Aligning Peer Tutoring System in Language Education: A Comparative Study of Face-to-face and Online Delivery Modes

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Abstract

This paper not only addresses the academic gap in current pedagogical practices but also connects with broader educational goals of equipping learners with skills that are directly applicable in real-life situations, including the workplace. This paper sets out to present an action research study and discusses the design and implementation of a peer tutoring system for Cantonese as a second language learners at a university in Hong Kong. Background and theoretical considerations of this peer tutoring system are discussed. The special focus of this action research will be on the implementation of this peer tutoring system before and during the COVID pandemic and its sustainable development. This paper also discusses the change from face-to-face peer tutoring activities to synchronous interactive online mode during the pandemic, the re-conceptualization of pedagogical design, and the development of the peer tutoring system in the post-pandemic period. This paper addresses research questions relating to how effective the peer tutoring system is in facilitating students' Cantonese learning and what advantages the peer tutoring system can bring to face-to-face and online delivery modes. The discussions are based on the analysis of feedback from tutors and tutees. Additionally, the possibility of applying blended and online peer tutoring in language education in the long run will also be discussed.

1 Learning and teaching Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions

In recent decades, the Hong Kong SAR government has promoted 'trilingualism and biliteracy', that is the use of three spoken languages, Cantonese, Putonghua, and English, and two written codes, standard written Chinese and written English, in official settings (Bacon-Shone et al., 2015; Bolton et al., 2020; Bolton & Lee, 2020). Putonghua is the official spoken language in China and has become more and more important in Hong Kong SAR in recent decades. The term 'Cantonese' refers to the language varieties used by immigrants who came to Hong Kong from various districts in Guangdong province, including Macau, Panyu, Taishan, Xinhui, and Zhongshan. Over time, their speech was blended into the contemporary variety of Cantonese used in Hong Kong since the late nineteenth century. Cantonese is often used to refer to the entire Yue subgroup of Chinese, which

includes varieties of Cantonese spoken in southern China, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore, and among overseas Chinese in North America, Europe, and Australia. It is currently estimated that there are about 70 million Cantonese speakers in the world. Cantonese has been and is still the major language variety used by people in daily life in Hong Kong (Bacon-Shone, Bolton, & Luke, 2015; Bolton, Bacon-Shone, & Lee, 2020; Bolton & Lee, 2020). According to the census results, around 90 percent of Hong Kong's population uses Cantonese as their usual spoken language (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2011, 2016, 2021). The Cantonese language also reflects aspects of traditional life and popular culture in Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangzhou.

Universities in Hong Kong set 'internationalization' as one of the institutional missions. Universities recruit students from different parts of the world and create opportunities for international exchange. As a result, the number of international students and non-domestic students' population increased (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2019). In the Hong Kong context, these students need to learn Cantonese and Putonghua in order to adapt to Hong Kong city life since Cantonese and Putonghua are two major Chinese varieties used in Hong Kong. Students learn Putonghua mainly because being able to use Putonghua helps their career, especially for those students who want to establish academic or business relationships with Putonghua-speaking communities (Lee, 2020). Students learning Cantonese believe that understanding and speaking Cantonese in Hong Kong is essential. Cantonese is a language that these students need to use in their everyday conversations and being able to communicate in Cantonese helps them better integrate into the community (Lee, 2020). Courses teaching Cantonese and Putonghua as a second language have become important at the university level in Hong Kong in recent decades.

2   Learning hurdles of Cantonese as a second language

Learning Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong is not always easy and simple (Boyle, 1997). Successful learners (Guest, 2019; Wee, 2019) pointed out that Cantonese learning needed 'a conscious effort and required a great deal of work' (Guest, 2019, p. 154). These successful learners asserted that they put continuous effort into learning pronunciation, tones, lexicon, and grammar. Cantonese as a second language learners are challenged by the Cantonese lexical tonal system, different aspects of sentence grammar, as well as a complex utterance particle system. On one hand, linguistic knowledge can be learnt in language classrooms and textbooks. However, on the other hand, the learning goal of most learners is to be able to communicate in actual daily language scenarios and the workplace outside the classroom. To achieve this learning goal, systemic training and practice on language use are required. Some previous research (Lee, 2019) indicates that there are various hurdles that Cantonese as a second language learners need to face while learning this language, especially at the beginner level. The linguistic hurdle is one mentioned above, and apart from this, some beginning learners also feel frustrated inside and outside the language classroom. The frustration is aroused when they try to use the target language but fail to do so because they lack appropriate vocabulary items to express their meaning. Some learners are saddened when they are thinking as adults but have lexicon and syntactic structure only on the level of a primary school kid while they are trying to engage in natural conversation. This mismatch creates a kind of psychological hurdle that affects their language learning.

In addition to the linguistic hurdles and psychological hurdles, some research (Lee, 2018, 2019) also investigates to what extent learners can use the target language in different real-life settings outside the language classroom. It seems straightforward to think that there are plenty of chances that Cantonese as a second language learners can use the target language outside the classroom in Hong Kong because around 90 percent of the Hong Kong population uses Cantonese for everyday communication purposes. However, these learners, especially beginners, reported that it is difficult to get a chance to practice the target language in real-life contexts in the community (Lee 2018, 2019). Many reasons can account for this situation. Firstly, some of their Hong Kong friends and people on the street do not understand their reasons for learning Cantonese and question their purpose in learning Cantonese (Li & Richards, 1995, Li, et al., 2016; Lee, 2018). Secondly, some people

easily switch to English to talk to expatriates because English is widely used in the government, business, and education domains (Cheung, 1984). And, thirdly some of their friends act as 'teachers' correcting their errors rather than engaging in natural conversation (Lee, 2019). The findings of these studies indicate that Cantonese as a second language learners have limited opportunities to use the target language in natural conversations outside the language classroom and they cannot get enough support from the Cantonese speech community. Such socio-cultural hurdles create challenges for Cantonese learning students. Thus, creating opportunities for these learners to use and practice Cantonese becomes an important topic in Cantonese language education in Hong Kong.

3   The design and implementation of Cantonese peer tutoring system

The result of the needs analysis conducted by Lee (2020) in 2017-2018 at a university in Hong Kong shows that university students studying Cantonese and Putonghua as a second language request learning supports, such as peer tutoring sessions, multimedia materials, and other learning aids associated with the formal curriculum to enhance their Chinese learning in addition to formal language classes (Lee, 2020).

Peer tutoring, as a form of cooperative learning, is a strategy used to support foreign language classroom teaching. Peer tutoring attracts continuous attention and arouses discussions in the language teaching field (Gaies, 1985; Flanigan, 1991; Thurston, et al, 2021). Some research has shown the positive effects of peer tutoring on reading comprehension skills for foreign language learners (Duran, et al., 2019). Some language education studies emphasize the benefit of using such cooperative learning strategies, as peer tutoring, for novice foreign language learners (Sun & Yuan, 2018). Sun and Yuan (2018) explore three groups of students learning different foreign languages including Chinese, French, and German at university. They found that such cooperative strategies were effective, especially for beginners. Their study also suggested that 'foreign language type was not a factor differentiating students' and teachers' perception of these cooperative strategies'. Research also showed that the use of peer tutoring in language courses increases social interactions among students. Xu et al. (2005) discovered that native speakers of the target language shaped positive social interactions and helped foreign language learners improve their social skills using the target language in natural conversations. Some studies also indicated that peer tutoring helped foreign language students who were learning in an environment where the target language is not a dominant language in the community, such as learning Spanish in the United States (August, 1987). To sum up, these studies showed evidence that peer tutoring has constructive effects on foreign/second language learning.

Among the researchers studying the effectiveness of peer tutoring, Takeuchi (2015) raised some concerns and pointed out that peer tutoring, although proven to be effective in America, Australia, and European countries by the research literature, students in Japan have their learning preferences and social hierarchies that affect the effectiveness of the peer tutoring approach. He suggested that more studies need to be done to investigate how peer tutoring can operate and work in the Asian context. This paper sets out to study the effectiveness of peer tutoring in the Hong Kong context through action research. Two research questions have been set.

1. How effective are peer tutoring activities in facilitating students' Cantonese learning?
2. What advantages can tutoring sessions bring to face-to-face and online delivery modes?

4   Action research

As discussed in previous paragraphs, there are specific hurdles that beginning learners of Cantonese as a second language learners have to face. This paper sets out to present an action research project and discuss the design as well as the implementation of the peer tutoring system serving Cantonese as second language learners at a university in Hong Kong and to investigate the effectiveness of the peer tutoring strategies in this context. Action research has developed rapidly in the

field of language education and promoting 'teacher as researcher' (Burns, 2011, p.237). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) suggested educational action research to be a spiralling process that includes, planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, replanning, acting and observing again, reflecting again and so on (Kemmis and McTaggart. 2005, p. 563). The researcher of the current study was continuously involved, as a project leader, in planning, acting, observing, and replanning the design and implementation of the Cantonese peer tutoring system. Based on Lee's (2020) needs analysis results, the Cantonese peer tutoring system was first developed from a face-to-face mode (version 1.0) in 2018-2019 to a completely online mode (version 2.0) during the global pandemic period.

5 Designing a face-to-face Cantonese peer tutoring system

Based on the data collected by Lee's (2020) needs analysis in 2017-2018, a face-to-face Cantonese peer tutoring system was designed and piloted in 2018-2019 and continues to run at the Chinese University of Hong Kong regularly. The design of this tutoring system aimed to cater to non-domestic university students' needs for Cantonese learning support. Tutoring activities were based on and closely related to the credit-bearing courses that the students were taking.

In the piloting stage in 2018-2019, the Cantonese peer tutoring system was designed and delivered in a face-to-face mode. The tutoring activities included peer tutoring group sessions and thematic workshops. The Cantonese tutoring system is administrated by the course teachers and run by students' Cantonese-speaking peers. In the piloting stage, five Cantonese-speaking university undergraduates and postgraduates from three different faculties, including the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Education, and Faculty of Social Science, were trained to be peer tutors and were running the peer tutoring sessions and the thematic workshops. All the tutors attended two pre-programme training sessions to understand the purposes and expectations of this Cantonese peer tutoring system. They also attended four bi-weekly training sessions which helped them prepare the content of the tutoring activities and enabled them to reflect and discuss issues encountered when they were carrying out the tutoring activities.

At the piloting stage, the tutoring activities focused on pronunciation practice, practice vocabulary, and grammatical points in various language scenarios. The tutoring system is closely linked to the content of the credit-bearing courses. A total of 80 beginning students enrolled in selected credit-bearing Cantonese courses joined the piloting scheme. They joined 90 minutes of lectures every week for 14 weeks and were invited to attend mandatory tutoring group sessions and non-mandatory thematic workshops. All tutoring sessions and workshops were held in university classrooms. Beginning students taking CLCC1703 (Elementary Cantonese for Chinese Speakers) and CLCC1113 (Application of Vocabulary and Grammar I) joined the peer tutoring system. CLCC1703 is a beginners' Cantonese course for non-domestic Chinese-speaking students learning Cantonese as a second language and CLCC1113 is a beginners' course for non-Chinese-speaking international students. These two courses have an average enrolment of around 20 students per class. In the piloting stage, a total of 60 CLCC1703 students and 20 CLCC1113 students joined the Cantonese peer tutoring system.

5.1 Tutoring group sessions

A total of 80 students enrolled in these two courses were grouped into eight tutoring groups which fitted into their timetable throughout one academic term. Each group had an average of around ten students which is half of the size of the lecture. Smaller tutoring group sizes ensure that tutees' individual learning needs can be attended to by the tutors. Students are required to attend seven tutoring sessions each term. Each tutoring session lasts for 45 minutes, equivalent to one university class session. Participation in the tutoring sessions was part of the course requirement and constitutes 5% of the final grade of the course. The content of the tutoring sessions included pronunciation

practices, listening practices, question-and-answer sessions, role-playing, and information gap activities. Students can practice and consolidate what has been learnt in the lectures and apply the knowledge and skills through interactive games and exercises.

5.2 Thematic workshops

These workshops were arranged on Fridays. Students can join the thematic workshops voluntarily. These workshops include 'pronunciation clinics', 'workshop on vocabulary use', and 'field trip to museums'. These workshops are non-mandatory and aim to provide support for students who need supplementary pronunciation, grammar, and cultural training.

5.3 Implementation result

Mid-term and end-of-term questionnaires were sent to all students who participated in the Cantonese peer tutoring system. The data collected in the mid-term evaluation in the piloting stage was mainly used to adjust tutorial content and style, for example, students indicated that they preferred activities such as language games and casual chats with tutors. The evaluation data of the tutoring system was mainly from the end-of-term questionnaires followed by two focused group discussions with tutees and tutors. Questions were focused on the usefulness of the tutoring system and feedback relating to peer tutors' performance.

5.3.1 Feedback and input from tutees

Students were invited to give an overall rate to the tutoring system in the end-of-term questionnaires. A 4-point Likert scale is adopted for participants to indicate their level of agreement. Students can choose 'extremely satisfied', 'somewhat satisfied', 'a bit satisfied', and 'not satisfied'. Mandarin-speaking students' responses clustered in 'extremely satisfied' (89.66%; with a response rate of 77.33%). International students' responses also clustered in 'extremely satisfied' (69.7%; with a response rate of 68.75%).

Five open-ended questions were also included in the questionnaire. Tutees indicated that the peer tutoring system was 'useful' and 'provided practical application' of what has been learnt in lectures. During the focused group discussions, tutees had the following comments.

- 'Language activities are useful in learning daily expressions.'
- 'Good, learnt a lot of phrases and expressions.'
- 'Useful and entertaining at the same time.'
- 'Tutorial session helps me to get used to my university life.'
- 'Speaking practice is very useful.'
- 'I like conversation practice. We can practice speaking.'
- 'I like group discussions. It is interesting to share experiences with others in Cantonese.'
- 'I like the interactive language games because we can incorporate what we have learned in the lecture.'
- 'I like 'communicating with your peer' part. It is useful to have chances to speak Cantonese in a relaxing way.'
- 'It helps me improve my pronunciation and make me speak out.'
- 'It is related to the lecture. A good way to practice what we've learnt in lecture.'
- 'Very helpful and committed to the course. Very useful. Enables the practical application of what has been learnt in the lecture.'
- 'Small group, more chance to practice and ask questions.'

Students were also invited to give an overall rate to the peer tutors. A 4-point Likert scale is adopted. Students can choose 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', and 'poor'. Mandarin-speaking students'

responses clustered in 'excellent' (90%). International students' responses clustered in 'excellent' (70%) and 'good' (30%). In general, students thought that the 'tutor was patient and helpful' and they 'used various examples to make us understand well.' Students also pointed out that 'whenever we have doubts, the tutor is ready to help and answer the questions.'

5.3.2 Reflection from tutors

In general, students' responses toward the tutoring system and tutors' performance are positive. It is also useful to look at this peer tutoring system from tutors' perspectives. By the end of the piloting stage, all peer tutors were invited to write a reflective report and participate in a reflection meeting to discuss issues relating to the tutoring sessions. All peer tutors found the experience meaningful and important. They thought that the experience gained helped their future career and academic pursuits. They wrote in the reflective reports that this was 'a valuable internship experience for me during my study at university.' They highlighted that 'the skills gained in this program will become my treasures in the future'. Concerning the skills that tutors had learnt, they stressed that this peer tutoring system 'equipped them with some pedagogical skills' and enabled them to 'learn how to help students with an effective knowledge review and how to create some tasks to interact with them', as well as the skills 'to deal with students' mistakes and errors'. Some tutors also reflected on the benefits of the tutors' training sessions. They found 'preparation meetings' useful and they reported that their understanding of the Chinese language had also been enriched although Cantonese is their first language. In general, tutors commented that 'there is no doubt that this experience left me a deep impression and brought with many benefits. I feel more confident.' Tutors also believed that their tutees benefited from this tutoring system. They reflected that 'these tutorial sessions are really beneficial to students to practice their oral Chinese' and they observed that their tutees 'got a significant improvement on Chinese learning'.

6   Aligning an online Cantonese peer tutoring system during the pandemic period

The Cantonese peer tutoring system was running well in the piloting stage in 2018-2019 and ran on a full scale in 2019-2020. However, the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in December 2019 imposed big challenges on the education sector in the whole world during 2020-2022 because most parts of the world were adopting strict social distance restrictions that made face-to-face teaching and learning difficult. Face-to-face teaching and learning activities needed to change to different types of teaching modes, such as synchronous online teaching, asynchronous teaching as well as different versions of blended modes. Social interaction is a particularly essential element in language learning. Some studies have been done to investigate many ways to maintain social interaction through educational technology and the effectiveness of online language teaching and learning (Enkin & Mejías-Bikandi, 2017; Maican & Cocoradă, 2021; Lee, 2022). The findings of these studies indicated some innovative ideas for maintaining social interaction via synchronous online platforms and online language teaching and learning methodologies. The pandemic has, in fact, opened up possibilities for the exploration of pedagogical modes and teaching methods. During the pandemic period, the education sector made use of online platforms to deliver courses, tutorials, and supporting learning activities. The Cantonese peer tutoring system has also been redesigned, transformed, and realigned in response to the changing pandemic situation. One major transformation was to change from face-to-face peer tutoring activities to online interactive peer tutoring activities.

After several months of peer tutor training and continuous discussion among peer tutors on the online platform. Based on the data collected in the first version of the peer tutoring system, the peer tutoring system has been transformed into an online Cantonese peer tutoring system. This transformed system made use of online platforms and included three types of tutoring activities, namely online interactive peer tutoring sessions, online workshops, and interactive online tours. A series of online tours were designed and added to the new system to allow Cantonese students to use the target language in casual settings. During the pandemic lockdown, with strict social distance policies

in most parts of the world, virtual tours were welcomed by both tutors and tutees.

The redesigned system was fully launched from the Fall Term 2020-2021 onward. From Fall Term 2020-2021 onward, a total of 20 university students, including sixteen undergraduate and four postgraduate students from four faculties, including the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Social Science, were trained as Cantonese peer tutors. These peer tutors interacted with Cantonese students in peer tutoring sessions and assisted in organising workshops and leading virtual tours. During 2020-2022, 63 peer tutoring groups (441 peer tutoring sessions), 16 language and culture workshops, and 25 Interactive online tours were organised. Around 500 Mandarin-speaking students and 100 international students (a total of 600 Cantonese students) participated in the peer tutoring system. All these online peer tutoring sessions, online language, and culture workshops, as well as interactive online tours, ran on the Zoom platform.

These peer tutoring activities were promoted and disseminated via email and social media, such as WeChat, and Instagram. Figure 1 is a screenshot of Cantonese peer tutoring events disseminated on Instagram.
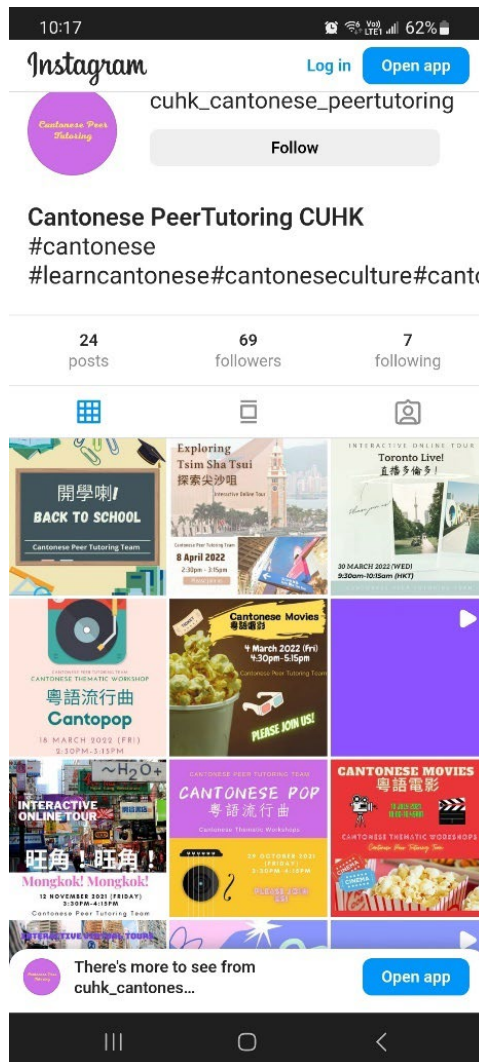

Fig. 1. Screenshot of Instagram posts of Cantonese peer tutoring activities

6.1 Online peer tutoring sessions

The design of the mandatory peer tutoring sessions followed the design piloted in 2018-2019. Peer tutoring sessions continued to be implemented in beginners' Cantonese courses (CLCC1703 Cantonese for Mandarin-speaking students and CLCC1113 Cantonese for international students). The peer tutoring sessions were targeted to have around 10 students in one tutoring group. In actual implementation, 5 to 15 students were allowed to match students' timetables and to cater to students in different time zones since some students were in different physical locations during the pandemic period. Tutoring sessions started after the add-drop period and concluded before the final exam. Each tutoring group had 7 tutoring sessions each term. Each tutoring session lasts for 45 minutes, which is equivalent to one university class session. The peer tutoring sessions were organised with the following content.

(1) **Pronunciation training**: Language games and exercises aimed at familiarising students with Cantonese romanisation and pronunciation.
(2) **Semi-authentic question-and-answer sessions**: Question-and-answer tasks based on the course materials. The tasks aim at consolidating students' learning of pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure.
(3) **Role-playing/Information gap activities**: These activities aim to provide language scenarios for students to consolidate what has been learnt in the lecture and students can apply the knowledge and skills in a simulated environment.

Tutoring sessions were part of the course requirement and participation in tutorials constitutes 5% of the class participation (25%) of the course. Table 1 shows the number of sessions and the average number of participants in each peer tutoring session. The average attendance rates of tutoring sessions were 78.54% (CLCC1703 Mandarin-speaking students) and 80.34% (CLCC1113 International students).

Table 1. Number of participants in the peer tutoring sessions

Academic year	Beginners' course	Total number of participants in the peer tutoring system	Number of tutoring groups	The average number of participants in the peer tutoring groups
2020-21	CLCC1703	234	22	10.6
	CLCC1113	47	7	6.7
	Total	*281*	*29*	*9.7*
2021-22	CLCC1703	250	25	10
	CLCC1113	57	9	6.3
	Total	*307*	*34*	*9*
	2020-22 Total	**588**	**63** **(441 sessions)**	**9.3**

6.2 Online language and culture thematic workshops

Sixteen online language and culture workshops were organised from September 2020 to May 2022. Topics are around Cantonese popular culture including 'Cantopop' and 'Cantonese movies'. Selected Instagram posts of these events are shown in Figure 2. Students can join the thematic workshops voluntarily. Table 2 shows that a total of 16 workshops were organised with a total headcount of 326 students.

Fig. 2. Instagram posts of the Language and culture thematic workshops

Table 2. Number of Cantonese language and culture workshops organised and number of participants

Academic year	Topics of the workshops		Number of workshops organised	Total number of participants in the workshops
2020-21	Cantopop		5	58
	Cantonese movies		5	64
		Total	*10*	*122*
2021-22	Cantopop		3	30
	Cantonese movies		3	174
		Total	*6*	*204*
		2020-22 Total	*16*	*326*

6.3 Interactive online tours

Due to the pandemic situation, all field trips were changed to online tours. Twenty-five interactive online tours were organised. During the pandemic period, non-domestic students cannot travel and cannot even travel to the university, online 'university campus tours' were organised at the beginning of each academic year. In addition to this, a series of Hong Kong street walks and city

tours were organised. The major themes of the tours include 'Mongkok street walk 旺角街道遊', 'Exploring Tsim Sha Tsui 探索尖沙咀', 'Have fun in Causeway Bay 銅鑼灣食買玩', 'Exploring Sham Shui Po 同遊深水埗', etc. Figure 3 shows the Instagram posts of selected tours. Table 3 shows that a total of twenty-five Cantonese language and culture workshops were organised with a total of 233 headcounts.

Fig. 3. Instagram posts of the Interactive virtual tours

Table 3. Number of Interactive online tours organised and number of participants

Term	Event	Number of virtual tours	Total number of participants in the virtual tours
2020-21	Virtual campus tour	10	114
	Hong Kong street walk (Mongkok, Causeway Bay, Shamshuipo)	10	52
	Total	*20*	*166*
2021-22	Hong Kong street walks (Mongkok, Tsim Sha Tsui, Causeway Bay)	5	67
	Total	*5*	*67*
	2020-22 Total	***25***	***233***

These interactive online tours were led by peer tutors and ran on the Zoom platform. The peer tutors prepared multimedia materials, such as PowerPoint slides and videos, and supplemented them with Google Earth, Google Maps, and Google Street View to introduce selected locations. In these tours, These peer tutors acted as tour guides or docents to introduce the locations and conversed with the participants, i.e. the tutees. Both the tutors and tutees spoke and used the chatroom function on the Zoom platform. Figure 4 is a screenshot of the 'University campus tour'.
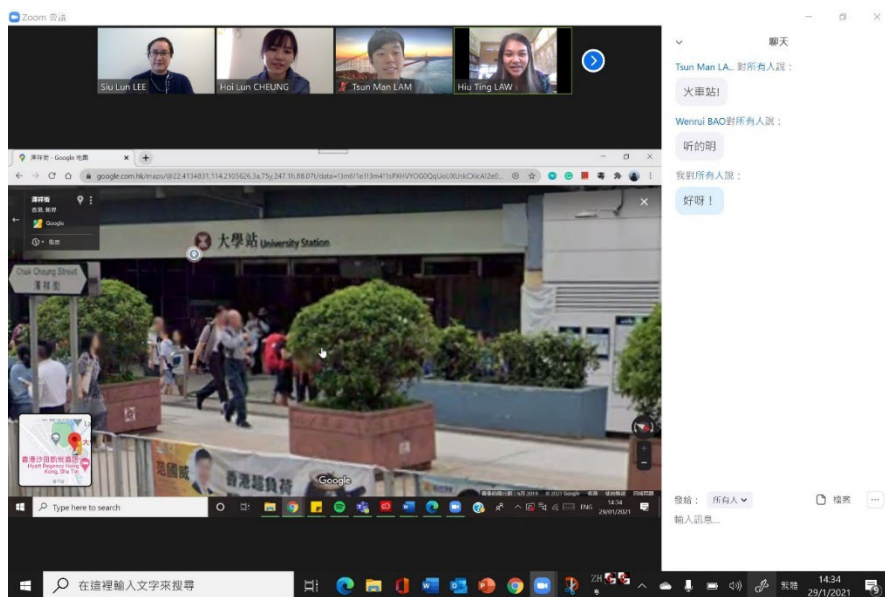
Fig. 4. A screenshot of an interactive 'University campus tour'.

6.3 Implementation results

A set of end-of-term questionnaires was sent to tutees. A questionnaire survey is used to evaluate the learning outcomes of the peer tutoring system and satisfaction level. The questionnaires consist of four closed questions and five open-ended questions to elicit students' feedback. Focus group discussion sessions were organised with both the tutees and peer tutors respectively.

6.3.1 Satisfaction level

The questionnaire survey focused on two parts, the usefulness of the tutoring system and feedback concerning peer tutors' performance. 4 open-ended questions are included in the questionnaire to collect students' feedback. In addition, the questionnaire also includes 4 closed-end questions set on a 4-point Likert scale for participants to indicate their level of agreement. Tutees were invited to give an overall rating to the tutoring system 2.0. On the 4-point Likert scale, students can choose 'extremely satisfied', 'somewhat satisfied', 'a bit satisfied', and 'not satisfied'. Mandarin-speaking students' responses clustered in 'extremely satisfied' (with an average score of 3.78). International students' responses also clustered in 'extremely satisfied' (with an average score of 3.88).

6.3.2 Tutees' feedback

Tutees have positive feedback on the content and approaches used. They reflected that the content was 'appropriate', 'useful', 'relevant', and 'fun'. They found 'dialogue conversation', 'language games', 'oral practice', and 'cultural tours' in the online system particularly helpful. Tutees had the following responses in the focus group discussions.

· 'The peer tutoring covered topics that related to the lecture.'
· 'The tutor presented dialogues for students and asked us to practice with a partner. I found this method very engaging.'
· 'Interactive online game in Cantonese is interesting and challenging.'

· 'The activities were useful in daily life. We practiced daily conversation with a script. By doing this, I could imagine how can I use vocabulary and grammar in daily situations.'
· 'The content is useful and relates to the lectures. We cannot travel to Hong Kong, but when we practice Cantonese, we also understand more about our university and Hong Kong.'
· 'The tutor helped me a lot with pronunciation. I like the practice part because I can practice using vocabulary and grammar learnt in the lecture.'
· 'We could practice more with peers. It was useful practicing speaking. The tutor gave examples of what we have learnt in class.'
· 'The workshops and tours are relevant to Hong Kong culture.'

Tutees' responses also indicate the peer tutoring system encourages mutual help among students. They commented that 'the tutor was very nice and very willing to help', 'the tutor has a good approach to students and understands learners' difficulties when learning Cantonese', and 'they created an encouraging atmosphere during the peer tutoring session'.

6.3.3 Tutor's reflections

All peer tutors found the experience meaningful and important. In the focus group discussion, they expressed that the experience gained is beneficial to their future career and academic pursuits. They highlighted that they learnt by 'trial and error' and they appreciated that they have the opportunities to 'work with peers online'. They reported that they have 'equipped with practical pedagogical skills', especially the way to 'communicate with peers in online platforms'. They regarded being able to work and communicate effectively online as an important skill in post-pandemic time. They believed that 'these skills gained will be helpful in the future career'. The peer tutors reflected that they have gained experience in helping others 'systematically' and 'professionally'. They believed that the peer tutoring system 'really benefited students and helped them practice the target language'.

To sum up, questionnaire surveys and focus group discussions were used to evaluate the project outcomes. The data reflected that these tutees benefited from the peer tutoring system. They reported that the peer tutoring system provided more opportunities for them to practice the target language. They can engage in semi-structured tutoring activities as well as natural conversations in a relaxed atmosphere with their Cantonese-speaking peers. The data also showed that the peer tutors have learnt pedagogical skills by hosting tutoring sessions and workshops. Peer tutors, in general, also become more confident and communicate well with their peers as they indicated in the focus group discussions. The data showed that this peer tutoring system encouraged mutual help among university students and promoted diversity and inclusion in the university context.

7   Discussion

There were challenges when the peer tutoring sessions were switched to online mode. With systematic training offered to peer tutors and regular communication in social media (mainly WhatsApp, WeChat group, and Instagram), the transition was swift, and the system operated smoothly. This project benefits Cantonese students and peer tutors and assists the university in achieving the aims of internationalisation promoting diversity and inclusion, as well as mutual help among students of different backgrounds. The Cantonese peer tutoring system project is highly sustainable. Two important factors for the operation of this peer tutoring system can be identified in the questionnaire survey and focus group discussion data.

7.1 Engaging tutors as teaching partners

One key factor in the smooth operation of this peer tutoring system is the engagement and active participation of the peer tutors. A stable working team and professional training for peer tutors, led

by the project leader, who is also an experienced teacher and curriculum designer, are vital to maintaining the operation of the system. Team building and mutual help among peer tutoring teammates are also essential elements in this collaborative system. In addition, the guidance offered to peer tutors from class teachers is necessary. On one hand, the peer tutors received training on communication (and also online communication) skills as well as pedagogical methodologies from the class teachers. On the other hand, the input and feedback peer tutors injected into the system enriched the curriculum as well as the learning experience of the Cantonese learners and provided pedagogical support for the class teachers. In all, tutor training, team building, and support for and from peer tutors are important to success. This kind of mutual support echoes the 'students as partners' discourse in higher education in recent decades. Research literature about engaging students as partners in higher education encourages students' involvement in curriculum design and pedagogical consultancy (Harrington, et al., 2014; Bovill, 2017). Students as partners (SaP) is a pedagogical approach that re-envisions students and academic staff as active collaborators in the diverse processes of teaching and learning. SaP empowers students to be actively engaged in, and share the responsibility for, their own education. This Cantonese peer tutoring system is an example demonstrating the establishment of a collaborative relationship between the class teachers and the peer tutors and encouraging peer tutors' to engage in curriculum planning. The peer tutoring system established a mutual support framework among teachers, tutors, and tutees. Peer tutors were paid by the university's standard remuneration rate, however, they stressed in the focus group discussion that it was not the monetary rewards that motivated them to help their peers. They stressed the working relationship among the peer tutoring team members and the support of the class teachers encouraged them to actively participate in the tutoring system. Mercer-Mapstone, et al. (2017) did a systematic study on research literature relating to the SaP approach. Their study indicates that involving students as partners in pedagogical planning increases students' engagement, confidence, and self-efficacy. It can raise students' awareness of employability skills or career development. It also encourages students to learn outside of the discipline, including critical skill development not linked directly to employability. Such practice can also enhance student-student relationships as well as trust between students and teachers. The feedback collected from focused group discussions among peer tutors in the current study resonates with these findings.

7.2 Creating a virtual speech community

Another key factor of this peer tutoring system is to understand the needs of Cantonese learners who are asking for exposure to the target language and opportunities to practice the language outside the classroom. Both the tutors and tutees highly valued the non-mandatory online workshops and interactive virtual tours which were organised during the pandemic period. One major feedback from Cantonese learners is that the online tutoring events indeed created a 'virtual speech community' for them to use the target language. This observation was highlighted especially during the pandemic period when the majority of the international and non-local students were staying outside Hong Kong and learning Cantonese in different physical locations, such as Europe, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, mainland China, Malaysia, Singapore, and America. They stressed that they benefited from this online teaching mode because they lacked opportunities to use the target language in the physical location where they were staying. The online platform created a 'third space' (Godwin-Jone, 2005) for Cantonese educators to connect with their students. This 'third space', as described by Godwin-Jone (2005), is 'neither home nor school/work', but a 'space' in which the target language is the major medium for communication among the members in this 'space'. The online Cantonese peer tutoring system provides a 'virtual third space' for Cantonese students, who are in different linguistic environments, to use the target language outside classroom settings with their peers. As mentioned in the previous section, an Instagram account has been operating to disseminate information relating to different peer tutoring events of this online Cantonese learning community. Cantonese students can join this virtual community, use the target language with their peers, and engage in natural conversations. Previous research (Whelpton, 1998; Lee, 2018, 2019, 2020) indicated that

Cantonese students lack opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom and they easily switch to English and/or Putonghua to communicate in schools or work situations in Hong Kong. These online peer tutoring sessions, workshops, and interactive tours encouraged the use of the target language among students with diverse backgrounds, enhanced the language learning experience of Cantonese students, and eventually promoted mutual help among students with different linguistic backgrounds in this virtual space. Wick (1997) studied the discourse of an email listserv named Pednet. She investigated the patterns in the discourse, norms for communicating, meta-communicative rules, and cultural distinctive forms. She argued that there can be virtual speech communities online and 'there is nothing about the online environment per se that precludes such a group from being a community in the larger sense' since a speech community refers to a group of people who share a set of linguistic norms and expectations regarding the use of language. Data collected in this action research provides evidence that such virtual speech communities exist and the Cantonese peer tutoring system, indeed, provides a virtual space in which Cantonese learners and Cantonese users communicate with each other and engage in social interactions.

This virtual community also facilitates and encourages mobile language learning. Research on mobile learning (Mosavi & Nezarat, 2012) suggested that mobile-assisted language learning makes use of mobile technology in language learning. Mobile-assisted language learning is different from classroom learning because there is no need for the learners to sit in a language classroom to get learning materials and complete language tasks. This kind of learning mode can be considered an ideal solution to language learning barriers in terms of time and place. This action research proves that mobile learning functions well during the pandemic time and has the potential to be sustainable in the long run in language education.

8   Future research and development

The Cantonese peer tutoring system has been developed from a face-to-face mode (version 1.0) to a completely online mode (version 2.0). Although both versions worked smoothly, they both have pros and cons. The tutoring system 1.0 face-to-face mode has the advantage of developing a better bond among teachers, tutors, and tutees (Serhan, 2020) but lacks flexibility in learning time and place. The 2.0 online system encourages mobile learning and creates a virtual speech community for Cantonese students to use their target language outside the language classroom. As the whole world is gradually getting back to normal since 2022, it is reasonable to review and plan for the post-pandemic time. A hybrid model, which combines online and face-to-face modes, of the system, is a possible version for the post-pandemic era. The combination of online and face-to-face modes can enhance Cantonese students' online-and-offline learning experience and encourage the use of the target language on different occasions in their physical daily academic or work life as well as in a virtual environment. The development of hybrid collaborative learning models can be further investigated in the next research.

The data collected in this action research proves that this Cantonese peer tutoring system provides support for students' language learning needs, helps them to cross some of the learning hurdles, especially the psychological and sociocultural hurdles (Lee, 2019), and motivates students to learn and use the target language. Another follow-up research that needs to be done in this context is to map students' Cantonese proficiency improvement with their participation in this peer tutoring system to investigate the impact of this peer tutoring system on proficiency improvement in Cantonese education.

The implementation of this Cantonese peer tutoring system, indeed, shows that the advancement of synchronous online tools, such as Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Zoom opened up a new type of platforms for teacher-student and student-student communication. During the pandemic period, not only classroom activities moved online, but also some social activities happened online. Students not only engage with classroom tasks online but also arrange causal events online. Further research on the discourse patterns in formal synchronous online classroom

teaching and learning, as well as in interactive online language enhancement activities, like this peer tutoring system, will be of interest to linguists and educators.

9 Conclusion

This paper has discussed the design and implementation of a peer tutoring system for Cantonese as second language learners at a university in Hong Kong. The design and development of this Cantonese peer tutoring system were based on students' needs analysis. This paper introduced the design and piloting of the face-to-face version of this Cantonese peer tutoring system and discussed the transformation of this face-to-face system to a completely online version during the pandemic. The action research showed that the two versions of the system, both the face-to-face and online versions, were running smoothly with positive results. The tutees reflected that this peer tutoring system helps them learn the target language. The tutors reported that they have learnt practical classroom management skills and experience that helped them in their future careers. The peer tutoring system provided a virtual 'space' for Cantonese students to practice Cantonese in more casual settings and engage themselves in natural conversations with their Cantonese-speaking tutors and peer learners. This virtual 'space' will continue to be valuable in the post-pandemic era. Both the face-to-face version and the online versions have their advantages. The face-to-face mode has the advantage of developing a better bond among teachers, tutors, and tutees and the online system encourages mobile learning and creates a virtual speech community for Cantonese students to use their target language outside the language classroom. Future research can be done to investigate the effectiveness of these different delivery modes and the design and experience of this peer tutoring system can be further tested in other language programmes, and in other institutions.

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