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Alan Cheung

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Language Policy in Hong Kong: A Review

Alan Cheung

There has been considerable debate in Hong Kong concerning language policy in teaching. The new language policy, implemented in 1998, requires all English secondary schools to switch their teaching medium from English to Chinese. Those schools that want to continue to use English as their medium of instruction have to appeal to the Chinese Education Department. Permission would be granted to a school under two conditions: (1) 85% of the students are able to demonstrate enough skill to handle English lessons, and (2) the teachers must be certified as capable of teaching in English. After assessments and evaluations, only 100 schools out of the 400 that applied were allowed to continue to use English as a medium of instruction. The other secondary schools must use Chinese as the main teaching medium.

The new language policy has unleashed criticism and sparked an educational debate in Hong Kong. Most parents, many of the business sectors, and some schools oppose the change, fearing that the switch will cause a decline in English proficiency in Hong Kong. The Education Department and some educators argue otherwise. They believe that the new language policy will help students learn more effectively in all subjects, including English.

In examining the language policy in Hong Kong, one has to look at not only the linguistic conditions in the school setting but also at those in the wider social environment.

This paper analyzes how the social and economic factors of a society may affect the successful implementation of a language policy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE HONG KONG EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Before the handover, 350 of the 400 secondary schools in Hong Kong were English-medium schools. Chinese-medium schools were often perceived as second-class schools. Prior to the 1960s, Chinese schools enjoyed a more prestigious status. Yau (1989, 281) stated, "In the face of the fierce competition from English schools, Chinese medium education had been able to hold its own for nearly a hundred years. In fact, it was only in the latter half of this century that English-medium education began to catch on."

Ever since Britain took over Hong Kong in the early 1840s, the British government spent most of their educational resources in English-medium schools. Although Chinese-medium schools did not receive any subsidies from the colonial government, they did well in enrollment. In 1954, over 40% of the candidates entering the School Certificate Examination were educated in Chinese-medium schools (Yau 1989, 281). However, the student enrollment in these Chinese schools has dropped significantly since the early 1960s. So (1984) suggested that two reasons exist for English schools' dominance in education in the latter half of this century, namely, education and employment.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, China gradually adopted a radical policy that made opportunities for higher education in China almost disappear. The only opportunity for higher education in China then was the English-medium Hong Kong University. In order to gain entrance to and survive in this English-medium university, a good command of English was required. As a result, English schools became more attractive than Chinese schools because the language advantages of the former gave students a better chance to enter Hong Kong University.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Employment opportunities also played an important role in favoring English-medium schools in Hong Kong. Under colonial rule, proficiency in English was the key to a successful career in the government because English was the language of law, commerce, and administration. Furthermore, in the 1950s, Hong Kong became an international port, and business with English-speaking countries increased dramatically. In order to trade and do business with these countries, Hong Kong needed to educate people to speak and write English. As a result, the need for English-speaking workers grew substantially. Hence, English has played a major role in Hong Kong society since the early 1960s, and English-medium schools have become increasingly dominant. For example, the percentage of English schools grew from 57.9% to 91.7% from 1960 to 1990. On the other hand, the percentage of Chinese middle schools dwindled significantly during the same period, dropping from 42.1% to only 8.3% (see table 1).

In her article, "The controversy over teaching medium in Hong Kong—an analysis of a language policy," Yau (1989)

Table 1. Day pupils in Hong Kong secondary schools

| Year | Chinese schools | English schools |
|------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1960 | 42.1 % | 57.9 % |
| 1965 | 29.0 % | 71.0 % |
| 1970 | 23.2 % | 76.7 % |
| 1975 | 21.3 % | 78.7 % |
| 1980 | 12.3 % | 87.7 % |
| 1985 | 9.5 % | 90.5 % |
| 1990 | 8.3 % | 91.7 % |

Source: Lee 1993, 206

also reported similar trends in these two types of schools. For example, the percentage of students enrolled in Anglo-Chinese schools jumped from 67% to 90% from 1960 to 1985. During the same period, enrollment in Chinese middle schools dropped from 33% to only 10%.

REASONS FOR PROMOTING THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

The Hong Kong government has been pushing mother-tongue education for the past two decades. During the 1980s, the government proposed a "language package" worth over HK\$600 million to encourage schools to use

Table 2. Enrollment in Hong Kong Secondary Schools

| Year | Anglo-Chinese | | Chinese | |
|------|---------------|----|----------|----|
| | students | % | students | % |
| 1960 | 55,510 | 67 | 27,778 | 33 |
| 1965 | 109,133 | 71 | 45,334 | 29 |
| 1970 | 167,642 | 79 | 45,834 | 21 |
| 1975 | 267,979 | 81 | 61,884 | 19 |
| 1980 | 382,979 | 88 | 52,631 | 12 |
| 1985 | 358,928 | 90 | 37,556 | 10 |

Source: Yau 1989, 280

Chinese as the medium of instruction (Yau 1989, 280). The government adopted a scheme of "positive discrimination" in favor of Chinese schools. This scheme would provide more resources and monetary support to these Chinese schools. Various education reports produced by the Education Department also supported the move. For instance, in the Education Commission Report No. 1 (1984), the government stated clearly its support for mother-tongue education:

On the assumption that . . . research efforts would substantiate the two popular beliefs, namely: that all other things being equal, teaching and learning would be generally more effective if the medium of instruction were the mother tongue . . . we RECOMMEND that individual secondary school authorities should be encouraged to adopt Chinese as the medium of teaching. (par 3.18)

In 1986, the Education Commission's Report No. 2 confirmed its original position regarding mother-tongue language. The report stated that according to research findings "the majority of the pupils would benefit if Chinese were used as the medium of instruction in lower forms." In 1990 and 1996, mother-tongue education was again emphasized in Reports No. 4 and No. 6 in which the Education Commission stressed that Chinese as a medium of instruction was undervalued. The reports proposed that schools should employ Cantonese as the teaching medium. The government pushed for mother-tongue education for two reasons: educational and cultural. Because most of the primary schools in Hong Kong use Chinese as the teaching medium, one of the problems students face when they get into English secondary schools is linguistic shock. Most students do not know how to deal with the change of language instruction. One student described her strategy to cope with the situation:

At first I could not understand fully the lessons taught in English. But somehow I managed to memorize all of them by heart: grammar, reading, bible, hygiene, history, etc. After getting good marks for the first test without knowing how, I was always referred to when my class teacher scolded somebody for laziness. In order not to lose face, I had to keep on memorizing even harder. Fortunately, I could gradually understand more and more of the lessons I tried to learn by heart. Before long I had formed the habit of memorizing every lesson in every subject, including Arithmetic. (Fu 1987, 31)

Various researchers (Education Department 1994; Siu et al. 1979; Yu and Atkinson 1988) have shown that students learn better through their mother tongue. These studies have included various educational benefits of mother-tongue teaching, including:

1. Mother-tongue teaching has positive effects on students' learning.
2. Most students prefer learning in the mother tongue.
3. Students learning in the mother tongue generally perform better than their counterparts using English as the medium of instruction.
4. Students of traditional Chinese-medium schools consistently achieve a higher pass percentage than the territory-wide average in both the Chinese Language and English Language sections of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

This shows the positive impact of mother-tongue teaching on the learning of Chinese and English as a subject (Education Commission Report No. 4 1990).

In addition to educational reasons, the cultural factor is another reason for supporting mother-tongue teaching. In his 1982 report, Llewellyn stated that mother-tongue education should be emphasized in all schools because

"language reflects the soul and culture of a people. Each language has its own images, proverbs, sense of humour, and different thought structures expressing various facets of civilization" (25). Kwok also shared the same view as Llewellyn: "to preserve the tradition and dignity of Chinese culture, it is necessary to save the deteriorating Chinese education in Hong Kong" (Lee 1993, 209).

In the late 1970s, thirty-two cultural and educational organizations organized a "Second Chinese Language Campaign." The purposes of the campaign were (1) to strive for the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in secondary school teaching, (2) to increase the social status of the Chinese language, and (3) to improve the quality of Chinese-English education (cited in Lee 1993, 209). Although there is little dispute on the advantages of mother-tongue teaching, most parents and schools prefer English-medium teaching. Lee identified three major reasons why many students and parents prefer English schools:

PRACTICAL REASONS

Hong Kong is an international port and, in order to compete in the international market, it will continue to need people at all levels in commerce, industry, and the professions who are fluent in English as well as Chinese. Yau (1987) surveyed 186 students as to why they chose English schools as their first choice. The students were asked to respond on a 6-point scale (0-5), with 5 being the most important, as shown in table 3. It is clear that the majority of students chose to learn English for practical reasons, such as employment and examination.

The attendance at various English language classes organized by the British Council and others also reflects the importance of English in Hong Kong society. In 1983, 35,000 people enrolled in the language classes. To many people, the

Table 3. Mean rating of reasons for attending English courses.

| Reasons | Mean Rating |
|-------------------------|-------------|
| For future job needs | 3.462 |
| For examination purpose | 2.364 |
| For present job needs | 2.227 |
| For traveling purpose | 1.271 |
| For interests | 1.271 |
| Others | 0.169 |

more English you learn, the better you are both in terms of education and career. Chau stated that "In Hong Kong, money talks English, especially in education" (cited in Fu 1987, 31).

Economic Reasons

The economic reason was perhaps the most clearly stated in the 1965 White Paper on Education Policy (Hong Kong Government 1965, 83). While acknowledging the educational and cultural advantage of learning through the mother tongue, the White Paper stated that "we are reluctant to endorse this recommendation in the fact of the parental preference for Anglo-Chinese secondary education, the fact that the English language is an important medium of international communication and that a knowledge of it has undoubted commercial value in Hong Kong" (cited in Lee, 1993, 212). Lin stated:

Hong Kong people are afraid of losing their "economic stability and prosperity" (a recurrent phrase in the public discourses in Hong Kong). The government, academic and media discourses repeatedly assert that Hong Kong's economic prosperity depends on attracting foreign investors, which in turn depends on providing them with an English-conversant labour force. This saturation of consciousness by the "economic argument" has legitimised the subordination of all sociocultural and educational goals to the single goal of mastering a socially,

culturally, and linguistically distant language for the majority of children in Hong Kong. (cited in Adamson, 1997, 91)

Social Mobility Reasons

Parents and students perceive English as a means of climbing the social ladder. In an Urban Family Life survey, students were asked to see how they felt about the importance of the English language. Downey recorded the findings:

1. Pupils with a greater knowledge of the English language are from higher class backgrounds, have higher expectations of attending universities, and are more confident about their career success.
2. Pupils with the most knowledge of English are more optimistic about the future.
3. Pupils in Chinese middle schools, as well as in Anglo-Chinese schools, are most optimistic about their future if they have a good knowledge of the English language (cited in Lee 1993, 213).

OPPOSITIONS AGAINST MOTHER-TONGUE TEACHING

Despite the genuine efforts of the Education Department, mother-tongue teaching has met with little success. People either ignore or reject it, not because of educational reasons but basically on socio-economic grounds.

Parental Attitudes

For most parents, Chinese-medium schools are not preferred alternatives for their children. From a 1989 study, Yau concluded that among the students presently enrolled in Chinese middle schools, some would have preferred going to Anglo-Chinese schools if there had been a place for them.

Like students, parents also perceive English as an important tool to help their

children in their future careers. In 1989, the Education Commission formed a working group to review the current status of the medium of instruction. The Report of the Working Group on the Review of Language Improvement Measures states the following:

Most parents know that English has a utilitarian value as a gateway to better prospects in life for their children within Hong Kong or outside of it, and they therefore exert a great deal of pressure on schools in favour of English as a medium of instruction. (cited in Lee 1993, 213)

Business Attitudes

The termination of British colonial rule has not reduced the importance of English in Hong Kong because English is still the lingua franca of the world. As Lord (1987, 11) stated:

In Hong Kong, over the past two decades, English has changed from being a purely colonial language whose use was largely restricted to government circles, the law, high-level business, and a few other sectors, to becoming an indispensable language of wider communication, for a growingly large range of people, all the way down from top brass to clerks, from taipans to secretaries.

The business community opposes the change of teaching medium in schools and argues that English is essential to the success of Hong Kong's future economy, as well as to society as a whole. In response to the new language policy, the business sectors launched a "Hong Kong Language Campaign" between 1989 and 1990 to improve the English language ability of Hong Kong students and to raise the public awareness of the importance of English through various symposia and community activities. As a member of the Language Campaign stated, "The Language Campaign has helped to raise the consciousness of the community at

large about the threat of a declining level of English to the continuing success of Hong Kong as an international business community" (cited in Pun 1997, 94).

Schools' Attitudes

One of the problems facing Chinese schools is that most parents and children view Chinese schools as inferior to English schools. Most believe that students from the Chinese schools are less likely to succeed in higher education and future careers. Some schools have tried to switch their medium of instruction from English to Chinese. Despite their genuine efforts, some of them failed miserably. The Carmel Secondary School was the salient example. In 1987, the school decided to switch their instructional language from English to Chinese. However after three years of experimentation, the school switched back to English based on the following reasons:

1. After the school announced its new language policy, it no longer could attract as many good students. The drop of the quality of students had a demoralizing effect on their teachers.
2. Pressure from parents was another main factor for the failure. Most parents opposed the switch, believing that the new system could not help their students compete with others in the future.
3. Even teachers feared that their students would not be able to catch up with others once they switched to other English schools and tertiary education.

David Cheung, the principal of Carmel Secondary School and an advocate of mother-tongue education, resigned after the incident (Interview, 1998). Because most students and their parents prefer English schools, Chinese middle schools become their second choice. As a result, Chinese-medium schools have to accept that most students who come to their schools are of much

lower academic caliber. Although many school principals realized that using Chinese as the teaching medium could be good for students, they also feared that once they switched the instruction language to Chinese, they would not be able to attract students of the same quality. The nine-year compulsory education review committee interviewed twenty-one principals. Twelve expressed the fear that the adoption of Chinese-medium education would adversely affect the standard and image of their schools (cited in Yau 1989, 293).

In order to minimize such fears, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) conducted a survey in July 1993. The schools were asked whether they were willing to change to mother-tongue education if such a change would not affect their competitiveness and if all the schools were going to switch their medium of instruction at the same time. Of the schools surveyed, 210 secondary schools (over 50%) indicated that they would support such a change. However, when the HKPTU initiated the "Mother Tongue Charter" and asked school sponsoring bodies in 1996 to sign it as a pledge in support of mother-tongue education, the response rates were extremely low. According to Au Pak-kuen, vice president of HKPTU, "only 29 schools signed the 'Mother Tongue Charter.'" As one principal stated, "Many schools only paid lip-service to mother tongue education and not many schools really want to take the lead because of the Carmel secondary school's effect. It is quite a sad thing." (Personal interview 1997)

CONCLUSION

Few dispute the fact that mother-tongue education is effective and beneficial for the majority of Hong Kong students. As has already been pointed out, mother-tongue education gives students a better understanding of what is being taught and fosters their interest in

their subjects. However, despite all these merits, most parents have negative attitudes toward the new language policy and insist that their children be enrolled in English-medium schools. This paper has noted that the medium of instruction is not primarily an educational issue in Hong Kong. Rather, social and economic factors have played important roles in affecting the successful implementation of the language policy.

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