Hong Kong's Bilingual Past and Present

Pan Shiwen
Hong Kong Institute of Education

Abstract

This study focuses on a recent change of language policy in education which is marked by a shift from English Medium Instruction (EMI) to Chinese Medium Instruction (CMI) in Hong Kong's secondary schools after its sovereignty return to PRC in 1997. It explores the current medium of instruction (MOI) policy which, considered by many a politically motivated departure from the past, is a continuation of the past bilingual policies to balance contending socio-political, educational interests. This policy change on the one hand has addressed the long standing problem of Hong Kong students' low academic performance in EMI schools, and on the other has caused problems such as lower bilingual attainment at Hong Kong secondary schools and fewer secondary school graduates who are able to meet the English standard for Hong Kong universities. This change derives an impact on a gradual change of English medium of instruction at Hong Kong's universities.

Introduction

Since the sovereignty handover of Hong Kong to PRC, Hong Kong has undergone a series of changes. To many, the change of medium of instruction appears to be one of the most controversial. In 1997, the Department of Education in Hong Kong laid down strict regulations towards the practice of medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools: except 114 secondary schools which were approved to continue EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) education, the rest secondary schools must use CMI (Chinese as a Medium of Instruction) in teaching most subjects except English. Medium of Instruction has been a thermometer to measure trends and directions of language policy in Hong Kong. This sudden shift of language of instruction in Hong Kong schools readily impressed people as a politically motivated departure from its past. The strongest opposition came from parents who wanted their kids to study in EMI schools instead of CMI schools- in their minds, EMI means quality education and brighter future for their children. Many school principals, teachers and parents took it to the street, petitioning for its renunciation. Indeed, this change of medium of instruction is hardly non-political-

as any policy is to lesser or greater extent political. We will go behind the political scene and briefly explore the social, historical, and educational motivations that have contributed to the policy change.

Early Colonial Language Policy

China ceded Hong Kong to Britain in 1842 as a settlement of the Nanking Treaty after China's defeat in the Sino-British War (known also as the Opium War) in 1841. Prior to the colonial rule, Hong Kong had basically remained a monolingual society where Chinese had been the only medium of instruction at schools for centuries. To establish English dominance, the new colonial government was faced with an immediate need to teach English to the Chinese speaking population. The aim of the early language policy was stated unequivocally by Pope Hennessy, Hong Kong's Governor in 1860s:

> "I should like to see no Government school whatever in this Colony in which the children are not taught English, and no government help given to any school in which the aim of the teachers should not be that the children on leaving that school should be able to speak English. We must, as practical men, have here an English-speaking Chinese Community." (Lord 1984).

The establishment of the new colony also gave an urgent task to train English speaking Chinese to fill the low and middle government positions, such as interpreters, government officials, teaching assistants, and assistants in courts whose role was primarily to communicate between the government's high officials and the local Cantonese-speaking population. At the beginning of the colony, there were very few people, normally missionaries, who could work as interpreters to liaise between Chinese and Westerners, though their knowledge of the two languages, in contemporary standards, was inferior and their accuracy in translation was usually not accountable. The new government felt it necessary to train interpreters to work in sectors of law, education, and commerce (Workman, 1990).

To achieve this goal, the first Government Central School was opened in 1862 to recruit both expatriates and local students. But the implementation of this monolingual policy to emphasize English dominance did not go on smoothly for conceivable reasons.

- The overwhelming majority of the population was Cantonese speakers who could not understand English instruction and they made slow progress in either English learning or academic subjects.

- Limited education funds made training and hiring English teachers difficult and opening new schools slow.
- Culturally and emotionally, resistance from the population to western education in the beginning of colony was tenacious.
- People were used to traditional Chinese teaching and preferred Chinese schools.

To make EMI meaningful to students, the Hong Kong Education Commission decided to incorporate English instruction with Chinese to bridge the language gaps faced by the non-English speaking students. A prototype of mixed code (or code switching in a more familiar sociolinguistic term) instruction was introduced to Hong Kong government schools- a practice that has been considered unacceptable by the Department of Education nowadays. It became a common practice that a native English teacher's instruction was immediately translated into Chinese by a Cantonese speaking assistant. Teaching thus became awkward in a way that words of the teacher and chapters of textbooks were translated into Chinese orally. As teaching English was of immediate importance to the young colony, the government paid a dear price to fumble through trial and errors. The Annual Report on Education 1881 had the following record of Education Inspector Stuart (Workman 1990):

> "It has been the rule that every sentence read should be explained in Chinese; that has been the invariable practice in the Central School. The assistant masters (usually a local bilingual) given to me at the first simply followed me and explained the word to the lads."

No matter how awkward was the way in which the lesson was delivered, it could be the most feasible a century ago for teaching a foreign language so remote to Chinese learners. As compared with those Chinese traditional schools, Hong Kong government schools were more competitive; their curriculum provided useful and practical new lessons like art, math, and sciences. Students graduating from these schools could easily find better-paid jobs. Chinese-English bilinguals have been trained in an increasing number in these schools which were run successfully from the very beginning (Lord 1984).

Mother-tongue Education in Hong Kong

By 1960s, Hong Kong Government took a more flexible stance to the issue of medium of instruction, and Hong Kong schools went through a period labeled as *laissez-faire* during which they had the liberty to choose their own medium of instruction. This made the controversial mother-tongue education a household name.

The Hong Kong SAR Government was not by far the first to propose mother-tongue education. As early as 1930s, British education inspector Burney made a candid report on the performance he observed in Hong Kong Government schools. Burney was not satisfied with the English spoken by the students and did not think the pupils' standard of Chinese comparable with students from schools in China. He criticised the Government's language policy as not beneficial to the students at schools, and proposed that teaching and learning in mother tongue could better achieve the education goals. Burney believed "more time would have to be devoted to Chinese, and Chinese should probably be used as the medium of instruction". Burney's conclusion was that language education policy in Hong Kong should ensure that no school learner should lack a command of the mother tongue sufficient for all needs of thought and expression, and that their standard of English should be limited to the satisfaction of vocational needs (Lord 1984).

Between 1970s and 1980s, the Education Department conducted a series of surveys on the existing education policies. Reports of the Education Department since 1980s arrived at the conclusion that only a minority of students (20-30%) had benefited from English medium instruction. Students made very slow progress in the first two years or more either in language attainment and academic performance because of insufficient English skills. " The majority of the students would benefit if Chinese were used as the medium of instruction at the junior secondary level." The Education Department made it clear that it would encourage schools to use Chinese as the medium of instruction (Hong Kong Government, 1986. pp.29-30; Liu, 1988).

However, the call for mother–tongue education received different responses from the primary and secondary sectors. Hong Kong primary EMI schools experienced a decline in 1980s to cater about less than 10 percent of pupils, while 90 percent of the schools adopted Chinese medium instruction- or the mother tongue education. This change was caused chiefly by recognition of the need for cognitive development of the children, which would otherwise be hampered when the instruction language was not the language that they first acquire to help them understand the world before schooling.

On the other hand, EMI became popular in secondary schools, of which 90 percent claimed to be EMI schools.

Medium of Instruction in Hong Kong Government Schools

		1960-1997	After1997
Primary:	EMI CMI	5-10% 90-95%	< 10% >90%
Secondary:	EMI CMI	60-90% 10-40%	25% 75%

(Hong Kong Government, 1991)

CMI and EMI schools are decided by the following criteria.

	EMI	CMI
Classroom instruction	English for all subjects except Chinese and Chinese history	Chinese for all subjects except English as a subject
Text book	Textbooks are in English except Chinese	Textbooks are in Chinese except English

Strong opposition to mother-tongue education comes from parents, whose pressure for English Medium Instruction schools has been a persistent influential factor in the language policy decision of the Department of Education. They prefer EMI schools and are reluctant to send their children to CMI schools. This phenomenon could be accounted for for a number of reasons:

- EMI schools are generally reputed for quality education
- English is a prestigious and useful, and symbolizes good education and high social status
- Graduates from EMI schools are better prepared for university study and have better chance to be accepted by universities
- Parents believe that English is a vehicle to success and well being of their children – the affluent fluent English speaking businessmen and well-paid English speaking government civil servants have been constantly conveying the message that more English is advantageous to their children.

EMI secondary schools have been made places for more capable students largely due to a selection process called Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment (MIGA) [i]given at the end of the primary school years. Through MIGA, children were divided into three groups based on their test results of English, Chinese and Math. Group 1 was for those who were in the top 40% in English and Chinese; Group 2 was for those who were below 40% in the subject tests; and Group 3 for the top 40% of one group and outside the top 50% of the other. Normally, Group 1 and Group 2 students would be accepted by EMI schools and CMI schools respectively, while Group C could possibly go to either EMI schools or CMI schools depending on their language test results. This selection process has been criticized as elitist and socially divisive and as relegating Chinese-medium education to second-class status (Johnson 1991). In Hong Kong, a child's ending up in a CMI school is considered inferior and unintelligent, and would disgrace the family.

Naturally, the EMI secondary schools are highly demanded by the majority of students who desire to receive tertiary education in one of the eight universities[ii], whose overall enrollment capacity is about one fifth of that of New York City, a city with a similar population size. Currently, the majority of the universities use English as the medium of instruction[iii] - this has greatly affected parents' selection of secondary schools. Students had to compete for EMI schools where they could be better prepared in English for future university studies. A student ending up in a CMI school had practically little chance of being accepted by most electives offered by the universities except Chinese and Chinese related subjects.

Bilingualism in Hong Kong

Bilingual type	1843	1983	1993
Chinese/English	<1%	44%	70%
Cantonese/Putonghua		39%	63%

(Hong Kong Government, 1995; Workman 1990):

Language policy change and its effect on education

The new language education policy enacted in 1997 also included an introduction of teaching Putonghua (Mandarin), the official language norm used in the People's Republic of China. Like English, Putonghua is being taught as a subject in all Hong Kong secondary and primary schools while Cantonese is used as the medium of instruction for teaching content subjects in CMI primary and secondary schools. The ultimate language goal of the new policy is to achieve trilingualism to facilitate communication and exchange with the Mainland and the outside world.

It is impossible to give strong predictions about the future course of medium of instruction and language education in Hong Kong. However, the present policy change has already caused consequences to the past elitist education system, which has been criticized for it role to cater to the needs and interests of a small percentage of students.

With the majority of EMI secondary school becoming CMI schools, the base for the large-scale late immersion programs has been shrinking to only confine to one hundred odd approved EMI schools. Hong Kong's language education through the medium of instruction has changed its course and scale. With Putonghua added to the primary and secondary curriculum, the immersion should be further reinterpreted and defined in line with multilingualism.

However, the present policy change is by no means problem-free when two instruction media are in operation with EMI favorably linked to higher education. The new policy does not imply any action so far taken to press for a change of the

instruction medium policy in universities. When universities continue to keep the EMI policy, the EMI secondary schools are apparently favored while the majority CMI schools, including those newly converted CMI schools, would be in a disadvantageous position to compete with the EMI schools for university education of their graduates. In fact, this change has caused nightmares to many students whose chance of entering a university has become much slimmer because of the new CMI status of the schools. On the other hand, the remaining EMI schools have been made more elitist ivory pagodas for the lucky minority whose chance of being enrolled by a university is increasing due to fewer prospective competitors. Obviously, it is both unfair and discriminatory that children's educational and career opportunities are arbitrarily decided at around twelve chiefly based on their performance of the second language. It seems unlikely that parents fight for places for their children in EMI schools will cease unless major actions have been taken to restructure the existing education system.

People have begun to question the medium of instruction policy in tertiary institutes and wondered whether a more thorough revolution is needed to change the medium of instruction in Hong Kong universities. Since the founding of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the first university adopting Chinese medium of instruction in Hong Kong, people came to accept that, besides English, Chinese is an alternative medium of instruction in universities in Hong Kong. However, it remains a very thorny issue for decision-makers to tackle. It is not a question whether Chinese is linguistically competent for university education, but rather whether Hong Kong is socially and psychologically ready for such a change. For a considerable portion of the Hong Kong residents who once enjoyed successes and prosperity at the colonial times and witnessed recent economic setbacks in Hong Kong and its neighboring countries, English is definitely better, and any grandiose feats accomplished by 'non-English' seem impossible- this constitutes a post-colonial syndrome haunting Hong Kong. We can therefore hardly predict whether or when the universities in Hong Kong will change their medium of instruction, and any drastic change of language policy in Hong Kong universities is unrealistic, given the high status of English and its availability in the post colonial Hong Kong. However, the discrepancy and discriminatory nature of the present language policy is damaging to the welfare of the children and it is bound to undergo further revisions to best meet the interest of the society.

Since the new medium of instruction policy was implemented, The Department of Education has announced encouraging discoveries in respects of academic performance and language attainment in schools where mother tongue education has been implemented. Some of those reluctant CMI schools, after adopting Chinese medium instruction, have also recorded improvement of student's academic performance and examination results. Although a complete picture of how the new policy has affected the education and how the remaining problems have been redressed is not yet clear, a more conclusive picture has yet to be

provided through comprehensive studies at schools- so far a number of government funded studies and surveys have been underway.

Future Prospects

Hong Kong used to impress tourists by the large percentage of the bilingual population who can communicate with outsiders in English – something unimaginable in other international cities like New York, Paris, Moscow and Tokyo. The change of medium of instruction policy has caused relocation of education resources in Hong Kong, and will consequently change the bilingual structure of the society. The overall English-Chinese bilingual population is thus expected to be shrinking due to the resource relocation under the new language policy.

Now the new medium of instruction policy has changed most EMI secondary schools to CMI ones, removing the very ground for a massive immersion which was once favorably compared with the Canadian and US immersion bilingual programs. With participants of about a quarter of the secondary student population, teaching through English as the medium of instruction in the remaining EMI schools could still be recognized as late immersion on small scales, though it differs from other immersion programs in aspects like objective, teachers, students, and teaching.

After all, English is important to Hong Kong's future and will continue to be taught as a subject. It is quite unlikely that English will be reestablished as the medium of instruction in most secondary schools in the future.

Conclusion

The colonial education for more than a century has changed the monolingual society of Hong Kong to one of diglossia, which has facilitated its rapid development in the past decades. It has also left many social and educational problems which invited the change of language policy change after Hong Kong's sovereignty return to China in 1997. Although it has long been proposed that Chinese should be used as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools, the social and psychological resistance to the use of mother-tongue education has been persistently strong partially due to the English instruction policy in Hong Kong universities. Despite all its problems, the educational process to change Hong Kong from an English dominated city to a multilingual one has begun, and is expected to continue to finally benefit this international city.

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[i] The Hong Kong Education Department is now replacing Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment (MIGA) by a school zoning system, according to which most students are allocated to the schools of their neighborhood. This move has caused immediate migration of student families to the EMI secondary school zones.

[ii] The eight universities are Hong Kong University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, The City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Lingnan University, The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Hong Kong Institute of Education

[iii] English has always been the medium of instruction for all Hong Kong universities except the Chinese University of Hong Kong, whose founding in 1963 has put an end to the 'English Only' situation in Hong Kong universities.

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