

The English Language in Hong Kong: Review and Prospect

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Abstract: This paper mainly discusses the issue of whether the English language should be attached the same importance in education as it was before in post-1997 Hong Kong. The status of English before 1997 in Hong Kong has been carefully compared from the sociolinguistic perspectives with that after Hong Kong returned to China in 1997. Both political and social, economic and technological considerations point to the fact that English will continue to be an important language in post-1997 Hong Kong. It is also argued that English is now becoming a foreign language rather than a second language in Hong Kong. Therefore, the focus of educators should be on improving the efficiency of teaching English as a foreign language.

Key words: the status of English Chinese language domains

Language is a tool for communication. With the development of human society, the function of language has gone far beyond that. All kinds of considerations coming from political, cultural, economic and educational perspectives have made language more like a barometer featuring the social changes. This is exactly the case for the use of the English language in Hong Kong. Before 1997, Cantonese was a language for families and friendly relationships while English was a language for government, economy and education (Lung, 1996). The handover of sovereignty of Hong Kong to the Chinese government has brought about changes as regards the linguistic domains concerning the use of both Chinese and English. As language is a “potential symbol of ethnicity among heterogeneous cultural groups in contact.” (Fisherman, 1989), it is natural that Chinese (Cantonese/Putonghua) is replacing English in government administration and becomes a language of importance and prestige. Under this new circumstance, one major concern in the field of education is that whether the English language should be given the same due weight as it was before. A reflection on past practice may cast light on the future.

1. The Status of English in Hong Kong before 1997

With the advantageous geographic position, Hong Kong has developed rapidly into one of the most important financial, commercial and tourism centers in the world. Hong Kong people live in a world imbued with western cultures and western concepts. Despite this, the local young people would still call themselves “modernized” instead of “westernized”.

Before the handover of the sovereignty to the Chinese government in 1997, Hong Kong was a colony under British rule. However, it was by no means a colony in its real sense. “It has become a sort of colony-in-transition. Although the Government is still a colonial government, it has in the last two decades, developed a whole apparatus of responsiveness to local public and international opinions. People in Hong Kong behave less and less as colonial subjects, and more and more as members of some vastly intricate business consortium.” (Lord & Tsou,

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1985)

This is an area inhabited by 98% Chinese. Most local people speak their native tongue – Cantonese for their daily communication. English was the language the British colonists brought to Hong Kong some 150 years ago and it had never gained its position as a national language. However, the use of the English language in Hong Kong more or less mirrored the colonial rule. English was more widely used in certain domains such as government administration, commerce, education, etc. If we make a distinction between a foreign language environment and a second language environment from the point of view of social role a language plays in a community, English was a second language in this society at this stage.

Although both Chinese and English were the legislated official languages of the government, it was English which enjoyed more prestige. One might find it not unusual to see such a statement in the footnote of many documents, saying that if there was any conflicting regarding the interpretation of any policy, please refer to the English version. It was also known to all that English was the sole language used in the law courts. Only after the establishment of a bilingual drafting team in the Legal Department in 1986 and a Bilingual Laws Advisory Committee in 1998 was Chinese accorded its official status in the law courts (The first case heard in Chinese in the regional court was late in 1995). Still, “the government’s conclusion appears to be that the English version will in fact, if not in law, remain ‘more authentic’ than the Chinese version.” (Johnson, 1994:185)

Moreover, “There is significant mass media support for English coming from such enterprises as two major local English-language newspapers, four radio stations, and two TV stations, broadcasting in English.” (Pierson, 1991:190)

Though the government had no rigid restrictions on the language used for instruction, the number of schools using English as medium of instruction (EMI) obviously outnumbered that using Chinese as medium of instruction (CMI). From the secondary school up, “all subjects except for Chinese literature and Chinese History are taught in English or at least make use of English textbooks.” (Chan, 1987:241) Behind this statement was a strong driving force coming from both the business world and tertiary education. As we mentioned above, English was used more for its practical value. Since Hong Kong had developed into an international hub of trade and commerce and a center of world finance, since most of the daily operations of business were done through worldwide telecommunication in English, the needs for English had grown. The economic structure of Hong Kong shifting from manufacture to service industry since 1980’s had put more demands for English as well. The primary concern of the business companies was that “the educational system could somehow produce enough school-leavers and graduates to meet the language needs, both Chinese and English, of a rapidly changing Hong Kong.” (Boyle, 1995:300) For most Hong Kong people, having a good knowledge of the English language meant a better chance of getting a job with better prospects.

In order to meet the requirements of society, it was a common practice that the universities set the proficiency of English as one of the yardsticks of enrollment. In universities, nearly 80% of the courses used English textbooks. Behind EMI, there was the need for universities to remain highly competitive in this laissez faire market. In turn, for secondary school students, good English was an insurance to gain access to universities. In order to let their children have more chance either professionally or academically in the future, most parents would send their children to EMI schools. This was the main reason why Chinese-medium education could not come into effect. In an investigation done by the Education Commission (1984), “an ideal proportion of English to Chinese medium students was...20% English and 80% Chinese. This was revised in the Education Commission (1990) to 30% English and 70% Chinese, reflecting the expanded role of tertiary education and the greater

demand for English in the business community over the intervening period.” (Johnson, 1994:186) There were some other factors responsible for the dominance of English in education. For instance, the government could not organize enough manpower to translate the textbooks into Chinese. In addition, the development of English-dependent hi-tech such as computers which were popular among Hong Kong families also made English an indispensable part of the daily life.

The practice of this educational policy presupposed that there should be enough qualified teachers who were good at both the professional knowledge and the English language as well. Meanwhile, it required the students to be strongly motivated and that their language input environment should not be confined to school only. The real situation is that the majority of Hong Kong school children were in a situation of what Lord (1985) called “bilingualism under pressure”. They had ambivalent attitudes towards the English language and were pushed by both their parents and society to learn English well. In addition, for students, it was also not easy to find an ideal language environment outside school. On the other hand, it was not easy for most schools to find and to fund enough versatile teachers. This led to the phenomenon of “mixing and switching” in class. Some school teachers had to rely on Cantonese to conduct their lessons.

This incompatibility of the education policy and the real inadequate language resources situation led to the vicious consequence that using a language which was not their mother tongue in the class, students found it very hard to follow the lectures. Many students could not fully master what they are supposed to know. “The only definite indications at that time were that two-fifths of pupils from EMI schools and four-fifths from CMI schools do not attain a standard of English that is acceptable to society, either educationally or for employment, and that the kind of English learned by our pupils may not serve their needs for employment and higher educational studies.” (Lord & T’sou, 1985) In her article, Basler (1989) pointed out that “signs of the decline in English, officials say, are all around, from the students in Hong Kong’s English language university who cannot follow class lectures to the bank tellers, telephone operators, government clerks, secretaries and salespeople whose English is limited to broken phrases.” It was not uncommon to come across such phrases as “open TV” meaning “turn on the TV” or “no many students” meaning “not many students” in compositions written by second year English majors in the university. The decline of language proficiency had been realized by the government which can be reflected in several successive Educational Reports from the Educational Commission. Though schools were encouraged to change to CMI mode by being offered all kinds of support varying from finance to staff training and to facilities, the situation still remained unaltered. As was reported by Boyle (1995:299), “in 1992 Education Department statistics showed 90% of schools were English-medium and only 6% were Chinese-medium (with 4% English-medium/Chinese-medium combined).”

2. The Status of English in Hong Kong after 1997

After the conversion of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997, the status of Chinese as the official language of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is reaffirmed without any doubt. During the swearing-in ceremony of the first term of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, as was witnessed by people all over the world through media of all kinds, all the local officials present, including the Chief Executive, the honorable Tung Chee Hwa, used Putonghua in their speech. This suggested the linguistic change that will inevitably take place in Hong Kong as the true Chinese parentage of Hong Kong is affirmed and the power by the Chinese government is asserted in Hong Kong. It is also quite natural that speaking Putonghua among local

residents becomes a craze, for it reveals people's desire to reaffirm their allegiance to their motherland. It is reported that "elective courses in Putonghua in the universities are all heavily oversubscribed and extramural evening classes in Putonghua for working adults are also extremely popular." (Boyle, 2000:71)

Nevertheless, in light of Article 9 of the Basic Law, English may still be used by the executive authorities, legislative and judicial organs of the HKSAR. Whether this means that English continues to keep its status as an official language is not clear. What remains apparent is that "whether one likes it or not in the next millennium the English language is going to be the *lingua franca* of members of international communities in trade and commerce as well as in science and technology. Being able to use English and use it well will be a mark of membership of these communities." (So, 2000:22) It is the sincere wish of both Chinese government and the local government of HKSAR that Hong Kong still keeps its edge as one of the most important financial, commercial and tourism centers in the world and maintains its status as the leading metropolis in the world as well after its return to China. Out of the consideration of social, economical and practical factors, it is a natural consequence that the local government would attach the equal importance to English, which has been attested in the Education Department's report(1997:1), explicitly recognizing the status of English as a crucial factor enhancing the economic competitiveness of Hong Kong worldwide.

The importance of English in Hong Kong society also finds its manifestation in people's attitudes towards the language. Affectively, after Hong Kong became an SAR of China and after the gradual demographical change because of the immigration policy which allows a strict quota of 150 for legal immigration from mainland China to Hong Kong each day, people, especially "the young Hong Kong Chinese have developed a strong sense of pride in their nation and ethnic identity." (Boyle, 2000:75) Anyhow, as was pointed in the earlier time by Boyle (1995), "on a more positive note, attitudes to English seem to be changing among Hong Kong students, from a situation 10 or 15 years ago when using English was felt to be threat to Chinese identity (Pierson et al, 1980) to a new acceptance of and tolerance towards the use of English (Pennington & Yue, 1994)." (1995:301). In a word, "with increasing travel and communication, they (the young people) have become more international in their outlook." (Boyle, 2000:75) Pragmatically, English is still to be considered an indispensable instrument to gain access to a better career prospect and to knowledge of various kinds, including to higher education. In a survey conducted by Lai (1999:282) to investigate attitudes of university students toward English, it has been found, among 200 students coming from different disciplines and from different years of studies, that they are strongly motivated to improve their English proficiency mainly out of instrumental and career-related considerations.

In the field of education, however, a perennial debate starting pre-1997, has been going on in post-1997 Hong Kong as to whether English should be employed as the language of instruction, especially at the level of secondary schools. On the one hand, at the micro level, the educational, pedagogical and psychological considerations all point to the advantages of CMI. In a proposal by the Working Group on Review of Secondary School Places Allocation and Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools (Education Department, 2003), it is explicitly stated that "we firmly believe that the mother tongue is the most effective MOI for all students learning through a second language (i.e. English for the majority of students in Hong Kong) inevitably creates language barriers, the kind and extent of which may vary from student to student..." and that "To nurture talents, schools should provide a conducive learning environment so our students enjoy learning, thinking and participation, and as a result, attain all-round cognitive and character development." Because of the firm guidance from the government in 1997, the proportion of EMI schools has dropped from approximately 90% before August 1998 to approximately 30% after that, while the number of CMI schools has increased from 6% to 70%. On the other hand,

factors such as social, economic and technological factors support the use of EMI. Because of the pragmatic value of English, the 1997 policy which only allows 114 schools using English as the MOI has encountered severe criticism. As reported by Lo (1998:4), “findings of a recent opinion poll reveals that the medium of instruction policy is the least desirable educational policy of all, with a strong majority of respondents objecting to its implementation.” The crux of the problem lies in the equality in education. The interpretation of this concept could be approached from four perspectives – access, survival, output and outcome. “Equality of access refers to the probabilities of being admitted into school. Equality of survival refers to the probabilities of staying in school to some defined level. Equality of output refers to the probabilities of learning the same thing at the same level. Equality of outcomes refers to the probabilities of living similar lives as a result of schooling.” (Farrell, 1997 cited in Lo, 1998:2). Since the tracking of schools into CMI schools and EMI schools was based on the evidence of students’ ability and the teachers’ capability, only those schools which are able to demonstrate their advantages in these respects could apply for adopting EMI. As a result of that, disparity among Hong Kong’s schools has been intensified. Being aware of the utility of English and EMI schools’ existing advantages which can help one in terms of access, survival, output and outcome, most people would elect for EMI schools as their first choice. “As long as the universities and elite schools in Hong Kong continue to be EMI, then parents will not be willing to admit that their children are not part of the elite.” (Morrison & Lai, 2000:482)

3. Conclusion and Prospect

Arguments over the medium of instruction prove, from another perspective, the importance of English in Hong Kong. With the guideline of “one country, two systems”, we expect that Hong Kong will retain its present status as an international centre, serving as a window to the outside world. Therefore, English will continue to be the language functioning mainly in science, technology, finance, commerce and tourism. Besides, it is a language spoken by billions of people in the world. “It is now well-recognized that in linguistic history no language has touched the lives of so many people, in so many cultures and continents, in so many functional roles, and with so much prestige, as has the English language since the 1930s”(Kachru, 1990:5). There is no exception for Hong Kong. According to the classifications of world Englishes done by Kachru(1990:2), Hong Kong may lie in the “expanding circle” with regard to the use of the language. English as the medium of wider communication in the modern society will continue to be an important language in Hong Kong.

Out of these considerations, therefore, we draw a tentative conclusion that in the field of education, the English language should be given the same due weight as it was before with focus on enhancing students’ language proficiency efficiently while avoiding arguments over the matter of medium of instruction. As a matter of fact, as far as the language situation in Hong Kong is concerned, “the realities of economic and demographic integration with China make it likely that English in Hong Kong in the years ahead will increasingly take on the features of a foreign rather than a second language, both in education and in everyday life.” (Lai 1999:280) Based on this, we hold the view that the language learning environment in Hong Kong is comparable to that in mainland China. No matter how large quantities of resources are and how excessive the use of English is, the learning of the language is mainly from the classroom. Consequently, in mainland China, the medium of instruction is undoubtedly its mother tongue – Putonghua. English is taught early in the primary school and students get intensive training both at the secondary schools and at the universities. The result proves that English learning is successful in mainland China. If the language planners and educators in Hong Kong can draw on the experience

of mainland China while taking into consideration the local language situation, the English proficiency of school-leavers can surely be pushed to a high standard. The problem of disparity of schools arising out of tracking schools into monolingual stream, i.e. either CMI school or EMI schools could also be solved in a reasonable way through improving the teaching of English as a foreign language while leaving the choice of medium of instruction open to school management itself.

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