

## **English Medium Teaching at Crisis: Towards Bilingual Education in Hong Kong**

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### **Abstract**

A language originally brought in by the British colonial rule in 1841, English used to be the major medium of instruction in Hong Kong educational system. An important debate in today's Hong Kong's education is on the issue of the continuity of English-medium education. A significant change since 1998 is that the local vernacular Cantonese has replaced English as the medium of instruction in most secondary schools. Integrating theoretical framework into the case of Hong Kong, this paper examines the wisdom and the long-term effects of this policy change. Acknowledging that mother tongue education may facilitate acquisition of knowledge, it appears that the Hong Kong Government's selection was not well planned and has eroded the principle of bilingual education, which runs counter to its proposed objective of "two written codes and three spoken codes". The paper points out that mixed code is unavoidable and universal in any bilingual society and therefore, it is irrational to regard it as the culprit of the decline of students' language competence. In face of the growing role of English in the world, the restricted use of English in education may cause an undesirable impact. The issue of language in education cannot be separated from the objective of language education. In short, the Hong Kong Government's well-intentioned goal of effective language education for the challenges of the new millennium might, ironically, be a case of linguistic myopia.

### **Aim**

Bilingual education in Hong Kong is at a crisis. On one hand, the Hong Kong Government has repeatedly call for its people to strive to make Hong Kong a society of "three spoken codes and two written language 1 so that Hong Kong may maintain its competitive edge in the international community. On the other hand, a significant change has occurred in Hong Kong education in terms of the role of English since 1997, when the Hong Kong Government issued a policy entitled *Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools* (Hong Kong Education Department, 1997). According to the new policy, the medium of instruction in secondary schools would be changed from English to Chinese starting from the autumn semester of 1998, except in schools where the staff demonstrates adequate English competence to teach in English. As a result of this policy, only 114 schools out of more than four hundred were granted permission to use English as the medium of instruction.

The above-mentioned governmental policy caused a great deal of controversy because of its exclusionary nature. Indeed, there have been a plethora of complaints from teachers, students and parents on the removed opportunity of using English as a medium of instruction in their schools. 2

One of the compelling reasons to keep English as a medium of instruction is rooted in the world of commerce. Simply stated, Hong Kong has a long pedigree as a commercial giant in an increasingly competitive global economy that is dominated by English. In order to compete effectively, the Hong Kong commercial society requires its employees to be proficient in English. Most commercial employers consider English proficiency as a condition of employment and a necessary ingredient for promotion. 3 Removing the perceived possibility of future employment incurs the current furore and discontent with the Government's new policy of suppressing English-medium education. The necessity of retaining English may also be connected to institutional decisions, as most universities in Hong Kong steadfastly maintain English as the medium of instruction. It is believed that the use of English as the teaching medium in pre-university education facilitates students' smooth adaptation to English-medium education in universities. The debate has been existing till this day. 4

Given the immediate and long-term ramifications of this educational policy change, this paper will provide background information on the socio-linguistic situations of Hong Kong, analyze issues which involve the Government's new policy on the medium of instruction, make theoretical arguments in support of bilingual education in Hong Kong, and explore the possible effects the policy may produce on the language education of Hong Kong. As Hong Kong is not the only society that faces the problems of bilingual education, the paper may have some implications for other societies that have to deal with similar issues.

## **Background**

### **The socio-linguistic scenario of Hong Kong**

Not only has Hong Kong been known as the Pearl of the East for its economic prosperity, but it has also been referred to as a harbour for bilingualism. Originally, its mainstream language was Cantonese, which is defined as a regional dialect of Chinese. As a consequence of British colonial governance for about one century and a half, English has been the official language of Hong Kong. In 1974, Chinese was granted equal status as English. Since then, Hongkong has been identified as a bilingual society.

However, this is merely an exterior armour of the city. The complexity of the language issue cannot be solved in an easy way. In reality, English is far from a language for the majority of the population in Hong Kong. It is labeled as a *second language* for Hong Kong people; but "unlike some ESL societies, English in Hong Kong is primarily learnt at school, through the education system (although Hong Kong people may later gain exposure to English at work)" (Bolton & Luke, 1999, p. 127). The 1991 census results shows that as small as 2.2% of the population speaks English as their usual language and 29.4% of the residents use English as another language (Hong Kong Government, 1991, p. 43). At home, "the reported use of English was generally very low" (Bolton & Luke, 1999, p. 105).

With regard to the Chinese language, there has never been a clear definition. Cantonese serves the local residents for all purposes. Among the whole population of Hong Kong, 91.9% speak Cantonese (Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 1998, p. 75). Therefore, it is qualified as a mainstream language, just as So (1992) has stated, “Hong Kong is essentially a monolingual Cantonese-speaking society where English is used in only a restricted number of domains” (p. 79). A rival to Cantonese is Putonghua, the officially designated national language of mainland China. Since the 1980s, Putonghua has gradually emerged in education and has become a “hot issue” and popular course in the Hong Kong society. Despite the fact that it is premature to predict any possibility of its replacement of Cantonese, its bright future cannot be underestimated.

Although Chinese is widely used and English is generally regarded as a second language in Hong Kong, English has been playing a vital role in the superstructures of Hong Kong all this time, namely, in government affairs, business administration and operation, legislature, jurisdiction as well as tertiary education. Li (1999, p.68 & p. 69) points out, “English continues to be an official language alongside Chinese. In view of the social prestige and symbolic predominance of English in post 1997 Hong Kong, the term ‘auxiliary language’ (Luke & Richards, 1982) seems no longer an appropriate characterization of its status. Instead, it will be argued that ‘value-added’ is a more suitable epithet”. He further contends, “Of the three languages — Cantonese, English and Putonghua — Cantonese and English remain the two most important languages in Hong Kong. English is an official language (alongside Chinese) which continues to be used in the formal domains of government, business and law, typically in the presence of native speakers of English” (p. 70). Precisely for the continuing status of English as a High language and as a result of the increasing importance of English in the world, the teaching of English in schools has remained the focus of attention and has gained top priority and preference throughout the educational system in Hong Kong.

### **From English to Chinese: A policy change in medium of instruction**

Since Britain’s occupation of the territory in 1841, English has been used as a medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools. This traditional practice is embedded in the school system and has had a profound influence on the bilingualism of Hong Kong. A lot of Chinese-English bilinguals have been trained in this educational system, and currently hold important positions in the civil service, as well as in the industrial, commercial, educational and other sectors of society.

Since the expansion of higher education in Hong Kong from the late 1980s, students’ general language competence in both English and Chinese has been perceived to be on the decline. Several large-scale studies (Hong Kong Government, 1982; Hong Kong Education Commission, 1984, 1986, 1990; Hong Kong Education Department, 1989) suggested that students were unable to receive education “purely” in English and the mixed code of English and Chinese was used to compensate students’ low English proficiency. The mixed code is regarded as the major obstacle to students’ progress in enhancing their language proficiency.

Grounded on these beliefs, a policy change occurred eventually in 1998 when the Hong Kong Special Administrative Government clearly stipulated that mother tongue

education should be implemented in all schools except in schools where teachers prove to be sufficiently proficient in English. Following the policy, about 140 schools applied for English-medium teaching, with 114 being approved. Since then, the issue of English-medium education has been continually and hotly debated.

## **Key Theoretical Arguments In Support of Bilingual Education**

### **Bilingual education and medium of instruction**

One reason for the implementation of mother-tongue education is to facilitate students' learning of knowledge. Some reports (Hong Kong Education Department, 1989; Hong Kong Education Commission, 1990, 1995) on language policy in education have proposed the use of the students' mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Some research findings suggest that mother tongue education can best serve students' needs for acquiring commonsense knowledge, educational knowledge and technical knowledge (Halliday, 1999) and mother tongue education does not hinder the growth of students' English (Chan, 1986, 1991; Siu & Mak, 1989; So, 1989; Lo, 1991). Such a claim is in congruence with UNESCO's findings (1953), which define the function of mother tongue education and promote the use of mother tongue in education. It was stated that everything being equal, the use of mother tongue in education could help achieve maximum learning effectiveness. The reason is simple to understand and easy to accept, that is, that one's familiar language is the best one with which to acquire knowledge.

As a further illustration, Krashen (1999) highlights the importance of using students' first language in bilingual education. He says, "When schools provide children with quality education in their primary language, they give them two things: knowledge and literacy. The *knowledge* that children get through their first language helps make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. *Literacy* developed in the primary language transfers to the second language. The reason literacy transfers is simple: Because we learn to read by reading, by making sense of what is on the page (Smith, 1994), it is easier to learn to read in a language we understand. Once we can read in one language, we can read in general" (p. vii-viii).

Using an L2 as the medium of instruction is not unique to Hong Kong. As Lewis (1976) says, throughout the history of formal education, the use of an L2 medium has been the rule rather than the exception. The currently popular content-based approach in teaching L2 precisely involves the use of the learners' target language as the medium of instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The popularity of the concept of using a target language as the medium of instruction to teach academic subject knowledge originated from the famous Canadian French immersion program, where Anglophone students learn their L2 (French) through its use as the medium of instruction rather than a language subject and achieve the desired French proficiency as well as good academic results (Johnson & Swain, 1997).

Swain (1999) reiterates the importance of integrating language learning with content learning by saying "language instruction needs to be systematically integrated into content instruction" (p. 143). Earlier, Swain (1986) points out, "Although individual bilingual education programs may differ considerably, generally speaking they have in common two major goals. One major goal is --- as with any educational program --

- that the students learn the substance of what is being taught. The second major goal is that the students learn at least one language other than their first one” (p. 1). The two goals may be seemingly conflicting; however, approximately one thousand studies on immersion in Canada repeatedly show that second language acquisition is likely to be more successful when the target language is learned not as an independent school subject, but used as a medium of instruction in authentic acts of communication. Through using the target language as the instructional medium, learners can attain both high levels of L2 proficiency and academic achievement.

Nunan (1989) offers a brief explanation of why language learning objectives can be easily achieved in this way. When learners use the L2 to acquire subject knowledge, they are faced with tasks of language communication in classrooms. “The tasks involve communicative language use in which the user’s attention is focused on meaning rather than on linguistic structure” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10).

Nevertheless, Swain (1986) contends, “the second language should not be used as the medium of instruction with the expectation that subject matter achievement will be satisfactory, until a threshold level of second language proficiency has been attained” (p. 5). Accordingly, on a theoretical basis, Hong Kong students with sufficient and proved English proficiency can benefit from the English-medium education. This is evidenced by Lo, Chan and Ip (1985), whose study found a strong and consistent relationship between English proficiency and the amount of English that schools claimed to use in instruction.

Although it is generally true that the use of students’ mother tongue facilitates the students’ learning of knowledge, the change in the medium of instruction will induce some harmful effects on the bilingual education of Hong Kong. The detriment will be seen through comparison with bilingual education in the world.

It is estimated that over half of the world’s population need to learn a second language for a variety of purposes (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 1). Compared with bilingual education elsewhere, Hong Kong is unique in that English as a second language is not the mainstream language used by the overwhelming majority of the residents in the society. As Lin (1997) points out, “the majority of people (especially the low socioeconomic classes) in Hong Kong have limited access to English Language resources as they live in a largely monolingual life world where English does not play an important communicative role, and where sociocultural norms mediate against the use of English among Chinese sharing a common first language” (pp. 286-287).

Nevertheless, English is much desired in this society, which is evidenced by parental support to English-medium education. For those with limited access to English, the language may mean little in terms of usefulness and importance. However, when they come into the education system, they may immediately feel a strong need for English, as their proficiency in the language determines their career development. In this sense, the Hong Kong Government’s policy on restricted use of English as the teaching medium denies the majority of non-elite school children of access to English education. Rather than forcing them to receive education through Chinese, more effort should be made to explore different forms of bilingual education to their benefit.

Hong Kong has been within the international community. When the British colonial government was in power, Hong Kong retained its status as the center for international finance and shipping. Its economic prosperity is partly due to the British colonial government's support for English-medium and bilingual education. To keep itself in close tie with the international community, Hong Kong needs English. Its history, current economical, social and cultural realities necessitate a bilingual perspective in its education system. Bilingual education will provide the society of Hong Kong with people who have both English and Chinese proficiency. This will help Hong Kong to maintain its status as a member of the international community as well as an integral part of China.

### **Bilingual education and identity**

Language serves to develop identity and is not just a method of communication. It is closely linked with who we are. For Hong Kong people, speaking their own language is about being Chinese, rather than being in a British outpost. Language is the means of demonstrating its speakers' ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities. For this reason, Chinese is indispensable to school education in to cultivating young citizens. On the other hand, Chinese is the official language of China. The spread of Chinese in Hong Kong contributes to the merging and reunion of Hong Kong with mainland China in terms of continued economic development.

However, it is not to the interest of Hong Kong if Chinese is reinforced in education at the expense of English. As has been stated before, English is needed to retain ties between Hong Kong and the international community. Although the linguistic ardour for English is reduced to some extent and it seems that Chinese has attracted more attention after the 1997 takeover, the pendulum may perhaps swing back sooner or later. What Hong Kong is experiencing now may simply be a repetition of what eventually happened in Nigeria and Ghana when colonial powers packed up and went home. English is restored as the medium of instruction after the first three and four years of primary school in these countries.

In view of these factors, it appears that the Hong Kong Government is too hasty in changing the medium of instruction. It may turn out to be a move that blocks the development of bilingual education that is regarded as the best avenue for functional competence in two languages.

### **Bilingual education and intelligence**

In their eagerness, the policy makers of Hong Kong might have overlooked an advantage of bilingual education, namely, the incidental effect of developing learners' intelligence. In the history of bilingual studies, research repeatedly shows that bilingual children have stronger intelligence and cognitive abilities and learn the target language faster than monolingual children, and that bilingual students consistently outperform their monolingual peers in academic studies (Bain & Yu, 1978; Genesee, 1989; Hakuta, 1986; Peal & Lambert, 1962; Wiberg, 1996; Krashen, 1999; Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979 ). Neurolinguistic studies (Lenneberg, 1967) conclude that one's mind can be open to two languages and be filled by them simultaneously as long as appropriate ages are not past.

Such being the case, bilingual education can facilitate students' academic studies and acquisition of achievements if it is properly implemented in Hong Kong. The value of bilingual education is due to two related contributions. Firstly, students' acquisition of subject knowledge in the native language makes the input in a second language more comprehensible. Secondly, students' rapid development of literacy in the native language facilitates literary development in the second language.

The policy makers of Hong Kong quoted the unsatisfactory evidence about the so-called Anglo-Chinese schools' poor records of students' language proficiency as their rationale to scrap English-medium education. Even those who were opposed to an all-round execution of mother-tongue education assume that bilingual education has problems. Research evidence, however, does not lend support to this stand. Research has shown that bilingual education has been generally effective, if properly organized and implemented in school education (Cummins, 1981; Greene 1998; Krashen & Biber, 1988). There are multifold factors resulting in the low proficiency among Hong Kong students in schools. Admittedly, inappropriate practice may exist in Hong Kong's bilingual education; nevertheless, it is premature to scrap bilingual education without in-depth investigation into underlying problems. Instead, efforts should be made to improve bilingual education in Hong Kong so that effects may show up to promote the significant development and enhancement of students' intelligence, the growth of which will, in turn, push their language learning toward success.

### **Challenging implementation issues for bilingual education**

Poor quality English-medium education is the main reason given by policy makers for scraping bilingual education in Hong Kong. Johnson (1994) points out that, "although no formal research has been conducted to confirm or deny this claim, it is widely believed that few teachers would at present be able to teach effectively while maintaining English as the medium of instruction even if the necessary curricular changes were introduced" (p. 18). "The poor quality" is evidently reflected in the use of English-Chinese mixed code. Lin (1996) described how teachers used English-Chinese mixed code in classrooms and, Bolton and Luke (1999) found the evidence of 81% of their subjects using mixed code (p. 146).

The scarcity of competent teachers of English has been a major blocking factor to the effective implementation of bilingual education in Hong Kong. This is also the unavoidable consequence of the Hong Kong Government's negligence of teacher education. Too few teachers in the field are trained properly. Because of this, the shortage of English teachers in bilingual education is more severe than in any other subject. Many students fail to perform well in English classes because their teachers do not speak English fluently. Research (Wong-Fillmore, 1991) shows that unless adults speak English well enough, their use of English has the danger of disturbing teacher-child communication, which cripples both cognitive and emotional development.

However, eliminating English-medium education because of a lack of competent teachers does not appear to be a sensible move. If there were a shortage of competent algebra teachers, would we scrap algebra from school subjects? The only solution to the deadlock is certainly not to avoid the problem, but to face it squarely. It is true that good bilingual education teachers are hard to find, as they should be able to

comprehend students' L1 on the one hand and to speak reasonably well in their L2. Precisely because of this, it is highly necessary to emphasize on teacher education. If more efforts are made to provide in-service training to current teachers and to improve the pre-service training, then qualified teachers will be produced.

### **Mixed code in a bilingual society**

The Hong Kong Government has long claimed that the mixed code of English and Chinese impedes the healthy growth of language competence (Llewellyn et al, 1982; Hong Kong Education Commission, 1990). But there is little empirical evidence to support this. Although some early literature viewed intra-sentential codeswitching as indicative of imperfect language acquisition, extreme cross-linguistic interference, or language erosion, "others despaired of finding any constraints on the combination of language forms. Subsequent studies have revealed that code-switching is rule-governed and systematic, demonstrating grammatical regularities that reflect the operation of underlying syntactic restrictions (Totibio, 2001, p. 404).

In a bilingual society, mixed code appears extensively and functions in various social domains. Sufficient proficiency in two languages is useful. But it must be made clear that sufficient proficiency does not guarantee avoidance of mixed code. In fact, mixed-code has its unique functions in a bilingual society. Just as Li (1999) contends, "the government, by outlawing mixed code as the cause of low achievement in language learning, has mistaken the symptom for the disease" (p. 89). Some subject teachers use mixed code at the inter- and intra-sentential levels just for convenience of expressing technical terminology which is either hardly or awkwardly expressed in Chinese. Others use it with the intention to emphasize a particular point. Some studies (Johnson & Lee, 1987; Lin, 1996) show that mixed code plays a variety of communicative functions in Hong Kong people's communication. In some cases, it is irreplaceable (Bond & Lai, 1986). Its wide use can even be found in meetings of the Legislative Council, which were previously dominated by English (Yau, 1997).

Instead of actively seeking effective measures to eliminate the mixed code as suggested by the Hong Kong Education Commission (1990), the new policy of the Hong Kong Government breaks the continuity of using English in schools, thus making language education suffer from inconsistency and giving rise to parents' and students' complaints. As Johnson (1997, p. 186) points out, "Since such a policy involves selection, it may result in strong protests from parents who believe that exclusion from English-medium schools, however inadequate they may be, discriminates against their children by restricting their educational and career opportunities". In fact, the use of mixed code cannot be completely eliminated by administrative measures in a society with complex linguistic situations like Hong Kong. It is a natural consequence of the co-existence of two languages and in many circumstances it has unique functions to play. As Li (1999, p. 90) comments, "the extent to which code-switching is prevalent among educated Hong Kong bilingual speakers suggests that it is a very useful communicative resource serving practical functions". All these considered, the conclusion is that it is unreasonable for the Hong Kong Government to prohibit mixed code through administration and to restrict the use of English as the teaching medium because of mixed code.



## Language in education versus language education

One of the main reasons why the Hong Kong Government implemented the mother-tongue education policy was the contention that teachers who use mixed code were not proficient in English. This was proposed by Johnson (1997). He posits this phenomenon by saying, “an unknown proportion of teachers in the content subject areas lack a level of proficiency sufficient to maintain English as the medium of instruction” (p. 173). Compared to the successful Canadian immersion program, in which “most teachers in Canadian immersion classrooms tend to have native or native-like proficiency in both French and English” (Baker, 1996, p. 333), the situation in Hong Kong seems unfavorable.

In bilingualism different languages can serve different purposes and fluency in each need not be exactly the same.

On this point, two concepts need to be explained to clarify the situation: the issue of language in education and the issue of language education. When we discuss the issue of medium of instruction, normally we talk about language in education. When we deal with the teachers’ proficiency in English, then the issue of language education comes under discussion. However, the two issues are not distinctively independent. For example, the Canadian French immersion program revolves around the medium of instruction (also the issue of language in education) on surface, but its ultimate purpose is developing students’ proficiency in French (an issue of language education). In the Hong Kong context, the issue of medium of instruction is closely linked to that of the teachers’ English proficiency. It was in the light of the teachers’ overall English competence that the Hong Kong Government granted certain students the privilege of receiving education through English. As Cummins (1997) puts it, “an initial distinction is whether bilingual instruction is defined in relation to *means* or *goals*. When bilingual education is defined in relation to the means through which particular educational goals are attained, proficiency in two languages is not necessarily a goal of bilingual education... However, the term *bilingual education* is sometimes defined in relation to *goals*, to refer to educational programs that are designed to promote bilingual skills among students” (p. xii).

Taking the Hong Kong case into consideration, one may feel that no such clear demarcation can be drawn between the two concepts. The heated debate on the medium of instruction in Hong Kong (an issue of language in education) aims just at raising students’ bilingual competence (an issue of language education). Particularly, many concerns about language in education are generated with the intention of developing students’ satisfactory language competence, which is an issue of language education in itself. In fact, the public’s attention is directed to the issue of medium of instruction by their strong desire and hope for a language education of better quality. In other words, it is realized by Hong Kong people that both Chinese and English are needed for personal career development and economic prosperity of the society. The dream can come true only through bilingual education. Now that English-medium education is on the verge of extinction as a consequence of the policy change made by the Hong Kong Government, an unavoidable repercussion is that people become concerned about the students’ English proficiency and they have the fear that reduced exposure to English will entail a faster decline of the general English competence. Therefore, in Hong Kong, the issue of language in education is entangled with the

issue of language education. The existence and extinction of English-medium education is regarded as a key factor that will exert influence over the level of students' proficiency in English.

### **Unexpected side effect of the policy change**

By definition, bilingual education refers to the use of two languages as the medium of instruction in an educational system. Siguán and Mackey (1987) comment, "the term 'bilingual education' is used with reference to an education system with two languages as the medium of instruction, one of which is usually — but not always — the student's first language" (p. 44). This viewpoint is further defined by Cummins (1997) when he says, "The term *bilingual education* usually refers to the use of two (or more) languages of instruction at some point in the student's school career. The languages are used to teach subject matter content rather than just the language itself" (p. xi). Baetens-Beardsmore (1993) also shares this view.

To be more exact, the policy of streaming schools into the two categories eliminates the existence of bilingual education in Hong Kong. Chinese-medium schools use Chinese as the medium of instruction except in English lessons which are reduced to an independent subject while English-medium schools continue to use English as the medium of instruction except in the subject of Chinese.

To many Hong Kong students, school education is the only opportunity that offers them English input. The change in the medium of instruction has definitely diminished the amount of linguistic input. According to Krashen (1994), a large amount of input is one of the leading factors for production of new messages in L2. Less exposure to English input is detrimental to the growth of students' bilingual competence.

### **Undesired status of mother tongue education**

Another undesired consequence of the change is that the distinction of English-medium schools from Chinese-medium schools has institutionalized the former and make them superior and prestigious in relation to the latter. Ironically enough, it is the Government itself that weakens the status of its mother tongue education.

Since enrollment in English-medium schools is restricted in number, enrolment in Chinese-medium schools become inevitable. Hence, English-medium schools become the desired choice of most students and parents. This is evidenced by people's persistent efforts to seek admission into English-medium schools and the triumph expressed by those schools that were authorized by the Government. It is believed by many that the use of a target language as the medium of instruction will facilitate students' command of it. Since only 114 schools are authorized to teach in English, they are considered the most "distinguished schools". Thus, Chinese-medium education has been downgraded to second-class education in the minds of people. As a result, some parents with sufficient financial means seek out private schooling for their children. 5 Strong opposition from Hong Kong people has marred "mother tongue education". If the Government does not intervene and works toward making bilingual education more effective, the situation will worsen.

Although it is always risky to make predictions, it seems clear that intense competition for the positions in the English-medium schools will continue. Moreover, dedicated parents, galvanized by the belief that their children will be best educated in English-medium schools, will do their best to attain this end.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, language education has been a central and controversial issue in Hong Kong society. English seems to continue its status of a preferred language after the 1997 takeover. Although the general sentiment of the public as well as research results are that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction will benefit students' learning (Cheng, Shek, Tse & Wong, 1973; Siu & Mak, 1989), the people of Hong Kong regard English as an essential link to the linguistic, cultural, and economic global community. As is widely documented (Lee, 1998; Walters & Bella, 1998), many are convinced that using English as the primary medium of instruction in schools will help enhance students' English proficiency and enable them to become more competitive in the world.

By contrast, as reflected in its policy on medium of instruction, the Hong Kong Government seems inclined towards upgrading the role of Chinese through the change of the medium of instruction.

It is clear from the above analysis that the policy has negative influences for all concerned. The results might be far beyond the expectation of the policy makers. An obvious disadvantage of the policy is that it has severely damaged the well-defined bilingual education in Hong Kong. In particular, it has ironically strengthened the status of English-medium education and demoted the Chinese-medium schools to being second-class education.

It is premature to say for certain that the current policy on medium of instruction will not yield any positive results. But if bilingualism is still highly valued by the Hong Kong Government, there is no reason to abandon it and replace it with monolingual mother tongue education. Since Hong Kong has merged with China, increasing communication with China in political, economic, educational and cultural activities may gradually influence the status of English in Hong Kong. In light of this, consolidateing and improving bilingual education deserves attention and effort, because bilingualism distinguishes Hong Kong from China and will keep Hong Kong in close contact with not merely China but also the whole world. Retaining bilingual education in Hong Kong can be a strong proof of the policy of "One Country, Two Systems". But due to several drawbacks as analyzed above, the current policy of the Government needs continuous observation, assessment, or even review and revision, along with the progress of their implementation.

## **Notes**

**1** The Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Mr. Tung Chee Hwa proposed the goal of language education in his first policy address in October 1997. The "three spoken codes" refer to English, Putonghua and Cantonese while the "two written languages" are English and Modern Standard Chinese.

2 Some people felt that the Government's list of English-medium schools were unfair; others expressed disappointment; still others burst into tears for not being on the list. For details, see *Ming Pao Daily News*, March 23, 1998, Section A10; June 7, 1998, Section A2 and A3.

3 To find out the requirement of language competence on the job market, the University of Hong Kong conducted an investigation among 300 business companies in the industrial and commercial sectors, only to find that the majority of them gave first priority to applicants' English proficiency when considering recruitment and promotion. The investigation was reported in *Sing Tao Daily*, May 21, 1998, Section A13. In addition, in September, 1999, some leading business companies propose to introduce the British-designed English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA) into Hong Kong as a proficiency test for job applicants.

4 The newly appointed Secretary for Education and Manpower Bureau Prof. Arthur K. C. Li is reported to be inclined toward allowing more schools to use English as the medium of instruction. See *Wen Wei Po*, September 6, 2002.

5 It is reported that the international schools in Hong Kong attracted 30% more applicants in 1998 after the issuance of the Government policy on mother tongue education. The majority of the new applicants desired to be admitted into English-medium secondary schools but failed to do so. A number of parents expressed their worries about the possible decline of their children's English proficiency in Chinese-medium schools. They would rather pay higher tuition to international schools, which are regarded as the replacement for local English-medium schools. For details, see *Ming Pao Daily News*, August 31, 1998, Section B1 0.

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### **Biodata**

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