Educational Decentralization:
a review of popular discourse on Chinese-English bilingual education

Abstract

Educational decentralisation is a worldwide phenomenon, which takes different forms and leads to different outcomes in different socioeconomic contexts. Taking Chinese-English bilingual education in mainland China as an exemplar, this study examines how decentralisation of education has worked in China in the past two decades, and what consequences decentralisation has brought about in the country. The analysis reveals that decentralisation has created a favourable overall socioeconomic and political context for bilingual education to develop from a local endeavour into a nation-wide undertaking. The analysis also reveals that decentralization has allowed diversified operations of bilingual programs at the regional level. However, there has been a visible inconsistency and incoherence between the theoretical underpinnings of the programs and practice in schools/classrooms. Such an inconsistency and incoherence may have resulted from a newly reconfigured relation between the central government and local governments, as well as a lack of human/intellectual resources at the regional level, leading to some unintended educational and socio-political outcomes in the country.

Key words: Chinese-English bilingual education; educational decentralization; education reform

Introduction

Educational decentralisation is a worldwide phenomenon, which takes different forms and leads to different outcomes in different socioeconomic contexts (Sayed, 1997; Kaufman, 1997; Tatto, 1999; Kamat, 2002; Astiz, 2004). "[D]riven by resource scarcity" (Ngok, 2007, p. 145), decentralization in mainland China was first initiated by the central government in 1985 and reinforced in 1993 to link education to economic reform so as to improve the efficiency of school management. Since then, decentralisation has become a significant theme of the education reform in the country. Its significance lies not only in the fact that this is the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that the central government relinquished its exclusive control over education to a guiding role (through legislating, funding, planning, and advising); but also in the fact that decentralisation challenges and is at odds with the existing governing structure resulted from centuries of centralized control in China. Consequently, such a policy is expected to bear serious implications on the lives of millions of skate holders, including teachers, learners, parents as well as school administrators, and local/regional educational service providers (see Mok, 2002).

This study takes Chinese-English bilingual education as an exemplar to examine the phenomenon of educational decentralisation in mainland China. The traditional form of bilingual education in the country has been for ethnic minority groups (e.g., Mongolian, Tibetan, Korean, which make up 8% of the nation's population) to assimilate into the mainstream society (dominated by the Han majority, who speak a variety of dialects of the Chinese language) and at the same time maintain their home language through "the use of a native minority language and standard Chinese [i.e., Putonghua or mandarin Chinese]" (Feng, 2005, p. 529). Chinese-English bilingual education reviewed in this study, on the other hand, refers to "a modern-day phenomenon in which the majority Han group aspire to produce

bilinguals with a strong competence in mother tongue Chinese and a foreign language, primarily English" (ibid.). Though a new initiative, Chinese-English bilingual education "has gathered great momentum… and is now rattling across the country like a juggernaut" (Hu, 2008, p. 195). It first appeared in 1990s (e.g., Shenzhen in 1992; Shandong/Qingdao in 1995) and endorsed officially in a small number of coastal and economically prosperous areas (e.g., Shanghai municipality city in 2001). Since then, Chinese-English bilingual programs have spread quickly from coastal areas to inland regional cities/counties in kindergartens, primary, secondary and tertiary classrooms. Chinese-English bilingual education has always been a controversial topic. Some have spoken highly of the operation as "a courageous education innovation" (Zhu, 2003, p. 54) and "a shining new spot in education reform" (e.g., Wu, 2006, p. 67; Yu, 2004, p. 29; S. Li, 2005, p. 31); others have referred to it as a "bilingual education obsession" (Gu, 2006, p. 83) resulting from "misconceptions, misrepresentations, and misinterpretations of the academic discourse" (Hu, 2008, p. 195). The appearance and flourish of Chinese-English bilingual education, which coincides with the process of the country's fast economic development, has been unavoidably influenced by the overall policies of the economic reform. Decentralisation, as the major education policy in China since the mid-1980s, is expected to be evident in such an education innovation. An examination of Chinese-English bilingual education hence may help understand the complexity of educational decentralization in a traditionally centralized country like mainland China. Insights obtained from the study might be useful for other countries which have been 'caught up' with this global trend of educational decentralization.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The Methodology section describes methodological considerations of the study. The Analysis section reviews the bilingual discourse under three themes that emerged from the findings. The Discussion section

examines the issues identified in relation to the decentralization policy in China.

Methodology

The research questions

The study aims to understand decentralisation of education in mainland China through a review of the discourse of Chinese-English bilingual education. Three research questions are asked, namely, 1) what is the context of Chinese-English bilingual programs?; 2) what is the nature of these programs?; and 3) what is their practice at school/classroom level?

The data

The data was collected from China Academic Journal Full-text Database (中国期刊全文数据库) www.cnki.net with the following search words: 'bilingual teaching', 'bilingual instruction', 'bilingual education', 'foreign language teaching and research' at 'primary' and 'secondary' levels and 'immersion'. A total of 187 articles were retrieved from the database, 95 concerning subject teaching in English (e.g., chemistry, political studies), 92 general discussion of bilingual issues (e.g., bilingual goals, bilingual types, bilingual curriculum). More than 80% of the articles retrieved were published between 2003 and 2006 with a few as early as 2001. It is worth mentioning that due to "the distinct publication culture of foreign language education journals in Mainland China" (Ling, Wang & Xu, 2005, p. 773), the articles collected for the review are not in the conventional sense of academic discourse as anticipated by a research-oriented audience. These articles, written in Chinese by scholars, policy makers and practitioners inside China, were non-research based general introductions of bilingual education/programs and expressions of personal views, approximately 80% of which are only 2 to 3 pages long. Nevertheless, this is a collection worthy of attention for several reasons. First, the mainstream foreign language journals in the country have kept silent on the issue probably because their target audience is tertiary level scholars instead of stake holders of bilingual education in primary/secondary schools (e.g., "*Foreign Language*

Teaching and Research focuses on theoretical and practical language issues for mainly university teachers;… *Linguistics and Applied Linguistics* prefers articles based on doctoral theses, especially from overseas Chinese scholars; and *Foreign Language Research* welcomes articles on modern linguistics and rhetoric". ibid. p. 768). The articles, which appeared in general education journals with no empirical data, turned out to be almost the only ones available for a review of bilingual operations at primary and secondary level. Second, since the majority of the authors are teachers of subjects other than English or local government officials, their mother tongue, Chinese, is the natural choice of medium in academic exchanges. Articles in Chinese hence constitute an indispensable part of discussion on bilingual education in China. Third, these articles represent a kind of discourse (see Gu, 2006, Hu, 2008 for criticisms of bilingual education research in Chinese mainland) that local practitioners and educators have produced about bilingual programs, and subsequently the kind of discourse they are exposed to (due to lack of access to studies in English). Such exposure is expected to play a role in nurturing their perceptions on bilingual education, and, in turn, affect their practice in classrooms. Fourth, an analysis of articles in Chinese provides non-Chinese readers with access to discussions on bilingual issues inside China.

The analytical procedures

General principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2005; Richards, 2005) were followed in the analysis. The data was coded in sequence system so as to obtain "some basic understanding of the principles, relationships, causes and/or motives underlying it" (DÖrnyei, 2007, p. 260). Through an iterative process between the research questions and the data, the collected articles were read through several times to locate thematic categories and relationship between them. First-level codes were given to each article (and often to paragraphs if an article contained more than one theme), leading to six categories, namely,

1) review of bilingual education types with reference to overseas models;
2) reports of bilingual program implementation;
3) reports of (research) studies on bilingual programs;
4) discussion (mostly personal views) of advantages and disadvantages of bilingual education;
5) evaluation of bilingual programs/lessons; and
6) school promotion of bilingual programs.

On the basis of a frequency count of the recurring themes in the articles, these broad categories were then combined into three second-level categories in relation to the research questions, that is, the nature of the bilingual programs (the original categories 1, 2, & 4) and practices at the school/classroom level (the original categories 3 & 5). Information regarding the context of Chinese-English bilingual education was gathered across the six original categories as more than half of the articles reviewed contained at least one or two introductory paragraphs on its background (the paragraphs were coded during the initial classification). After an integration of three second-level categories, decentralisation emerged as a salient focal point, which demonstrated an intertwined and coherent relationship among the categories. Discussion was then followed, concentrating on the complexity of the process of educational decentralization as well as its product, intended or otherwise.

Results

This section reports on the findings of the three research questions, namely, the context of bilingual education, the nature of the bilingual programs and the practices at the school/classroom level. Some findings are found to bear a direct (or tangible) relationship with the educational decentralization policy (e.g., curriculum space for bilingual lessons; diversified school practices); while others are indirectly associated with the overall

socioeconomic development of the country (e.g., outcry for change; space/possibility for discussion of alternative ways of educational provision as a result of the decentralised policy).

Context of bilingual education in China

Four recurring contextual factors were identified in the articles, which could explain the wide spread of bilingual education in China, Firstly, Chinese-English bilingual education seems to be an expression of a widely *perceived* and politicised need for English competence in the process of China's transition from a planned economy to a more open and globally-oriented market economy. More than 40% of the articles reviewed attempted to make a link (sometimes very briefly in an introductory note) between high levels of English competence and "a more open, prosperous and advanced China" (Jiang, 2002). In this regard, frequent reference was made to China's increased role in international affairs (e.g., WTO membership in 2001; hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, see Yu, 2004; Li & Wang, 2006; Zhao, Gao & Li, 2005;). Competence in English in this socioeconomic context was regarded as 'cultural capital' and "part of perfect characteristics of a modern cosmopolitan citizen" (Qian, 2003a, p. 54). Chinese-English bilingual education, promoted as an effective means to develop English proficiency, was thus associated with both a bright future of the country as well as prospects of individual learners, who were promised to obtain "an extra pair of eyes and ears, and also an extra mouth and brain to perceive the world" (ibid.) as a result of bilingual education.

Secondly, an open outcry, a recurring theme in approximately 20% of the issue-related articles, against current ELT practice in China paved the ground for a pedagogical change in the foreign language teaching sector. Accused commonly as "costly and inefficient" (e.g., Jiang, 2002; S.Li, 2005), English teaching in China was criticized for its incapability of shouldering the mission of language education. As a replacement for the perceived undesirable practice, a new ELT approach 'pan English' (similar to content-based teaching, see Baker, 2006, p. 215) was proposed, aiming to integrate subject teaching with

language teaching (Zhu, 2003; Yu, 2004). Advocates of this new approach (e.g., Qiang & Zhao, 2000, p. 38) contended that learners, with a genuine purpose for using English in subject lessons, would have a better chance to develop high levels of English proficiency. This belief consequently became one of the justifications for Chinese-English bilingual education in China.

Thirdly, parents support became a visible force behind the popularity of Chinese-English bilingual programs (e.g., S. Li, 2005; Y. Li, 2005) as indicated in about 13% of the issue-related articles. This was probably because more contact with the outside world in the developed regions enabled them to see the importance of English as potential linguistic and cultural capital (Jiang, 2003; Qian, 2003b). To appeal to parents demands for better English of their children, Chinese-English bilingual education was used as a school enrollment strategy (Zhang, 2005). At the same time, fast economic development of China (especially in coastal areas and special economic zones, beneficiaries of the overall policy of economic decentralization) equipped families with financial means (Mok, 2002) to absorb the cost of bilingual education (e.g., employing native speaker teachers and buying imported textbooks). Thus, an interactive dynamic between parents' demands and school responses has transformed Chinese-English bilingual programs from something not only desirable in perception, but also feasible in reality. Educational decentralization has played an important role in creating such a reality.

Fourthly, an approximately 9% of the issue-related articles mentioned curriculum space as a contextual factor of Chinese-English bilingual programs. The new curricula for the 9-year basic education (Ministry of Education, 2001 and 2003) were believed to have created more space to accommodate the 'pan English' approach that bilingual education advocated (Yu, 2006). Availability of curriculum space could also be discerned from the fact that 78% of subject-oriented bilingual articles were written by teachers of elective subjects such as

chemistry, biology, geography and history. With less pressure to cope with the national examination, these teachers had more time and flexibility to experiment on bilingual lessons. In addition, in the same spirit of decentralization, a number of provinces and municipal cities (which coincide with those bilingual hubs) were allowed to develop their own curricula, syllabuses, and textbooks in the last ten years or so. Chinese-English bilingual education would not have been possible without the central government relinquishing control over the content of schooling, "usually one of the last areas" for educational decentralisation (Hawkins, 2000, p. 449).

Nature of bilingual education

While bilingual education was on everybody's lips, what was meant by bilingual education is an area of controversy in the articles reviewed. Two different camps were identified, each striving in its own direction. This debate on the nature of bilingual education represents diversified perceptions of the goal and approaches of foreign language and subject teaching, which is a new phenomenon in consequence of educational decentralization in the country.

Approximately 20% of the articles contained definitions of bilingual education. The most popular definitions included "the use of a second or foreign language in school for the teaching of content subjects" (e.g., Yu, 2006, p. 58; Luo, 2003, p. 39; Chen, 2002, p. 43; Cheng, 2003, p. 21; Guo & Long, 2006, p. 113) cited from the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*; or "the use of a language other than the mother tongue for the teaching of non-language subjects" (Lu, 2003, p. 23; Guo & Chen, 2006, p. 86); or "the use of more than one language (one mother tongue and one target language, i.e. English, Japanese, Russian) in school for the teaching of subjects other than languages" (Chen, 2006, p. 53). These definitions made it explicit that teaching of non-language subjects (e.g., chemistry, biology, history and social science) was the goal (or the 'end') of Chinese-English bilingual

education; while the second/foreign language used in teaching was the means to achieve the goal/end. Fundamentally different from the above, bilingual education was also defined in the articles as "development of a foreign or second language through intervention and exposure to a level close to the mother tongue" (Wang & Wang, 2006, p. 66), in which development of a non-mother tongue language, English in this case, was taken as the goal/end of Chinese-English bilingual education.

Despite the definitions given, a debate over the role of the English language in a bilingual program indicates a somewhat different line of argument (see Qian, 2003b) as revealed in approximately one third of the articles reviewed. More than 60% of the authors involved in the debate held that English was as a means to an end (e.g., learning chemistry through English). They were mainly subject teachers (e.g., Lu, 2003, Zhang, 2006), who believed in subject teachers teaching subjects (e.g., chemistry teachers teach chemistry) in English (e.g., Wang, 2006; Zhou, Long & Zhou, 2002). For them, solid subject knowledge was the goal of bilingual education and good English proficiency was merely a desirable side-product. The other 40% of the debaters, on the other hand, contended that the ultimate goal of bilingual education was to improve learners' English proficiency instead of developing their subject knowledge through English. Holders of this 'end' view were mostly regional education officials or teachers of English (e.g., Jiang, 2003; Zhu, 2003; Liu, 2005), who advocated English teachers teaching non-language subjects in English (mostly at primary or lower secondary level with less demanding subject matter). For them, Chinese-English bilingual education was, in fact, *English language* education for the purpose of developing competent users of English with mother tongue Chinese complementary to L2 competence. It is worth noting their belief is utterly different from the popular definitions cited above, which assert that the teaching of subject knowledge (e.g., chemistry) in a second/foreign language (i.e. English) was the goal of Chinese-English bilingual education.

Unfortunately, such self-contradictory arguments were commonplace in the articles reviewed, and sometimes even evident within the same article (e.g., Luo, 2003).

Two bilingual models, 'the transitional model', and 'the additive model' were mentioned in approximately 40% of the issue-related articles, which could further illustrate the nature of Chinese-English bilingual programs in China. The former, aiming to help minority children transit smoothly from their mother tongue to the main stream language as the case in the United States and Australia, was dismissed in the discussion because of its obvious mismatch with the goal of this modern-day phenomenon of bilingual education. The latter, aiming to help English-speaking children acquire French in addition to their L1 as the case in Quebec, Canada, was overwhelmingly favoured by bilingual advocates in China (e.g., Zhu, 2003; Li, 2005; Jiang, 2002). Though labelled 'additive', except that the target language is additive to the mother tongue, Chinese-English bilingual education bears little resemblance to the Canadian case. While the Canadian 'additive' bilingual education serves as a means to promote social justice and equal opportunity of schooling and employment in a multicultural and multilingual society, it is clear that Chinese-English bilingual education in the mainland is for its majority (Han ethnic group) learners to develop a linguistically 'weak' language (English) while maintaining their mother tongue (Chinese) in a monolingual PTH dominated society (Zhu, 2003, p. 55; 2004, p. 14). This departure from the Canadian model, however, does not appear to have drawn serious attention in the discussion of bilingual education inside China. Once again, decentralization has played an indirect but key role in the discussion of the nature of bilingual education. When schools/regions are granted with autonomy to provide educational services in their own ways, seeking alternative education modes becomes a necessity.

Practice in schools

Every documented bilingual program (approximately 34% of all the articles reviewed) was different in terms of its curriculum structure, resources and teaching methodology adopted. Diversity was first observed from the structure of school curricula. For example, programs in Qingdao were reported to have followed the principles of "less before more", "easy before difficult", "gradual progress in a contextualized manner" (Jiang, 2002, p. 16), which led to the provision of English Arts at primary 2, English Math at primary 3, English Science at primary 4, and Society & Culture at primary 5 and 6 (Yu, 2006, p. 58). Programs in Changsha, as reported in Liu (2005), adopted a three-stage structure: key subject related words in English in the Penetrating stage; code switching between English and Chinese in the Integration stage; and full English in the Final stage (p. 42). These programs shared the same concern on English proficiency, but differed in the amount of English used in teaching non-language subjects. The programs in Shanghai, on the other hand, focused on overall development of school learners, that is, "moving from periphery to the center, non-core subjects (e.g., biology) to core subjects (e.g., math); elective to compulsory; and junior grades to senior grades" as reported in Zhou & Qu (2005, p. 24).

Diversity was also found in the amount of time allocated to bilingual lessons in a program. The documented range of teaching hours in English was huge (e.g., from up to 20% of the total curriculum time in Shandong to two English science lessons per week in Hunan; or only as extra-curriculum activities over weekends (see Jiang, 2003; Liu, 2005; Zhou, Long & Zhou, 2002). In addition, the actual amount of English used in each lesson varied to an even greater extent as well. Some lessons were found to contain merely routinized managerial use of English such as greetings, nominations and simple feedback (e.g., 'good morning, boys and girls'; 'well done'; see Yin, 2002); while others, especially subject lessons, were conducted exclusively in English on the basis of a sentence-by-sentence script, including, sometimes, anticipated students' responses (e.g., F. Li, 2005; Zhang, 2006; He, 2004). In

between these extremes, code-switching was frequently reported as a strategy to cater for and cope with language difficulties encountered. This included teaching subject-specific terminology in English in subject lessons (Cao & Wang, 2002; Qiu, 2003); explaining new topics in Chinese and summarizing them in English; and presenting subject matter with bilingual notes/subtitles (Yu, 2005). No evidence in the articles reviewed suggests that the amount of English actually used in a lesson was prescribed by schools; so the choice seems to be dependent on availability of human and material resources in a particular school.

Known as a "bottle neck phenomenon" in bilingual education (e.g., Liu, 2003, p. 31) as mentioned in approximately 24% of all the articles reviewed, shortages of text-books published in China were reported to meet the ever increasing demands. Imported textbooks were unable to match the number of students (Yan, 2004, p. 42). High quality textbooks catering for learners' needs in English and subject matter were even scarcer (e.g., Qiu, 2003; Han & Wu, 2005; Liu, 2003). Consequently, local teachers had to compile their own materials by integrating imported (subject) textbooks with simplified language (Qiu, 2003). Sometimes, Chinese subject textbooks were used when content was delivered orally in English (e.g., Jiang, 2004, p.102). Diversified practice in this regard seems to be inevitable as there was no documented guidance for textbook compilation in the articles collected. Other problems encountered in bilingual programs included lack of qualified bilingual teachers (e.g., Yu, 2004) and low English proficiency level of students to cope with bilingual lessons (e.g., Yuan, 2006).

In contrast to such a diversity mentioned above, Chinese-English bilingual programs unanimously associated themselves with imported teaching techniques with an emphasis on oral interaction between teachers and students (e.g., pair/group work, drama/role play, classroom presentation, see Huang, 2005; Yuan, 2006). These activities, however, appear to be taken for granted. No justification or any empirical evidence was given in the articles for

such a pedagogical choice; and no discussion was found relating this methodological choice to the aim/approach of a particular bilingual program. While there were reports of efforts to cater for students' needs in a lesson (e.g., simplifying subject knowledge to compensate for students' and sometimes teachers' lack of English proficiency, see Xu & Lu, 2005), such practice was, in fact, scattered and uncoordinated in terms of overall consistency and coherence of a bilingual program.

Discussion

Decentralization is defined as "the transfer of decision-making authority, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organisational levels or between organisation" (Hanson, 1998, p. 112). The above review suggests that bilingual education in China is an exercise of educational decentralization represented tangibly or intangibly in various aspects of the phenomenon. Unlike the undertaking in Mexico (Tatto, 1999) and Hungary (Kaufman, 1997) where educational decentralisation is more politically oriented, decentralization in China is fiscal in nature (Mok, 2002). Similar to reform of other kinds, decentralization in China faces a series of challenges, concerning governance, stake holders and socio-political outcomes etc. These are reflected inevitably in the operations of Chinese-English bilingual programs.

Governance: reconfigured relation between the central government and local governments

Education as 'a public good' in China used to be controlled exclusively by the central government. Under the policy of decentralisation, although regional governments are given certain autonomy to run education (e.g., to formulate policies, allocate resources, recruit teaching staff, design curriculum and textbooks, and evaluate outcomes, see Ngok, 2007 and Hu, 2002), the central government, in their 'guiding' and 'monitoring' role (Hawkins, 2000), continues prescribing what counts nationally as knowledge and the ways to learn/teach such knowledge. Two instances could illustrate the government's role. First, Article 10, Language

Law of People' Republic of China states explicitly that "[s]chools and other educational institutions must use *Putonghua* and standardized Chinese characters as the basic spoken and written language in education and teaching" (2001). As pointed out by Sun & Gai (2006), this language policy has, in effect, ruled out the possibility of using English as the medium of instruction in schools as advocated by bilingual education Second, bilingual education was not given an endorsement in the new secondary curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2003). Unlike its counterparts such as communicative language teaching and task-based learning, Chinese-English bilingual education, despite its popularity in the mainland, does not have an official status at the national level, therefore, it could only be considered a local endeavour. However, the central government has been turning a blind eye to the flourish of bilingual programs across the country as shown in the previous section. In the face of its speedy growth, a central government official chose to 'warn' language teaching professionals in two journal articles (Bao, 2005; 2006) that China was not yet ready to carry out any large scale bilingual education. He argued (2006) that "instead of the popular belief in 'winning in three areas' (i.e., development of L2, L1 and subject knowledge), pre-mature undertaking of bilingual education without sufficient planning in curriculum, teacher training etc. would have a serious negative impact on learning of language and subject" (p. 25). Given the negative tone of the message, however, it is not clear if the arguments represented the stance of the central government, or merely the author's personal opinions. His voice was, thus, "drowned in the overwhelming academic discourse by a growing contingent of vocal advocates" (Hu, 2008, p. 195). No evidence in the articles reviewed indicates whether the central government's silence is a deliberate strategy to avoid interference with local education initiatives, or an oversight regarding the seriousness of the matter, or simply a dilemma of governance arisen from the new reconfigured relation in the process of decentralisation. As a cross-curriculum exercise by nature, bilingual education has become not only a matter of

language education affecting the foreign language sector, but a matter involving educational authorities/stake holders across the board. The existing national-level governing body, the English language teaching department of Ministry of Education in charge of foreign language education in schools, appears to be powerless when guidance is needed in the face of such a cross-curriculum problem at various levels of the education system.

The mismatch between the traditional structure of governance and the current undertaking of bilingual education does not stop at the rhetorical level, but shows up at another battle front, namely, the new relation between subjects and English in a school curriculum. Bilingual education involves not only English as a subject, but also other disciplines as well. The current centrally-controlled academic structure in China categorises school subjects as science, math, Chinese, English, chemistry, history (see State Education Commission, 2000). Each of the subjects has its "unique identity with its own internal rules and special voice" (Bernstein, 1996, p. 20) materialised in its own curriculum. This discursive classification at the national level does not seem to have the capacity to accommodate bilingual education as a 'pan English' exercise (see Zhu, 2003; Yu, 2004) at the regional/school level. Theoretically speaking, when the boundary between subjects is broken or blurred, a subject discipline is in danger of losing its identity. When English steps into the territory of other subjects (e.g., teaching chemistry/history in English), its increased voice in a non-language subject class might be taken as a threat to the identity of the subject as a discipline of its own. Thus, the debate over the 'means' or 'end' of Chinese-English bilingual education mentioned previously is more than a debate between regional education authorities/English teachers and subject teachers, concerning merely who should teach bilingual classes, but a struggle for the integrity of a particular subject discipline. This is obviously a new phenomenon of reconfigured relation in the process of decentralisation, which needs urgent attention.

Stake holders: local governments, teachers and parents

One of the anticipated consequences of decentralization is the creation of various 'stake holders' (Ngok, 2007, p. 144), namely, other power centres (e.g., regional education authorities, local communities and teachers), who are expected to share responsibilities of a decentralised task (Hawkins, 2000). Although the central government is seen willing to delegate their authority and tasks to regional governments, whether or not those regional education authorities/individual schools are equipped adequately to take over decentralised tasks becomes questionable.

Curriculum development, regardless whether it is centralised or decentralised, requires serious consideration of the questions regarding 'what knowledge is considered legitimate to be selected for a curriculum?', 'how is the selected (legitimate) knowledge recontexualised into texts of a recommended textbook?' and 'who is responsible for decontextualising the selected (legitimate) and recontexualised knowledge in pedagogical practice in classrooms?' (see Apple, 1993). Bernstein (1996) points out that pedagogical decisions are the symbolic control over distribution of power (through distribution of knowledge to different social groups), concerning education equality (or inequality), and entailing long-term concrete and material consequences. However, there is no evidence in the articles reviewed to suggest that local educational authorities involved in bilingual education took these fundamental issues into account in their decision making. In this regard, the academic discourse on bilingual education produced inside China (like the ones reviewed in this paper) is unhelpful in equipping local authorities with an overall understanding of the relationship between education reform and selection of pedagogy. Passionate promotion of bilingual education was abundant, but empirical evidence to justify the choice was rare. A few documented studies, undertaken by regional officials or project leaders (e.g., Zhu, 2003; Jiang 2002), were found flawed in research design and results interpretation, and therefore of

doubtful validity and reliability (see Hu, 2008, p. 214-218). Long-term effects of bilingual education such as its linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural consequences beyond the domain of English language instruction (e.g., bilingual children's cultural identity and their mother tongue proficiency) simply did not exist (Gu, 2006, p.82). When the guidance from the central government is either ambivalent or absent (e.g., keeping salience in the face of the flourish of bilingual programs); when there is a scarcity of documented empirical-based and contextualised studies on bilingual education for regional education authorities and individual schools to refer to, an informed and rational decision is most unlikely. The diversified bilingual programs observed above could hence be interpreted as an indication of a certain level of randomness and inconsistency in decision-making (concerning curriculum structures and operation strategies) at the regional/school level. In this regard, local governments seem to be at a dual disadvantage. They are expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of the central government but without the advantage of its rich human/intellectual and financial resources to carry out the tasks (e.g. compiling textbooks to meet students' needs as discussed previously). In this sense, local governments could be said to have lost their legitimacy granted to them under the decentralisation policy.

While regional governments are heavily involved in making education decisions, the role of teachers (both English and subject) in such practices, however, is not clear. Similar to the case in South Africa and Hungary where "decentralisation does not lead to genuine participation" (Sayed, 1997, p. 365) nor "increased participatory decision-making" (Kaufman, 1997, p. 26), no evidence in the articles reviewed indicates that teachers were in effect involved in decision making in adopting bilingual education in their schools. The reported active participation of school teachers (indicated in a high number of articles written by practicing teachers) seem to be all oriented towards policy implementation instead of policy making. In the same vein, although parents were reported in the articles reviewed to have

embraced bilingual education enthusiastically, it is not clear if they were ever consulted in the process or simply responded to the decision made for them by local/school authorities. This suggests decision making could still remain in the hands of one single power centre. Instead of the central government, a different tier of the education system is taking over the decentralised authority and tasks; only this time, at a lower level by regional governments and individual schools. Transference of decision making power does not seem to happen automatically because of a 'social space' created by the decentralisation policy at the national level.

Outcomes of decentralisation: socio-political consequences

The decentralisation exercise in China, as the case in Mexico, is "a multifaceted effort with multiple outcomes, some intended, and some not" (Tatto, 1999, p. 275). The impact of the outcomes is likely double-edged (Cheng, 1995). On the one hand, decentralization has given local education authorities certain incentives to provide education services with a sense of ownership. The flourishing of Chinese-English bilingual programs shown previously (in spite of its unofficial status at national level) serves as a footnote to this point. On the other hand, however, "[v]ariation in provincial resources has a strong effect on the benefits of fiscal decentralisation, [which] seems to be working well if the locality is already doing well economically" (Hawkins, 2000, p. 450). With their abundant resources to absorb the cost of educational innovations (e.g., curriculum design, textbook compiling, assessment design), well-off areas (e.g., Shanghai and Guangdong) become the hubs of bilingual education with a vision to "develop world-class foreign language teaching programs… so as to turn the municipal city into a world-class international metropolis" (SCTMRC, 1999, p. 3); while poor inland regions are struggling hard to keep up with the trend with very limited revenue to support even basic education needs. As a result of this fiscal decentralization, the expenditure on education by local governments in a well developed region could be three times more than

that in an underdeveloped region (Sun, 2007, p. 50). An apparent consequence of such an imbalance in expenditure is "the social inequalities that exist at the local level" (Kamat, 2002, p. 111) "if each community ends up with an education that reflects its income and power" (Lagos, 1993, p.4). Chinese-English bilingual education, probably independent of its original intention, has turned into a means to create further social inequality between prosperous and under developed regions in the country. Unlike the traditional concept of bilingual education, it seems this modern-day phenomenon does not only have the potential to disadvantage learners of ethnic minorities (Feng, 2005), but also the majority Han learners in less developed areas.

Conclusion

Through a review of Chinese-English bilingual education discourse published inside China, this study has made an attempt to exemplify how decentralisation worked in China in the past two decades. The analysis has revealed that decentralisation has created a favourable overall socioeconomic and political context for bilingual education to develop from a local education endeavour into a nation-wide undertaking. The analysis has also revealed that decentralization has allowed diversified operations of bilingual programs at regional level. However, there has been a visible inconsistency and incoherence between the theoretical underpinnings of the programs and practice in schools/classrooms. Such an inconsistency and incoherence may have resulted from a newly reconfigured relation between the central government and local governments, as well as a lack of human/intellectual resources at the regional level, leading to some unintended educational and sociopolitical outcomes in the country. All these need urgent attention from both the central and local governments as well as stake holders. Education is a microcosm of the country as a whole. The problems identified above cannot be treated as educational issues only, but have to be addressed in relation to the overall socioeconomic development in the country.

Chinese-English bilingual education will probably continue to exist for quite some time in the mainland, but under certain conditions. First, educational decentralization remains as a long-lasting policy in China. No political or economic evidence so far suggests this will not be the case. In fact, once a giant engine (like China's economic system) has started moving fast in a certain direction, it is most unlikely to stop or reverse to where it was before. Second, stake holders have to be convinced of the effectiveness of Chinese-English bilingual programs with empirical evidence derived from well-designed research studies so as to obtain continued public support for the programs. Academics and scholars have an especially important role to play in this regard. Third, bilingual education may be able to survive as an alternative pedagogy in those prosperous areas when English continues being taken as linguistic/cultural capital. However, high fever for bilingual education may diminish once people have realised that proficiency in English may not have anything at all to do with China becoming a modern nation-state.

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