Chapter 5 - Improving the Standards and Promoting the Use of English in Hong Kong: Issues, problems and prospects

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Introduction

With over seven million people in an area of about 1,100 square kilometers, Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Being a former colony of Britain for over 150 years, Hong Kong's sovereignty was returned to China and it became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) on 1 July 1997. Around 95 per cent of the population are ethnic Chinese; the overwhelming majority (about 90 per cent) have Cantonese as their 'usual' language (Li, 2006). The non-Chinese population have rarely exceeded five per cent, with Filipinos and Indonesians being the largest groups (1.7 per cent and 1.6 per cent, respectively; *Hong Kong 2006 Population by-census Main Report Volume I*, p.39).

The success story of Hong Kong under British rule, notably its rise from a barren rock to an international metropolis rivaling London, Tokyo and New York, has inspired a sizable body of literature on Hong Kong studies, particularly around the time of the handover (e.g. Lau, 1997; Tsang, 1997). Natural resources being negligible, international trade and commerce have always been a main source of revenue and the lifeline for a significant percentage of Hongkongers. For about two decades since the early 1960s, the 'Pearl of the Orient' made a name and won international acclaim through its sundry price-worthy manufactured goods bearing the etiquette 'Made in Hong Kong'. Following the move of the manufacturing sector to the Pearl River Delta in the last two decades, however, the principal economic activities gradually shifted from manufacturing to those which are service- and knowledge-based. Among the most vibrant sectors today are banking, investment and finance, imports/exports, tele-communications, transport and logistics, tourism, hotels, restaurants, insurance, retail trade, and real estate services. Bustling

economic activities since the early 1960s have fueled an impressive economic growth, making it possible for the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) government under the first Chief Executive, Mr. Tung Chee-hwa, to reposition the former British colony as ‘Asia’s World City’.

From an international perspective, probably no other sector commands as much international attention as investment and finance, where HSI (Hang Seng Index) is one highly visible index for traders of stocks and shares worldwide. How successful and important the Hong Kong Stock Exchange has been may be gauged by the increasingly popular abbreviation ‘Nylonkong’ – abbreviation for ‘New York, London and Hong Kong’ – in the discourses of international investment and global finance. More recently, in the face of a global financial tsunami that struck in October 2008, financial services was named by the Task Force on Economic Challenges headed by Mr. Donald Tsang, the Chief Executive, as the most affected economic pillars in need of government support (the other three pillars, now turned problem areas, are ‘trade and logistics’, ‘tourism and consumption-related services’, and ‘real estate and construction’, in that order). One of the ten appointees of the Task Force, then Standard Chartered Bank chairman Mr. Mervyn Davies, was quoted as saying that “this market correction gives Hong Kong as a regional financial center a huge opportunity to stand side by side with New York and London” (Lo, 2008, p.10).

‘Biliteracy and trilingualism’: Hong Kong SAR government’s language policy goal

The socioeconomic realities of a service- and knowledge-based economy outlined above have significant implications for Hong Kong’s language policy and the language needs of the local workforce. Cantonese is no doubt a viable regional lingua franca in the Pearl River Delta area. To do business with people elsewhere in Greater China, however, a working knowledge of Putonghua is indispensable; to communicate with clients from other parts of the world, English is the expected lingua franca. This is the background and rationale for the language policy known as ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’. Accordingly, one important goal of education is to enable secondary school-leavers and university graduates to read and write Chinese and English on one hand, and to speak Cantonese, English and Putonghua on the other.

Despite the fact that Putonghua is the national language and the lingua franca of Chinese speakers in Greater China, its use in Hong Kong SAR remains rather limited. Putonghua is used – after Cantonese, before English – in official ceremonies such as celebrations of the National Day and trilingual announcements of MTR (Mass Transit Railway) trains and some city buses. Radio Hong Kong operates a Putonghua station, but it is unclear how successful it has been in attracting a faithful audience. Putonghua is also increasingly heard in transactional communication between Cantonese-accented shopkeepers and visitors and tourists from mainland China. Beyond these contexts, it is unclear how widely Putonghua is used in the local community. There has been little research on the use of Putonghua in the workplace. In the education domain, great efforts have been made to promote Putonghua in school. For over a decade, Putonghua has been taught from primary school as a subject; at the end of Form 5 (Grade 11), Putonghua is one of the exam subjects in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations (HKCEE). It is also learned by more and more working adults in evening classes, largely for work-related purposes. All this helps explain why, according to the by-census in 2006, 40.2 per cent of Hongkongers claimed to speak Putonghua as their 'usual' language (0.9%) or 'another' language (39.2%) – a marked increase from 25.3 per cent ten years earlier (*Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census Main Report Volume I*, Table 3.12, p.44). This figure is on par with 44.7 per cent of Hongkongers who claimed to speak English as their 'usual' (2.8%) or 'another' language (41.9%), up from 43 per cent in 2001.

Compared with Putonghua, English has attracted far greater amounts of community resources. Miller and Li (2008) discuss a number of costly government initiatives to enhance the quality of teaching and learning of English in school from primary to tertiary levels, including two special schemes, Workplace English Campaign (WEC) and Continuing Education Fund (CEF), to encourage working adults to improve their English (among other languages such as Japanese and Korean; see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Hong Kong (SAR) Government initiatives to enhance English

Provisions to enhance English in Schools
• Reform of the curriculum guidelines for primary and secondary schools • Redevelopment of the public examinations • Introduction of the 'dual medium-of-instruction streaming policy' from Secondary 1-3 (Grades 7-9) • Employment of Native English-speaking Teachers (NETs)

• Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) • English Enhancement Scheme
Provisions to enhance English in tertiary institutions
• Additional funding to universities for language enhancement programs • Reimbursement of fees to undergraduate students who take the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test
Provisions to enhance English in the workplace
• Launching of the Workplace English Campaign (WEC) • Launching of Continuing Education Fund (CEF)

(Adapted from Miller and Li 2008: 80)

The Continuing Education Fund (CEF), for example, is managed by the Student Financial Assistance Agency under the Education Bureau (EDB). It subsidizes up to 80 per cent of tuition fees for courses offered by recognized providers of continuing education, on condition that the courses are successfully completed. Language courses, especially English and Putonghua, are among the most popular courses for which reimbursement claims were made. In early 2007, for instance, over 350,000 applications for reimbursement were processed, with the net disbursement value in excess of one billion Hong Kong dollars (ca. US$128.2 million) (Miller & Li, 2008: 89).

Teaching of English: from kindergarten to university

English is taught from kindergarten onwards. As a consequence of the compulsory nine-year education policy since 1978, school attendance up to Secondary 3 (Grade 9) is mandatory. With a minimum of eight 35- to 40-minute lessons per week from primary school, by age 15 the average teenager in Hong Kong will have received no less than 2,000 hours of classroom input in English. The outcomes of learning are far from satisfactory. Basic literacy skills in English are generally attained, but at the end of secondary education (Secondary 5) relatively few school-leavers are able to hold a conversation in English fluently with confidence. Even those who manage to secure a place in one of the eight publicly funded tertiary institutions (around 20 per cent of all Secondary One entrants) find it difficult to cope with English for academic purposes at the tertiary level. Research shows that many undergraduate students have difficulties understanding lectures delivered in English (Flowerdew *et al*.,1998, 2000), while their written outputs tend to be fraught with lexico-grammatical inaccuracies (see, e.g., Chan & Li, 1999; Li, 2000; Li &

Chan, 1999; 2001), partly as a result of cross-linguistic influence from their first language, Cantonese. This makes it necessary for universities to strengthen the teaching of English. There is for example a three- to six-credit University English requirement for most undergraduate programmes across all disciplines, including students of Chinese Language and Literature. Still, dissatisfaction with Hong Kong students' poor English performance, university graduates included, is one recurrent topic in mass media. Employers complain that newly recruited local graduates are unable to cope with the actual needs for English in the workplace. In response to this 'complaint tradition' (Bolton, 2003; cf. Milroy & Milroy, 1985), the government provides a monetary incentive for undergraduate students to take the IELTS test before graduation. The IELTS expenses are reimbursed provided the student accepts having his or her IELTS score listed on their transcript. It remains unclear to what extent this incentive helps improve university graduates' English proficiency.

In short, there is no question that English is widely perceived as an indispensable asset, both in terms of its instrumental value for accessing higher education (local and abroad) and facilitating upward and outward job mobility. As shown in Table 1, various government initiatives, curricular and extra-curricular, have been made in the last decade to help improve Hongkongers' standards of English, but their effectiveness leaves much to be desired. Why? The explanations are partly linguistic and partly social. In the rest of this chapter, we will discuss two main factors: tremendous typological and linguistic differences between English and Chinese on one hand, and a lack of a conducive environment for practising and using English on the other.

Marked typological differences between Chinese and English

Owing to marked typological or cross-linguistic differences between English and Chinese, there is very little useful L1 resource that the Chinese learners of English could fall back on in the process of learning English. English is an Indo-European language, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages (Gordon, 2005; http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=family). Phonologically, English and Cantonese differ tremendously in both segmental and suprasegmental features (Chan & Li, 2000; Hung, 2000; 2002). This helps explain why few Hong Kong Chinese learners of English are able to approximate native-like pronunciation. For instance, the phonemic distinction between pre-vocalic /n/ and /l/ in English is often ignored by Chinese learners,

largely because these two consonants behave like free variants in the initial position of the Cantonese syllable (e.g. the second-person pronoun 你 is variously pronounced as *nei*^{23} or *lei*^{23}, with no risk of confusion in context)[xx1]. The two languages also differ significantly in lexico-grammar. A large number of deviations from Standard English or EAP (English for Academic Purposes) norms may be accounted for by contrastive lexico-grammatical differences. A subset of these common 'errors' is listed in Table 2.

Table 2: List of common 'errors' in Hong Kong Chinese 'learner English' (source: http://personal.cityu.edu.hk/~encrproj/error_types.htm)

Type of deviation	**Example**
Missing relative pronouns	I met two parents *attended* the interview yesterday.
too + Adj + to + VP	He is *too* happy *to see you*. (meaning '…so happy to see you.')
Periphrastic topic-constructions	*According to Tung Chee Hwa, he said that*...
Resumptive pronouns	She is the teacher *that she changes my life.*
Non-parallel structures	Its main functions are *file maintenance* and *storing information*.
Independent clause as Subject	*Snoopy is leaving* makes us all very happy.
Dangling modifiers	*Entering the stadium, the size of the crowd* surprised John.
There has/have	*There* will not *have* any paper in the printer.
Pseudo-tough movement	*I am difficult* to learn English.
On the contrary	John is a very diligent student. *On the contrary*, Mary is very lazy.
Concern / Be concerned about	The only thing I must *concern* is the style of clothes.
Somewhere has something	*Hong Kong has* a lot of rubbish.
Very + V	I like playing basketball. So I *very enjoy* it.

All of these deviations from Standard English have been shown to be due at least in part to cross-linguistic influence (see, e.g., Chan, 2004; Li & Chan, 1999; 2001). There are other non-standard features which are more likely to be attributable to faulty or inadequate observation of the collocational patterns in the target language. Thus in each of the following trios involving a transitive verb (*discuss*, *emphasize*, and *blame*), it may be argued that the non-standard structure in (c) is the result of the learner mapping the collocational pattern in the corresponding nominalized structure supported by a 'delexical verb' in (b) (e.g. *have a long discussion about*, *place more emphasis on*, *put so much blame on*) to that in (a):

1. (a) They discussed the project for two hours.
   (b) They had a long discussion about the project.
   (c) ?? They discussed about the project for two hours.

2. (a) We should emphasize this more.
   (b) We should place more emphasis on this.
   (c) ?? We should emphasize on this more.

3. (a) Don't blame her so much!
   (b) Don't put so much blame on her.
   (c) ?? Don't blame on her so much.

As for the orthographic system, English is alphabetic while Chinese is logographic (Erbaugh, 2002). There is no such thing as the Chinese alphabet; rather, a logographic Chinese character tends to be morphemic, and is generally pronounceable as a syllable, hence the term 'morphosyllable' (Bauer & Benedict, 1997: 296). Being a non-alphabetic system, there is no direct relationship between the way a morphosyllable is pronounced and the way it is written. Part of the learning of a Chinese morphosyllable thus involves learning its written form (形, *jing*^{21}), pronunciation (音, *jam*^{55}) and meaning (義, *ji*^{22}).

The above discussion serves to illustrate the tremendous typological and linguistic differences between English and Chinese at the phonological, lexico-grammatical and orthographic levels. This is why very little of what Hong Kong Chinese learners of English know about their first language, Chinese (i.e. spoken Cantonese and standard written Chinese) has any reference value in

the arduous process of learning English. In the absence of facilitating factors such as extensive home support and strong motivation to learn English, therefore, successful acquisition of English by Cantonese-L1 learners in Hong Kong up to a native-like proficiency level is relatively rare.

Further, since the majority of teachers of English are themselves Hong Kong Chinese, many of their proficiency problems are passed on to their students, leading to considerable problems in the quality of teaching and learning. This issue is currently being addressed by the SAR government, in that teachers of English at all levels are required to be subject-trained and to pass the 'Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers' test (LPAT in English; more popularly known as the 'benchmark test', see Miller & Li, 2008). Nonetheless, given that English and Chinese have so little in common typologically speaking, and that English is learned and used in Hong Kong more like a foreign than a second language (see below), the strong societal expectation of students exiting school with a high-level of English proficiency, as enshrined in the well-intentioned language policy goal of 'biliteracy and trilingualism', is generally perceived by Chinese students as a great burden as they struggle their way up the education ladder. This is probably also true of mainland Chinese and Taiwanese students (see Gil & Adamson; Chen & Hsieh, this volume).

English in Hong Kong SAR: ESL or EFL?

Another major social factor which militates against effective acquisition of English in Hong Kong is a lack of a conducive language-learning environment, an issue which is closely related to the question, 'Is English in Hong Kong more appropriately characterized as a second or a foreign language?'. The status of English in Hong Kong (SAR) has been variously characterized as ESL or EFL (compare, e.g., Bolton, 2003; Kachru, 2005; Li, 1999/2008; Luke & Richards, 1982; McArthur, 2001). A typical second language has the following characteristics (cf. Jenkins, 2003):

- being an official or co-official language;
- used as the medium of instruction (MOI) in school;
- widely used in such key domains of government, law, education, and business; and
- used by local people spontaneously for intra-ethnic communication

These characteristics are largely true of English in former British colonies such as India, Nigeria and Singapore, where English continues to be highly visible in society after they declared independence. In contrast, a typical foreign language does not have these characteristics, viz.:

- not an official language
- not used as MOI, but taught as a subject in school
- not widely used in such key domains as government, law, education, and business; and
- seldom used by local people among themselves

One consequence is that being a foreign language, English is hardly visible in society. This is generally the case of English in EFL societies in Asia such as China, Japan, Korea, Macao and Taiwan (compare Chen & Hsieh; Gil & Adamson; and Young, this volume). The situation in Hong Kong SAR is not as straightforward, for it exhibits both ESL and EFL characteristics:

- English is a co-official language alongside Chinese[xx2]
- English is used as MOI in about 30 per cent of the secondary schools, but taught as a subject in primary schools and other secondary schools;
- English is widely used in such key domains as government, law, education, and business, more commonly in print than in speech; but
- English is seldom used by Chinese Hongkongers for intra-ethnic communication (except in Chinese-English mixed code)

Thus English in Hong Kong does not fit conveniently into the traditional ESL-EFL dichotomy. This is one important reason why different views are held. The World Englishes scholar, Kachru (1997: 6; 2005: 90), for instance, regards English in Hong Kong (along with English in China) not as a second language, but a “fast-expanding” foreign language (cf. Li, 1999/2008; 2000). His position differs manifestly from that of McArthur (2001) and Bolton (2003). For McArthur (1998: 53; 2001: 8-9), Hong Kong is one of ‘the ESL territories’ on a par with Bangladesh, Brunei, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Singapore. In his book-length account of Chinese Englishes, Bolton (2003) adopts an ‘archeology of English’ approach (see the preface of his book) to researching World Englishes by drawing principally on historical and textual evidence revealing forgotten traces of contact between English and the local

language(s). After reviewing all the arguments for and against the emergence of ‘Hong Kong English’ as a ‘new English’ (chapter 4), Bolton believes that significant forces towards the community’s recognition of Hong Kong English are ‘bubbling from below’ (p.218). This conclusion is based on a detailed and systematic analysis of Butler’s (1997:106) five main criteria for diagnosing the emergence of a localized variety of English:

1. A standard and recognizable pattern of pronunciation handed down from one generation to another.
2. Particular words and phrases which spring up usually to express key features of the physical and social environment and which are regarded as peculiar to the variety.
3. A history – a sense that this variety of English is the way it is because of the history of the language community;
4. A literature written without apology in that variety of English.
5. Reference works – dictionaries and style guides – which show that people in that language community look to themselves, not some outside authority, to decide what is right and wrong in terms of how they speak and write their English.

In Bolton’s (2003) view, with the exception of (5), HKE already meets all the other criteria. Relative to the question, whether English in Hong Kong is more appropriately characterized as a second or foreign language, Bolton’s analysis is worth examining in more detail.

First, Bolton (2003) is certainly right that Chinese learners and users of English have a distinctive and phonologically well-defined ‘Hong Kong accent’ (cf. Hung, 2000; 2002), but it remains unclear whether this accent constitutes evidence of an autonomous variety. For one thing, few Chinese Hongkongers are willing to use English entirely for intra-ethnic (i.e. Chinese-Chinese) communication. More importantly, linguistic features of Hong Kong accent which do not conform to those of a NS-based model are generally perceived by teachers and learners alike as ‘errors’ in need of correction, rather than instantiations of a localized variety (Andrews, 2002; Bunton & Tsui, 2002; Li, 2000; Luk, 1998; Tsui & Bunton, 2000).

Butler’s second criterion has to do with local, culture-specific words in English. As shown in Bolton’s (2003) careful documentation (Appendix 5, pp. 288-297),

many cultural aspects specific to Hong Kong (and elsewhere in Asia) have found expression in English, mainly through transliteration (lexical borrowing) or loan translation. But one crucial question is: Who are the users of the localized, acculturated English words? In Hong Kong, words like *moon cake*, *astronaut* (literally 'wife-empty-person', denoting 'an émigré who lives away from his spouse and family and who often flies between the host country and Hong Kong', cf. Bolton 2003: 288), and *snake-head* ('leader of a human smuggling ring', p.296) are commonly used in local English media discourse, both print and electronic, but are seldom heard in Chinese-Chinese interaction in Hong Kong (with the possible exception of returnees; Chen, 2008). A list of Hong Kong-specific English words says nothing about who uses them. To the extent that the acculturated English words with a local flavour are not used among Hong Kong Chinese themselves, it seems more appropriate to see them as an extension of the 'World Standard English' lexicon, broadly as a result of globalization and dictionary compilations by international publishers (McArthur, 2001: 15), in the same way that words like *curry*, *pizza* and *sushi* can no longer be seen as the exclusive property of peoples from whose cultures they originated.

Butler's (1997) third criterion concerns the presence of English in the local community over an extended historical period. In this regard, Bolton (2003) provides an impressive documentation and analysis of the history of contact between English and Chinese dating back to imperial China (since the late seventeenth century) and colonial Hong Kong (since 1842), especially the linguistic and sociolinguistic discussion of Chinese pidgin English (CPE). This is consonant with his appeal for examining archives and socio-historically significant documents with a view to establishing a conceptual link between earlier phases of the local(ized) variety of English and the present. All this is enlightening. Less convincing is the implied claim, through the continued use of a subset of vocabulary items specific to the region, that 'China English' and 'Hong Kong English' have had an existence which is co-extensive with that of the British colonizers' presence in China. Whether it is a pidginized variety (CPE) among the group of Chinese engaged in trading activities with English speakers in 'treaty-port China', or a learner variety acquired by Chinese pupils through proper schooling, there is no evidence of these Chinese users and learners of English communicating with one another in English (except for a minority of reform-minded Chinese literati such as Lin Yutang, who deliberately published magazine articles in English, see chapter 5, Bolton, 2003).

Butler's fourth criterion concerns creative works in English written by local writers. Bolton (2003) lists a number of literary works written in English by Hong Kong writers, notably Xu Xi. However, neither the number of such Anglophile creative writers of Asian descent nor the amount of local literary work produced to date is comparable to that in other ESL societies like the Philippines. Rather, literature in English produced by local writers appears to be limited to a relatively small group compared with the size of the population (over seven million). As the veteran journalist C.K. Lau (1997: 111-112) remarks[xx3]:

> An obvious indicator of English's failure to become entrenched in Hong Kong is that there is absolutely no English-language Hong Kong literature. The small number of available English titles focusing on Hong Kong life are almost all written by expatriates, and usually for an expatriate readership. Unlike Singapore, Hong Kong has not produced any popular local writers in the English language. For leisure reading, most Hong Kong Chinese prefer to pick up a Chinese-language publication because reading in English is a chore for them. (Lau 1997: 111-112)

The placement of Hong Kong in the outer circle as opposed to the expanding circle has theoretical implications in Kachru's three-circle model, namely 'norm-developing' (outer circle) vs. 'norm-dependent' (expanding circle). The above discussion shows that, while a number of typical ESL characteristics are true of the former British colony, there is nevertheless one feature which makes English here more like a foreign than a second language, namely, the fact that few local Chinese use English entirely and spontaneously for intra-ethnic communication – unlike Chinese Singaporeans in this regard (compare Tupas, this volume).

Chinese Hongkongers are generally reluctant to use or switch to English at the inter-sentential level in their informal interactions with each other (Li, 2008; Li & Tse, 2002). This may be explained by the intricate relationship between language choice and local identity. There is a widely shared perception that Cantonese is the unmarked language as it is the mother tongue of the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong Chinese. As Bolton explains, one important purpose of his (2003) book is to plead for "acceptance of a new space, or spaces, for the discourses associated with English in Hong Kong"

(p.xv). His advocacy for more intellectual space for discussing HKE is well taken, but given the functions assigned to English at present, it seems certain that English remains psycholinguistically detached (except in Cantonese-English mixed code, Li, 2008; Li & Tse, 2002) in the lifeworld of the majority of Chinese Hongkongers. Lau (1997: 109) regards this as the "social cause of Hong Kong people's poor English":

> the root cause of their poor English skills is social (…) For the majority of the Chinese population, a genuine English-speaking environment has never existed to encourage them to learn and use the language (…) (Lau 1997: 109)

This, I believe, is one of the major hurdles resisting sociolinguists' efforts to characterize the status of English in Hong Kong as a bona fide second language or a new, localized variety.

The MOI debate: stigmas and dilemmas

Huge community resources have been allocated to promote Hongkongers' 'biliteracy and trilingualism'. Lofty as it may seem, 'biliteracy and trilingualism' remains a worthwhile language policy goal. Few would dispute that the sustained prosperity of Hong Kong SAR hinges upon, among other things, a trilingual citizenry with a fairly high level of proficiency in English and/or Putonghua (in addition to the community language Cantonese), as well as a reasonably high level of literacy skills in Chinese and English, both being indispensable for assuring life-long learning in a service- and knowledge-based economy. What remains uncertain in the language-in-education debate is the most promising road map which has the greatest potential to help us get to where we want to be most efficiently and effectively.

One of the major controversies surrounding the Hong Kong SAR government's language-in-education policy concerns the choice of Cantonese or English as the medium of instruction (MOI) at the onset of secondary education (Grade 7). In principle, using English as the MOI gives students more exposure to this de facto global language, and so they are more likely to master English up to a higher level. Hong Kong parents are aware of such a putative advantage for their children which, however, is contingent upon whether they are motivated

to learn through the medium of English and the availability of home support in different forms of learning aid such as dictionaries, books in English, private tutoring and language games (cf. ‘English fever’ and ‘national obsession’ with English in Taiwan, see Chen & Hsieh, this volume). The mother-tongue education policy was implemented in September, 1998, out of recognition that other things being equal, learning through one’s first language (Cantonese in the context of Hong Kong for the majority) facilitates understanding and learning, which is especially important for those who demonstrably do not have the aptitude and motivation to learn through an unfamiliar language. After lengthy debates amplified through the mass media, the Hong Kong SAR government under Mr. Tung Chee Hwa decided to allow some 30 percent of all secondary schools (114 out of 411) to retain EMI status. Instead of being praised for getting the best of both possible worlds, however, this ‘streaming policy’ has been criticized for undermining the credibility of the pedagogically well-intentioned mother-tongue education policy, which, according to Tsui *et al*. (1999: 205-206), is the vindication of the politico-educational agenda over the social and economic agendas after the handover. Worse still, since EMI is seen as more desirable and EMI students are widely perceived as more capable academically, that ‘streaming policy’ in effect engendered social divisiveness in that CMI students get socially stigmatized as ‘second best’.

More recently, there is some evidence that more is at stake than social stigma. According to a longitudinal study conducted by Tsang Wing-kwong, students graduating from CMI schools are worse off compared with their EMI peers in terms of (a) the success rate of being admitted into Form Six and university, and (b) their Hong Kong A-level (university entrance) exam results (cited in Clem, 2008). Tsang tracked the academic performance of 37,277 students from Form One in 1998 and 1999 to the completion of their A-level (university entrance) exams in 2005 and 2006. Their A-level scores were compared, factoring into the analysis a number of variables such as gender, prior academic performance, socioeconomic background, as well as the average academic performance and socio-economic background of other students in the same school. The results showed that CMI students appeared to have an early advantage over their EMI peers from Form One (Grade 7) to Form Three (Grade 9), but the performance gap was gradually narrowed toward Form Five (Grade 11). In terms of meeting the minimal requirements for admission into local universities as measured by the student’s A-level exam scores, CMI students were worse by a wide margin. Interestingly, those CMI students who

switched to English-medium instruction earlier (e.g. Form Four) tended to fare better than those who did so later (e.g. Form Six), with the group who received CMI instruction throughout (i.e. from Form One to Form Seven) having the lowest success rate. Tsang is cited as saying that “changing [to EMI] at Form Six is basically a disaster…The indicators are all negative” (Clem, 2008). Whatever trade-off effect there was as a result of mother-tongue education, therefore, it did not quite offset the lack of proficiency gain in the English language. The findings led Tsang to conclude that, relative to gaining access to university education as one of the primary goals of secondary education, mother-tongue education did not seem to be serving CMI students’ best interests. Like other scholars (e.g. Poon, 1999), Tsang is in favour of allowing individual schools the freedom to decide upon the MOI of particular school subjects (Clem, 2008).

Tsang’s findings prompted the Education Bureau (EDB) to consult educational stakeholders, notably secondary school principals and teachers, for alternative policy options with a view to “fine-tuning” the mother-tongue education policy, which is due to be implemented from September, 2010. To counteract the socially divisive and stigmatizing effect it engenders, some ‘fine-tuning’ measures have been proposed by EDB with a view to blurring the distinction between English- and Chinese-medium schools.

‘Biliteracy and trilingualism’ policy: problems and prospects

Two main factors – one linguistic and the other sociolinguistic – help explain why a high level of English proficiency as part of the Hong Kong language policy of ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’ is likely to remain a remote if not unattainable goal. We have seen that enhancing Hongkongers’ English through education is hugely expensive; relative to the multi-million dollars invested (directly) in schools, tertiary institutions and (indirectly) in providers of continuing education annually, the returns seem to be grossly disproportionate and far from satisfactory. Typologically, owing to tremendous differences between Chinese and English at practically all linguistic levels from phonology and lexico-grammar to orthography, Cantonese-L1 learners’ linguistic knowledge of their mother tongue (i.e. their vernacular Cantonese and standard written Chinese) is of little use in the arduous English-learning process. At the same time, it also helps explain why cross-linguistic influence

tends to be characterized by negative rather than positive transfer.

In terms of the ways English is used in Hong Kong society, one of the perennial sociolinguistic realities is that, with the exception of a minority of returnees from English-speaking countries (Chen, 2008), bilingual Chinese Hongkongers – regardless of their proficiency level in English – tend to be reluctant to use English entirely for informal interaction with one another. For this reason, the status of English in Hong Kong is more like a foreign than a second language. This is bad news for local teachers and ELT practitioners for, relative to the goal of acquiring English, opportunities for the natural use of, and exposure to English outside school premises are hard to come by. This is thus another major stumbling block for the government's costly initiatives to promote the use of English in society through education.

Leaders of local universities are aware of this problem. To cope with this problem, two strategies are currently used by all local tertiary institutions to different extents depending on the availability of resources. One strategy is to internationalize the student population on campus by enlarging the percentage of non-local, English-speaking and Putonghua-speaking students. In the presence of non-Cantonese speakers, a switch to English or Putonghua is natural in order that they would not be excluded from the conversation. Another useful strategy is language immersion, that is, to encourage students to spend one or more semesters in an English-speaking country.

As for the controversial medium-of-instruction debate, recent developments suggest that the SAR government has finally recognized the detrimental effects of stigmatization brought about by the socially divisive policy of assigning labels to schools as either English-medium or Chinese-medium. By creating and perpetuating a second-class syndrome among those who 'failed' to make it to EMI schools, such a 'streaming policy' has triggered a lot of ill-feelings among different groups of stakeholders: CMI students, their parents, teachers and principals of CMI schools (Li, 2009). Today, there seems to be growing consensus in the community that a more liberal policy which allows individual schools to decide which subjects are more appropriately taught in English or Chinese, or some combination of these, is pedagogically more sound and productive. The role of the education authorities may accordingly be re-defined as one of monitoring individual schools' abilities to teach in English and evaluating the students' learning outcomes (Cheung, 2008).

Notes

[1] Cantonese expressions are transliterated using *Jyut*^{22} *Ping*^{33} (粵拼), the LSHK (Linguistic Society of Hong Kong) romanization scheme. The two digits in superscripts give some indication of the tone level and contour of the Cantonese syllable.

[2] Article 9 of the Basic Law states that "In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region." (*The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China*, available at http://www.lawinfochina.com/law/display.asp?id=1210)

[3] In the intervening decade after Lau (1997) made these remarks, the literary scene in English produced by local writers has witnessed considerable growth, as shown in such new titles as *Woman to Woman and Other Poems* (Agnes Lam, 1997, third printing 2005), *Water Wood Pure Splendour* (Agnes Lam, 2001), and *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English 1945 to the Present* (Xu & Ingham, 2003; see http://www.xuxiwriter.com/ for many more titles). It remains unclear, however, how many bilingual Hong Kong Chinese readers of English have developed an active interest in the emerging home-grown literature in English.

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