

Educational Values and the English Language Curriculum in Hong Kong Secondary Schools Since 1975

Introduction

Hong Kong is an international city of slightly over 7 million people located in the southern part of the People's Republic of China (PRC). More than 98% of the population is ethnically Chinese and the majority speaks Cantonese as their first language. During Hong Kong's colonial history of more than 150 years (1841-1997) under British rule, English was established as the sole official language of the government and trade. For years, schools served the purpose of educating local, ethnic Chinese students for service in the colonial government. To this day, the majority of parents and students believe that attending English-medium schools would offer better opportunities for jobs and further studies. However, despite British colonial influences in the political and education system of Hong Kong during its rule, educational practices tend to reflect Chinese traditions and influences. Classes are large, usually around 35-40. Teachers are highly respected figures and are perceived as sources of authority and knowledge. Teaching methods are mostly expository, keenly focused on preparation for the highly competitive public examinations, and consequently exert considerable pressure on teachers and students. Teachers are expected to adhere to the teaching syllabus which is mostly textbook-bound.

This paper describes and analyses changes in the English language curriculum formally proposed for Hong Kong secondary schools (Forms 1-5) from 1975 to the present day. Curriculum developments reflect interrelated social, political, economic, and cultural factors of the period and the ideology in educational circles that is pre-eminent at the time (Clark, 1987), and the English language syllabus in particular is shaped by views about the purposes and nature of language learning. In time, values systems alter and views about language learning are reassessed and one would expect to find that the nature and aims of the curriculum likewise undergo change. Adapting Morris and Adamson's (2010) labels for educational values systems, the English language curriculum in Hong Kong can be labelled as classical humanism (1878-1952), social and economic efficiency combined with social reconstructionism (1952–1995) and progressivism (post-1995). The dates that demarcate a shift in values systems are crude as there often follows a time-lag before widespread acceptance and implementation of change occurs, but they mark significant educational decisions or the genesis of curriculum renewal. The focus of this paper is from 1975 because that was the year when the first official English syllabus was published in Hong Kong after a period of *laissez-faire* in which English language teaching materials from countries such as Malaysia formed the core teaching syllabus (Adamson & Lee, 1994). The paper also covers the period of significant social change brought about by the retrocession of

sovereignty over Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997.

The documents used for this analysis of the English language curriculum in Hong Kong secondary schools are the 1975 (provisional) Syllabus for English (Forms 1-5), the 1983 Syllabus for English (Forms 1-5), the 1999 Syllabus for English (Forms 1-5). Major structural reforms were introduced in Hong Kong schools in 2009, with the introduction of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum that changed the former 5-2 structure to a 3-3 model (i.e. three years' junior secondary and three years' senior secondary schooling). Changes were made to the examination system and the content of the senior secondary school curriculum, but these are beyond the scope of the current paper, as there was little impact on the content of the curriculum for junior forms.

Using the analytical framework articulated by Walker et al. (2000), this paper describes the syllabuses in a chronological order with respect to the following areas: the genesis; the intended aims, content and methodology; the ideological basis; and the issues that arose when the syllabuses were implemented. Figure 1 summarises the relation between macro-level social changes and English syllabus changes.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The 1975 curriculum

Genesis

In the early 1970s, the study of English in Hong Kong aimed to prepare students for university entrance and to perpetuate an English-speaking elite for the purposes of government and commerce (Sweeting, 1993). Syllabuses were presented in the form of an examination blueprint, outlining the generic contents of examination papers. The majority of children at that time left school after primary school, and worked in industries such as textiles, garment making or small businesses; 53% of the work force was engaged in secondary industry at that time (Morris, 1995).

However, by the mid-1970s there were moves to implement nine years' compulsory schooling, which was finally made law in 1979. The spur for this curriculum change can be traced to demographic changes, economic development and political changes in the 1950s and 1960s, the effects of which began to be felt in the mid-1970s. Firstly, there had been a rapid increase in refugees from the PRC. Secondly, economic conditions had improved largely due to the free market philosophy of Hong Kong and the entrepôt trade, leading to the emergence of a middle class. As their children left primary school there was increasing pressure from the middle class for the provision of more secondary school places. The government began to increase public funding for education largely as a result of the public demand, but also because they did not want to be seen by the West

as using child labour in manufacturing (Morris & Adamson, 2010).

Intended aims, content and methodology

The 1975 English syllabus reflected the change from elite to mass education by introducing a form of differentiated syllabus that was designed to take into account people's aspirations for jobs in the government, financial and commercial sectors. Two courses were set out, called Syllabus A and Syllabus B. Syllabus A was claimed to be less difficult than Syllabus B, and was designed to cater for the mass of students who were expected to leave school after Form Three. The publication of the syllabus meant that the teaching and learning aims of English were no longer simply implicit in an examination syllabus. The 1975 syllabus states that the general aim is to enable pupils to consolidate and extend the English already learned by them in the primary school. The more specific objectives are that pupils completing the first three years of secondary school study should at least be capable of simple self-expression in speech and writing, of comprehension of straightforward everyday English both spoken and written, and of reading for information and enjoyment (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.6). Thus the aims clearly refer to students who are not going to use English for university or other advanced study.

The syllabus is flexible in the sense that it provides materials for courses of three to five

years duration, and that “teaching may be cut off at any point”, with prescribed learning goals being set, based on the year level and instrumental need of the students. Students finishing the first three years “should be capable of speaking, reading, writing and understanding English within the range of structural patterns prescribed up to that point” (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.1), while students of higher levels are given the opportunities to learn more. Individual ability and needs are briefly mentioned in parts of the syllabus; for instance, in the preamble, it is stated that ‘One of the most important principles of curriculum development is that syllabuses should be tailored to meet the real needs of pupils,...’ (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.iv).

The intended methodology is the “oral structural teaching method” (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.1), which is underpinned by Behaviourist notions that language could be acquired through habit-formation, and a view that a language syllabus can be determined on the basis of social utility. However, when these two viewpoints are combined, a tension emerges. Habit-formation drills place emphasis on students reproducing uncontextualised, discrete sentence patterns, whereas social use of language is contextualised and holistic. The syllabus resolves the dilemma by indicating a preference for sentence practice within vague or unrealistic contexts. For example, it suggests that a dialogue of this kind might be set up, using a wall picture of an

aeroplane:

1st pupil: Where is the aeroplane?

2nd pupil: She asked where the aeroplane was.

3rd pupil: It's in the sky.

4th pupil: He said it was in the sky.

(Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.136)

Paradoxically, although such drills tend to be unnatural, the section on assessment suggests oral rather than written modes, as oral modes gives students the opportunity to use English in situations that are more meaningful and realistic than can be achieved in written examinations (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.24). In reality, Syllabus A students, including Form Three leavers, still had to sit for examinations which tested largely decontextualised grammatical skills.

Although the syllabus stresses the relationship between the four language skills, there is no explicit suggestion on methods to enhance the integration of the skills, apart from emphasising the importance of providing students chances to practise. The syllabus reiterates that every structure written by learners must first be practised orally. Therefore, not surprisingly, one-quarter of the whole syllabus is devoted the teaching of oral English, with detailed suggestions on different types of oral work, such as the

repetition of tape-recorded sentences, the use of wall pictures as prompts for drills, language teaching games, and questioning. In this methodology, one role of the teacher is to be the language model for the students (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.156). Very detailed guidelines are given on how to structure and organise lesson to maximise 'active' participation by the pupils. Basically the pattern: presentation–controlled practice (oral repetition by the class) – extended oral practice is recommended. The role of the students is therefore to master the oral production of the discrete language structures that have been identified in the syllabus as relevant to their needs. Later they are expected to transfer this mastery to written modes. There is little scope for student creativity or autonomy, and the main activities would be teacher-fronted drills, whole class work and individual practice.

Ideological basis

Applying the Morris and Adamson framework, the 1975 English syllabus represents a shift from elitist classical humanist to a social and economic efficiency model (i.e. English serving the human resource needs of Hong Kong) allied to a social reconstructionist philosophy. English was seen as a means of social mobility for people, through greater access to the language of government, higher education and international business. Initially the form of reconstructionism was very mild. A move towards egalitarianism was manifested in the improved provision of education. Little

attempt was made at consciousness-raising or promoting social change. The principal function of language learning was an end, rather than a means to other educational goals. In terms of instruction, the rule-based, direct transmission tenets of grammar-translation were replaced by a more pragmatic view of language learning that stressed language use rather than knowledge about language the goal was for students to achieve communicative competence in oral and written language.

Support for change and implementation

This syllabus generally gives the impression that it is addressed to readers who have minimal or no teacher training, by claiming to be “a comprehensive guide” to the oral-structural teaching method (Curriculum Development Council, 1975, p.1). Pages 66 –74 give detailed guidance on how to teach composition writing, and pp151 – 155 give detailed advice on questioning. Indeed, in the mid-seventies, there was a severe lack of trained teachers (Tsui, 1994). To a certain extent the syllabus *was* the teacher training. However, the guidance is superficial and ill-defined. It uses terms such as “simple” and “straightforward” to describe content and processes, but such terms are relative and unclear. In short, the untrained teacher would still have had many problems with implementing the aims of the syllabus, especially with less able learners.

A further problem was the lack of context-compatibility. The reforms sought to move

from an elitist orientation towards quality education for all, but class sizes remained large in the vast majority of schools, and a hierarchy, or market in schools developed, where the most academically able had access to their school of choice, and the less academically able were forced into less desirable schools. There was no attempt to introduce comprehensive schooling where each school comprised a diverse range of students, and resources could be allocated equitably. The public examination system, as noted above, was also out of synchronisation with the thrust of the curriculum changes. In summary, although the English syllabus provided some assistance to untrained teachers, there were still many features of the syllabus and the system in which it operated, which limited its feasibility, and hence its effective implementation.

The 1983 curriculum

Genesis

The rapid expansion in secondary education was not accomplished without problems. In particular, educationists began to express concern over the standard of students in both Chinese and English, prompting the Education Department to set up a working party to study the issue. One result was an overhaul of the English curriculum, with a new Primary syllabus published in 1981, and Secondary syllabus in 1983. By then there had been significant changes in the economic and political environment of Hong Kong. The UK government clearly indicated its intention to return sovereignty of Hong Kong to

the PRC in 1997. Discussions between the UK and Chinese governments culminated in the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984, which resolved the matter. The impact on language was a change of status for English in Hong Kong. Its colonial importance was not diminished by the rise in the status of Putonghua—the spoken language of mainland China—because the blueprint for post-1997 assured a continuing role for English in the governance of the Special Administrative Region, as Hong Kong was to become. However, the value of English as the language of international commerce was rising. In the early 1980s, there was a shift of employment focus in Hong Kong from secondary to tertiary industries, as China's economic modernisation drive led to Hong Kong's labour-intensive jobs being relocated to the cheaper sources of labour in the newly created Special Economic Zones in Guangdong Province, across the border (Morris & Adamson, 2010). Hong Kong, with its rule of law and stable banking system moved towards providing business and financial services for local and international companies trading with China. Such a shift required different work skills, and English was desirable for its role in business and financial communication.

Intended aims, content and methodology

The implication for the English secondary school syllabus that appeared in 1983 was that its aims had to be more than vague 'basic, everyday English' in order to cater for the English needs of the more sophisticated work and work-related contexts. The

syllabus had a new and strong emphasis on the *use* of English. For example, “the English teacher should set as her main task the provision to the students of opportunity to put English language to use in the classroom” (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.6). Nevertheless, there are many similarities with the 1975 syllabus aims. Again, the syllabus is described as a “guide” to the teaching of English in schools, and the claim for special attention to Form Three leavers is repeated. The wording is very similar to the 1975 document, and the broad teaching aim remains to consolidate and extend the English already learned at primary school (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.6). However, in contrast to the 1975 document, the 1983 document spells out the “objectives” of the curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, pp.8-11), which elaborate the aim of putting English to use:

The principal objective of the English Language curriculum in schools of Hong Kong is to provide every student with the opportunity to develop the maximum degree of functional competence in English of which s/he is capable, given the constraints inherent in the situation, in particular competence in those domains of use which are especially appropriate to the Hong Kong situation” (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.8).

The predicted domains of use, absent from the 1975 document, are the workplace; international communication; government and officialdom; leisure; communication with

non-Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong; and study. Under the “no change for 50 years” policy established by the PRC to assure Hong Kong residents of stability after the retrocession, English was still to be used for written communication within the civil service. In the domain of leisure and entertainment, there was still considerable influence from US culture, despite the ever-expanding local entertainment industries. In the domain of communication with non-Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, the influx of overseas workers and a growing tourist industry meant a steadily growing, if small, non-Cantonese speaking presence. In the domain of study, young people had begun to seek tertiary study overseas as the Hong Kong tertiary sector still offered only limited access. British and Australian universities, in particular, strapped for cash in an unsympathetic political environment, began to see the opportunities for reaping more benefits from the colony through providing educational services at ‘overseas student’ rates.

The 1983 syllabus is described as a “major revision” (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.5) of the 1975 syllabus because it is less prescriptive in terms of content and aims. The most obvious changes in the 1983 syllabus are that translation, as an intellectual activity in its own right does not appear, while listening skills and language arts are new sections. Although listening skills still represent practice of decontextualised skills, their inclusion nonetheless reflects a greater emphasis on

communication. The new language arts section incorporating poetry and drama reading (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, pp.85-117) replaces the section in the 1975 syllabus entitled 'literature' which seemingly served simply to berate teachers for teaching abridged versions of English classics and calling it 'literature' teaching. The language arts section contains some written genres, such as travel fiction, poetry and drama, for the first time. Another innovation is drawing students' attention to the intended readership when producing written work:

The receiver of the message must be ... 'psychologically present'.... It helps a great deal if the student can have some idea of the person he is writing for and consequently what assumptions he can make about shared knowledge and attitudes (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.113).

In terms of pedagogy, like the 1975 syllabus, the 1983 syllabus describes itself as a "guide" to the teaching of English in secondary schools. The 1983 syllabus states that there is "nothing really radically 'new' about the general approach" it advocates (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.5). The most significant shift is towards a more communicative approach away from the predominantly oral-structural methodology in the previous syllabus. That is, there is a shift from structurally-focused classroom activities towards more meaning-focused activities, and a more definite phase of the English lesson devoted to student production or use of English in more realistic

and better-defined situations. The new syllabus contains examples of teaching techniques implicit in the communicative approach. Group work and pair work are emphasised and new techniques such as information gaps are used to give a communicative dimension to language learning activities. Overall, however, the 1983 English secondary school syllabus is less expansive about methodology, possibly since the teaching techniques that it promotes remain basically the same as those in the 1975 syllabus. There is an implicit 'presentation, practice, production' (PPP) approach, although the new syllabus emphasises the 'production' phase more strongly. New methods include less teacher 'control' and more unpredictability and spontaneity in students' language use, through more student-centred approaches, encouraging autonomy, diversity and creativity, such as by giving students a choice of topics and opportunities to explore their own responses to literary texts. While methodological detail is lacking, teachers are exhorted to 'teach creatively', 'allow imaginative response', 'offer encouragement', play down competition, stress co-operation, let students do drama (Curriculum Development Council, 1983 p.96-98), allow memorisation (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.103), not analyse and moralise in poetry teaching, and allow students to watch Educational TV uninterrupted by translation or teachers' comments (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.121).

Interestingly, almost as an afterthought, the last sentence of the 1983 section on aims

and objectives names another aim “which should be kept in mind throughout” as teaching English in such a way that students are helped to “learn how to learn, to equip them with the ability to continue their education by means of self study” (Curriculum Development Council, 1983, p.10). This aim shows signs that the educational views of the syllabus designers were moving towards a view of education characterised by attention to the autonomy of the individual learner.

Ideological basis

The strong determinant of change to the English secondary school curriculum in 1983 was the economic profile of Hong Kong. The syllabus demonstrates a social and economic efficiency orientation, although the mild reconstructionist element noted in the 1975 syllabus remains present. The aims of the syllabus reinforce Hong Kong’s goal to serve as China’s ‘window on the world’, and are phrased in terms of functional competencies in contexts where the new generation would operate and gain social mobility. All in all, the 1983 English syllabus aims made explicit Hong Kong’s need for English as a resource to provide a locally and internationally responsive service, business and commercial base, and to provide opportunities for its citizens to obtain further education in English-speaking countries.

Although it could be argued that the syllabus aims were generally compatible with the

social context of the time, it is doubtful that a strong emphasis on *use* of English, especially in speech, could be easily implemented in the classroom. The same constraints identified in the previous curriculum remained in force. Teacher competence was a limiting factor, as were class size and the crowded, noisy school environment. In addition, the learning culture of students meant that any opportunities for student talk were unlikely to be taken up in class, and that they were hardly likely to achieve the aim of “learning how to learn”. Students saw the teacher as the giver of knowledge and their role as a passive receiver. Most students appeared to abide by the tacit rules that they should not show their knowledge verbally in front of peers; and they should not appear to be fluent in using English. Although modesty is highly valued, and could partly explain this behaviour (Tsui, 1995), it could also be explained as a response to the examination-driven and authoritarian schooling environment.

Probably the most important factor affecting the students’ use of English was that the examination system did not really assess spoken English use in a communicative way. Students were asked very often, as interpreted by some examiners and schools, to describe pictures (although the pictures, as stipulated by the examination authority, were meant to be a starting point—a stimulus for conversation that could go in any direction thereafter with the examiner) and read aloud conversations. Furthermore, the oral component of the public examinations was only worth 10% and teachers could take the

view that drilling the students well enough on the other examination components meant they could ignore the 10% oral component. Since the washback effect of examinations in Hong Kong is very strong (Fullilove, 1992; Andrews & Fullilove, 1993; Andrews, 1994; Education Commission, 1999), emphasis on the use of spoken English (for example) was unlikely. These factors combined with the poor physical conditions in schools hampered the implementation of the communicative goals of the 1983 syllabus.

The 1999 curriculum

Genesis

Throughout the 1980s, much of Hong Kong's manufacturing base continued to emigrate to Guangdong in the PRC and other parts of south-east Asia. In the following decade, Hong Kong developed information-based and service industries to fill the void. At the same time, rapid technological advances, most notably computerisation, and the globalisation of trade, including tourism, created a demand for a highly skilled and linguistically competent workforce. Political movements experienced particularly in Western countries, such as democratisation and human rights issues, also found echoes in Hong Kong because of its political, economic and communication links to the West, improved educational and living standards, and sensitivity in relation to its hand-over to the PRC in 1997. The hand-over produced a realignment of languages in the curriculum in Hong Kong, with Putonghua receiving greater prominence and one goal of education

was to produce citizens who were biliterate (in written Chinese and English) and trilingual (in spoken Cantonese, Putonghua and English). English was viewed as crucial for Hong Kong to remain active in international trade. As a consequence of these global and local changes, and of the development of new constructivist theories of learning that had been trialled in primary schools in Hong Kong, a reform of the English curriculum was promulgated in 1999 for implementation in secondary schools in 2001.

The 1999 syllabus, the first post-colonial English syllabus, appeared at a time characterised by rapid change in many aspects of life, but also against a background of claims from the business sector and middle-classes that Hong Kong schooling was overly academic, enervating rather than curiosity-exciting, and encouraging passivity and superficial learning. To address these problems, a series of reforms were undertaken to promote mindsets of curiosity, risk-taking, confidence and flexibility. The 1999 syllabus originated in the Target and Target-related Assessment (TTRA) project set up in 1990. The TTRA cross-curricular framework was designed to operationalise learning and make it fit for the purposes and changing requirements of the modern world and for the changing understanding that was then available about how knowledge, individual learning and progress are best brought about. In 1994 in order to emphasise that TTRA was not an assessment-driven scheme, the Advisory Committee set up by the Director of Education recommended that the name TTRA be changed to Target-Oriented

Curriculum (TOC) to underline that the major purposes of the scheme was to improve the quality of the curriculum as a whole, of which assessment is one part, and through this to improve the quality of learning. The TOC Programmes of Study for Key Stages One to Four provide the framework and content for the development of the new 1996 English syllabus for primary schools and the 1999 syllabus for secondary schools.

The secondary curriculum in general was reorganised around key learning areas to alleviate the problem of an over-crowded curriculum; based on the division of stages worked out in the 1983 Syllabus, linkages between the primary and secondary stages of schooling were made more explicit and strongly emphasised through the definition of four Key Stages (corresponding to Primary 1-3, 4-6, Secondary 1-3 and 4-5) with explicit and coherent learning targets. The main vehicle to build challenge, motivation and interest into the curriculum for all students was task-based learning.

The influence of economic globalisation on the 1999 English syllabus is seen in its use of market discourse—*targets, performance indicators, input, output, criteria, strategies, efficiency*, and so on. Another influence is seen in the emphasis placed on adaptability to change and problem solving. If individuals are to be effective in the new environment they must be equipped to adapt to flux in life, and to persist at solving problems in creative ways—such tools are often referred to as “soft” or “21st century” skills. In the

syllabus, the students are encouraged to develop, through engaging in tasks, five intertwining learning skills—inquiring; conceptualising; reasoning; problem-solving; and communicating (Clark et al, 1994)—so they may interact more and become more responsible for their own learning. The choice of task-based learning was influenced by experiences overseas and placed Hong Kong reforms “in line with major curriculum developments elsewhere, such as the UK and Australia”; as such, it represented a major step, being viewed as “a radical attempt to shift curriculum planning, teaching and learning in the direction of student-centred learning” (Dimmock & Walker, 1997).

Intended aims, content and methodology

The syllabus aims explicitly promote a task-based approach to English, responsive to individual learners’ experiences, stages of development, learning styles and interests.

The overall target for English is:

for learners to develop an ever-improving capability to use English to think and communicate; to acquire, develop and apply knowledge; and to respond and give expression to experience; and within these contexts to develop and apply an ever-improving understanding of how language is organised, used and learned.

(Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.7)

The syllabus lays out “learning targets” in three dimensions—Interpersonal, Knowledge and Experiential. The learning targets provide a far more specific level of “aims” than

the broader skill-based “objectives” of the previous syllabuses. The 1999 syllabus retains the emphasis on communication found in the previous syllabus, but with greater clarity through the use of extensive examples. That is, some language items are still listed, but are given in association with a communicative function, e.g., ‘use adjectives, adverbs and formulaic phrases *etc to make comparisons and give descriptions of processes and situations*’ (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.24, emphases added). It also acknowledges the integrative nature of language use in real situations and states that meaningful learning activities “involve more than one Dimension, more than one language skill, more than one major communicative function and form, and involve language development strategies and attitudes” (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.10). A new element in the syllabus is the goal of fostering intercultural understanding, as it is important that students are enabled to “be acquainted with the culture and conventions of language behaviour of other countries” (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.6). Another goal, found previously but in a more understated manner in the 1975 and 1983 syllabuses, is the affective domain, labelled the Experience Dimension, which contains such sub-targets as one in Key Stage 4 that seeks to encourage students “to describe with colour, motion, emotion and beauty” (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.34). The attention to the affective domains suggests that English is viewed beyond its utilitarian value.

The 1999 syllabus offers a more comprehensive coverage of methodology than previous syllabuses. It contains suggestions on task-based learning, while separate booklets of exemplars of tasks and assessment tasks are provided as further support. Although the tasks in the syllabus are not graded specifically for a particular level of students, the targets the task is addressing could probably show what level it is aiming at. The teachers are left to decide what is appropriate for their students' needs and interests. The range of suggested tasks is limited to more holistic and demanding tasks, while tasks of a simpler nature not included. The tasks are suggested in terms of what the teachers can do with the class, i.e., in terms of what teaching methods can be adopted. Teacher/learner negotiated tasks and content are not given consideration in the syllabus. A spiral approach in learning is recommended in which areas of learning are regularly revisited, reinforced, and extended. The spiral approach entails the language forms and functions, topics, and most importantly, targets and objectives. Tasks are the organising focus and are placed at the centre of the connections. They are to be related to the learning targets and objectives, and by common themes and topics. Although the main emphasis is on the student actively constructing their own knowledge, according to constructivist principles, teachers are also active participants in the process. They are expected to design integrated curriculum experiences that enhance the personal and social development of their students, and engage them in more active learning processes. They are also expected to construct explicit links between formal learning in

classrooms and informal and non-formal learning contexts. In addition they are asked to construct modes of assessment that involves them in a systematic process of gathering and reflecting on evidence to effect improvements to the quality of students' curriculum experiences.

Ideological basis

The 1999 syllabus, unlike the 1975 and 1983 syllabuses, set out individual-oriented aims before the society-oriented aims. Specifically, the aims are:

to offer every student the right to a second language which provides further opportunities for extending knowledge and experience of the cultures of other people, including opportunities for further studies, pleasure and work in the English medium; and to enable every student living in the twenty-first century to be prepared for the changing socio-economic demands resulting in advancement in information technology, including the interpretation, use and production of materials for pleasure, study or work in the English medium. (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.7).

In terms of ideological values, this syllabus reflects a “progressivist” educational ideology in that it aims at whole-person development of the individual. However, the linkage to the human capital needs of Hong Kong means that the syllabus also retains a

social and economic efficiency orientation.

The syllabus aims are also compatible with the current social environment which was more individualistic (Morris, 1995) at the end of the 1990s. The element of intercultural understanding and attention to attitudes is in line with the contemporary political context in the sense that democracy and associated pluralism were beginning to develop, if a little unevenly, in Hong Kong. For example, with sizable populations of Filipinos, Indians, and Pakistanis, issues of multiculturalism were becoming topical (Daswani, 1999). Moreover, many people returned from emigration to more multicultural societies (US, Canada, Australia), and possibly saw themselves as ‘transnationals’ (Sweeting, 1998). However, the element of intercultural understanding envisaged by the syllabus is very limited, at the level of vocabulary rather than attitudes or cultural heritage:

[T]eachers should be careful with words that reflect the interests of other cultures that may not be shared by our learners. Take for example, the underground railway. It is called the “tube” in London, the “subway” in New York, and the “MTR” in Hong Kong.it is useful for learners to begin to develop the awareness that there are many varieties of English, as the language is used in many parts of the world with different traditions. (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p.21)

It is not a syllabus aim for Hong Kong students to learn anything about those traditions.

The curriculum reforms were supported by a number of initiatives. One, the Native English Teacher (NET) scheme provided funding for the recruitment of up to 700 native-speaking teachers of English to serve in Hong Kong secondary schools for an initial period of two years. The scheme was implemented in September 1998, as a continuation of earlier pilot schemes. The NET scheme was introduced as one of a series of measures designed to address the problems of declining language proficiency identified in Education Commission Report Number Six (Education Commission, 1996, p.18).

Initiatives specifically related to the use of TBL included a try-out scheme in a number of secondary schools that gathered valuable experience, and an in-service course on the new curriculum that was developed and run by the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The aims of the 15-hour course were to enhance teachers' understanding, skills and strategies in using TBL. A total of 385 teachers enrolled on the course. Workshops were also run by the Education Department to introduce TBL to teachers.

Discussion

Curriculum change in the subject of English has been stimulated predominantly by

social and economic shifts in Hong Kong, although a social reconstructionist agenda is also discernible in the first two syllabuses and the 1999 syllabus reflects progressivist values. Population increases, the rise of a wealthy middle class, the development of the tertiary sector of industry at a time of increasing globalisation and new socio-political trends have impacted upon the curriculum, prompting changes in proposed methodology and content. The 1975 syllabus is more content-oriented, specifying the knowledge of the language system and language skills, with examples of practice suggested within an oral-structural methodology framework. The 1983 syllabus is quite a shift towards communicative language teaching, with an emphasis on language use, on top of the knowledge of the language system; while the 1999 syllabus is more methodology-based with the emphasis on the use of TBL to bring about more holistic English learning in class. Each syllabus recommends one particular approach in ELT instead of advocating integration or a combination of different approaches to facilitate English language learning.

In nearly 40 years the planned secondary English curriculum in Hong Kong, as represented in three syllabuses, has changed fairly radically in methodology but it has changed very little in terms of content, which has remained the English language system itself. This could be explained by the fact that the intended methodology has been imported from overseas, while the content has been left in line with indigenous

conceptions and practices of language teaching and learning. The intended methodology has moved from ‘oral-structural’ approaches that are characterised by an emphasis on decontextualised and discrete language practice aiming at structural accuracy, to more integrated, contextualised practice according to communicative pedagogical principles. The introduction of task-based learning in 1999 reinforced this move to the extent that English language learning was no longer viewed as the sole aim, but also as a means for accessing other knowledge and skills as part of whole-person growth. These shifts have had implications for classroom activities and the respective roles of the teacher and students, with the latter expected to become more participatory and independent in their learning, and the former providing supportive input and scaffolding.

Formulating aims is the easy task, but as experience suggests, implementation is usually much more difficult and much slower. While the aims of the syllabuses have been largely compatible with the economic and political context of the time, they have not necessarily been compatible with school environmental factors such as teacher competence, teacher attitudes, class size and examination requirements, or with the socio-cultural contexts in which students, teachers, and schools are situated. When a language policy has low feasibility, it is imbued with in-built failure (Kan et al., 2011). A major problem with English is its desirable status. As a result, it is allocated a large proportion of time in the school curriculum (Adamson & Lai, 1997) while human

resources (teachers) are under-allocated and class sizes are simply too large to allow teachers, even if they were competent to do so, to design and implement effective language learning experiences. There has also been under-investment in the qualifications of teachers. The high stakes nature of public examinations (which have tended to lack synchronisation with new syllabuses) leave teachers to see themselves as ‘examination trainers’ and disinclined as well as ill-prepared to adopt the sophisticated, outward-looking aims of the syllabus.

A tacit expectation underpinning curriculum reform in Hong Kong is that teachers should change in accordance with changes in curriculum components and curriculum products such as syllabuses and textbooks. All three syllabuses analysed above have made very large assumptions about and increasing demands upon teachers without there being sufficient possibilities for teacher development to cope with the changes. As long ago as 1975, the syllabus assumed firstly that teachers themselves were able to *use* accurate spoken English to motivate and to elicit spoken English responses from students before any writing occurred; to elaborate and correct student speech; to mobilise and train holistic skills such as debating. Secondly, it was assumed that students would feel able and willing to speak in English as required. These two assumptions were and still are unrealistic. The assumption in the 1999 syllabus is that teachers are multi-skilled, able to use and exploit authentic (e.g. language arts) materials

in near-authentic contexts, and are able to provide quality, individualised opportunities for improving language proficiency by attending to student output which is largely unpredictable and unique. They are expected to play a larger role in materials and curriculum development, due to more student-centred methodologies. They are more accountable in the sense that student-centred methodologies give a greater voice to students in all phases of learning in order to promote more student active learning – task planning, task doing and task assessing. However, many of the practising English teachers in Hong Kong are not subject-trained, and struggling to cope with an ever more demanding job in a system that, itself, is not always conducive to achieving curricular aims. The results of curriculum reforms in English to date have proved disappointing because of the lack of compatibility between the goals of the reform and the contexts in which they are expected to be implemented. This suggests that, when formulating curriculum reforms, policymakers should pay more attention to the capacity of the system and practitioners working within it to ensure a reasonable chance of success.

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	1975 English syllabus	1983 English syllabus	1999 English syllabus
Genesis of curriculum change	Mass migration to Hong Kong in 1950s & 1960s Manufacturing-based society 1974 –9 years subsidised education	1978 economic modernisation in China; move from manufacturing to service economy 1982 –Education Commission set up	Service economy Aspirations to be “world class” city Globalisation Return of émigrés
Ideology of education	Social and economic efficiency Social reconstructionism	Social and economic efficiency Social reconstructionism	Social and economic efficiency Progressivism
Syllabus aims (meso-level)	Basic level of everyday English in 9 years of schooling	Competent English use in specific domains: work; government; leisure; communication with non-Cantonese speakers; study	Well-rounded individual development by working towards interpersonal, knowledge and experience dimensions
Intended methodology	Oral-structural: guided control practice; repetition; part-skills practice	Oral-structural embedded in contextualised communication	Task-based: contextualised learning process; learning through doing
Content	Language system + skills; translation (for higher forms)	Language system + skills + language arts	Thematic content+ language system + skills+
Language focus	Structural knowledge and accuracy emphasised in speech before writing	Accurate and fluent language use emphasised in both speech and writing	Fluency, accuracy, appropriacy and originality of language use emphasised
Skills areas	Translation, reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary	reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, functions and notions, vocabulary	Integrated skills under three domains: knowledge, interpersonal and experience
Teachers’ role	knowledge transmission and owner of academic knowledge director of classroom language learning	organiser & manager of class activities resource person materials developer	organiser & manager of class activities resource person materials and curriculum developer participant in negotiated activities
Knowledge/ skills required of teachers	discrete language skills, with ability to speak accurately foremost ability to give detailed grammatical & lexical explanations & feedback	contextualised language skills ability to integrate skills in class materials adaptation	high level in all skills areas ability to contextualise skills in class materials development school-based curriculum development IT knowledge and skills catering for individual differences negotiating and collaborative skills
Assessment procedures	Exam and test format focusing on discrete language knowledge and skills	Formal and informal diagnostic/forward looking assessment; attention to language use in context	Task-based holistic assessment: formative and summative; criterion-referenced; bands of performance

Figure 1: Summary of English curriculum, 1975 – 1999 (adapted from Walker et al., 2000)