

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

The field of bilingual education in Hong Kong provides a perfect window to study the transformation of education in the context of wider processes of economic, institutional, political, sociolinguistic and cultural changes. As Hong Kong changed from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region (SAR, hereafter) of the People's Republic of China, the space of language education has seen the overlapping of old and new discourses regarding what languages should be learned or taught, by whom, when and to what degree. Such discourses and the related policies which have contributed to their institutionalisation cannot be detached from shifting conditions as to who gets to decide what language repertoires are attributed value in which sociolinguistic markets vis-à-vis local and trans-local processes of destabilization of the modern politics of language and culture.

This entry traces major works that have reported and described these processes, with attention to their implications for the existing language-in-education policies and practices in contemporary Hong Kong. Recurrent problems and future directions for research are also discussed.

Early Developments

Research on bilingual education in Hong Kong has focused on description of the unequal value assigned, in education, to English and Chinese (usually practised in Hong Kong as spoken Cantonese and written Standard Mandarin Chinese)¹ since Hong Kong was ceded by the Qing Dynasty to Britain as a colony in 1842. In the context of a colonial socio-economic and political mode of organization, tied to the rise of the European bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century and to its interests in expanding economic activities both within and among unified national markets, these two languages became framed within a diglossic relationship in Hong Kong. On the one hand, English was associated with access to higher education and elite jobs and social networks. On the other, knowledge of only Chinese was linked to less well-to-do families. Thus, English was historically constructed from the outset as a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1991) in the socio-economic market of Hong Kong, that is, as a key gatekeeper upon which class-based hierarchical structures have been reproduced and legitimised.

The process by which this unequal socio-economic distribution of English and Chinese has been gradually institutionalized and legitimised in Hong Kong's education system was documented through three major contributions (see historical reviews by Sweeting, 1990; Lin, 1997). Firstly, Eitel (1890-91) collected and compiled information from missionary and governmental sources, regarding the history of education in Hong Kong from 1841 to 1878, which allows identification of the first introduction of English in government aided schools in 1853. As a missionary, educator and Head of the Education Department of the government, Eitel reported on complaints by European residents who felt “that the whole educational

energies of the Colony served almost exclusively to benefit the Chinese and promoted Chinese literature, whilst the children of European and other non-Chinese residents were (owing to their unwillingness to attend what were virtually Chinese schools) almost entirely neglected” (Eitel 1890-91: 322, cited in Sweeting 1990: 147).

Secondly, Irving (1914) characterized education in Hong Kong during the 1910s and correlated the increasing demand for English-Chinese bilingual white-collar workers with the growth of a fluctuating-but-generally-expanding economy. This period saw the transition, from a disorganized and missionary-based system to an incipient bureaucratic-based structure legitimized and empowered by the first Education Ordinance of 1913. Irving’s description sheds light on the constitution of a linguistically streamed school system derived from the strengthening of two relatively new social classes in Hong Kong, namely, wealthy westernized Chinese and working class Europeans². This led to conformation of a dichotomized educational structure composed of an English-medium channel up to university level, serving the aspirations of those who aimed to occupy the new emerging middle-class labour market (i.e. the above-mentioned two new social classes) as well as of political elites willing to culturally reproduce their social status, and a Chinese primary education stream providing basic skills for the rest of the population.

The third was the *Burney Report*, published by a British education inspector (Burney, 1935), which carried forthright criticism of Hong Kong’s educational policy and represented a turning point towards a period of vernacularization during the first half of the 20th century, under the influences of anti-imperialist and self-reforming cultural and political movements in Mainland China such as the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the New Life Movement of the late 1920s and 1930s, and the consolidation of the Chinese Nationalist Party in 1928 (see Cheng, 1949, for further details). Burney stated that the Hong Kong government was neglecting primary education in vernacular language as it was left in the hands of out-of-date private schools. Burney recommended the provision of primary education in Chinese as well as a stronger orientation of the educational system to the needs and interests of Hong Kong society.

Though Burney’s recommendations resulted in some government support being extended to Chinese-medium schools in the 1930s and 1940s, the situation was soon reversed by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. According to Lin (1997), the isolationist policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, hereafter) led to a decline in popularity of the Chinese-medium schools in Hong Kong “because there no longer existed as an alternative, attractive symbolic market offering higher studies and job opportunities for Hong Kong Chinese medium school graduates” (p. 281). The subsequent policies and debates are described in the following section, with reference to shifting political and economic conditions at both local and trans-local orders.

Major Contributions

Further work done since the 1950s has shown how language-in-education policies and practices in Hong Kong cannot be detached from the dilemmas and struggles faced by the local elites over the imagination of the modern configurations of language, nation and State, in the context of the transition from a British colony to a Chinese SAR. Before the handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong’s bilingual education was caught in between the plans for national modernization implemented by the CCP and those of the British Empire.

In a post-World War II scenario characterized by cultural imaginaries reinforcing an overarching polarization between the “democratic West” (i.e. liberal) and “the rest” (i.e. communist), Britain’s preparations for decolonization of Hong Kong paved the way for institutionalization of a community linguistically and culturally differentiated from Mainland China – being this strategy economically and politically supported by USA in its attempts to prevent the expansion of communism in East Asia. This decolonization involved several means, including: localization of the civil services (i.e. increase of the number of English-educated Hong Kong Chinese taking up high colonial offices); introduction of some democratizing elements in the political system (i.e. district-board elections and popularly elected seats in the legislative council); and the expansion of a largely English-medium higher education (i.e. from a formerly elitist two-university system to eight publicly funded universities).

This combination contributed to the strengthening of “a local English-educated Hong Kong Chinese bilingual middle class that has benefited from and will continue to have strong investments in the English language and British-related institutions, whether political, linguistic or educational” (Lin & Man, 2010: 75). Indeed, more than 90% of secondary schools became English-medium by the 1980s and the early 1990s even though the British Hong Kong government’s policy over Medium of Instruction (MOI, hereafter) was based on a *laissez-faire* mode which allowed schools to choose either Chinese or English as the medium of instruction.

After the handover to China, the cultural, linguistic, political and socio-economic differences between Hong Kong and the rest of the People’s Republic of China were reconciled through the constitutional principle of “one country, two systems” formulated by Deng Xiaoping. However, MOI policies for all primary and secondary schools have been issued and reshaped in different directions over the last two decades, in a post-colonial policy-making context characterized by deep contradictions at all educational levels (see historical reviews provided in Ho, Morris & Chung, 2005). Although these contradictions are due to multiple factors, the pressure over education to meet both Chinese national and global agendas emerges as particularly relevant.

These pressures are manifest in the gradual shaping of the curriculum. With the aim of shifting towards a high value-added and technology-based economy which targets both the international and the Chinese national markets, the Hong Kong curriculum has progressively allowed greater room for promotion of Chinese patriotism, nationalism and cultural identity while maintaining the “unique” political characteristics that place Hong Kong as a bridge between the best of the so-called “East” and “West” (Education Commission, 1999). In doing so, this combination is discursively constructed as key “to develop a society which is outward-looking, culturally confident, free and democratic” (ibid, p. 10).

The contradictions resulting from such overlapping agendas are evident in the space of language education, which has been complicated with heated debates over changing symbolic values assigned to Chinese and English, as well as with introduction of Putonghua (i.e. Mandarin Chinese). Such contradictions are particularly indexed in three major policy developments, namely, the mandatory linguistic streaming policy, the policy to use Putonghua as the MOI of Chinese language and literature, and fine-tuning the linguistic streaming policy.

The mandatory streaming policy was put in effect in September 1998, and introduced Chinese as the medium of instruction in all government and aided secondary schools – taken to mean Modern Standard Chinese in traditional characters as the written MOI and Cantonese as the oral MOI – unless otherwise specified under special conditions. Out of the over 400 schools, only 100 were initially allowed to remain English-medium schools followed by a later adjustment to 114, based on the test results of their fresh intakes in English and Chinese. Although officially rationalized on the basis of cognitive and educational benefits of education in mother-tongue, this policy has been related to both cultural nativism and economic instrumentalism. Regarding cultural nativism, this mandatory scheme contributed to re-elevate the status of Chinese, in line with the strengthening of Chinese culture and history throughout the curriculum of all subjects (Tsui, 2004).

As to economic instrumentalism, the streaming policy has also been described as a strategic measure to solve what was perceived as a “problem” by the business sector and employers during the 1990s. Given the predominance of English among secondary schools in the years prior to the handover, many students who did not have high enough proficiency to fully function in English-medium lessons ended up getting enrolled in English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools. This entailed teachers and students having to switch between English and Cantonese as a common meaning-making practice in the classrooms (see Lin, 1996), and this was later officially deemed to be the cause for “declining language standards” (Lin & Man, 2010: 76). Therefore, Hong Kong bureaucrats could have waited until after 1997 to face this perceived “problem” by framing the linguistic streaming policy within a postcolonial political legitimisation argument that placed mother tongue at the centre.

Nevertheless, this language education policy aroused marked public opposition from the start since it created a labelling effect between Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) and EMI schools. As English has become crucial to Hong Kong’s economic competitiveness as a financial centre, and as the international language of “upward and outward mobility” (Johnson, 1994: 177), knowledge of English has remained a matter of prestige, and parents in Hong Kong are still highly motivated to send their children to EMI schools. So the mandatory policy has been accused of downgrading the self-esteem of students, teachers and administrators in CMI schools. This has also been regarded as a source of social stratification in that it hampers students’ exposure to English in CMI schools and reduces their opportunities to access a still-largely English-medium higher education system (see Lo & Lo, 2014; Poon, 2009; for further debates on effectiveness of medium of instruction in Hong Kong).

Following the mandatory linguistic streaming policy, use of Putonghua as the spoken MOI of a subject known as Chinese Language and Literature first appeared on the government’s agenda in 2002, based on rationalizing arguments that students would improve their Chinese writing skills if they are taught in Putonghua as the MOI (Chan, 2003)³. In addition to the contradiction of highlighting the educational benefits of Cantonese mother-tongue education in a socio-linguistic market where English still remains a gatekeeper to higher education and better jobs, this posed further dilemmas.

On the one hand, Putonghua is not regarded as mother tongue by the vast majority of Hong Kong people (see more details on census statistics over time in Leung & Lee, 2006). On the other hand, the view that oral proficiency in Putonghua leads to written skills in Modern Standard Chinese has been considered as ill-informed. In fact, Modern Standard Chinese has also literary sources from ancient Classical Chinese and from the regional varieties of the

Chinese language which, as in the case of Cantonese, have inherited many ancient Classical Chinese expressions (Lin & Man, 2010: 83). However, Putonghua has reportedly started spreading among upper-middle classes in Hong Kong, hand-in-hand with the growing influence of the People's Republic of China in the new globalized economy and with the subsequent expansion of Mandarin-based language and cultural industries across the globe.

Later on in 2010, the policy was fine-tuned because of the public dismay caused by the 1998 mother-tongue CMI policy. Despite the Government Education Bureau having provided evidence that mother tongue education had helped students to achieve better academic results in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (a Secondary 5 school – leaving examination), as well as better access to higher education for students in CMI schools, a continuous decline in English language results of the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (a pre-university public examination) led to a strong demand from the public for reinstating EMI in all schools at all secondary levels (see Tollefson & Tsui, 2014, for a detailed review of statistical data, contextual factors and perspectives involved in the debate around this latest policy).

The reported positive outcomes notwithstanding, the Hong Kong SAR government gave in and announced the elimination of bifurcation of schools into EMI and CMI. From the 2010-2011 school year onwards, secondary schools were given greater autonomy over choosing their MOI, in accordance with the criteria specified by the education authority, such as the requirement of the students' language proficiency, teachers' qualifications and school-based support. Concerning the students' language proficiency, schools are now permitted to choose their MOI from CMI or EMI if they admit at least 85% of their Secondary 1 students from the top 40% of Hong Kong students in terms of academic ability – this can be applied to individual subjects, sessions or even classes if they fail to achieve this requirement.

With regard to teachers' qualifications, stricter requirements have been imposed on non-language teachers if they are to adopt EMI to teach their subjects. According to the policy, teachers are now required to have a Grade C (level 3) or above in English language of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and a Grade D or above in the Use of English in the Hong Kong Advance Level Examination (HKALE). In addition, they are also requested to attend at least 15 hours of professional development activities every three years. As for the school-based support measures, the government provides more resources to enable CMI schools to improve their English learning environment; it also allows Extended Learning Activities (ELA) during lesson time for junior secondary students to have more exposure to subject-related English while learning content subjects in the mother tongue, in order for these students to have a better transition to a senior secondary curriculum delivered in English – schools can strategically allocate a maximum of 25% of the total lesson time of content subjects for ELA.

This set of policies and processes represents the major shifts concerning bilingual education in Hong Kong. I shall now turn to ongoing developments which further expand our understanding of contemporary educational, linguistic and social transformations.

Work in Progress

According to Tollefson & Pérez-Milans (forthcoming), work in the field of language education policies should shed more light on the local mechanisms by which the modern politics of language and identity get destabilized under conditions of the so-called “late

modernity”. They state that this focus involves closer examination of the widespread processes of late capitalism leading to the selective privatization of services (including education), the information revolution (associated with rapidly changing statuses and functions for languages), the weakening of the institutions of nation-states (with major implications for language policies), and the fragmentation of overlapping and competing identities (associated with new complexities of language-identity relations and new forms of multilingual language use).

In the educational space of Hong Kong, some of these processes are now being reported by ongoing work that shows how the intensification of linguistic and cultural diversity generates new dilemmas and tensions that impact the way schools deal with (and implement) language education policies. Due to space constraints, this can only be illustrated by briefly referring to two lines of ongoing research investigating issues related to mobility and equity. The first involves fieldwork on cross-boundary and newly-arrived students from Mainland China, and the second focuses on the situated experience and trajectories of students with South Asian background.

Research on students from Mainland China suggests that their linguistic repertoires are institutionally devalued in the Hong Kong educational system (Yuen, 2013). Cross-boundary students are children with working-class socio-economic backgrounds who reside in Mainland China – typically in border towns such as Shenzhen and Yantian – but who daily attend school in Hong Kong. This practice is common for various reasons. First, the cost of living is lower in Mainland China than in Hong Kong; second, mainland mothers usually have to wait for some years to secure the right of abode in Hong Kong; and third, moving to Hong Kong often involves the disconnection of working-class women’s established social and supportive networks. On the other hand, the term “newly-arrived students” is used by the Hong Kong government to refer to students who have moved from Mainland China to Hong Kong within the first three years after they have become resident. In both cases, Yuen’s preliminary findings show that identification practices from the students tend to value Cantonese more than their home language variety which, in the context of the devaluation practices mentioned above, can be seen as an indicator of social assimilation rather than integration.

The research stream that explores the experience and trajectories of students with South Asian backgrounds is now thriving in reaction to the predominant quantitative work (Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2014; Pérez-Milans & Soto, forthcoming; Soto, 2015). While Hong Kong public schools serve over 9,000 primary and secondary school students with South Asian backgrounds, most of them born in Hong Kong, these students face several difficulties, and in official figures and statistics, access to standard written Cantonese, adaptation to school life and limited opportunities for further education seem particularly problematic. These conditions may perpetuate their exclusion in Hong Kong, both in and out of public education, leading to a socially (and ethnically) stratified system.

Although there has been some consensus on the existence of these difficulties, most resources and policy measures focus mainly on academic factors and on creating “more suitable” Chinese language education programs for these students, without sufficient exploration of their social experiences. In other words, lack of access to Chinese language skills is assumed to be the main reason for this widespread failure among students with South Asian background, without taking even a close look at the ways in which these social processes are constituted through everyday situated practice. However, the findings by Pérez-Milans &

Soto show that while there certainly are struggles over access to conventional Hong Kong-based Cantonese, the difficulties experienced by these students involve a broader range of socio-educational elements derived from their economic marginalization.

In relation to these youngsters' school life, these findings also suggest that educational institutions do not bring about a truly cultural change in the school curriculum and organization, even though schools are now forced to open up to cultural diversity and to accept students other than ethnically Chinese in order to achieve the minimum intake required by the government's funding policy. So these students end up having serious difficulties connecting their transnationalized linguistic and cultural repertoires to their school experiences (see also Thapa, forthcoming, for a detailed ethnographic exploration of the experiences of students with a Nepali background).

Taken together, these two strands of work-in-progress exemplify some of the tensions and contradictions posed by contemporary processes of linguistic and cultural diversification. In a Hong Kong modern educational system built upon two linguistically differentiated paths inherited from the colonial times (English and Chinese), the current patterns of global mobility introduce complex configurations of language, culture and identity that go beyond the traditional discrete boundaries. This is briefly expanded in the last section below, focusing on some persisting problems in mainstream research on bilingual education in Hong Kong.

Problems, Difficulties and Future Directions

The historical developments mentioned in the previous sections point to an ongoing process of linguistic and culture hybridization that makes the ethno-national imagination of homogeneous linguistic communities hard to maintain, in line with what is being described elsewhere (see Blommaert, 2013). Nevertheless, research and policy in the Hong Kong context still approaches the field of language education and bilingualism from a predominantly modernist perspective, that is to say, from an ideological stand that takes languages and cultures as bounded systems tied to specific communities and territories.

This is particularly reflected in the uncritical reproduction of the idea of the "native speaker" as well as in the understanding of bilingualism as a conflation of two separate monolingualisms, regardless of the vast amount of socio-linguistic literature that has criticized these constructs over the last few decades (see, for instance, Rampton, 1990; Heller, 2007). Far from acknowledging the daily nature of widely documented meaning-making practices such as "crossing" (Rampton, 1995) and "translingualism" (Canagarajah, 2013), in which languages, repertoires and styles are flexibly mobilized according to specific activities and goals in situated practice, much of existing research and educational policies in Hong Kong keep placing emphasis on the ideal separation of abstract (and pure) linguistic systems as a precondition to learning.

The Native English-speaking Teacher scheme (NET, hereafter) illustrates the persistence of the above-mentioned ideological constructions. Launched by the Hong Kong Education Department to enhance the teaching of English language and increase exposure of students to English in Chinese medium schools since the 1998-1999 school year, in response to the perceived declining standards in English among the students, this scheme aimed to attract overseas native speakers of English to work in Hong Kong schools, co-teaching with local teachers. In this way, NETs are often expected to perform in their schools as linguistic and

cultural outsiders who only speak standard English with their students (Sung, 2011), irrespective of whether they have Hong Kong local background due to transnational life trajectories (i.e. second generation Hong Kong nationals who migrated to the USA, UK or Canada); in other words, they are prevented from having a more complicated or disorderly speech background which may also include Chinese.

This reinforces the artificial separation of Chinese and English in everyday meaning-making practices as well as, in most cases, the English-only rule in classrooms which may in turn prevent increased contact and language interactions between NETs and students. More importantly, the reproduction of such language ideologies prevent Hong Kong educators and administrators from drawing on international research and experiences in general on innovative bilingual education in which trans-lingual and trans-literacy classroom practices have proved to be pedagogically effective in multilingual contexts (see, for example, Schwarzer, Petrón & Luke, 2011). However, there is still an important research gap in the Hong Kong context, and so future research directions should engage more actively in dialogue with the increasing attention to multilingualism in the fields of language education and applied linguistics worldwide.

Notes

1. The use of “Chinese” as a vague umbrella label to refer to spoken Cantonese and written Standard Mandarin Chinese, by the policy documents in Hong Kong, is an inherited practice from the British colonial government who allowed Cantonese some space by not naming it but covering it under the umbrella term “Chinese”.
2. In contrast to monolithic portraits of social groups where Europeans are repeatedly characterized as upper-middle classes, and ethnically Chinese as working-class, sources from this period show social class discrimination as led by wealthy Chinese groups and citizens as well. Some of these groups submitted several petitions to the Governor asking for a separate school for European children, or even for the establishment of a school where higher fees than those paid at schools run by Europeans may be charged, with the aim of avoiding the association of their children with the poorer classes in English-medium schools (Sweeting, 1990: 196-199).
3. Standard Written Chinese (both in traditional and simplified characters) has been described as based on the linguistic features of spoken Mandarin, which has led to numerous arguments about the learning difficulties that this poses to Cantonese speakers whose oral language does not share the same lexical and grammatical features of Mandarin.

See Also: Nelson Flores & Jeff Bale: Sociopolitical issues in bilingual education (Volume 5); Taehee Choi: Identity, transnationalism and bilingual education (Volume 5); Ofelia Garcia & Angel Lin: Translanguaging and bilingual education (Volume 5).

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