

Positioning Pop Songs in the Chinese Language Education Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper examines the innovative design and delivery of a Cantonese as a second language course that integrates popular songs as a pedagogical resource. It situates Cantonese popular songs (Cantopop) within the Chinese language education curriculum at a Hong Kong university and adopts an action research approach to investigate its instructional potential. By analysing the stylistic diversity of Cantopop lyrics, the study demonstrates how this genre provides rich linguistic input, exposing learners to varied grammatical structures, registers, styles, and vocabulary. The paper further outlines the rationale for constructing a Cantopop lyrics corpus to support course design and extend the discussion of popular culture in language education. Findings suggest that incorporating Cantopop enables students to engage with the target language in authentic cultural contexts, fostering deeper understanding of the social and cultural forces shaping Cantonese. The development of this course highlights the pedagogical value of popular songs in enhancing student engagement, promoting cultural awareness, encouraging creative thinking, and offering an accessible and dynamic medium for language learning across diverse educational settings.

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1 Introduction

Cantonese, English, and Putonghua are the three major spoken languages in Hong Kong (Bolton et al., 2020). The *Population Census 2021* recorded that 88.2% of the population reported Cantonese as their usual spoken language (Hong Kong Government, 2021). As Cantonese is one of the major languages used in Hong Kong, over the years, there have been a number of international students, exchange students, and working professionals learning the language in universities in Hong Kong. These Cantonese learners have come from different parts of the world, including but not limited to Africa, America, Australia, Europe, Japan, Korea, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Lee, 2020a). According to studies concerning teaching and learning Cantonese as a second language (Lee, 2020a; Li & Richards, 1995), students study Cantonese mainly for job-related and cultural reasons so that they can work while enjoying life and culture in Hong Kong.

The relationship between the Cantonese language and Hong Kong popular culture is complex and dynamic. Hong Kong popular culture, which includes music, cinema, television, and comics, has influenced the Cantonese language in various ways. Meanwhile, the Cantonese language shapes the genres and styles of Hong Kong popular culture. For example, some lyrics of Cantonese popular songs (Cantopop) are written in standard Chinese but sung in Cantonese pronunciation, while some movies and Cantopop use colloquial Cantonese expressions and slang that reflect the identity and humour of Hong Kong people (McIntyre et al., 2002). This paper discusses the linguistic features of Cantopop lyrics (see Section 2.4). The paper then presents the purpose and an empirical investigation of implementing a Cantonese language course that incorporates popular songs into its design, including materials preparation, syllabus development, and student classroom activities, and explores the implications for practice.

2 Literature review and research questions

2.1 Approaches and trends in Cantonese language education

Cantonese language learning has its origins in the nineteenth century, when European missionaries arrived in China and began studying the language. As Lee (2020b) noted, early missionaries and diplomats adopted structuralist approaches, emphasising the analysis of Cantonese phonology and grammatical structures. A seminal contribution to this tradition is Chao's *Cantonese Primer* (1947), which prioritised linguistic accuracy and introduced both the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method. More recent research, including Lee's (2018, 2019) investigations into learner needs and classroom practices, has revealed a shift in pedagogical priorities. Learners have increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with a sole focus on grammatical competence, prompting a transition from structuralist ideologies to socio-pragmatic perspectives highlighting communicative language use and cultural sensitivity. Contemporary learners tend to prioritise the appropriate use of Cantonese

in everyday contexts. Consequently, enhancing cultural awareness through curriculum design, syllabus development, and textbook content has emerged as a major concern in the field of Cantonese as a second language education.

2.2 Popular culture in language education

Popular culture (pop culture) is the set of cultural goods and phenomena that are consumed by many people in society, including music, movies, television shows, video games, sports, and more. Using pop culture references in language teaching has become increasingly popular over the years, and this trend can be attributed to its effectiveness as a tool for engaging learners who are accustomed to these contemporary forms of media.

Pop culture can be a valuable resource for language learning and teaching, as it can provide authentic, engaging, and diverse input for learners of different ages, levels, and backgrounds (Duff & Zappa-Hollman, 2013). One of the benefits of using pop culture in language education is that it can expose learners to the language of real-life situations and contexts as well as to linguistic innovation and variation. For example, learners can encounter different registers, dialects, accents, slang, idioms, and grammatical structures through pop culture materials (Bruti, 2020; Werner, 2020). Pop culture can also help learners develop various language skills, such as listening, reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar (Rucynski, 2022; Tegge, 2017; Tegge & Coxhead, 2020). Moreover, pop culture can enhance learners' motivation, interest, and enjoyment in language learning, as it can connect to their personal preferences, experiences, and identities (Peirson-Smith & Miller, 2020).

Several studies have discussed the use of movies and films in foreign language teaching (Baddock, 1996; Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Eslava & Lawson, 1979; Qiang et al., 2007), and these studies found that movies can be educational, informative, and entertaining in language classrooms. Ning (2009) examined the use of popular Chinese movies in Chinese as a foreign language education and found that movies can not only improve learners' language skills but also help them develop their cultural awareness of the target culture. Most research has shown that using films in language classrooms helps improve learners' listening and speaking skills (Chan & Herrero, 2010; Léon-Henri, 2012), as well as increases foreign language learners' cultural knowledge and awareness of stylistic differences (Etienne & Sax, 2006; Qiang et al., 2007). Several methods have been examined, such as the "silent movie" technique (Eslava & Lawson, 1979) and the "three-stage procedure" (Lee, 2014; Liu, 2005). The use of movies in language learning has garnered considerable attention. Compared to movies, the use of popular songs in language teaching has been less studied, especially in the context of Chinese education; however, some research has indicated that incorporating pop songs into language classrooms significantly impacts students' language achievement. Haghverdi's (2015) experimental study on high school students showed that songs, in addition to movies, in English classes had notable effects on students' progress in listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar. Jung and Crookes' (2020) work demonstrated the use of the Korean pop songs phenomenon and lyrics as prompts for critical dialogue in English classrooms designed for academic purposes. Pai and Duff's (2020) article discussed how students' critical engagement with pop culture, including pop songs and media, helped sustain motivation to learn and use languages.

Hong Kong Cantopop is one of the genres in the international music industry (Chu, 2017). Starting in the 1970s, Cantopop reached its "age of glory" in the 1980s. Cantonese popular songs have become one of the cultural attractions for learners of Cantonese. Lee (2023a) studied Cantonese online teaching videos and videos showing Cantonese learners' performance, and this study found that Cantonese learners singing in Cantonese online has been a popular way to display their Cantonese abilities.

For the current study, the most relevant work is Tegge's (2017) research. Tegge examined the lexical coverage and vocabulary load of English popular songs in the United States. She analysed the lexical load in two American popular song databases and noted that popular song lyrics can serve as entry-level authentic reading or reading-while-listening activities. She proposed that the short length of popular songs, compared to other text genres, makes them suitable for repeated listening and singing during lessons to reinforce vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, the relatively brief duration of songs, compared to other scripted audio texts, allows for the implementation of one or several supplementary activities around the song.

2.3 Corpus linguistics in language education

Tegge (2017) conducted her research using two popular song databases to examine the linguistic features of American song lyrics and explore their pedagogical potential in English language education. The use of linguistic corpora and databases in language education has been extensively examined by scholars over the past few decades (Bernardini, 2004; Flowerdew, 2012; Liu & Lei, 2017; O'Keeffe et al., 2007). Research on both first language (L1) and second language (L2) corpora has contributed to understanding which lexical items and grammatical structures should be taught, as well as the optimal sequencing of their presentation. These studies have also highlighted common errors and learning challenges faced by L2 learners (Lee et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2019). Such corpus-based analyses of vocabulary and grammar have provided valuable insights for the compilation of Chinese language textbooks and the design of syllabi (Xu, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that linguistic corpora offer authentic examples of language use, thereby reflecting the actual communicative practices of native speakers (Chin, 2023; Liu & Lei, 2017). Rather than relying solely on prescriptive grammar rules and traditional textbooks, language instructors can utilise corpus data to help learners inductively identify linguistic patterns (Lu & Chen, 2019). Furthermore, studies investigating learners' attitudes toward corpus-based instruction have found that this approach enhances engagement, motivation, and enjoyment in language learning (Gilquin & Granger, 2010).

2.4 Linguistic characteristics of Cantopop lyrics

In the Cantopop context, it is not an easy task for learners to understand the linguistic complexity and the cultural content in the songs and the language used without systematic guidance from language teachers. One reason is that Cantonese popular songs have different registers, styles, and themes (Wong, 2003). Another reason is that the lyrics of these songs are written in different linguistic forms. Some lyrics are written in standard written Chinese and sung in Cantonese pronunciation, while some

lyrics are written in spoken Cantonese and a distinct variety of “written Cantonese”, which is widely used in advertising billboards, informal written communications, song lyrics, television subtitles, and Hong Kong comic books (Bauer, 1988, 2018; Snow, 1991). Example (1) shows lyrics written in spoken Cantonese.

(1)

Song lyrics: 我笑住回答，講一聲我係我。

Cantonese romanisation: *Ngóh siujyuh wùihdaap, góng yāt sīng ngóh haih ngóh.*¹

English gloss: “I replied with a smile and said I am me.”

[example extracted from the song 問我 *mahn ngóh* (“Ask me”) lyrics written by James Wong 黃霑, sung by Grace Chan Lai Sze 陳麗斯, and released in 1976]

At the same time, there are also a number of Cantonese song lyrics written in standard written Chinese but sung in Cantonese pronunciation. Although it is straightforward to think that Cantonese song lyrics should be written in Cantonese, the situation in Hong Kong concerning written Chinese is quite complex (Bolton & Lee, 2020). Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, educational authorities began promoting spoken Putonghua and simplified characters on the mainland. During this period, Hong Kong retained the use of written *baihua* 白話², or “modern standard Chinese”, which was written in full characters and remained the predominant form in most schools across the territory. From the 1950s until recent years, Chinese education in Hong Kong primarily entailed proficiency in spoken Cantonese alongside mastery of the distinctive Hong Kong variant of standard written Chinese (Choi, 2017). The presence of a visible diglossic system in Hong Kong’s written Chinese is evident, wherein many Cantonese grammatical and lexical items classified as “L” (low variety) in colloquial forms have corresponding “H” (high variety) forms in standard written Chinese. For instance, *néihge ūkkéi hái bīndouh* 你嘅屋企喺邊度 (“where is your home”) is used in spoken Cantonese, whereas *néih dīk gā joih náhléuih* 你的家在哪裡 represents the equivalent expression in standard written Chinese. Similarly, the Cantonese pronoun *kéuihdeih* 佢哋 (“they”), the genitive marker *ge* 嘅, and the question word *mātyéh* 乜嘢 (“what”) correspond to *tāmúhn* 他們, *dīk* 的, and *sahmmō* 甚麼, respectively, in standard written Chinese.

In Example (1) above, the Cantonese sentence 我笑住回答，講一聲我係我 is in standard written Chinese as 我笑著回答，說一聲我是我。The expressions 笑住 *siujyuh* (“smiling”), 講 *góng* (“speak”), and 係 *haih* (“to be”) in spoken Cantonese correspond to 笑著 *siujeuhk*, 說 *syut*, and 是 *sih* in standard written Chinese. Hong Kong Chinese children are instructed from an early age to distinguish between spoken language (*háu yúh* 口語) and “book language” (*syūmíhn yúh* 書面語). They are explicitly taught that characters used in spoken language are not acceptable in formal written Chinese and are expected to read aloud written texts using the proper “reading pronunciation” aligned with the “H” form of Cantonese. Written Cantonese is discouraged in contexts requiring “H” functions. Despite the increasing prevalence of written Cantonese, its use remains highly stigmatised in educational and official settings (Bolton & Lee, 2020). Nevertheless, standard written Chinese continues to be favoured in domains such as poetry, song lyrics, and literary works in Hong Kong. Example (2) below illustrates lyrics composed in standard written Chinese.

(2)

Song lyrics: 最心痛是，愛得太遲。有些心意不可等某個日子。

Cantonese romanisation: *Jeuī sāmtung sih, oi dāk taai chih. Yáuhse sāmyi bāthó dāng mauh go yahtjī.*

English gloss: “The most heartbreaking thing is that it is too late to love. Some intentions can’t wait for a certain day.”

[example extracted from the song 愛得太遲 *Oi dāk taai chih* (“Love comes too late”) lyrics written by Albert Leung 林夕, sung by Leo Ku Kui-kei 古巨基, and released in 2006]

In Example (2), the phrases 是 *sih* (“to be”), 不可 *bāthó* (“cannot”), and 有些 *yáuhse* (“some”) are written in standard written Chinese. The colloquial equivalents of these phrases are 係 *haih*, 唔可以 *mhóyih*, and 有啲 *yáuhdī*.

Studies have discussed the relationship and interplay between spoken Cantonese and standard written Chinese in Chinese education (Lee, 2023b; Luke & Nancarrow, 1991). Lee (2023b) analysed formal Cantonese speeches and demonstrated that spoken Cantonese in formal styles resembles, to a large extent, standard written Chinese. However, informal and colloquial Cantonese differ considerably from the standard written forms. Learners of Cantonese need to be aware of the differences when they learn spoken Cantonese. When they learn Chinese literacy via Cantonese, they need to learn the conversion rules (see Lee, 2023b); for example, *ūkkéi* 屋企 (“home”) in spoken Cantonese is presented as *gā* 家 in standard written Chinese and vice versa. Cantonese learners, especially beginning and intermediate learners, are always troubled by the complex relationship between colloquial Cantonese, the formal style of spoken Cantonese, and written Chinese (Lee, 2023b). Cantopop lyrics present examples in these different styles, providing authentic resources for curriculum design and teaching activities.

In addition to lyrics written in written Cantonese and standard written Chinese, lyrics of Cantopop also contain intrasentential code-mixing of Cantonese, English, and languages like Japanese and Spanish, as well as intersentential code-switching in these languages to show novelty and reflect the multicultural aspects of Hong Kong. These lyrics provide instances of code-switching in Cantonese, a phenomenon commonly observed in Hong Kong (Chan, 2007). Example (3) shows the case of an intersentential Cantonese-English mix in which one lyric line is in Cantonese and followed by the next line in English.

(3)

Song lyrics in Cantonese: 不因氣壓搖擺，只因有你擁戴。Cantonese romanisation: *bāt yān heingaāt yùuhbái, jí yān yáuh néih júngdaai.*

English gloss: “I’ll not change because of the air pressure, but because of your support.”

Song lyrics in English: Believe me, I can fly, I’m singing in the sky.[example extracted from the song 我的驕傲 *ngóh dīk gūnouh* (“My pride”) lyrics written by Wyman Wong 黃偉文, sung by Joey Yung Cho-Yee 容祖兒, and released in 2003]

Example (4) below shows an intrasentential Cantonese-Japanese mix in the song lyrics in which Japanese expressions are embedded in the Cantonese lyric line.

(4)

Song lyrics in Japanese: *Sayonara, o, sayonara, o.*

English gloss: “Goodbye, goodbye.”

Song lyrics in Cantonese: 而為何心中總有情義在Cantonese romanisation: *yih wáihhòh sāmjūng júngyáuh chihngyih joih*

English gloss: “But why is there love in my heart?”

[example extracted from the song 我的親愛 *ngóh dīk chānngoi* (“My dearest love”) lyrics written by Gene Lau 劉卓輝, sung by Leon Lai 黎明, and released in 1992]

Examples (3) and (4) illustrate how Cantopop lyrics encompass various linguistic forms and sociolinguistic patterns, offering valuable pedagogical resources for Cantonese language acquisition and broader Chinese language education.

2.5 Research questions

This article discusses the positioning of Cantopop within the Cantonese language curriculum and explores a systematic approach to integrating popular songs into Chinese language education. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the potential of incorporating Cantopop into Chinese language education?
2. How can a systematic proficiency-based course be developed using popular songs for language instruction?
3. What are the pedagogical impacts and challenges of using Cantopop in classroom settings?

3 Methodology

This study adopted an action research approach to explore the integration of Cantopop into Chinese language education. The method was selected for its collaborative and reflective nature, enabling educators and learners to evaluate innovative teaching strategies (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis et al., 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). To analyse the qualitative data, a thematic analysis framework was applied, allowing systematic identification of recurring patterns in learner reflections and classroom interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This dual methodological design enabled iterative refinement of pedagogical strategies and ensured that students’ feedback was systematically analysed, leading to more effective instructional practices and insights into linguistic and cultural learning.

Two participant groups were involved. A focus group of 10 Cantonese language teachers, each with 5 to 15 years of Cantonese teaching experience, contributed to curriculum design through three one-hour workshops. Their insights informed a 12-week pilot course delivered to 25 intermediate-level students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The course used selected Cantopop songs to enhance speaking, listening, and cultural understanding. The second group comprised 25 students with an intermediate level of Cantonese proficiency who participated in the pilot course.

A post-course questionnaire was administered in the tenth week to assess students’ engagement and collect their feedback, followed by one student focus group discussion at the end of the course. Additional post-course focus group discussions with teachers provided further qualitative feedback. Survey data were analysed quantitatively, while transcripts from discussions were thematically coded. As the researcher also served as the programme administrator, steps were taken to reduce bias. Surveys were conducted anonymously, focus groups were moderated by an independent facilitator, and a second reviewer validated the data analysis to ensure objectivity.

4 Results

4.1 Course design

A pilot course, *Learning Cantonese through Songs*, was developed in 2022 for intermediate to upper-intermediate Cantonese second language learners (according to the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* 2012). The course was designed for students who had completed basic Cantonese conversation courses and wanted to enhance their speaking abilities by engaging with Cantonese culture. This course focused on analysing the linguistic and cultural aspects of Cantonese songs. The learning activities aimed to (1) encourage students to participate in oral discussions on cultural topics, (2) increase students’ cultural knowledge, (3) improve

accuracy in Cantonese pronunciation, and (4) expand students' Cantonese vocabulary through appreciation of popular songs. Coursework involved listening and speaking exercises, class discussions of selected Cantonese songs with peers, and a series of short presentations prepared by students on these songs. Emphasis was also placed on training students in accurate Cantonese pronunciation through lyrics reading-aloud exercises. The course lasted 12 weeks, with two sessions per week, each session lasting 45 minutes.

4.2 Building of the Cantopop lyrics corpus

A focus group of 10 teachers was formed to select songs and design the curriculum. In the focus group discussion, it was suggested that there be some guidelines on linguistic forms and that an inventory of Cantopop songs be built up so that teachers could choose from it. A *Cantopop lyrics corpus* was therefore developed in 2022 comprising representative songs from 1971 to 2022³. A total of 852 songs were initially gathered from the annual awards of three representative billboards⁴ (Radio Television Hong Kong, Television Broadcasting Company, and Commercial Radio). These awards were determined based on the songs' popularity, broadcast frequency, and audience votes. Songs sung in Putonghua were removed, leaving a total of 827 Cantonese songs with 285,681 Chinese character tokens in the corpus. Table 1 shows examples of different levels of syntactic complexity drawn from the *Cantopop lyrics corpus*.

Table 1. The level of syntactic complexity of the examples in the Cantopop lyrics corpus

Name of song	Year released	Syntactic complexity	Example sentences
心亂如麻 <i>Sām lyuhn yùh màh</i> ("A confused and broken heart") Written by Albert Leung 林夕, sung by Janice Vidal 衛蘭	2006	Choice-type questions	你會不會拒絕我? ("Will you refuse me?")
我生 <i>Ngóh sāng</i> ("My life") Written by Albert Leung 林夕, sung by Leo Ku Kui-kei 古巨基	2006	Wh-questions	甚麼叫做友情? ("What is friendship?")
愛是永恆 <i>Oi sih wihng'hàhng</i> ("Love is eternal") Written by Richard Lam 林振強, sung by Jacky Cheung Hok Yau 張 學友	1997	Short sentences	愛是永恆。 ("Love is eternal.")
獅子山下 <i>Sījī sāan hah</i> ("Below the Lion Rock") Written by James Wong 黃霑, sung by Roman Tam 羅文	1979	Long sentences	我哋大家用艱辛努力寫下那不朽香 江名句。 ("We, through hardship and effort, have written those immortal lines of Hong Kong.")
相愛很難 <i>Sēung oi hán nàahn</i> ("Love is hard") Written by Albert Leung 林夕, sung by Jacky Cheung Hok Yau 張學友 and Anita Mui Yim-fong 梅艷芳	2002	Parallel sentences	得到浪漫又要有空間。 得到定局卻怕去到終站。 ("To gain romance, yet need space. To gain certainty, yet fear the final stop.")
真的愛你 <i>Jān dik oi néih</i> ("I really love you") Written by Sui Mei 小美, sung by Beyond	1989	Relative clauses	無法可修飾的一對手帶出溫暖永遠 在背後。 ("The hands that cannot be adorned are the ones that carry warmth forever behind us.")
囍帖街 <i>Héitip gāai</i>	2008	Coordinate clauses	這一區曾經稱得上美滿甲天下，但

("Wedding Invitation Street")		霧眼全街的單位快要住滿烏鴉。 ("This district was once hailed as supremely blissful, but in the blink of an eye, its buildings are nearly filled with crows.")	
Written by Wyman Wong 黃偉文, sung by Kay Tse 謝安琪			
單車 <i>Dāanchē</i> ("Bicycle")	2002	Subordinate clauses	如孩兒能伏於爸爸的肩膊, 誰要下車。 ("If a child can rest upon their father's shoulder, who would ever want to get off?")
Written by Wyman Wong 黃偉文, sung by Eason Chan Yick Shun 陳奕迅			

4.3 Syllabus design and materials preparation

The same group of teachers then shortlisted 50 songs from 1971 to 2022 drawn from the *Cantopop lyrics corpus*. Drawing on their teaching experience and needs, the teachers further narrowed these down to 18 songs for the course, with a total of 5,879 Chinese characters, including nine focused songs on selected themes and nine supplementary songs on the same themes. These songs were transcribed, romanised, and used in classroom teaching. Linguistic form and cultural themes were the two major criteria in the selection process. Other factors, such as the suitability of lexicons and sentence structures to learners' proficiency level, and the length of the song, were also considered. The 18 songs covered seven themes, including 香港文化 ("Hong Kong culture"), 返工文化 ("work culture"), 戀愛 ("affection and romantic love"), 母愛 ("maternal love"), 父愛 ("paternal love"), 生命意義 ("the meaning of life"), and 文化保存 ("cultural preservation"). Table 2 below shows the course syllabus design with the nine focused songs and these cultural themes.

Table 2. Course syllabus design with cultural themes and nine focused songs

Lesson	Cultural themes	Focused songs
1	Hong Kong culture	獅子山下 <i>Sījī sāan hah</i> ("Below the Lion Rock") (1979)
2	Work culture	半斤八兩 <i>Bun gān baat léung</i> ("Half a catty, eight taels") (1976)
3	Affection and love	愛得太遲 <i>Oi dāk taai chih</i> ("Love comes too late") (2006)
4	Romantic love	愛是永恆 <i>Oi sih wihng'hahng</i> ("Love is eternal") (1997)
5	Romantic love	相愛很難 <i>Sēung oi hán nàahn</i> ("Love is hard") (2002)
6	Mid-term test	
7	Maternal love	真的愛你 <i>Jān dīk oi néih</i> ("I really love you") (1989)
8	Paternal love	單車 <i>Dāanchē</i> ("Bicycle") (2002)
9	Meaning of life	我生 <i>Ngóh sāng</i> ("My life") (2006)
10	Cultural preservation	囍帖街 <i>Héitip gāai</i> ("Wedding Invitation Street") (2008)
11	Wrap-up	
12	Students' presentations	

The lyrics of these nine focused songs were written in different linguistic forms, including Cantonese and standard written Chinese (sung in Cantonese pronunciation). These Cantonese songs demonstrate the differences between standard written Chinese and spoken Cantonese, aiming to raise Cantonese learners' awareness of these distinctions.

4.4 A four-stage approach to classroom teaching

The classroom teaching methodology used a “four-stage approach”, which adapted the traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP) three-stage approach (Anderson, 2017; Criado, 2013) and the pedagogical methods used in movie classes in teaching Chinese as a second language (Lee, 2014; Liu, 2005). This presentation-practice-production method included “presentation of new material in context”, “practice in a controlled practice phase”, and “production activities designed for less-controlled practice”. The classroom teaching of the selected songs was divided into the four stages below.

1. First viewing (presentation of new material in context): In each class, the music videos of the selected songs were played to the students. During the first viewing stage of each song, students obtained a general idea of the story by watching the music videos and listening to the songs. Students then tried to use the target language to talk about the theme and content of the songs, as well as to discuss interesting points they had picked up while listening to the songs.
2. Lyrics reading and comprehension (practice in a controlled practice phase): In this stage, the lyrics of the songs were presented to the students. Songs presented in the course covered an extensive number of lexical items, which can be used in real-life situations. Students read the lyrics aloud. Teachers demonstrated the use of words, grammatical structures, and cultural points in these songs with classroom exercises and activities (Tegge & Coxhead, 2020; Werner, 2020). Reading-aloud exercises, sentence-making exercises, and fill-in-the-blank exercises were designed. Table 3 below shows a fill-in-the-blank exercise focusing on the internal structure and usage of Chinese four-character phrases presented in the lesson *Below the Lion Rock* 獅子山下.

Table 3. Sample cloze exercise used in the lesson 獅子山下 “Below the Lion Rock”

After listening to the audio, complete the exercise by filling in the blanks with the appropriate words.	
Lyrics in characters	Lyrics in Yale romanisation
人生中有歡喜， 難免亦常有淚。 我哋大家 在獅子山下相遇上， 總算是歡笑多於唏噓。	<i>Yàhn sāng jūng yáuh fūn hēi,</i> <i>Nàahn mìn yihk séuhng yáuh leuih.</i> <i>Ngóh deih daaih gā joih Sī jí sāan hah sēung yuh</i> <i>séuhng,</i> <i>Júng syun sih fūn siu dō yū hēi hēui.</i>
人生不免崎嶇， 難以絕無掛慮。 既是 1. _____ 在獅子山下且 2. _____， 拋棄區分求共對。	<i>Yàhn sāng bāt mìn kēi kēui,</i> <i>Nàahn yih jyuht mòuh gwa leuih.</i> <i>Gei sih 1. _____ joih Sī jí sāan hah ché 2. _____,</i> <i>Pāau hei kēui fān kàuh guhng deui.</i>
放開彼此心中矛盾。 理想一起去追。 同舟人誓相隨， 3. _____ 更 4. _____。	<i>Fong hōi bēi chí sām jūng màauh téuhn.</i> <i>Léih séung yāt héi heui jēui.</i> <i>Tùhng jāu yàhn sai h sēung chēuih,</i> <i>3. _____ gang 4. _____</i>
Read aloud the following phrases: 1. 同舟共濟 <i>tùhng jāu guhng jai</i> “Working together in the same boat” (a metaphor for unity and mutual support in overcoming difficulties) 2. 無畏無懼 <i>mòuh wai mòuh geuih</i> “Fearless and unafraid” 3. 敬業樂業 <i>ging yihp ngaauh yihp</i> “Respect and find joy in one’s work” 4. 放開矛盾 <i>fong hōi màauh téuhn</i> “Let go of conflicts” 5. 誠心誠意 <i>sihng sām sihng yi</i> “Sincere and wholehearted”	

3. Second viewing (practice in a controlled practice phase): Learners then had the second viewing after the knowledge-teaching stage. A set of short questions, sentence-making exercises, and conversion exercises (from standard written Chinese to colloquial Cantonese and vice versa) was given to the learners to help them understand the language used with different register styles (Fisher, 1975). Students were asked to jot down relevant linguistic and/or cultural points for further discussion in the post-viewing activities.
4. Post-viewing activities (production activities designed for less-controlled practice): These activities focused on the cultural issues or the cultural aspects of language use. Discussion topics in the course design of the *Love Songs* lesson included, but were not limited to, the following:

- (1) What kind of love is depicted in the song 愛得太遲 *Oi dāk taai chih* (“Love comes too late”)?
- (2) Can you share your understanding of love with your peers in class?
- (3) A television programme interviews you about your understanding of love. Please share your thoughts.

Students talked about these songs and were involved in classroom activities such as oral discussions and debates to express their views on specific cultural points and the comparison of values among different cultures (Peirson-Smith & Miller, 2020; Rucyuski, 2020).

4.5 Course assessment

Assessment of the course focused on the use of lexical items, sentence structure, lyrics reading, as well as students' presentations. Periodic tests on the use of lexical items consisted of multiple-choice questions, sentence-making, and story-making tests to evaluate students' understanding of these lexical items taught in class. Lyrics reading tests focused on pronunciation accuracy at the discourse level. The end-of-term presentations required each student to give a four-minute presentation by selecting a Cantonese song from the internet based on one of the major themes covered in class. Students discussed the lyrics of the song and introduced the selected song to their peers. Teachers assessed speech performance in terms of pronunciation, fluency, use of language, and content. The assessment criteria were based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012). Table 4 shows the assessment of this course.

Table 4. Assessment of the course *Learning Cantonese through Songs*

Assessment tasks	Percentage	Description and assessment criteria
Participation and periodic tests	30%	These periodic tests assess the use of lexical items through multiple-choice questions, sentence-making, and story-making tests. Criteria focus on accuracy of the use of Cantonese expressions and grammatical accuracy.
Lyric reading tests	30%	Students are required to read the lyrics aloud. These tests focus on pronunciation accuracy at the discourse level.
Students' presentations	40%	Each student gives a four-minute presentation by selecting a Cantonese song from the internet based on one of the major themes covered in class. Students' performances are graded based on ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines.

4.6 Students' feedback

This pilot course aimed to introduce the Cantopop genre to students. It also aimed to enhance students' listening, speaking, and the use of vocabulary found in selected songs. All students in this pilot course were university students who had completed the elementary level of conversational Cantonese and continued learning Cantonese as a second language. They were invited to participate in a focus group discussion (N = 25) at the end of the course. During the focus group discussions, topics such as the usefulness of the course content and activities, aspects students liked or disliked, and how well the course met their learning needs were discussed. Student feedback was collected and shared with course designers and teachers to refine the course content, activities, and assessment methods. Table 5 displays a thematic analysis of students' feedback on the pilot course.

Table 5. Students' feedback on the pilot course

Students' feedback	No. of responses N = 25 (%)
This course was beneficial for learning the target language in a cultural context.	25 (100%)
The Cantopop lyrics increased awareness of stylistically appropriate language use.	25 (100%)
These songs acted as prompts for meaningful dialogue and provided content for deep discussions and explorations of cultural issues.	25 (100%)
These songs helped students understand and discuss culture and values conveyed in the songs.	25 (100%)
Useful phrases and grammatical structures were learnt from the song lyrics.	22 (88%)
The learning of Cantonese songs increased interest in language learning.	20 (80%)
Listening skills were improved by listening to different types of songs.	20 (80%)

All students in the focus group agreed that "it was beneficial to learn the target language in a cultural context" (25/25) and that they "learned useful phrases and grammatical structures from the song lyrics" (22/25). Notably, all recognised that the Cantopop lyrics increased their awareness of stylistically appropriate language use (25/25), and they appreciated that these songs acted as prompts for meaningful dialogue and provided content for deep discussions and explorations of cultural issues, such as fidelity, love, family relationships, and work life, which also helped them understand and discuss Hong Kong culture and values conveyed in these songs (25/25). Students also reported that "the learning of Cantonese songs increased their interest in language learning" (20/25). Most students pointed out that the course helped them "improve their listening skills by listening to different types of songs" (20/25).

5 Findings and discussion

This course, *Learning Cantonese through Songs*, was later integrated into the university's Cantonese programme as a two-credit course and has been offered to students regularly each fall semester since 2023 to meet their linguistic and cultural learning needs. A total of 59 students enrolled in and completed the course from 2023 to 2025. Questionnaires were sent to these students at the end of the course to ensure that the course aligned with their learning needs and to gather information for the refinement

of the course. The survey revealed an average satisfaction score of 5.77 on a 6-point Likert scale, with a 70% response rate (N = 41). The questionnaire also included five open-ended questions focused on the effectiveness and usefulness of the course, how well the course met students' needs, and how the course activities and content supported students in learning the target language. Students' responses to these open-ended questions were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was adopted to identify pedagogical themes. Table 6 below shows these pedagogical themes.

Table 6. Students' responses to the open-ended questions in the post-course survey

Students' responses	No. of responses N = 41 (%)
The Cantopop course kept my attention in the classroom, and my interest was also sustained outside the classroom.	37 (90%)
Incorporating popular songs and cultural references into language teaching had boosted my engagement and maintained my interest throughout the learning process.	36 (88%)
Speaking exercises helped me understand and use new vocabulary when discussing abstract topics.	35 (85%)
Engaging with songs in the target language offered an exciting way for me to practise speaking and listening while immersing myself in various narratives.	34 (83%)
I can analyse and compare cultural differences presented in popular songs and expand my interest to other popular culture genres, such as television dramas and movies.	34 (83%)
Cantopop lyrics helped me recognise different registers and styles in real-world settings.	33 (80%)

5.1 Engaging learners and sustaining learning interests

The most prominent finding is that students reported that their interest was sustained inside and outside the classroom. Most of them (90%) reported that the use of Cantopop kept their attention in the classroom, and their interest was also sustained outside the classroom. Most of them continued to explore the Cantonese pop music genre, both for language learning and entertainment. The survey also showed that 88% of students noted that incorporating popular songs and cultural references into language teaching had boosted their engagement and maintained their interest throughout the learning process. They shared that popular songs increased their interest in language learning and allowed them to "engage in the target language in a culturally immersive and enjoyable environment." For teachers, using Cantopop in lessons helped maintain students' focus, especially when explaining grammatical structures or seemingly dull topics such as morphology and sentence construction. Including excerpts from popular songs allowed students to recognise familiar words often used in real-world situations. Student feedback collected after the course highlighted the effectiveness of this approach. Additionally, students commented that song lyrics offered meaningful content for in-depth discussions in the target language. These discussions, often connected to personal experiences, preferences, and identities, promoted active participation in classroom conversations (Peirson-Smith & Miller, 2020). This, in turn, made students more involved in their language-learning journey.

5.2 Effective for vocabulary learning

A total of 85% of the students in the post-course survey indicated that speaking exercises helped them understand and use new vocabulary when discussing abstract topics like "love", "human relationships", and "the meaning of life" in selected popular songs. This finding aligns with Kramersch's (2015) observation that educational strategies incorporating popular song culture can motivate and engage students by providing a fun learning experience and placing linguistic knowledge and practice in a cultural context. In addition, 83% of the students noted that engaging with songs in the target language offered an exciting way for them to practise speaking and listening while immersing themselves in various narratives. Similar to the findings in Werner's (2020) study, teachers reported that grammatical structures found in songs and popular culture can be introduced and explained with vivid examples. Compared to other text genres such as news, novels, and stories, popular song lyrics were relatively short. Students reported that these lyrics were easy to repeat and practise both inside and outside the classroom. These comments were consistent with Tegge's (2017) study, which demonstrated that lexical items derived from popular song lyrics can significantly enhance students' vocabulary acquisition.

5.3 Fostering cultural awareness and stimulating critical thinking

The use of songs in language teaching not only reinforced the understanding of grammatical structures and vocabulary but also served as an innovative approach that encouraged students to discuss the target culture using the target language. The results indicated that 83% of students appreciated that they could analyse and compare cultural differences presented in popular songs and expand their interest to other popular culture genres, such as television dramas and movies, especially when the song was a theme song for a popular TV show or film. This, in turn, helped develop a broader understanding of the target culture. Incorporating popular culture into language instruction gave learners an enjoyable way to learn about the target culture. By exposing students to various languages, customs, beliefs, and values, language teachers can promote cross-cultural dialogues among students from diverse backgrounds worldwide (Kramersch, 1993, 2015). Additionally, students noted that song lyrics helped them recognise key cultural traits, both their own and those of others, which improved their understanding of popular

culture in daily life in Hong Kong. Using popular culture in language teaching also boosted critical thinking skills. Students compared familiar and unfamiliar elements in activities related to popular songs and culture (Hughes, 2019). These practices can improve students' language skills while also deepening their cultural understanding.

5.4 Learning language use and register styles

Students made an important remark in the survey about language use. Eighty percent of the students appreciated that Cantopop lyrics helped them recognise different registers and styles in real-world settings. Cantopop lyrics reflect the actual use of Cantonese in Hong Kong, including examples that mirror daily language use, the use of Cantonese slang, the Cantonese pronunciation of standard written Chinese, and a mixture of Cantonese/Chinese and English (Bauer, 2018). These songs also reflect a variety of Chinese writing styles in Hong Kong, such as written Cantonese, standard written Chinese, a combination of written Cantonese and standard written Chinese, as well as Chinese mixed with other languages. Students pointed out that the selected Cantopop lyrics helped them realise the complex linguistic and sociolinguistic situation in Hong Kong and increased their awareness of appropriate language use. The benefit of using popular songs to develop a Cantonese language syllabus was that students' awareness of the relationship between spoken Cantonese, written Cantonese, and written Chinese could be raised through classroom exercises that practised conversion rules between spoken Cantonese and standard written Chinese. There have been ongoing discussions about the inadequacy of grammatical accuracy in teaching Chinese as a second language, and some scholars have suggested that contemporary language learning should be connected to language use in real-world settings (Wang, 2010). Besides grammatical accuracy, learners also need to develop sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence to use the language effectively in real-world situations (Lee, 2020b). The current action research showed that the teaching and learning of popular song lyrics can help students become aware of the differences in language use across various genres with different register styles, enabling them to further develop their language skills towards appropriate use in real-world contexts.

5.5 Challenges and limitations in course design

Some scholars may argue that using popular culture in language education also presents challenges and limitations. For example, some popular culture materials might contain inappropriate or controversial content, such as stereotypes, swear words, violence, or biased views (Bednarek, 2020; Issa, 2020). Curriculum developers and teachers need to be aware of these issues and address them thoughtfully and critically. Another challenge involves selecting and integrating materials that suit learners' needs, goals, levels, and contexts. Teachers should also consider factors like relevance, difficulty, availability, authenticity, and diversity when choosing and using popular culture materials (Trotta, 2020). In the current study, besides content selection, the linguistic complexity found in Cantopop lyrics also posed challenges for syllabus design. As discussed in Section 2.4, Cantopop lyrics can be written based on spoken Cantonese, standard written Chinese, or a mix of both. Some examples showed that these songs were written in combinations of spoken Cantonese, standard written Chinese, and even classical Chinese. This style of satirical writing, blending elements of classical Chinese, Cantonese, and standard Chinese, called 三及第 *sāam kahp dái* (or *sāam gahp dái*), was developed in Hong Kong in the 1950s (Bauer, 2018). For example, the song discussed in Section 2.4, 愛得太遲 *Oi dāk taai chih* ("Love Comes Too Late"), has a line: 我過去那死黨早晚共對, 各也紮職以後, 沒法暢聚 *ngóh gwoheui náh séidóng jóumaahn guhngdeui, gok yáh jaatjīk yihhauh, muhtfaat cheungjeuih* ("Back in the day, my best friend and I spent every morning and evening together. But once we got promoted, we haven't been able to hang out freely"). This line includes the Cantonese-specific expression 紮職 *jaatjīk* ("promoted at work"), which is written as 升職 *sīngjīk* in standard Chinese. It also contains phrases in standard written Chinese, such as 那 *náh* ("that"), 早晚 *jómáahn* ("morning and night"), and 沒法 *muhtfaat* ("cannot"), as well as expressions shared in both everyday spoken Cantonese and standard written Chinese, like 以後 *yihhauh* ("afterwards"). Due to the variety of writing styles in Cantopop lyrics, randomly selecting songs may not meet pedagogical needs and could confuse students. One solution is to adopt a tiered approach to using songs, differentiating based on the activity's purpose, the level of teacher support, and the material itself. Tegge's (2017) study showed that popular songs can serve as entry-level authentic texts for English language teaching. However, unlike the English songs discussed by Tegge, the linguistic and sociolinguistic complexity of Cantopop lyrics means they may better serve learners at intermediate and advanced levels through a tiered approach to content selection and activity planning.

This empirical study demonstrated that the design of the *Learning Cantonese through Songs* course presented a systematic method for choosing teaching materials and content when incorporating popular culture into language education. The *Cantopop lyrics corpus* created a collection of teaching and learning resources, supporting curriculum development and material creation. Teachers can make use of song lyrics to focus on grammar rules or language aspects such as adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, and semantics. During materials development, involving teachers in focus groups can help reach consensus and ensure that the resources meet students' proficiency levels and needs.

6 Future research

In the course *Learning Cantonese through Songs*, the development and application of the *Cantopop lyrics corpus* enabled teachers to systematically identify grammatical complexities and cultural themes embedded in Cantopop lyrics, thereby informing curriculum design and lesson planning. Nonetheless, the corpus could be further updated and refined by incorporating contemporary slang and emerging cultural references, ensuring its continued relevance for both linguistic analysis and pedagogical implementation. The *Cantopop lyrics corpus* can be further analysed to show Cantonese language learners how Cantonese popular songs differ from other popular culture genres by examining their mixture of spoken Cantonese, standard written Chinese, and code-mixing.

7 Conclusion

This paper has outlined the design and implementation of a language course called *Learning Cantonese through Songs*, which aimed to incorporate popular songs into teaching strategies by creating activities and organising resources around current trends and digital media. It has presented an innovative approach to combining language and culture learning in language courses. During the course design, the *Cantopop lyrics corpus* provided ample resources for teachers to develop curricula and teaching materials based on authentic content. The course offered students an opportunity to learn the target language within cultural contexts and gain a deeper understanding of the social and cultural influences shaping Cantonese. Its development demonstrated that Cantonese popular songs are a valuable resource for educators to boost student engagement, enhance language learning, foster cultural awareness, encourage creative thinking, and provide an engaging way to learn the language across various settings.

Notes

1. This article uses the Yale Romanisation System to transcribe Cantonese words and phrases. This system was promoted by Gerard P. Kok and Parker Po-fei Huang in their textbook *Speak Cantonese*, published by Far Eastern Publications in 1958. This romanisation system recognises six tones, as in *fā* (high level), *fá* (high rising), *fa* (mid-level), *fàh* (low falling), *fáh* (low rising), and *fah* (low level).
2. 白話 *baihua* is the form of written Chinese based on the varieties of Chinese spoken throughout China, contrasting with *wenyan* 文言, or classical Chinese – a literary style used in Imperial China until the early twentieth century. In 1917, the scholar *Hu Shi* 胡適 initiated the *Baihua Yundong* 白話運動 (“vernacular language movement”), which advocated adopting the *baihua* (“vernacular”) style as the primary written form to revitalise the classical Chinese literary language and enhance its accessibility for the public. This movement successfully made *baihua* the language used in textbooks, periodicals, newspapers, and public documents. *Baihua* now commonly refers to standard written Chinese, also known as modern written Chinese. Since the early 1920s, this modern vernacular form has been the standard style of writing for speakers of various Chinese dialects across mainland China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, functioning as the written form of modern standard Chinese.
3. The first Cantonese TV theme song, 《啼笑姻緣》 (“Crying and Laughter in Marriage”), was produced around 1971. This song was the creation of songwriter Joseph Koo 顧嘉輝 and was sung by Sandra Lang 仙杜拉. This marked the beginning of Cantonese popular songs (Cantopop) in Hong Kong. In the 1980s, Hong Kong Cantopop expanded rapidly. The entertainment industry used Cantopop songs extensively as theme songs in television dramas and movies.
4. The three billboards are 十大中文金曲 (“Top Ten Chinese Gold Songs Award”), 勁歌金曲頒獎典禮 (“Jade Solid Gold Best 10 Awards”), and 叱咤樂壇流行榜 (“Ultimate Song Chart Awards”). 十大中文金曲, organised by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), an official radio and television station operating under the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau of Hong Kong SAR, has been held every year since 1979. The selection criteria for awardees are based on marketing research conducted in Hong Kong and overseas Chinese-speaking communities. 勁歌金曲頒獎典禮, organised by Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), a commercial Chinese programme producer and television station established in 1967, has been held every year since 1984. Winners are determined by a selection committee consisting of stakeholders in the music industry and by audience votes. 叱咤樂壇流行榜, organised by the Hong Kong Commercial Broadcasting Corporation Limited (Commercial Radio Hong Kong), has been held annually since 1988. The selection criteria for awardees are based on the broadcast frequency of the songs on the Commercial Radio Hong Kong channels and audience votes.

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