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# HONG KONG'S ENGLISH TEACHING CONUNDRUM

By C.K. Lau

*“The necessity for most (Hong Kong) students to learn two languages – English and Chinese – is an unusual privilege and burden.”*

*“Many Chinese speakers find it almost impossible to master English at the level of proficiency required for intricate thinking; and yet pupils from non-English speaking Chinese families have to express themselves in English at school. Under these conditions, more emphasis tends to be placed upon rote learning.”*

*“The mother tongue is, all other things being equal, the best medium of teaching and learning.”*

*“The aspirations of upwardly mobile Chinese families (rather than the desire by the powerful of the political economy to dominate the scene) keep at bay any formal acceptance of Cantonese as a major medium of instruction, because of the preference for English.”*

*“One possibility is to embark on a long-term project of changing parents’ and employers’ attitudes towards Chinese as a teaching medium.”*

- Excerpts from *A Perspective on Education in Hong Kong: Report by a Visiting Panel*, November 1982

National pride was behind moves in many former colonies to discard colonial tongues in favor of native languages at independence. For example, when Malaysia became a sovereign nation in 1957, it tried to end the supremacy of English in colonial times by making Bahasa Melayu the national and official language. Since 1970, it has been used as the medium of instruction at all levels and in all fields. English standards suffered as a result, and it took Malaysia two decades to face up to the

problem. In 2002, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad announced a policy switch to restore English as the teaching language, he had to justify it as being in the national interest.

To casual observers, the English language seems to have suffered a similar fate in Hong Kong. One of the first major policy moves by Tung Chee-hwa, the first Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, was to order most secondary schools to use Chinese—the mother-tongue of most students—rather than English as the medium of instruction from 1998.

(In Hong Kong, using Chinese as the teaching medium means, in practice, using textbooks written in standard modern Chinese and having teachers lecture in Cantonese, the dominant dialect in southern China and most Hong Kong homes. It has to be noted that the oral equivalent of standard modern Chinese is Putonghua, or Mandarin, which differs greatly from Cantonese phonetically. Strictly speaking, Cantonese is not a script-based language and its written form is not widely accepted outside southern China. For this reason, although mother-tongue teaching means using Cantonese as the classroom language, the policy is formally referred to as teaching and learning in Chinese.)

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Only 114 schools, or about 30% of the total, were allowed to teach in English on the grounds that their instructors had the ability to do so and their students had the minimal English skills needed to use it for learning other subjects. A decade later, however, his successor, Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, decreed a policy change in 2009 that will allow more secondary schools to use English, following persistent complaints in the community that English standards had fallen because of the so-called mother-tongue teaching policy.

### **A Pragmatic Approach**

But it would be wrong to draw a parallel between the post-colonial fates of English in Malaysia and Hong Kong as if they were driven by similar nationalistic forces. For one thing, the termination of colonial rule in Hong Kong did not take the form of independence. Instead, Hong Kong was returned to a motherland, China. More significantly, at the time

of the handover, most Hong Kong Chinese did not regard English as a colonial legacy that had to be purged. They had a pragmatic attitude towards English, regarding it as the global language that connects them to the world and a key component of the Hong Kong system that should be preserved under the so-called “one country, two systems” policy. The status of English as an official language in post-1997 Hong Kong is guaranteed by the Basic Law, a Chinese law that is the city’s de facto constitution. Its Article 9 provides that: “In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.”

In fact, when Mr Tung pressed ahead with the mother-tongue teaching policy, he was following a plan hatched during the last years of colonial rule. Its primary objective was educational rather than political; it was about protecting young people who have difficulty learning in English. That was also why some 30% were allowed to continue teaching in English. To put the policy in perspective, it was conceived to address the school system’s lop-sided emphasis on English. As proficiency in English was a prerequisite for well-paid civil service jobs and lucrative professional careers, the language had a very high market value. Even though ethnic Chinese constituted 95% of the city’s population and English was hardly spoken outside government and corporate offices, there was tremendous pressure on Chinese children to learn English. While Chinese was the teaching language in most primary schools, a big chunk of class time was devoted to teaching English as a subject. Most secondary schools used English as the teaching language, in the belief that primary school students had acquired sufficient skill in the language to use it to learn other subjects and that increased exposure would help develop fluency.

Until 1978, these assumptions had a grain of truth, as only about 30% of primary students were able to receive secondary education in public schools after passing extremely competitive examinations in three subjects—English, Chinese and mathematics. These high-stake tests drove schools to drill their students in these subjects, often at the expense of other subjects. Most who passed the tests were, by and large, able to follow instructions in English, even though their proficiency was by no

means comparable to native speakers of similar age.

When secondary education became universal and compulsory in 1978, however, the challenge of teaching most secondary students in a foreign language soon became apparent. English had never been properly taught in most primary schools, due to a dearth of trained teachers and the absence of a social environment conducive to English learning. As a result, many children failed to master the language and ended up dreading it. On entering secondary schools, the harsh reality of having to use English to learn other academic subjects killed off many students' interests in learning. It did not help that many teachers themselves did not have an adequate command of English to deliver inspiring lectures. Studies found that the problem of juvenile delinquency in Hong Kong was compounded by young people's heavy language load and the pressure to learn in English.

In the early 1980s, the Hong Kong Government commissioned a panel of international experts to review the city's education system. The medium of instruction was a major issue in its 1982 report, *A Perspective on Education in Hong Kong: Report by a Visiting Panel* (see excerpts above). The study confirmed what was widely known at the time. Although most secondary schools claimed to teach in English, many teachers lacked the necessary skills to do so and many students had great difficulty learning in English. Though textbooks were in English, lectures were delivered in a mixture of English and Cantonese that was not conducive to developing proper skills in either language or higher-order thinking. The commission stated that, all things being equal, the mother-tongue—Chinese for the majority of students in Hong Kong—was the best medium for teaching and learning. However, attempts to encourage schools and students to teach and learn in Chinese were shunned because of the high market value of English.

### **“Firm Guidance” for Schools**

The colonial administration's response was to set up an Education Commission, comprising officials, educators and lay members, to map strategies to address issues identified by the panel. In successive reports, the commission laid down a comprehensive action plan to progressively

encourage more secondary schools to teach in Chinese rather than English, stream students according to their language skills and change parents' attitude towards teaching in Chinese. In its fourth report, published in November 1990, the commission spelled out, for the first time, a time-table for providing "firm guidance" to secondary schools—to become effective in 1998—on whether they should teach in Chinese or English according to the capabilities of their staff and students. The time-table and related measures to implement mother-tongue teaching was affirmed in the commission's sixth report published in March 1996.

If the Education Commission had set 1998 as the year to implement mother-tongue teaching in anticipation of Hong Kong's 1997 reunification with China, its report did not say so. But one would have thought that the termination of colonial rule should lead to a softening of attitudes against using Chinese as the medium of instruction. Indeed, during the last years of British rule, many pundits predicted that after 1997 the supremacy of English in colonial Hong Kong would be overtaken by Putonghua, the Chinese national language. Yet when Mr Tung decided to implement the commission's plan, he was roundly criticised—erroneously—for making a political decision to please Beijing by suppressing English, the colonial language. By allowing 114 secondary schools to continue teaching in English, he was condemned for launching a socially divisive policy that effectively endorsed the "superior" status of English-medium schools and the "inferior" standing of Chinese-medium ones. Schools and parents were not convinced that children could master English by learning it as a subject in Chinese-medium schools, despite an intensive official campaign to promote the merits of mother-tongue teaching.

Over the following decade, the perceived successes and failings of mother-tongue teaching were constantly debated in the community. The Tung administration pointed to slight, but all-round, improvements in test scores among graduates of Chinese-medium schools which previously taught in English as evidence that mother-tongue teaching was working. Critics, however, pointed to an apparent decline in English skills among school-leavers as proof that the policy had failed. To them, it is far more important for students to score better in English than in other subjects by

learning them in Chinese.

A complicating factor is the secondary school place allocation system. It groups primary school graduates into three bands—five bands before 2000—by performance. The best students from Band One get to pick their desired secondary school first, and they tend to choose one that teaches in English. Students from Bands Two and Three are lower on the priority ladder for school selection. As most of these students are judged not ready to learn in English and schools cannot teach in English unless they get a sufficient number of students capable of learning in English, the mother-tongue teaching policy causes widespread resentment. Parents and students blame it for depriving students of the “right” to receive an education in English. Most schools that were stripped of the “right” to teach in English grumble that the English-medium schools have creamed off the best students and the allocation system makes it very difficult for them to climb the ladder of recognition by teaching in English.

### **A Reversal of Policy**

By 2008, five classes of students subject to mother-tongue teaching had completed secondary school. A study found that a smaller proportion of graduates from Chinese-medium schools were able to enter university because of their poor English. This was partly because qualified primary pupils who lived in low-income districts had a lower chance of entering English-medium secondary schools, which tended to be located in high-income districts. In January 2009, the Tsang administration announced that schools would be allowed more discretion when choosing their teaching language. No longer will each one be compelled to teach all classes in English or Chinese. Instead, each can decide to teach all or some students, or all or some subjects, in English or Chinese, based on the capabilities of staff and students. Officially, the change was billed as a fine-tuning of the mother-tongue teaching policy, but there is no doubt that it amounts to a return to the pre-1998 situation of allowing schools to choose their teaching language.

Public reaction to the policy change has been largely positive, despite the misgivings of some educators who lament that most students will suffer by learning in a foreign language. Even the Hong Kong

Professional Teachers' Union, the city's largest teachers' union which campaigned in favour of mother-tongue teaching before 1998 on educational grounds, has acquiesced to the change. Nor has any political party, including those that had endorsed mother-tongue education a decade earlier, spoken against the reversal.

It is not difficult to understand why. While colonial rule had ended, the market value of English remains high in Hong Kong because of its as yet unrivalled status as the global language. Putonghua has become more popular as well as acceptable in high society, thanks to rising numbers of mainland Chinese executives in corporate boardrooms. In the street, more Putonghua is now heard due to an influx of tourists from all over China. But there is no sign of an impending demise of the English language in Hong Kong. Parental pressure on children to learn English well has increased rather than reduced. Year after year, the media have no difficulties zooming in on the crying faces of children who failed to be allocated a much coveted place in an English-medium school.

By restoring English-medium teaching in most secondary schools, Mr Tsang has made a shrewd move that has earned him political kudos. But whether the policy will arrest an alleged decline in English standards is uncertain. Using English as the medium of instruction from Secondary One as a means of developing proficiency might have worked for top students in the past, but it did not work for many other students once universal secondary education was introduced. In many non-English speaking countries, children do not begin to learn English until they are well into their teens, but they manage to achieve a much higher level of proficiency than that attained in Hong Kong.

The "fine-tuned" mother-tongue teaching policy is supposed to give schools the flexibility of choosing the right teaching language to match students' language capability. In theory, as long as schools are professional in making their choices and streaming their students, the appropriate medium will be chosen to match the capabilities of both teachers and students, and the teaching language should not become an impediment to effective teaching and learning. However, the fear is that, as was the case before 1998, too many schools will opt to teach in English even though their teachers and students are not ready. If so, then

the age-old problems of young people leaving school with a poor command of both English and Chinese and stunted thinking skills would remain unaddressed.

### **A History of Complaints**

It also needs to be pointed out that complaints about poor English skills of Hong Kong Chinese are as old as the city's history, but the reasons attributed to allegedly falling standards have changed over the years. In the mid-1980s, when most secondary schools were still using English as the teaching language and less than 5% of the 17-20 age group could receive tertiary education in Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong cited school-leavers' falling English standards as one of the reasons why it should lengthen its degree programmes from three to four years. Employers bemoaned that young recruits were unable to perform simple tasks in English and that their Chinese skills were also declining. They put the blame on the massive expansion of secondary education and the admission of too many "unqualified" students into university. In the 1990s, there were grumblings that young people were losing interest in learning English because they felt the language would no longer be useful after 1997. After the handover, critics began to put the blame on mother-tongue teaching. Now that mother-tongue teaching will be ditched, critics no doubt will find other excuses.

In fact, there is evidence that English standards have risen rather than fallen since universal secondary education was introduced 30 years ago. According to an Education Commission report in 1994, the portion of the population claiming to understand English rose from 44% in 1983 to 70% in 1993. Census data showed that the proportion of the population that could speak English, either as a first or second language, rose from 38.1% in 1996 to 43% in 2001 and 44.7% in 2006. What has not been ascertained are the levels of proficiency of these self-professed English speakers. It is safe to say, however, that more people now understand some English and the number of highly competent English users also has increased. The problem is that English proficiency has not improved quickly enough to meet ever-growing demand, as Hong Kong climbs the value ladder to become a service economy. Meanwhile, much more poor English can be heard and seen because many more people now use it,

giving the impression that standards have fallen.

What is certain is that the over-whelming majority of Hong Kong Chinese do not dispute the importance of English as a necessary tool for sustaining Hong Kong's growth as an international business center. They are disappointed that the education system fails to provide an adequate supply of competent English users. Relative to the vast resources devoted to teaching English, Hong Kong has a sorry story to tell in terms of efficacy. A sure formula for producing more competent English users in this Chinese society has yet been found.

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