Towards 'biliteracy and trilingualism' in Hong Kong (SAR): Problems, dilemmas and stakeholders' views

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Abstract

Despite the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) government's determination to implement the 'mother tongue education' policy amid strong social resistance one year after the handover, English remains a prestigious language in society. The need for Putonghua (Mandarin/Standard Chinese) is also increasing following ever-expanding trade and other activities with mainland China. The societal demand for both English and Putonghua in postcolonial Hong Kong is important for understanding the SAR government's language-in-education policy called 'biliteracy and trilingualism'. The learning of English is fraught with two main problems: (a) the absence of a conducive language-learning environment outside the classroom, which makes English in Hong Kong more like a foreign than a second language, and (b) tremendous typological difference between Chinese and English on one hand, and considerable linguistic differences between Cantonese and Putonghua on the other. Given the significant phonological differences and, to a lesser extent, lexico-grammatical divergence between the majority's vernacular and modern written Chinese, the learning of Putonghua is no straightforward task either. The dilemmas of the medium-of-instruction (MoI) debate will be discussed by elucidating the main concerns as seen from the respective vantage points of the government and five key stakeholder groups: employers, parents, school principals, teachers and educationalists, and students.

Introduction

A good decade has elapsed after the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China on July 1, 1997. Within the space of barely 1,100 square kilometers, Hong Kong SAR is home to over seven million inhabitants (as of 2009), making it one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Over 95 per cent of Hongkongers are ethnic Chinese, with an overwhelming majority being native speakers of Cantonese (*Hong Kong 2006 Population by-census Main*

Report Volume I, p.39). This demographic detail helps explain why Cantonese is widely perceived as the unmarked language choice among Chinese Hongkongers, and that initiating or maintaining an English-only conversation is so highly marked except in the presence of non-Cantonese speakers. Natural resources being negligible, trade and commerce have always been the lifeline of this former colony. Since the 1980s, the principal economic activities gradually shifted from manufacturing to those which are characteristic of a knowledge-based economy. In terms of manpower development and educational needs, therefore, English is regarded by policy makers as important linguistic capital for the continued well-being of "Asia's World City", and by Hongkongers as an indispensable language for upward and outward mobility.

This paper will first briefly discuss how the Hong Kong SAR government's language policy of 'biliteracy and trilingualism' is shaped by the socioeconomic realities outlined above. It will then address two main issues: (a) problems pertaining to the effective acquisition of English and Putonghua (Mandarin/Standard Chinese) by Chinese Hongkongers; and (b) the social tension between Cantonese, English and Putonghua in the education domain, as epitomized in various concerns of different stakeholder groups regarding the controversial medium-of-instruction (MoI) debate: the Hong Kong government, employers, parents, school principals, teachers and educationists, and students. The primary purpose of this review paper is to help readers who are unfamiliar with the Hong Kong language situation to better understand the predicament faced by Hong Kong language policy makers and the key stakeholders affected for over two decades.

HKSAR's Language-in-education policy: biliteracy and trilingualism

Like many other parts of the world, Hong Kong's manpower needs have been largely conditioned by its principal economic realities. From the period between the two World Wars to about the end of the 1950s, Hong Kong prospered essentially through bustling entrepôt trade. In the next three decades until around the mid-1980s, manufacturing became the mainstay of economic activities, with 'Made in Hong Kong' being the hallmark of this former British colony which came to be known as 'The Pearl of the Orient'. Throughout this period, the needs for English in society were by and large limited to the upper echelons of government officials and business people, as

well as senior administrators in the domains of education and law. This was reflected in the relatively restricted numbers of and societal needs for university graduates with a high level of English proficiency. Up until the early 1980s, the competition for a place in one of the two local universities – especially the English-medium *University of Hong Kong* – was very keen, with a success rate of barely two percent of all secondary school leavers (Form 7 or Grade 13, aged around 18) per year.

From the mid-1980s onwards, the manufacturing sector gradually gave way to several others which are more characteristic of a knowledge-based economy. Of these, the most vibrant are banking, investment and finance, imports/exports, tele-communications, transport and logistics, tourism, hotels, restaurants, insurance, retail trade, and real estate services. The 1980s also witnessed the gradual transformation of mainland China from a self-secluded communist state to an increasingly export-oriented economy after the open-door policy was enthusiastically embraced and actively implemented by the Beijing government under the leadership of the helmsman Deng Xiaoping. China's gradual integration into the global economy, which culminated in her successful accession to WTO in 2001, has tremendous implications for Hong Kong's manpower needs. To the extent that business opportunities and transactions with non-Cantonese-speaking mainlanders take place increasingly in Putonghua, pragmatically-minded Hongkongers have little choice but to expand their linguistic repertoire to include at least some Putonghua. In April 2009, the government-initiated Task Force on Economic Challenges (TFEC) identified six potential industries for future development: testing and certification, medical services, innovation and technology, cultural and creative industries, environmental industries, and (international) educational services (http://news.gov.hk/en/category/businessandfinance/090403/html/090403en03004.htm). It can be seen that these niche industries, which are seen by the government as crucial for Hong Kong's sustained vitality and further development, all require a high level of proficiency in English and Chinese (i.e. Cantonese, Putonghua, and modern written Chinese)***1.

Above is thus the background to the SAR government's needs-driven language-in-education policy called 'biliteracy and trilingualism'. Accordingly, one important policy goal of higher education is to graduate students with a reasonably high level of ability to speak Cantonese, English and Putonghua,

and to read and write Chinese and English. The increasing need for a biliterate and trilingual workforce is also reflected in the percentage of students gaining access to postsecondary education: from a mere two percent in the early 1980s to 18 percent in the mid-1990s (Lin and Man 2009).

Learning English and Putonghua: two unfavorable acquisitional factors

English in Hong Kong (SAR): second language or foreign language?

As the absolute majority of Chinese Hongkongers (over 90 per cent) is Cantonese-speaking, Cantonese has always been the dominant vernacular cum lingua franca among Hongkongers. This fact has important implications for the ease – or rather a lack of it – with which English and Putonghua are acquired. Since the non-Chinese population has rarely exceeded five percent, the English-speaking people, including the British during colonial times, have always been minority groups. This demographic detail helps explain why, despite the conspicuous presence of English in society – from shop names and street signs to textbooks and menus; from newspapers and magazines to public announcements and broadcast media – English is rarely used by (Chinese) Hongkongers for intraethnic communication among themselves. Indeed, in the absence of non-Cantonese speakers, the choice of English as the medium of communication is widely perceived as highly marked, probably out of concern for the co-speakers' ethnolinguistic identity. One consequence of such a concern is that whoever initiates or persists in maintaining an English-only conversation with no non-Cantonese-speakers around is expected to come up with some justification about that unusual language choice. This is what sets Chinese Hongkongers and, say, Chinese Singaporeans apart. In terms of opportunities for language practice or authentic use, what this means is that for the majority of Hongkongers, English has very little reality outside school premises or in their lifeworld. In this regard, sociolinguists would say that Hong Kong lacks a conducive environment relative to the important goal of learning English effectively. No wonder many 'errors' or accuracy problems at the lexico-grammatical level are found at various stages of the learning process, thereby fueling criticisms in an ongoing public discourse mediated by both the print and broadcast media (e.g. Chan et al. 2002; Li and Chan 2001). In his extended treatise on 'Chinese Englishes', including 'Hong Kong English', Bolton (2003) points out that for a long time, there has been a widely shared perception in Hong Kong society that the

standards of English have been declining. In this connection, he speaks of a 'complaint tradition' (cf. Milroy and Milroy 1985). However, those who complain fail to realize that following the gradual shift from elite education to mass education, the percentage of young people receiving higher education, especially at the university level, has increased considerably, leading to a general decline in average academic performance, including a lower level of language-learning attainment. Above all, what is often ignored in such complaints and criticisms is the absence of a conducive environment for Hongkongers to practise and use English beyond the language classroom. Owing to Chinese Hongkongers' inhibition against speaking only English among themselves, it is not at all obvious how the learners' classroom inputs may get consolidated through active meaning-making in natural communication with others.

This brings us to one interesting issue related to the functions and status of English in Hong Kong: is it more like a second language or a foreign language (cf. Li 1999)? As mentioned, English is seldom used by Chinese Hongkongers for intraethnic communication among themselves (except in Cantonese-English code-switching, which takes place more often at the intra- than inter-sentential level, Li and Tse 2002). This makes English more like a foreign than a second language (Li 1999). At the same time, to the extent that English is one of the official languages (alongside Chinese) which is commonly and actively used, more in print than in speech, in the key domains of government, education, law and business, it functions more like a second language. Such characteristics make English in Hong Kong an untypical second or foreign language. This is probably why in the literature on 'Hong Kong English', different analyses and conclusions are arrived at depending on the World Englishes scholar. Kachru (2005: 90) categorizes English in Hong Kong, along with that in China, as a foreign language, albeit a "fast-expanding" one. McArthur (2001: 8-9), on the other hand, places Hong Kong along with Bangladesh, Brunei, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Singapore as one of 'the ESL territories'. Likewise, in his extended treatise of 'Hong Kong English', Bolton (2003) places it in the outer circle. The placement of Hong Kong in the outer circle or the expanding circle has theoretical implications in Kachru's three-circle model (1985), namely 'norm-developing' (outer circle) vs. 'norm-dependent' (expanding circle). The above analysis suggests that a model featuring three concentric circles based essentially on nation-states in abstraction of tremendous variation within them is not as useful for

characterizing the status and functions of English in a place like Hong Kong, where percentage-wise only a minority speaks English as a quasi-L1, while the majority of Chinese-English bilinguals fall within a cline of proficiency levels with 'proficient' at one end and 'barely intelligible' at the other. In any case, what is clear is that English in Hong Kong is an untypical second or foreign language which defies any attempt to have it placed in one Kachruvian circle or the other in a cut-and-dry manner.***2

Typological distance between Chinese and English, and linguistic differences between Cantonese and Putonghua

In addition to the absence of a conducive social environment for using and practicing English, another major problem is linguistic, which is rooted in the fact that English and Chinese are typologically very dissimilar languages. English is an Indo-European language whereas Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family (Gordon 2005). Phonologically, many of the pronunciation features are alien to Chinese ears, including the dental fricatives, stress-timed rhythm (as opposed to syllable-timed rhythm in Chinese), and consonant clusters, the latter being uncommon or not found in Chinese varieties (Hung 2000, 2002). Still other pronunciation difficulties are due to the Chinese learner's ignorance of phonotactic constraints regarding which English consonants may occur in the syllable- or word-final position. This is a major source of difficulty for Chinese learners of English in general, which often combines with the problems created by consonant clusters.***3

Grammatically, most of the subsystems in English such as tenses and articles are non-existent in Chinese. In terms of lexis, apart from a small subset of loanwords borrowed from English (e.g. Cantonese words for 'taxi' and 'bus', 'foreman' (of a company/enterprise) and 'counter' (of a bank/hospital)), the number of cognates in English is negligible. As for the way the two languages are written, English is alphabetic while Chinese is logographic (Gordon 2005). As a result of salient typological differences, therefore, very little of Chinese learners' knowledge of their mother tongue is of any use in the process of learning English – unlike learners from other cognate language pairs such as English and German, or French and Italian. This linguistic factor helps explain why, for the majority of Chinese learners, English is so difficult to learn, let alone to master.

What about Mandarin or Putonghua? Do Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers find it easy to acquire this national lingua franca of Greater China? The answer is a qualified 'yes'. Since written Chinese is based essentially on Putonghua, learning to read Chinese means that one naturally becomes familiar with a large number of vocabulary words in the national language, even though in Hong Kong SAR, students continue to pronounce Chinese texts in their vernacular, Cantonese. This is the background against which Cantonese and Putonghua have evolved many cognates (Luke 2005). In other words, many Putonghua expressions are pronounceable in Cantonese because learners in Hong Kong are taught to pronounce them in Cantonese rather than in Putonghua, as is the rule in mainland schools. As far as writing is concerned, one additional complication is that, in accordance with the Hong Kong (SAR) Basic Law, Chinese characters in Hong Kong SAR continue to be written in traditional forms, as opposed to simplified forms in mainland China (Snow 2004; for more details about Chinese as a lingua franca in Greater China, see Li 2006).

Despite the commonalities outlined above, for the majority of Hongkongers, the learning of Putonghua somehow exhibits certain characteristics of the learning of a second language. Most of the learning difficulties are related to the rather different phonological systems between the two Chinese varieties, notably with regard to their systems of tones. There are four tonemes in Putonghua but six in Cantonese, with marked differences in their respective tone contours (Matthews and Yip 1994). Other phonological problems that Cantonese learners have to grapple with include morpho-syllables pronounced with neutral tones or tone sandhi, the latter being triggered by systematic allophonic changes necessitated when morpho-syllables of the third tone co-occur together (e.g., the expression 很好, 'well' or 'very well', consists of two morpho-syllables which are pronounced in isolation as *hěn* and *hǎo*, but together they should be articulated as *hén hǎo*). In addition, perhaps more importantly, learners' exposure to Putonghua tends to be restricted to the language classroom, for like in English, there are hardly any opportunities for meaningful practice beyond school premises.

Toward biliteracy and trilingualism: challenges and dilemmas in the MoI debate

The language-in-education policy in Hong Kong has been a source of

tremendous social tension in the last two decades (Lin and Man 2009). Few would dispute the usefulness of English in the white-collar workplace. Given that English is seldom used for intraethnic communication, however, for the majority of Hongkongers schooling is almost the only domain in which they get exposure in English, which is taught and learned from kindergarten onwards. Until the end of Primary education (Primary 6 / Grade 6, aged around 12), with few exceptions the teaching medium is mainly Cantonese. At the onset of Secondary education (roughly Grade 7), however, since September 1998 the 'mother tongue education' policy stipulates that schools must teach in Chinese (Cantonese and Standard Chinese written in traditional, as opposed to simplified, Chinese characters), unless they can demonstrate an ability to teach through the medium of English effectively. There are about 30 per cent of over 400 secondary schools which meet this EMI requirement.

The language situation became more complicated after the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China in July, 1997. Being the national language taught and learned by practically all Chinese nationals across mainland China, Putonghua is an important symbol of national unity, and so there seems no reason why Hong Kong Chinese should be exempted from learning to understand and speak Putonghua – a state of affairs which is currently "tolerated", as stipulated in the Hong Kong (SAR) Basic Law.

English has evolved into an international or global lingua franca (Jenkins 2003; Kirkpatrick 2007; Seidhlhofer 2004). While Putonghua/Mandarin is as yet nowhere near being a contender for that position, it is fast becoming a regional lingua franca in Greater China among ethnic Chinese. The number of Confucius Institutes – comparable in mission and objectives to other more established national counterparts like British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe Institut and Instituto Cervantes – keeps expanding in different parts of the world. The increasing demand for the Chinese language worldwide is indicative of China's expanding sociopolitical influence internationally, suggesting that in the not-too-distant future a knowledge of Putonghua and Chinese literacy has great potential for making the speaker more competitive in the global job market. In short, being able to speak English and Putonghua/Mandarin fluently will be an important asset for anyone making preparation for a professional career in the multilingual workplace. This is why English and Putonghua figure so prominently in the SAR's language-in-education policy of 'biliteracy and trilingualism'.

The rationale behind the needs-driven 'biliteracy and trilingualism' policy is hardly disputable. What remains controversial is the right and reasonable target level of attainment (e.g. is it '*balanced* biliteracy and trilingualism' or '*functional* biliteracy and trilingualism'?***3), and, once the goal post is agreed, how to get from where we are to where we want to be. At the moment, no attempts have been made to define exactly what level of 'biliteracy and trilingualism' is intended, although this is often understood implicitly as native-speaker-based standards in terms of the four skills (hence 'balanced' rather than 'functional'), as evidenced in the 'complaint tradition' and public discourse on 'errors'. Since explicit instruction through classroom teaching tends to be the only means by which the majority of Hongkongers can gain access to English and Putonghua, for over two decades there has been an ongoing debate regarding the most productive way(s) of teaching these two important languages (see, e.g. Johnson 1997; Johnson and Swain 1997; Lin 1996, 1997, 1999). Lin and Man (2009) offer a timely, detailed account of the key issues involved in this debate. Various models and experiences of immersion which have been implemented in other countries like Canada, Singapore and Malaysia are discussed and their relevance to Hong Kong carefully analyzed. The 'mother tongue education' policy, introduced in September 1998, consists of streaming Primary-school leavers to English-medium (EMI) and Chinese-medium (CMI) Secondary schools depending on their relative academic performance in Chinese and English (for the streaming mechanism, see below). This 'late immersion' policy, effective for three years till the end of Junior High School (Secondary 3, Grade 9, aged around 15), is premised on the theoretical assumption that teachers and learners ought to stick to the same language of classroom interaction, be it English or Cantonese. Any form of 'code-mixing' is seen as undesirable and detrimental to the development of the target language.***5 After being implemented for over a decade, the late immersion policy did not seem to be as effective as hoped, as shown in the English language attainment of students' public examination results (Hong Kong Certificate of Examinations, HKCEE; Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations, HKALE). This has sparked criticisms and triggered suggestions for alternative modes of immersion (e.g. mixed-mode teaching, whereby less language-dependent subjects such as Music, Art and Mathematics are taught in English, while more language-dependent subjects such as History and Geography are taught in the students' mother tongue; see Lin and Man (2009) for more details). As of

the time of writing (June, 2009), the Education Bureau (EDB) has just announced the timeline for implementing the 'fine-tuning policy' (effective from September, 2010), with Secondary schools being given more flexibility – subject to specific EDB guidelines – when deciding which language to select as the medium of teaching and learning for a particular class/subject. Still, the MoI debate mediated by mass media shows no signs of abating.

The debate is further compounded by the need to introduce Putonghua into the Primary school curricula. To date, Putonghua is taught and learned as a school subject at the Primary (in some schools, Secondary) level. The learning outcomes are clearly unsatisfactory, a fact which adds ammunition to those who are advocating for teaching Chinese subjects (mainly Chinese Language and Chinese History) in Putonghua. The PMI (Putonghua-medium instruction) project has been piloted at the Primary level under the aegis of the government; many educationalists believe that it will eventually be implemented Hong Kong-wide. Opponents (see, e.g., Bauer 2000) are concerned about the continued vitality of the community's (now) dominant vernacular – once school children are no longer taught to pronounce Chinese characters in Cantonese. And, in terms of facilitating learning and teaching, there is no doubt that using the students' (and teachers') most familiar vernacular – Cantonese for the majority – as the medium of instruction will remove unwanted language barriers in the give-and-take between teachers and students. One way out of the quagmire, according to some advocates of a radical position, is to implement real 'mother-tongue education' by officially declaring Cantonese to be the primary (i.e. unmarked) language of instruction in secondary education across the board (e.g. Bauer 2000). It remains unclear, however, how such a position would be received by stakeholders – notably the government, parents and educationalists – and whether the outcome of English-learning would be compromised.

Below, we will briefly outline the main concerns of the SAR government and various stakeholder groups vis-à-vis the vicissitudes of the MoI policy with regard to English as the medium of instruction: employers, parents, school principals, teachers and educationalists, and students. The purpose is to help disentangle the complexity of the picture viewed from the respective vantage points of these groups.

The MoI debate: key stakeholders' concerns

Hong Kong (SAR) government. It is almost a cliché today to say that Hong Kong is the meeting place between East and West. Her success story, one that features a remarkable transformation from a sleepy fishing village set against a barren rock in the 1840s to an international metropolis cum global financial center rivaling New York, London and Tokyo in the twenty-first century, is arguably sui-generis. For all this to happen, it can hardly be denied that English has played an instrumental role, albeit with the key players being members of the English-educated elite. Like the central government in Beijing, the SAR government is acutely aware of the significance of English to the continued well-being of Hong Kong, and so English figures prominently in the curricula of the local education system. Every year, a significant percentage of the SAR's GDP amounting to multi-million (HK) dollars is budgeted for education-related expenses, with a view to improving the quality of English language teaching and learning (Miller and Li 2008), but the overall returns are disproportionate and disappointing by any standards. The two main factors discussed above – a lack of a conducive English-learning and English-using environment on one hand, and tremendous typological differences between the two languages Chinese and English on the other – represent two main obstacles which militate against the government's efforts to upgrade Hongkongers' general proficiency and standards of English. The promotion of Putonghua through classroom teaching is no easy task either. Apart from considerable phonological differences between Cantonese and Putonghua, a lack of opportunities for meaningful practice outside the classroom is another real obstacle. A further thorny issue is the limited number of qualified teachers of Putonghua, who are needed in the thousands given the size of the schooling population at Primary level (around 100,000 at Primary One) each year. These obstacles notwithstanding, there are two recent trends which seem to provide some room for optimism: (a) in the 'fine-tuning policy' the government seems to have adopted a more tolerant stance toward the 'mixing' of languages in the classroom which, as Lin and Man (2009) have observed, could be an effective bilingual teaching strategy if done properly (cf. Lin 1996, 1999); and (b) independently of the government's efforts to raise the quality of the teaching of English and Putonghua in school, more and more Hongkongers (especially working adults) are willing to learn English and Putonghua in an attempt to enhance their competitiveness when job-hunting (Miller and Li 2008).

Employers. Opening the classified post of any local newspapers on any day,

including e-dailies, one will notice that virtually all of the job adverts – from managers to messengers – require applicants to have at least some knowledge of English, in addition to Cantonese. Where interaction with non-Cantonese-speaking business representatives in mainland China is an important part of the job specification, an additional working knowledge of Putonghua is a must. Today, the business environment in Hong Kong, like elsewhere in Greater China, clearly favors multilingual workers. Those who are conversant in more than one Chinese 'dialect' (e.g. Shanghainese and Chiu Chow, the latter being the home dialect of Mr. Li Ka-Shing, a well-known philanthropist and the richest person in Hong Kong) will have an advantage – if their wider linguistic repertoire could be put to meaningful use on the job. Indeed, multilingualism is increasingly valued by multinational consortiums as an important asset and a key to business success (Li 2007). No wonder employers from the business sector are among the most vocal critics, whose voices deploring Hong Kong students' 'declining English proficiency' are often amplified in mass (both print and electronic) media (cf. the 'complaint tradition' discussed above). While similar criticisms have not yet been extended to Hongkongers' non-standard Putonghua, such criticisms are conceivable the more widespread Putonghua becomes in the local business sector. It is therefore understandable why some business enterprises are among the staunchest supporters of various language enhancement schemes (e.g. HSBC's support for workplace English), typically in addition to boosting their staff's language skills through in-house, on-the-job corporate training, which tends to include some elements of ESP (and increasingly Putonghua as well).

Parents. Hong Kong parents have an unmistakable preference for their children to be educated through the medium of English, to the point of moving into neighborhoods with a marked concentration of English-medium schools, so as to maximize the chance of their children being allocated to an English-medium Secondary school (Li 1999). Such a preference has been variously analyzed as a form of passive, uncritical submission to the global hegemony of English ('English linguistic imperialism' being a form of 'linguicism', Phillipson 1992), as opposed to an active, conscious wish to embrace and partake of the linguistic capital of the de facto global language (Li 2002). In any case, it cannot be denied that many Hong Kong parents tend to be unaware of the kinds of support or preconditions needed – if the placement of their child in an EMI school is to be an educationally sound decision. Crucial to this decision are two key factors: the amount of home support for English

(e.g. one or more English-speaking parent, access to a private tutor, availability of learning resources such as language games, etc.), and their child's aptitude to learn through the medium of English. Research in SLA has shown that some children / learners are more gifted at foreign language learning than others (see, e.g., Skehan 1989; Dörnyei 2005). In the absence of either condition – or worse, both conditions – then requiring one's child to learn content subjects through English is not at all a wise decision. Indeed, in whichever direction the MoI policy may be further developing, there is clearly a need for the government to step up the efforts to 'educate' parents in order to bring home this important message. This could be done, for example, by making available or pointing the way to useful resources, including those on the Internet, so that parents could find out more about various factors which are conducive to effective language learning. This type of information may be useful for helping at least some parents to arrive at their own informed decision.

School principals. School principals have the responsibility of ensuring the survival of their school, which hinges on how successful it is in attracting academically high-performing students. Given Hong Kong parents' preference for English-medium education, being able to claim 'EMI status' would naturally work to the advantage of the school. The government is clearly aware of this, and so a lot of efforts have been made to monitor the qualifications and actual EMI-teaching capabilities of the teaching staff in self-proclaimed EMI schools. One critical issue arising from the mother tongue education policy is stigmatization: other things being equal, a CMI school / student is generally perceived as lower in standard compared with an EMI school / student. This has been a major point of contention between supporters and opponents of this policy; it is also ostensibly the main reason for the most recent 'fine-tuning' initiative, which according to government officials is intended to deliberately blur the distinction between CMI and EMI schools as part of an attempt to counteract social stigmas engendered by the labeling effect of 'dual-medium-of-instruction' streaming.

Teachers and educationalists. Stigmatization as a direct consequence of the 'dual-medium-of-instruction' streaming policy is one of the most serious concerns among conscientious teachers and educationalists. Another main concern of frontline teachers is the government's stance toward (Cantonese-English) 'code-mixing', which is commonplace in those EMI

lessons (including English lessons in CMI schools) where keeping to English often makes it difficult for students to follow. As mentioned earlier, until recently the government was rather intolerant of 'code-mixing', largely out of a concern that 'mixing' the languages would deprive students of precious exposure to good English. This concern is well taken; yet one lingering problem remains nevertheless: by sticking to a language which is less familiar to some students and unfamiliar to others, the immediate and arguably higher-order objective of learning is being sacrificed. In this regard, if the conjecture that the government has adopted a more tolerant stance toward language alternation (i.e. the use of bilingual teaching strategies) in class is accurate, that would be pedagogically a most welcomed development.

Students. Hong Kong students are clearly aware of the linguistic capital associated with the successful acquisition of English and, to a lesser extent, Putonghua. Owing to the above-mentioned obstacles, however, the majority find it a very difficult if not an impossible task. For Primary students, the dual-medium-of-instruction streaming or selection process is a source of anxiety. Once the results of the streaming are announced, both EMI and CMI students have their respective worries. EMI students would worry about, among other things, having to learn – typically by rote – a seemingly endless list of English vocabulary words in the textbook of practically every school subject (except Chinese Language and Chinese History). The teachers' input is often difficult to follow if not downright incomprehensible. Whether the EMI student is able to cope depends to a large extent on the availability of home support and/or access to additional private tuition. CMI students, on the other hand, may have the 'luxury' of learning through their mother tongue, but they will have to put up with a lingering concern that in the long run, they may be worse off as they do not have a body of English lexicon for academic purposes, which is an important prerequisite for securing a place in a local university. In the past decade, there is ample evidence, including longitudinal research and news reports, showing how CMI Secondary school leavers are disadvantaged by a lack of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) knowledge in high-stake public exams such as HKCEE and HKALE (e.g. research conducted by Professor Tsang Wing Kwong and his associates, see CUHK press release dated March 2008; http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/cpr/pressrelease/080314e.htm; see also Clem 2008) and/or after they have successfully entered an EMI university. The research question, when is the most opportune time for effecting a transition from CMI to EMI education (i.e. Secondary Four, Five, Six

or Seven) remains a tricky one. Finally, it should be remembered that CMI students, who make up the majority (ca. 70 percent) of all Secondary-school leavers, are the most vulnerable of various stakeholder groups, for they are the ones who bear the brunt of stigmatization. Many have to cope really hard to overcome the psychological barrier of being socially labeled ‘second best’.

Conclusion

At the dawn of a new millennium, there is no doubt that Hong Kong SAR, the most cosmopolitan and internationalized of all Chinese metropoles, has evolved into and depends for its survival on how well it fares as a knowledge-based economy. Most of the economic activities require a workforce with a reasonably high level of proficiency in English and Putonghua. Given the significance of these two languages to Hong Kong’s socioeconomic vitality, continued prosperity and sustainable development, it comes as no surprise that English and Putonghua should figure so prominently in the Hong Kong SAR government’s language-in-education policy, which came to be known as ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’. There are however two rather serious problems as the government and citizens of “Asia's World City” alike grapple with the task of becoming biliterate in Chinese and English, and trilingual in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. The first problem is concerned with a lack of a conducive language environment for using and practicing English and Putonghua in authentic situations. Another way of putting it would be to say that being foreign languages, English and Putonghua are hardly used for authentic meaning-making purposes among Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers. The use of only English or Putonghua when conversing with fellow (Cantonese-speaking) Chinese Hongkongers is so highly marked that one is burdened with some sort of justification if one initiates, and seeks to maintain, an English-only or Putonghua-only conversation. Conversely, one could say that the widely perceived unmarked language choice for intraethnic communication is Cantonese, a fact that may be explained by the demographic or ethnolinguistic pattern of Hong Kong, which has always been a Cantonese-speaking Chinese society. Indeed, as Bolton (2003) has observed, in earlier sociolinguistic research on Hongkongers’ language use patterns, it was not uncommon to find commentaries that Hong Kong was ethnically a (relatively) homogenous society.

Another major problem concerns the high degree of linguistic dissimilarity

between Chinese and English (Li, in press). Typologically, they belong to different language families with very different linguistic characteristics from phonology to lexico-grammar, from orthography to information sequencing. In terms of the relative (un)ease of acquisition, one consequence for Hong Kong Chinese learners of English – as a foreign rather than a second language – is that linguistically very little of what they know about their mother tongue (Cantonese) has any reference value in the strenuous process of learning English. While the same cannot be said of the learning of Putonghua, which shares many cognates with Cantonese lexico-grammatically and which adopts the same orthography, it is no easy task for Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers to master the pronunciation system in Putonghua. The considerable discrepancy between the vernacular and standard written Chinese suggests that the term 'mother tongue education' is in one sense a misnomer, for Hong Kong Chinese school children do not write the way they speak (Li 2000, 2006).***6

In short, for Chinese Hongkongers the road toward biliteracy and trilingualism is a bumpy one and those on board are riddled with plenty of dilemmas. Everyone knows that the continued well-being of Hong Kong SAR depends crucially on a biliterate and trilingual workforce. However, the collective ethnolinguistic identity of Chinese Hongkongers is so strong that initiating or maintaining a conversation in a language other than Cantonese is generally perceived as highly marked and in need of some sort of justification (sometimes implicitly, e.g., to avoid excluding a non-Cantonese-speaker in the conversation). This results in an odd situation commonly found in foreign language learning settings: many eager learners of English and Putonghua are ready to pay an exorbitant fee to some tutorial center, typically charged by the hour, just to be given the opportunity to practice using the target language with other like-minded learners, often under the guidance of a native-speaker tutor. This consumer demand is probably what the writer of the following advertising slogan for a learning center has in mind (english town, May, 2009): "It is wrong to study English!" ("學英語是錯的!", subtext in Chinese: you can't master English by studying it; practice is the key, which is our teaching philosophy). The same may be said of the learning of Putonghua: many are aware that a high level of proficiency in the national language is a key that helps open many doors in the workplace, and yet outside the classroom it is very difficult to find natural opportunities for meaningful practice.

What this means is that the learning of English and Putonghua is very much confined to classroom teaching as a school subject. The limitations of this teaching and learning approach are well known, and so for over a decade, the Hong Kong (SAR) government has sought to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness by providing EMI education to those students who have demonstrated a certain level of ability to learn through English (students are selected through a scoring mechanism known as MIGA, or Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment, see Lin and Man (2009) for more details).*****7** Some 11 years after the 'mother tongue education' policy has been implemented, the results leave much to be desired. In addition, as briefly discussed above, the policy has also antagonized various stakeholder groups, who are displeased with it in one way or another. Some of their more salient concerns are summarized as follows:

- Employers find it difficult to recruit employees with a high-enough level of English and Putonghua skills needed for the workplace;
- Parents resent dwindling opportunities for their children to be educated through English;
- Principals of CMI schools are weary of adverse consequences brought about by the public's perception that their teachers "lack the competence" to teach in English;
- Teachers – of CMI and EMI schools alike – find it difficult to abide by an EDB guideline against any form of code-alternation (Lin 1996, 1999); and
- Students of CMI students have to put up with being stigmatized and socially labeled as 'second best', while many EMI students have to cope with varying degrees of cognitive problems in the process of learning through a language that they are less familiar / unfamiliar with.

The rationale behind the 'biliteracy and trilingualism' policy is beyond dispute, which to a large extent may be regarded as a linguistic reality thrust upon Hongkongers as the former British colony gradually evolved into a knowledge-based economy toward the end of the last century. In the absence of a conducive language-learning environment, and given the considerable linguistic differences between Cantonese/Chinese and English on one hand, and Cantonese and Putonghua on the other, it does not seem obvious how the many dilemmas of various stakeholder groups outlined above may be resolved. The 'fine-tuning policy', due to be implemented in September 2010, is expected to give schools more flexibility in terms of language choice for a

particular class or subject (subject to specific EDB guidelines). Insofar as it aims to minimize social divisiveness by blurring the CMI/EMI divide, it is worthy of support. In the long run, late immersion may be a way out. No doubt it will be an uphill battle; to inform ongoing policy adjustments, what is needed is sound empirical research in locally based bilingual teaching strategies, as well as methodologically well-conceived experimentation with different modes of bilingual education (Lin and Man 2009).

Endnotes

*****1.** For a discussion of the nuanced conceptual distinction between such related terms as 'Modern Chinese' (*xiandai Hanyu*, literally "modern language of the Han people"), 'Modern Standard Chinese', 'Putonghua' and 'Modern Written Chinese', see Li (2006: 152-3).

***2. For a discussion of the extent to which English in Hong Kong may be characterized as a 'new variety' (cf. five criteria, Butler 1997:106), see Li (2008) and Li (in press).

*****3.** I am indebted to Reviewer B for pointing this out to me.

*****4.** Being functionally trilingual does not mean that the learners/users are 'balanced trilinguals' in terms of being equally highly proficient in all three languages. Instead, functional trilingualism is a more realistic goal, in that it is broadly understood as the learners/users' ability to use the three languages to varying degrees of proficiency and for different purposes.

*****5.** There is some empirical evidence showing that code-mixing is due in no small measure to a 'medium-of-learning effect', i.e. English-L2 learners' cognitive dependence on English terminologies as a direct result of studying through the medium of English (Li 2008).

***6. Of course the same learning difficulties can be expected when English-speaking or Putonghua-speaking learners learn Cantonese, but research has shown that the former can get by with little or no knowledge of Cantonese (Tinker Sachs and Li 2007), while the latter can often assume that Hongkongers will make an effort to speak to them in the national language (e.g.

mainland tourists shopping in Hong Kong).

***7. From September 2010 onwards, a new streaming mechanism called *Secondary School Places Allocation* (SSPA) mechanism will be used for streaming all primary-school leavers to CMI/EMI schools (see http://www.edb.gov.hk/FileManager/En/Content_1914/moisspa%20booklet%20dec%202005_eng.pdf).

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Towards 'biliteracy and trilingualism' in Hong Kong (SAR): Problems, dilemmas and stakeholders' views

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