Understanding Mixed Code and Classroom Code-switching: Myths and Realities[1]

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by

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Abstract

Background:

Cantonese-English mixed code is ubiquitous in Hong Kong society, and yet using mixed code is widely perceived as improper. This paper presents evidence of mixed code being socially constructed as bad language behavior. In the education domain, an EDB guideline bans mixed code in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to stick to Cantonese or English, depending on the school-based medium of instruction policy (i.e. EMI vs. CMI schools).

Aims or focus of discussion:

This paper analyzes the major reasons why mixed code is so difficult to avoid, both inside and outside the classroom. One important factor is the 'medium-of-learning effect'. Empirical evidence will be presented to demonstrate students' cognitive dependence on English terminologies as a direct result of English-medium education. The paper draws implications for classroom code-switching, which is pedagogically a valuable linguistic resource.

Arguments / comments / suggestions:

The EDB guideline banning mixed code in the classroom is too rigid. Code-switching has great potential for helping the bilingual teacher to achieve context-specific teaching and learning goals like clarifying difficult concepts and reinforcing students' bilingual lexicon (e.g. melamine/三聚氰胺, financial tsunami/金融海嘯). For EMI teachers, switching to Cantonese helps maintain class discipline, build rapport and reduce social distance with students. The assumption or claim that mixed code leads to declining English or even Chinese standards is not informed by sound empirical evidence.

Conclusion:

Educated Chinese Hongkongers find it difficult to resist using some English in their informal interactions with others in Cantonese, resulting in mixed code. Instead of banning mixed code indiscriminately, a more proactive and productive approach will be to conduct empirical research with a view to (a) better understanding the circumstances under which classroom code-switching is necessary, (b) identifying pedagogically sound and productive code-switching practices, and (c) disseminating good code-switching practices through demonstrations, workshops, and teacher-training.

Keywords: code-switching, medium of instruction, bilingual teaching strategies

摘要

背景:

儘管廣東話與英語的中英混用一般不為人所接受,中英混用在香港社會極為普遍。本文列舉一些例子,說明中英混用如何被建構成不當的語言行為。在教育的範疇,教育局有一明確指引,禁止老師上課時轉換語碼,並呼籲老師該視乎其教學語言(即英文或中文)的規定,使用純正的廣東話或英文授課。

重點:

筆者分析為何無論課堂內外,中英混用均難以避免。構成中英混用的成因很多,本文提出實證,重點分析其中一項重要成因 —— '教學語文效應',即通過英語學習所產生的對英語專用術語的倚賴。這分析結果顯示,若用得其所的話,中英混用在課堂上乃一項重要的語用資源,能有效地提昇教學質素。

論點 / 建議:

現時教育局禁止老師中英混用的指引有欠靈活和彈性。對具備雙語能力的老師來說,中英混用在促進教與學的用途上有很大的潛力,讓學生更容易掌握複雜的英語概念,以至鞏固學生的雙語詞彙,例如指出 melamine 即三聚氰胺, financial tsunami 一般被譯作金融海嘯。在英語作為教學語言的課堂上,老

師若能在適當的時候直接以學生熟悉的語言授課，有助維持班房的秩序，建立彼此間的互信，並能有效地拉近師生的距離。有人提出中英混用會導致英語甚或中文水平下滑，這說法缺乏實證支持。

結論：

教育程度越高的香港華人，他們之間用廣東話交談的時候出現英文片言隻語的情況越難抗拒，中英混用便因此形成。與其全面禁止在課堂上轉換語碼，筆者呼籲，應通過實證研究，深入了解語碼轉換在何種情況之下難以避免，如何有利於教學質素的提昇，並通過範例，工作坊，及師資培訓等形式把教學效果顯著的語碼轉換方式給老師推介。

關鍵詞：語碼轉換(中英混用)，教學語言，雙語教學策略

1. The ubiquity of mixed code in Hong Kong society

The use of Cantonese-English mixed code (hereafter 'mixed code') in Hong Kong is widely perceived as indicative of the speaker/writer's inability to use 'pure' Cantonese/Chinese or English. In speech, mixed code refers to the sprinkling of English expressions in otherwise Cantonese conversation. In writing, mixed code also commonly occurs in the Chinese press when English words of various lengths feature in a sea of Chinese characters. Despite a widely shared negative perception, therefore, mixed code is pervasive in informal communicative situations (Li, 2000, 2003, 2008; Wu and Chan, 2007). It is for example commonly used in local Chinese media, especially in advertising slogans such as '卡數 Easy Go' ('credit card payments easy go' by Promise, a Japanese finance group 邦民日本財務), or '讓肌膚每天做 spa' ('treat your skin to spa every day', which is frequently heard in another advert of a liquid soap on TV).

The term 'mixed code' refers to the outcome of language alternation. When emphasis is placed on the process of language alternation, different terms are used depending on the scholar. Some use the term 'code-switching' (CS) to refer to the alternate use of two or more languages in an extended stretch of discourse, where the switch takes place at sentence or clause boundaries. When the switch takes place within a sentence or clause, the term 'code-mixing' (CM) is preferred. As many have pointed out, however, the term code-mixing itself tends to attract negative associations, giving (especially lay readers) the value-loaded impression that 'mixing' languages is symptomatic of bad or pathological language behavior. To avoid such unwanted associations, therefore, the term code-switching will be used in this paper to designate switching between Cantonese and English at both the inter- and intra-sentential level, although the latter is clearly more commonly found in informal interactions between educated Chinese Hongkongers.

It should be noted that CS is by no means unique to Hong Kong. It is very commonly

found, in speech as well as in writing, in other multilingual societies such as India, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore (see, e.g., Lin, 2008). What is interesting is that CS, more often than not involving English, is similarly felt to be bad by many multilingual speakers in these societies.

2. Evidence of increasing multilingualism in Hong Kong SAR

Hong Kong is a multilingual society with an overwhelming majority – about 95 per cent – being ethnic Chinese. The percentage of Hong Kong population aged 5 and above with Cantonese, English or Putonghua as their 'usual language' and 'another language' are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of Hong Kong population aged 5 and above with Cantonese, English or Putonghua as their 'usual language' and 'another language'

Language	Usual language	Another language
Cantonese	90.8%	5.7%
English	2.8%	41.8%
Putonghua	0.9%	39.2%

Source: *Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census Main Report Volume I* (2007), Table 3.12, p.44.

These figures suggest that while demographically Hong Kong SAR remains essentially a Chinese society, its population can no longer be characterized as monolingual. Rather, for work- or study-related purposes, Hong Kong people need to speak at least some English and/or Putonghua, in addition to the dominant vernacular, Cantonese. The above figures are strongly indicative of English and Putonghua being looked upon, and increasingly used, as linguistic resources in the local community.

3. Language policy: Problems toward biliteracy and trilingualism

Well before the return of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, there was general consensus among policy-makers and leaders in the business and education sectors that, as Hong Kong was gradually moving from a manufacturing-based to a service- and knowledge-based society, a workforce with a reasonably high level of proficiency in English and Putonghua is one important condition for the sustained socioeconomic vitality of this former British colony. This is the background against which the official language policy of the first Hong Kong SAR administration under Mr. Tung Chee-hwa was framed as 'biliteracy and trilingualism' (兩文三語). Accordingly, one of the most important goals in the language-in-education policy is to help Hongkongers develop

an ability to read and write Chinese and English, and to speak and understand Cantonese, English and Putonghua (Luke, 1992; So, 2000; for an historical overview of the medium-of-instruction policy in Hong Kong, see Ho and Ho, 2004; Tsui et al., 1999).

It has been well over a decade since this official policy goal was formally pronounced in public. Huge amounts of resources have been allocated each year to education providers, but the actual language learning outcomes of Hong Kong students, university graduates included, leave much to be desired. Employers of transnational consortiums and business leaders are among those whose concerns or complaints about the adverse consequences of 'declining English standards' of the local workforce on the local economy are often amplified in the local media. In this regard, Bolton (2003) speaks of the 'complaint tradition' in his book on Chinese Englishes, and disputes the "myth" of declining English standards.

One important explanation behind Hong Kong students' generally disappointing language proficiency attainment may be found in the Hong Kong language environment. Despite being a co-official language, English functions more like a foreign than a second language (Li, 1999; Li, in press). With the exception of students studying in EMI schools, for the majority of local students English is taught and learned essentially as a school subject (Lu, 2005). The same is true of Putonghua which to Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers is in many aspects a second language, especially pronunciation and vocabulary (Huang and Yang, 2000).

Unlike Singapore, Hong Kong Chinese who are fluent in Cantonese/Chinese and English are reluctant to use English entirely as the medium of communication among themselves – except in the presence of non-Cantonese speakers (Li, 1999; Li, in press). One consequence is that it is difficult for local Chinese students to find natural opportunities to practise using the language inputs obtained in English lessons. Parents who can afford it would enroll their children in tutorial centers, some of which charge exorbitant fees, just to give them opportunities to brush up their speaking skills with tutors and their peers.

What is the likelihood for learners learning English as a school subject to develop native-like competence in English? Experience suggests that the chance is slim. Many parents recognize this point; those who can afford it would send their children to study in an English-speaking country at the primary or secondary level, hoping that they could pick up English more easily. Early immersion does make a difference to these students, but often at the cost of their literacy development in Chinese. For

many less affluent Chinese parents, local international schools are the next best alternative. For students who cannot afford to study abroad, the question was raised as to whether it matters if their level of English attainment falls short of native-like proficiency. Given the unfavourable language-learning environment outlined above, Kirkpatrick (2008) finds it neither realistic nor necessary to develop native-like competence in English and Putonghua. Rather, a more realistic goal would be to equip Hong Kong students with essential language skills needed for 'functional trilingualism'.

4. Mixed code is socially disapproved and banned in the classroom

Evidence of mixed code being socially disapproved may be found from time to time in news stories. In November 2007, during the election campaigns of former Chief Secretary Mrs. Anson Chan and former security chief, Mrs. Regina Ip for the place in Legco left vacant by the deceased MA Lik, Mrs. Chan was reportedly offered some coaching in Cantonese debating skills apparently because, having been educated in English, her speaking skills in Cantonese were not as good as her skills in English. One news story has it that, to encourage her to stick to Cantonese, she would be fined for using mixed code during practice (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, 06/11/2007, A27).

In another feature article in *South China Morning Post* (Taylor, 1999), a mainland Chinese teacher of Putonghua at Lingnan University, Ms. Chen, was reportedly proud of her "monolingual stubbornness". She regarded mixing languages as wrong:

> Ms Chen refuses to speak Cantonese or English to her students – inside or outside the classroom. 'Otherwise, you end up with linguistic pollution,' she said. Ms Chen was critical of the mixed code that often took place in Hong Kong's classrooms, believing that only one language – or dialect – should be allowed at a time. (Taylor, 1999)

These two examples are just a trickle of ample evidence that mixed code is socially constructed as a form of bad, if not pathological language behavior (Lin, 2000). No wonder mixed code is banned in the classroom. This government stance may be traced back to the late 1980s. In 1990, for example, Report No. 4 of the Education Commission recommended that mixed code should be minimized. According to a current EDB (Education Bureau) guideline, teachers are encouraged to stick to the stipulated language of instruction Cantonese or English as much as possible. For instance, in one *Comprehensive Review Report* of the quality of teaching in an EMI

school conducted recently by the Quality Assurance Division of the EDB, some teachers were criticized for using Cantonese in what were supposed to be EMI lessons:

> "English, as the intended MOI, is not fully and proficiently used in a majority of lessons and Cantonese or mixed code is resorted to. The school needs to create and maintain a culture which ensures the faithful and fruitful use of EMI." (*Comprehensive Review Report*, 2007, p.15)

This lends indirect confirmation of anecdotes provided by some secondary school teachers regarding their psychological unease due to a lingering threat posed by the 'language police', namely the Principal's unplanned 'walkabout' during school hours.

Banning mixed code presupposes that it could be avoided. But is that so? Plenty of evidence suggests that the opposite is true. In fact, the more highly educated the Chinese bilingual, the more difficult it is to avoid using some English in the middle of Cantonese (and written Chinese, to a lesser extent). According to one tongue-in-cheek columnist of *Next* magazine, Mr. Victor Fung, then newly elected chairperson of Hong Kong University Council in 2001, could not help using some English when advising HKU students on the significance of English and Putonghua skills:

> "香港將會扮演 between 中國同世界　中介角色，希望兩邊語言 average 來講都可以達到最高水平..."
> ('Hong Kong will play a mediating role *between* China and the rest of the world, [I] hope [you] can reach the highest possible *average* proficiency level in both languages…').

When asked about his view toward code-mixing, Mr. Fung was quoted as saying

> "我間唔中都會講句英文，要講全中文會辛苦　"
> ('I sometimes use some English [when I speak Cantonese]; it is kind of taxing [for me] to speak Chinese entirely'; *Next*, 27/09/2001, p.92).

5. EMI-induced code-switching: The 'medium-of-learning effect'

It is well-known that Hong Kong Chinese are not keen on using English among themselves. Teachers of English will appreciate how difficult it is to get their students to stick to English during English lessons, university classes included. Somewhat

paradoxically, Chinese Hongkongers' reluctance to use English entirely and spontaneously for informal social interaction among themselves is in stark contrast with their readiness to sprinkle some English onto their Cantonese or written Chinese. Why? Research to date tends to suggest that CS reflects Chinese Hongkongers' hybrid Chinese-cum-western identity (see, e.g., Pennington, 1998). Findings in more recent research indicate that the picture is more complex than this.

To test to what extent educated Chinese Hongkongers are able to stick to 'pure' Cantonese, I conducted an experiment with 12 undergraduate students majoring in English (Li and Tse, 2002). They were instructed to follow an artificial 'no-English-allowed' rule of speaking for one day. At the end of the experiment, they had to write a diary and share their experiences in a focus group interview. The results showed that none of them could avoid using at least some English with friends and peers, especially when the topic touched upon school work or matters related to their university. One important finding is that technical terminologies taught and learned through the medium of English (e.g. *final year project*, *group presentation*) are particularly difficult to avoid, when such topics are invoked in conversation or electronic communication.

Li and Tse's (2002) one-day experiment has been replicated in a separate project involving a total of 108 student participants in Hong Kong and Taiwan (see Li et al., in press for more details). For one day, participants were asked to:

(a) speak only their local, dominant community language (Mandarin in Taiwan, Cantonese in Hong Kong);
(b) keep a record of speech events specifying 'who speaks what to whom and when';
(c) write a reflective diary in a language of their choice and send a soft copy of it to the investigators; and
(d) take part in a focus group discussion attended by participants studying the same discipline, sharing their experiences and views on the reasons behind their preferred language choice in context-specific situations.

Data consisted of two main sources: 108 participants' language diaries and the transcriptions of 13 focus group interviews. Results show that the medium-of-learning effect (Li and Tse, 2002) is strongly supported. For instance, one English major in Taiwan (CEF1) explained in her diary why it never occurred to her to refer to the Chinese equivalent of the word *syllabus* (of a course), because that word was used by the professor from day one of the course[2]:

| 1 | Another example is the '*kèchéng dàgāng biǎo*' or '*jiàoxúe jìndù biǎo*' – a progress chart of the course distributed by the professor at the first lecture. I have always called it '*syllabus*', and never thought about how it is called in Chinese; hence it was only when classmates from other departments had difficulty understanding [this term] that I realized [the need to] ask how [syllabus] is expressed [in Chinese] by others. (CEF1; original in Chinese except the word *syllabus*) |

A very similar point was made by a business major in Hong Kong (HBM4) with regard to the technical terms *sample size* and *pilot test* when talking to a lecturer:

| 2 | during our conversation, I couldn't avoid using some English words to express my meaning. Like when she asked about my progress in the research, I had to say something related to my sample size, pilot test, etc. I really don't know what the Chinese words are for sample size and pilot test, so I didn't mention this and just [kept] talking about something related to it or directly using the English words although I knew it violated the rule of this experiment. (HBM4) |

Further supporting evidence is found in what may be termed 'field-specific language choice', as shown in the data collected from Taiwanese participants, who reportedly perceived a strong need for using some Japanese, English, Italian and French when practicing judo, modern dance and baseball, opera singing, and fencing, respectively (Li et al., in press; cf. Fishman 1972).

More compelling evidence of the medium-of-learning effect comes from a mainland Chinese undergraduate student (HEF9), a native-speaker of Cantonese, who had been studying on exchange at City University of Hong Kong for about four months at the time of the experiment. Owing to space constraints, the instructive examples she cited during the focus group are summarily presented as follows:

- HEF9 could not help saying *CCIV* (pronounced in four syllables), which is the code of a compulsory 'Chinese Civilization' course at CityU. Even though this course was taught entirely in Chinese (Mandarin or Putonghua), it never occurred to her – and her peers for that matter – to refer to this course in Chinese as it was introduced to her from day one as *CCIV*.

- During her first computer lesson at CityU, HEF9 found it difficult to follow

her tutor's use of word-processing commands such as *click*, *double click*, *delete* and *print* in Cantonese-English mixed code, because the same commands had been introduced to her in Chinese (Putonghua/Cantonese). It took her a while to get used to such English commands in English. After studying in Hong Kong for several months, she gradually became addicted to English computer jargon when conversing with CityU classmates and peers in Cantonese, resulting in mixed code. This turned out to be a vexing problem, however, when later she returned to Guangzhou for a short visit, in that she had to avoid invoking English computer jargon when talking to mainland classmates and peers. A few even accused her of snobbism after studying in Hong Kong for just a few months, which made her feel very upset.

- When HEF9 first heard her Hong Kong peers use the term *add* and *drop* (courses), she had no idea why these English verbs were necessary since at the university in Guangzhou, the same meanings are usually expressed in Cantonese as 揀科 (gaan2 fo1, 'choose course') or 揀選修科 (gaan2 syun2 sau1 fo1, 'choose elective course'). She soon realized, however, that when a more specific distinction had to be made between two types of elective course at CityU – program electives and OOD (out-of-discipline) courses – the use of more specific expressions *add, drop, OOD, elective* would be clearer and for that reason more difficult to avoid (e.g., *add咗科 OOD*, 'added an OOD'; *drop咗科 elective*, 'dropped an elective'), resulting in mixed code. One highly plausible reason why these terms are so popular among members of the CityU community is that most university-wide announcements and information for students at CityU are written in English.

- One focus group participant invoked a similar example of being unfamiliar with the Chinese equivalents of technical jargon such as *sine, cosine* and *tangent* as a direct result of learning mathematics through English. HEF9 did not follow those English terms until it was glossed by me, one of the moderators present, as 函數 (haam4 sou3, 'trigonometry', or 三角函數, saam1 gok3 haam5 sou3, to be more exact).

In his book on 'MIX', Gibbons (1987) characterizes instances of MOI-induced code-switching such as those exemplified above as the 'learning effect'. To give due recognition of the significant role played by the medium of learning and teaching, the term 'medium-of-learning effect' is preferred here. This effect is arguably triggered by what may be called the 'first-impression hypothesis':

> When a concept C is first encountered in language X, C tends to be cognitively mediated through the language X (Cx), even if a direct translation of C is subsequently encountered in language Y (Cy).

In view of the evidence presented above, educated Chinese-English bilinguals who believe they could maintain a water-tight boundary between Cantonese and English can give it a try, by going through the same experiment for an hour or two and see how successful they are in preventing English-dominant, field-specific terminologies from cropping up in their Cantonese.

6. Other reasons for code-switching

Research shows that CS may be triggered by several other factors, some linguistic or psycholinguistic, others social (Li, 2000, 2003, 2008). Some English terms are preferred to their Chinese equivalents either because there are no known Chinese equivalents (i.e. lexical gap, Li et al., in press). *YouTube* and *Facebook* are two such examples. To my knowledge, there is as yet no idiomatic-sounding Chinese equivalent of YouTube or Facebook. Sometimes the Chinese equivalents are known but obscure to the speaker/writer at the time of speaking/writing (e.g. due to fatigue).

Other times an English term is preferred because it reflects the preference of the community or the group of which the speaker/writer is a member. *Email* and *blog* were once technological novelties, but their Chinese equivalents have evolved meanwhile (電郵 and 網誌 respectively). These Chinese or Cantonese equivalents are however dispreferred, which is why *email* and *blog* are often used in mixed code. To a large extent, the same may be said of (electronic) *games*, which occurs much more often than 電子遊戲 or its abbreviated, albeit less transparent version 電玩. There are other cases where the Chinese equivalent is shunned. In Li and Tse's (2002) experimental study, one female participant found it embarrassing to invite a male friend to play war games. As she explained, without that artificial 'no-English-allowed' rule of speaking, she would have used mixed code 打 *war games*. To honour that rule of speaking, she found herself saying 打野戰 (daa2 je5 zin3), the usual Cantonese translation of 'play war games'. It was embarrassing because in Hong Kong, *daa2 je5 zin3* is often used in reference to illicit sex activities.

Where semantic discrepancy between an English term and its corresponding Chinese term is not an issue, sometimes the English term may be preferred because it is shorter and thus more convenient than its Chinese counterpart. This is clearly the

case of English acronyms such as *TSA* (全港系統性評估), *TBL* (以作業為本學習), and *SBA* (校本評核), among many others. Compared with these standard Chinese equivalents, the English acronyms save the speaker up to four syllables. Two other popular examples in the domain of business are *WTO* and *CEPA*. Top mainland Chinese politicians are frequently heard using *WTO* in the middle of press conferences delivered in Putonghua, while *CEPA* often figures prominently in the Chinese press, including headlines such as:

> 傳胡將向台送 CEPA 大禮
>
> ('rumour has it that Hu [Jintao] would present CEPA as a big gift to Taiwan', *Hong Kong Economic Times*, 29 April 2005, A23).

The standard Chinese translation of CEPA requires an additional five characters or syllables: 更緊密經貿關係安排, for which there is no workable Chinese abbreviation. A very similar reason helps explain why, in the realm of natural science, *DNA* is preferred, in speech as much as in writing, to the six-syllable standard Chinese equivalent 去氧核糖核酸 (*qù yǎng hé táng hé suān*), suggesting some 'principle of economy' is at work in bilingual conversation (Li, 2000, 2003, 2008).

7. Ubiquity of mixed code in society: Some conclusions

There is some evidence that CS is EMI-induced. This is especially evident in light of the general reluctance of Hong Kong Chinese to use English entirely and spontaneously among themselves. With over 90 per cent of the local population speaking Cantonese as their usual language, an English-only language choice in Chinese-Chinese interaction is generally perceived as highly marked. This is why speaking English with peers, be it for the sake of meaning-making or language practice, makes the conversation sound so unnatural and the speakers so uncomfortable. No wonder Chinese Hongkongers' attempts at speaking English with peers tend to be aborted after a few half-hearted trials, with or without their well-intentioned efforts being interpreted as showing off.

On the other hand, as a direct consequence of learning through the medium of English as well as the influx of English terminologies in such domains as IT, business, fashion, nonlocal food items (delicacies), and showbiz, Hongkongers get cognitively dependent on English, which tends to surface when those terms are invoked in informal conversation or writing (Li, 2000, 2003, 2008).

Thanks to the nine-year compulsory education policy since 1978, Chinese

Hongkongers have developed basic literacy skills in English. When conversing with one another in Cantonese, therefore, English is a useful additional linguistic resource for meaning-making. Below is a summary of the typical situations in which Chinese Hongkongers find English a useful resource in their informal interactions:

1. when there are no known Chinese equivalents at present (i.e. lexical gap, e.g. *iPhone, iPod, MP3, YouTube, Facebook*);

2. when the English terms are cognitively more salient due to EMI education (e.g. *final year project, group presentation, PowerPoint, credit transfer, immersion*), and products and services which are better known by their English brand names in adverts (compare the shampoo *Rejoice* and 飄柔), even though Chinese equivalents have subsequently been encountered;

3. when the Chinese equivalents are dispreferred for semantic reasons (i.e. the corresponding Chinese terms sound funny, e.g. 歡樂時光 for *happy hour*; 點擊, 雙擊 for *click* and *double click*; 打野戰 for 打 *war games*);

4. when the English terms are considered more convenient, especially shorter and well-known acronyms, e.g. *CEPA, DNA, IT, WTO* and school jargon involved in Hong Kong education reform such as *SBA, TBL*, and *NSS*, etc.); and

5. when, occasionally, negotiation of identity is clearly in evidence, for example, in Chinese-Chinese communication between snobbish shop assistants and shoppers who feel they deserve better service, the choice of English, especially with native-like accent, may serve an indexical function. English hints at the speaker being a member of the socioeconomically more affluent elite group of upwardly mobile, and better-educated native speakers of English.

8. Some implication for classroom code-switching and the MOI policy

Used judiciously in classroom settings, switching to English in the middle of Cantonese instruction, or switching to Cantonese while teaching in English may potentially have pedagogical merits (see, e.g., Ho, 2008; Lu, 2005; Luke, 1992). This is increasingly borne out by CS research worldwide (Lin, 2008). The existing EDB guideline banning mixed code in the classroom is inflexible; it removes one important teaching resource at the disposal of bilingual (especially EMI) teachers.

Bilingual Chinese teachers face a number of dilemmas. In general, as part of the normal give-and-take in EMI lessons, the use of Cantonese has the potential to:

    (a) help clarify difficult concepts;

    (b) help introduce or consolidate students' bilingual lexicon (e.g. 金融海嘯, financial tsunami; 三聚氰胺, melamine); or

    (c) help build rapport by reducing social distance (e.g. when an EMI teacher wants to comfort students suffering from pain, physical or psychological).

All this is not allowed under the current EDB guideline. EMI teachers face the daunting task of making their low-proficiency students understand English-dominant school subjects in Cantonese. In the process of explaining and helping their students 'crack the code', they cannot avoid naming the concepts in English, resulting in mixed code. CMI teachers occasionally want or need to refer to English concepts for students' reference (e.g. jargon in economics such as *supply curve*, *demand curve*, *inflation, elasticity, opportunity cost,* and more recently, *financial tsunami*, etc.), but this would be seen as improper. For EMI and CMI teachers alike, Cantonese is more effective for disciplining students and signaling concern about students' well-being.

One implicit argument and widely shared assumption against classroom CS is that teachers' use of mixed code is responsible for their students' declining language standards. This assumption, however, is supported by little or no convincing empirical evidence. On the other hand, mixed code is especially common among highly proficient bilingual speakers of English such as the Council Chairperson of HKU, Mr. Victor Fung. Harvard-trained Mr. Fung who seems prone to use mixed code in informal interactions with fellow Cantonese speakers is by no means alone in being able to use English fluently. There is thus strong evidence that mixed code is perfectly compatible with high proficiency development in English.

What is interesting is that when the same highly proficient bilingual speakers speak English (e.g. to non-Cantonese speakers), they rarely need to switch to Cantonese. Why? One important clue is that, unlike EMI education which makes Chinese Hongkongers cognitively dependent on English terminologies – the medium-of-learning effect discussed above – there is no such dependency on Cantonese or Chinese, except when culture-specific phenomena are invoked, for which there is no obvious English equivalent, e.g. *fung shui (feng shui), dim sum, kung fu*, and the like. Some of these Cantonese expressions have meanwhile become an accepted part of the English lexicon through lexical borrowing.

There is no question that local teachers welcome the relaxation of the 'no mixed-code allowed' classroom language policy (see, e.g., Boyle, 1997). However, under the current EDB guideline banning the use of mixed code in class, the

important pedagogical functions outlined above are blocked. Worse, that top-down guideline makes frontline teachers who somehow could not help using mixed code in class feel guilty, as if they had done something terribly wrong to their students. Given Hong Kong's language realities – Cantonese-speaking learners learning English as a foreign language – and that mixed code is potentially such a useful pedagogic resource, it is a great pity that bilingual teachers are deprived of the right to use it and have to cope with ill-feelings arising from using mixed code in class. Relative to the goal of biliteracy and trilingualism, the EDB guideline 'advising' teachers to avoid using mixed code may be characterized as a disservice (幫倒忙) from the pedagogical point of view.

Before closing, a caveat is in order. What this article advocates is NOT 'anything goes'. To be sure, CS is not necessarily pedagogically conducive to effective learning and teaching. All depends on <u>how</u> it is used for what particular teaching and learning <u>goals</u>. In other words, an important distinction ought to be made between pedagogically sound and productive CS practices, as opposed to CS practices that are pedagogically unsound and counterproductive. We simply don't understand enough at present.

In view of the stake of English to Hong Kong's sustained well-being, it is high time that methodologically sound empirical research be conducted to first collect naturally occurring data involving classroom CS (with participating teachers being fully assured of anonymity), with a view to identifying good or model CS practices through some objective evaluative criteria. Such findings, when made available, will go some way to making CS a teaching resource in the classroom, for example, through demonstrations and exemplifications in seminars, workshops and eventually through teacher training programmes at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Back in October 1998, the exhilarating news that Prof. Daniel C. Tsui (崔琦教授) was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics inspired one fellow alumnus of Pui Ching Middle School to write a feature article in *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (Anonymous, 1998). Apart from lauding and congratulating Prof. Tsui's crowning academic achievement for a natural scientist, the writer lamented the inflexible dual-language streaming policy which had just been enforced in local secondary schools for about two months. It was further pointed out that Prof. Tsui's shining achievement was due in no small measure to the use of both English and Chinese at Pui Ching Middle School, where teachers would teach in English first, before explaining the main points again in Chinese:

當年培正的教學方法是中英並重，而且不拘泥於形式。務求令同學全面理解。縱然是英文課，老師以全英文授課後，往往以中文將重點再解釋一次。不若現今的制度，「母語教學」上課不准說英文，而「英語教學」又不准說中文那麼的死死板板。

('At that time the teaching methods at Pui Ching Middle School emphasized Chinese and English equally, whatever the mode of bilingual teaching. The purpose was to ensure that students understand completely. Even in English lessons, after something was taught entirely in English, often the main points would be reiterated and explained one more time. That was so different from the present system, where English is forbidden by the mother tongue education policy, while Chinese is so rigidly banned in EMI lessons.')

What this anonymous alumnus of Pui Ching Middle School said here gives us much food for thought as we ponder and weigh the desirability of two MOI policy options: (a) to cleanse mixed code in class against tremendous social forces of code-switching at work, both inside and outside the classroom, or (b) to harness CS by better understanding how and in what ways it could be turned into a pedagogically sound teaching and learning resource. The modest goal of this article will have been achieved if it succeeds in initiating a rational debate among the key stakeholders – bilingual teachers, school principals, academics, language policy makers, parents and students – on the most effective and desirable future directions of the MOI policy.

Notes

1. Part of the data presented in this paper was collected for a project supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. CityU 1241/03H).
2. Chinese expressions that are meant to be read in Mandarin will be transcribed using Pinyin. Those which are meant to be read in Cantonese will be transcribed using JyutPing. The number (from 1 to 6) indicates the tone contour with which the Cantonese morpho-syllable is pronounced.

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