
English Medium Education in Hong Kong

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English medium education has long been a controversial issue in Hong Kong, arousing passions among parents, teachers, school children, and language educators. Some are convinced that pupils learn most effectively through the mother tongue (Cantonese) than through the second language (English) (Yu and Atkinson, 1988; Bruce, 1990). Others maintain that proficient mastery of English contributes so much to Hong Kong's economic well-being and the educational opportunities of its citizens, that it is well worth teaching it to all children from the time they enter school, and to attempt to ensure its mastery through using it as the medium of education at the secondary level (Lord, 1987).

The Learning of English in Hong Kong

At present, there are essentially three basic types of secondary schools in Hong Kong: Chinese middle schools using Cantonese as the medium of instruction in all subjects except English language; Anglo-Chinese schools theoretically using English as the medium of instruction for all lessons except Chinese Language, Literature and History; and prevocational schools which provide a vocationally oriented curriculum for weaker students. The first type of school now belongs to a minority (about 13%) due to strong parental preference for their children to be educated in English. Although Anglo-Chinese schools claim to use English as the medium of instruction, Cantonese is regularly used alongside English, and code-switching is common in most lessons (Johnson, 1988). In practice, very few Anglo-Chinese secondary schools attempt to use English exclusively as the medium of instruction.

There are seven degree-granting higher institutions in Hong Kong, all offering English-medium education except on Chinese related subjects. On completion of the secondary education, students will either further their studies locally or overseas mainly in one of the English-speaking countries such as England, Australia, Canada and the US. Hence, achieving a high level of English is of paramount importance for students to pursue tertiary education. When one further considers that Hong Kong has for years engaged in international business transactions with the world of commerce, one would appreciate more deeply the need for proficient mastery of English if Hong Kong is to thrive as a commercial and economic centre. It can be seen clearly that English plays an essential role in the educational and business sector.

With the imminent advent of 1997 when Hong Kong is to revert back to full Chinese sovereignty, the question of whether English will still be important in Hong

Kong continues to be controversial (Pennington and Yue, 1994). One would anticipate that the focus should now shift to the learning of Chinese to increase the involvement by Hong Kong citizens in the Chinese public affairs. However, when one considers the social and economic background of Hong Kong, one would certainly favour the implementation of English medium education all through the secondary level. The reality is that the majority of pupils in Hong Kong are not able to cope with it. Bruce (1990) observes that there is a high incidence of code-switching between English and Cantonese, and Johnson (1985) showed that on average there was more Cantonese spoken than English. Johnson (1989) reports on the positive humanistic role of code-switching and its educational necessity when, even with code-switching, at least 30% of the school children have difficulty following an English medium curriculum. Kwo (1987) suggests that these pupils are often so poor in English that they switch off when the teacher switches to English.

Over the years, most teachers have within the confines of the classroom walls, felt increasingly compelled to call upon Cantonese to help struggling learners when the lesson is supposed to be taught entirely in English. With such increased use of mixed code switching between the second language and first language, learners have understandably grown used to tuning in closely when the first language is used, and waiting patiently for comprehensible input eventually to appear after the second language has been used. In fact, a bizarre notion seemed to underpin much of the Hong Kong language planning policy at the time: that all the problems associated with language teaching could be solved at a stroke if Cantonese was to be used as the medium of instruction or if mother-tongue teaching was to be used to fix concepts prior to reteaching them in English. Although the claim that learning and teaching are most effective in the first language is firmly supported by experience and research (Siu *et al.*, 1979; Yu and Atkinson, 1988, Bruce, 1990; Hong Kong Education Department, 1990), there is no firm evidence that the standard of English has been unaffected as a result of the increasing use of Cantonese. Furthermore, Lo (1992) demonstrates that when information is taught in one language, it is likely to be encoded within long-term memory in the same language, suggesting that learning is most effective when the language of instruction is the same as the language of testing. This shows that the common practice of code-switching may not be very helpful, although Johnson (1988) thinks that it is sometimes necessary because of the humanistic role it plays.

Efforts Towards Improving the Learning of English

The government in Hong Kong has always been enthusiastic in promoting the learning of English in Hong Kong. As a result of the introduction of universal, free and compulsory junior secondary education in 1978, additional teachers were provided

for remedial teaching to pupils who were weak in Chinese or English, or both. In order to further enhance bilingual literacy, a \$HK320 million language package was offered by the Government in 1981 (British Council, 1986), including the establishment of the Institute of Language in Education (ILE) in 1982 to raise the quality of language teaching in schools through inservice training of teachers and research, the provision of extra language teachers in Forms One to Three for remedial teaching in English and Chinese, and recruitment of expatriate lecturers in the ILE and in Colleges of Education.

There has never been a shortage of resources in the area of Teaching English in Hong Kong. In 1986, in an effort to encourage wider reading, reading in English for pleasure, a \$HK16 million Pilot Extensive Reading Scheme was launched in nine secondary schools. The purpose of the scheme was to provide schools with a wide range of carefully graded readers, packaged by the Institute of Applied Language Studies of the University of Edinburgh (Yu, 1993). In 1987, the Government launched a \$HK53 million, two-year Expatriate English Language Teachers' Pilot Scheme, involving the placement of native English speakers in language departments in secondary schools to teach junior form pupils (Forms One to Three) (Hong Kong Education Department, 1984). The scheme was later extended to senior forms and cost a further \$HK42 million. The intention behind the move was to provide native speaker models of training to students, boosting their confidence to speak English among themselves and to foreigners.

Realising the utilitarian value of learning English, parents have a preference for their children to be educated in English, and even the children themselves seem to recognise the purpose of the exercise. In actual fact, English is greatly emphasized at all levels of education in Hong Kong: Kindergarten, primary, secondary and tertiary. Parents judge whether a school is good or not by the amount of English taught and the number of English textbooks used. Although the Education Department is strongly opposed to the teaching of English at kindergarten level, many of these schools ignore this advice, introducing English through the teaching of the alphabet, isolated vocabulary items and simple English conversation. English activities such as choral recitation and drama are included in extra-curricular activities held on Saturday. In order to enhance their reputation, many kindergartens employ native-speakers of English as teachers. Parents are keen for their children to be educated in these kindergartens because they provide a stepping stone for entry into a good primary school.

In the predominantly Chinese-medium primary school, a child is taught both Chinese and English from the age of six. Written Chinese is particularly difficult to learn as the construction of characters relies heavily on memorisation. Hard as it may be, Chann (1976) claims that to learn English is doubly difficult because it is completely alien to an average child in Hong Kong. The Education Department does

not recommend primary schools to use English as the medium of instruction except in English lessons. Hence, all subjects are taught in Cantonese. Some prestigious schools, which feed directly to prestigious sister secondary schools, take very firm steps to raise the standard of English. This is achieved through the use of supplementary grammar exercises and simplified English readers in addition to the normal school curriculum.

There seems to be a strong inclination in all parties concerned (the government, schools, parents and students) to improve the learning of English in Hong Kong. How can such incredible educational determination to improve English be reconciled against the suggestion that the majority of the students cannot follow lessons taught in English? There is always the impression in the teaching profession that students nowadays are not as good as those in the past decades.

There seems to be no simple answer to this question. One explanation for the decline in English standards put forward by the Education Department (1989) is that, with the introduction of the nine-year compulsory education, a greater proportion of the normal population now had the opportunity to receive education in English, compared with the very elitist educational system in the fifties, when English was taught to the brighter and wealthier young people. The traditional teaching methods which were accepted without dissent by the elite stayers-on at school, were quite unsuited to the normal range staying on at school as the eighties broke. In addition, the great economic success of Hong Kong has created a new demand for English to meet the needs of commerce, the financial sector, government and service industries, leading to the misconception that standards of English are declining and that teachers and students alike are not as good as they once were. However, it is difficult to convince practising teachers that the falling standard in English is due to a mismatch between supply and demand and constant complaints about students' poor English are often heard in the staff room.

The Importance of Linguistic Environment in Learning English

In analyzing why children do not learn English well in Hong Kong, one also has to examine the environment in which learning takes place. Outside the English classroom, pupils rarely have to use English in their daily life. The use of English in Hong Kong is severely limited to social interaction with non-speakers of Cantonese, with government and academic field. Although radio, television, films, newspapers, magazines and other written materials in English are available in English, school children make little or no use of them in school and home and they seldom use English on the street, in the society or for social purposes. Most teachers and pupils have no contact with foreigners and, indeed, the English they do

know is rarely heard in the society, although English mass media are available. Pierson et al. (1981) found that many school children think that it is bizarre for two Chinese to speak in English in public, and Lin *et al.* (1991), more than a decade later, observes that such an attitude has not changed.

The importance of a rich linguistic environment is receiving increased attention from linguists and language educators, who seek every opportunity to broaden language pedagogic paradigms, simulating the "real-life" situation in which the second language can be introduced in natural contexts in order to maximize the learner's participation in naturalistic language exchange. Immersion programmes, for example, are attempts to saturate the school learning environment with the second language to replicate as closely as possible the condition in which children acquire their first language. The psycholinguistic rationale for immersion programmes, claims Carey (1987), includes the view that since language is basically rooted in communication, an ideal acquisition context would include communication in the second language in a great variety of social settings.

The success of second language acquisition through immersion has been demonstrated extensively both in Canada (Lambert and Tucker, 1972) and in the United States (Politzer, 1980), involving the use of the target language in classroom instruction and communicative interaction. Hammerly (1987) claims that immersion programmes are the most sophisticated form of Second Language Acquisition through Classroom Communication (SLACC) and a manifestation of the validity of second language acquisition theories. Krashen (1984), the champion of the naturalistic approach to language teaching, points out that the approach is in line with his theory of second language acquisition, claiming that it is the most successful programme in the literature of language teaching. Transmitting all "meaningful academic and interpersonal content" through the use of second language, immersion approaches are far more effective than conventional class teaching as the language is used as a medium rather than a subject (Cummins, 1982).

Lambert and Tucker (1972), and Swain (1978) are advocates for an early start of second language learning, suggesting that young children are more responsive to language learning in natural settings. Whereas early immersion is beneficial in second language learning, late immersion seems to have no deficits at all, with older learners acquiring second language competence more rapidly than young learners (Genesee, 1978). Stern and Cummins (1981) remark that younger children are more likely to develop "basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS)" which are required in a social situation, whereas older children are more readily to develop "cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)," which emphasizes decontextualised textual processing.

Although immersion programmes demonstrate great success, it seems unwise to jump to the conclusion that merely immersing the learner in a second language

saturated environment will inevitably bring about linguistic advancement, as it will in the case of first language acquisition. Despite extensive empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of immersion approaches, a number of studies show that it is difficult for immersion students to achieve a high level of second language proficiency, claiming that the linguistic output of immersion students "linguistically faulty" (Pawley, 1985; Hammerly, 1987). Gustafson (1983) comments that thirteen years of immersion are insufficient to produce linguistic competence.

Lo (1987) examined the effects of exposure to a second language saturated environment on learning English with a group of Cantonese speaking university students who had newly arrived in England to start an undergraduate course. She monitored their linguistic progress in an experimental period of one year, anticipating that, in theory at least, their cultural knowledge and proficiency in English should be enhanced as a result of total immersion in a second language environment at the end of the period. Results turned out to be rather disappointing in that only little progress was shown both on linguistic and cultural knowledge. Replicating the above study, Doland and Lo (1990) compared the performance of two Cantonese speaking groups; the first, a group newly arrived in England and the second, a group who had been in England over a year. One of their hypotheses was that the latter group should demonstrate better knowledge about English and the British culture in a computer generated language task due to their extra exposure to and interaction with the environment. Results again did not bear out this hypothesis and a detailed examination of the data and individual background of the subjects led to the conclusion that mere exposure to a second language environment would not lead to automatic linguistic gains. The extent to which the learner participates in the process of learning determines the ultimate second language proficiency.

It appears that the road to second language proficiency is difficult and that second language mastery requires much more time than many educators would like to believe. Even with the most favourable condition, learners do not seem to make great progress in learning English. One is, therefore, led to postulate that the learning of English is extraordinarily difficult in the 'bilingual' context of Hong Kong, where opportunity to engage in English is so rare.

Possible Solution

If successful second language learning is to be achieved, it must be supported by massive exposure to, and use of the target language. Otherwise, very little will be learned and the little that is mastered will soon be forgotten. Since Hong Kong is essentially a monolingual society in which everyday communication is effected through Cantonese, exposure to the target language (English) is extremely limited outside the classroom. For thoroughly successful learning, what is needed is for students to be placed in an English saturated school environment in which English medium is used in an immersion fashion, ideally beginning from the primary stage,

with the amount of English used being increased proportionately to the class level. Such a recommendation is well grounded because research findings show that an early start of second language learning is beneficial, taking advantage of the fact that children are more responsive to language in natural settings (Lambert and Tucker, 1972; Swain, 1978).

To ensure a smoother transition from the Cantonese-medium primary to English-medium secondary, it is advisable to increase exposure to English at upper primary levels to alleviate the pressure accruing from the sudden change of language medium. In order to assist English learning at an earlier stage, the mother tongue can be used in greater proportion to allow pupils to express what they want to say but its use should gradually be reduced at later levels. Atkinson (1978) suggests that the mother tongue in the language classroom is a potential resource that should merit considerable attention, pointing out that at early levels a ratio of about five per cent native language to about ninety-five per cent target language may be profitable. Similarly, Katchen (1990) also supports the use of the mother tongue in small amounts because this helps pupils understand, saves time and enhances teacher rapport with students.

Simply postponing the use of the English medium to as late as secondary or tertiary levels and offering remedial teaching when problems have already arisen is probably too late. Despite huge amounts of remedial work undertaken to improve students' English at this stage, the general impression is that the standard of English among pupils is still falling. The late introduction of English medium education at the tertiary level will complicate matters because there is the problem of coping with the learning of subject knowledge and a language problem at the same time. Many language educators worry that the early phasing in of the English medium education to the curriculum would have an adverse effect on the development of the mother tongue. Such a fear may not be necessary as Cantonese is used so widely at home and outside school, one would expect that students would have sufficient exposure to the language to develop competence.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reviewed the case of English learning in Hong Kong, highlighting the importance and necessity of English medium education from the perspectives of parents, school, students, government and society. I have also examined the linguistic environment of Hong Kong which causes difficulties in English learning, concluding that increasing exposure to English at upper primary level will be able to smooth the transition from Chinese medium primary schools to English medium secondary schools and compensate for the insufficient second language input in the environment. The immersion approach should definitely benefit children in the progress towards genuine bilingual education.

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