaker, spoke with a clear and accurate intonation without any pronunciation problems. The English pronunciation of the two other NNS teachers contained errors commonly found in Hong Kong. For example, the teacher of Class 2, despite having a near-native English intonation, did not accurately differentiate voiced and voiceless sounds such as /s/ and /z/ — a typical feature of Hong Kong English (OED, n.d.). The teacher of Class 3 misused simple and past tenses quite often in story-telling.

One clear difference in the spoken English between the NS teacher and the NNS teachers lay in the variety and difficulty of the vocabulary used. The former did not avoid using relatively difficult words, such as 'visible', when speaking to the children; while the latter exhibited certain lexical features of teacher talk in terms of using basic and less varied vocabulary. Another difference was in the use of ritualised phrases. The NS teacher did not tend to use them when speaking to the children, but such use was found in the speech of the two NNS teachers.

All the teachers demonstrated the features of verbal reinforcement and promoting pronunciation in their oral input to the children. However, especially for the NNS teachers, insufficient pedagogical skills were shown in teaching the children accurate English pronunciation. For example, the teacher of Class 2, in a lesson teaching the English phoneme /k/, introduced words with this sound (e.g. 'come', 'car' and 'cup') with relevant body gestures, and drilled on the pronunciation of the words by asking the class to repeat them after her. She explained and demonstrated the pronunciation of the /k/ sound with vibrations in the throat, but the children were not shown how to understand and be able to follow this. At the end, the children only mimicked the teacher's pronunciation of the sample words rather than showing an understanding of how to produce the sound.

There were also variations in the provision of corrective feedback among the teachers. Unlike the two other teachers, the teacher of Class 3 did not give children corrective feedback on their mispronunciation and incorrect expressions — only positive feedback, such as 'good job' and 'well done', was provided.

Table 3. *Features of teachers' oral input*

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Pronunciation and intonation	Native	Near native	Non-native
Varied input	Rich	Average	Average
Ritualised phrases	No	Yes	Yes
Verbal reinforcement	Yes	Yes	Yes
Promoting pronunciation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Corrective feedback	Yes	Yes	No

4.3. Features of Children's Oral Output

For question 3 on the features of children's oral output in classrooms, Table 4 summarises the features of children's oral output. The children in Class 1, taught by the NS teacher, produced a rich amount of English oral output in general. They communicated with one another in English in class most of the time, occasionally mixed with Cantonese phrases. Their pronunciation was exceptionally good in terms of showing a native-like intonation, though occasionally missing out the last consonants of the words.

Comparatively, the children in Classes 2 and 3 produced less English oral output in class. Although their pronunciation was good for local Chinese speakers of their age, their oral output contained problems such as inaccurate pronunciation of /z/ and missing out the last consonants of the words. They communicated with one another in Cantonese. For Class 3, there was even little interaction among the children during lessons.

Table 4. *Features of children's oral output*

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Amount of English oral output	Rich	Average	Average
Use of first language	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pronunciation (intonation)	Good	Average	Average
Associated words	Rich	Average	Average
Interaction with others	Rich	Average	Little

In addition to the results obtained from the present study, findings of studies related to language teachers' oral input in classrooms are summarised in Table 5 for comparison. They show that teachers' proficiency in the target language is related to students' language proficiency as a learning outcome (Krugel & Fourie, 2014), in terms of providing students with models of the target language (Canh & Renandya, 2017). For language classes taught by NNS teachers, it was found that the teachers may use their first language in teaching the target language (Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Tang, 2011). Their language input provided to the students may be limited in areas such as variety of lexical use (Tang, 2011) and accuracy of pronunciation (Richards, Conway, Roskvist & Harvey, 2013). Their students' language output was found to be minimal (Tang, 2011) or contain similar errors made by the teachers (Nel & Müller (2010).

In the present study, the results on the teachers' oral input showed that both NS and NNS teachers could deliver class activities clearly and effectively in English with a sufficient amount of oral input provided. Contrary to the popular perception (Kirkpatrick, 2007b) or the native-speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992), the NNS teachers were not inferior to the NS one in terms of classroom delivery skills. Their oral input was high in verbal reinforcement and promoting pronunciation. All the teachers showed positive input to their classes, except that one NNS teacher did not give much corrective feedback. The results also showed that both the NNS and NS teachers promoted oral comprehension, vocabulary building, and phonemic and phonological awareness in their class activities. The children in all three classes were given ample practice in manipulating the sounds and the meaning of new vocabulary they had acquired. The finding is consistent with Canh and Renandya (2017) that teachers' language proficiency does not have a clear relation to their classroom teaching skills.

Different from the related studies that teachers' and students' first language (Chinese) was often used in class for teaching English in China and Hong Kong (Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Tang, 2011), the NNS teachers in this study only used English for teaching. Chinese was occasionally used on matters of class discipline. There was not a clear difference in the amount of English oral input given in class between the NS and NNS teachers.

Table 5. *Findings of related studies on language teachers' oral input*

Related studies	Context of studies	Related findings
Canh and Renandya (2017)	• English classes in universities and secondary schools in Vietnam taught by NNS English teachers	• Teachers' target language proficiency influenced their capability in providing students with good models of the target language. • Teachers' high language proficiency may not result in effective classroom teaching.
Krugel and Fourie (2014)	• English classes in secondary schools in South Africa taught by NNS English teachers	• Students taught by teachers with a higher level of English proficiency learnt English more effectively than those taught by teachers with a lower level of proficiency. • There was a correlation between teachers' and students' English proficiency.
Littlewood and Yu (2011)	• English classes in junior secondary schools in Hong Kong and Macau	• Teachers used their first language (Chinese) for teaching in about 20% – 64% of the English classes.
Nel and Müller (2010)	• English classes taught by teacher training students in South Africa schools	• Children taught by the teaching training students made similar English errors as the training students did.
Richards et al. (2013)	• Foreign language classes in New Zealand schools taught by teachers who only had limited proficiency in the foreign languages	• The teachers were unable to provide rich language input (e.g. speak at a natural pace, use various structures and longer utterances) and answer questions about the foreign languages they taught. • They were unable to provide accurate pronunciations of new words asked by learners.
Tang (2011)	• English classes in universities in China taught by NNS English teachers	• The teachers' variation of lexical input to students was limited. • Teachers' and students' first language was commonly used in classes. • Students' oral output was minimal.

Another finding was that the NS teacher was bolder than her NNS counterparts in terms of using difficult vocabulary in front of her class. For instance, she introduced the researcher as 'an invisible person' to her class and asked them to ignore the presence of the researcher during the class observation, and did not seem to be bothered by the children's lack of comprehension. The varied input (vocabulary) in the NS classroom was richer than in the NNS classrooms where the vocabulary was largely restricted to one- to two-syllable simple words. According to the Input Hypothesis, Krashen (1985) had already stated that offering language input which requires a higher level of linguistic competence than the learner's current level helps him/her to acquire new (grammatical and lexical) structures. McGee and Morrow (2005) argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and comprehension — the more the children listen to or read the words, the more words they acquire and the more complex and

difficult words they can comprehend. From this perspective, it is unnecessary and over-cautious to choose only simple and easy vocabulary in lessons that, in an unnatural way, limits the children's exposure to vocabulary.

The study also found that only the NNS teachers used ritualised language in classroom teaching. Although the use of ritualised language helps children to become familiar with the situations which accompany the ritualised phrases in the beginning of the learning process (Burmeister, 2006), such use might be less favourable for more experienced learners. It has been suggested that language input should be more complex when learners gradually develop their language competence (Lyster, 2007). Considering that the children observed in this study (i.e. K2 and K3 levels) already had a basic competence in English listening and comprehension, they might be already familiar with the situations. The extent to which the use of ritualised language was helpful for them is therefore unclear.

There was a clear difference between the oral input from the NS and NNS teachers in their language proficiency. Grammatical mistakes and pronunciation problems were found in the input of the NNS teachers in addition to features of Hong Kong English, although they did not appear to affect the teachers' clear delivery of the learning activities. It has been recognised that teachers' language proficiency affects how well they teach an L2 (Krugel & Fourie, 2014; Richards, 2015), where a less proficient teacher might have difficulties in identifying and correcting learners' errors (Farrell & Richards, 2007; Richards et al., 2013) and developing engaging classroom activities (Canh & Renandya, 2017), or make language errors which might be mimicked by learners (Nel & Müller, 2010). This could possibly account for the lack of corrective feedback from the Class 3 teacher's input.

In addition to second language acquisition, the adoption of the Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme in this study also confirmed its applicability for evaluating the quality of English learning and teaching in Hong Kong kindergartens. It supplements the other observation schemes developed to cope with the local context of kindergarten education, such as the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Scale (Chau, Li & Lau, 2013) which is based on the generic performance indicators set by the Hong Kong Government (Education Bureau, 2012; Education Department and Social Welfare Department, 2001) to evaluate the quality of preschool programmes. This study contributes to showing that the quality of English learning and teaching in Hong Kong kindergartens can be assessed with more specific criteria, with an applicable observation scheme, to address the specificity of this subject discipline.

The findings and implications of this study should be viewed in relation to its limitations. The study adopted naturalistic observation to collect data in three kindergarten classes, the results are contextually situated and cannot be generalised to represent the overall situation of Hong Kong kindergartens. As recommended in related studies adopting a similar methodology (e.g. Pyle & DeLuca, 2013), further studies covering broader kindergarten contexts would allow a more thorough understanding of the English oral input and output in Hong Kong kindergartens.

5. Conclusion

Early language development plays a vital role in fostering children's positive attitude and confidence in using L2. This study revealed the teachers' English oral input, which directly affects children's early language development, in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms. The findings shed light on this under-explored area by addressing the amount and features of the kindergarten teachers' oral input in different English teaching contexts. While the NS and NNS teachers delivered class activities clearly, the NS teacher offered a more accurate and varied

oral input. These results contribute to complementing the relevant literature by showing the possible consequences — such as limited vocabulary exposure in classrooms — of the lack of training in English language teaching among the majority of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers (Ng & Rao, 2013). The results therefore suggest the need for more emphasis on the provision of training and pedagogical support for English language teachers in kindergartens. As shown in the results, the accuracy and variation of teachers' oral input as well as teaching skills such as corrective feedback are both important for increasing children's oral output. Given that the classroom activities in Hong Kong kindergartens were still predominantly didactic (e.g. drilling on pronunciation), more L2 pedagogical training is also needed for promoting the use of a broader variety of learning activities to encourage communicative output from children.

As reported in the NICHID Early Child Care Research Network (2005), it is critically important to identify factors in children's early school environment that can improve their language development which plays a significant role in moulding their socio-behavioural development in later life. Appropriate language development in early childhood education contributes greatly to the holistic development in children and its effects can be extended into their academic and socio-behavioural development in their primary and secondary education (Siraj & Taggart, 2013). More emphasis and resources should be put into providing a rich language environment and qualified language teachers in Hong Kong's kindergarten education. This study aims to promote a greater research interest on oral input in early childhood education. More work needs to be done to further unravel the quality and amount of oral input in early language development. Finally, the use of the Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme in this initial study lays the basis for future studies on a larger scale. Such work could focus on a more in-depth and quantitative analysis of the oral input of kindergarten English teachers and its impact on children's learning outcomes, with a stronger emphasis on teachers' and children's pronunciation and reducing common pronunciation errors in Hong Kong.

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Appendix

The Oral Input Quality Observation Scheme was used for observing teachers' oral input and children's oral output in kindergarten classrooms (Wong et al., 2018) [adapted from the Input Quality Observation Scheme (Weitz et al., 2010)].

Observation	Time
	Class
	Activity
	Duration
General information	No. of children
	Age of children
	No. of teachers
	No. of native English teachers
	Focus of lesson (A: form, B: communicative context, C: meaning)
Teacher's input	
Quantity	L2 amount (poor/average/rich)
	Direct L1 use (poor/average/rich)
Input characteristics	Pronunciation (intonation)
	Varied input (poor/average/rich)
	Ritualised phrases (e.g. repeating after the teacher)
	Verbal reinforcement
	Focus on form (metalinguistic)
Promoting pronunciation	Fun repetitions (e.g. choral practice)
	Individual practice
	Explanation and comparison
	Diagram (e.g. illustration of mouth movement)
Reacting to children's output	Encourage and maintain L2 output
	Corrective feedback
Children's output	
Quantity	L2 amount (poor/average/rich)
	L1 amount (poor/average/rich)
Output characteristics	Pronunciation (intonation)
	Associated words (poor/average/rich)
	Interaction with others with the new words