

# **Honours Project**

## **Research title:**

The attitudes of teachers and students towards using  
Cantonese in English classes in Hong Kong

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## Declaration

I, ZHANG HAINING, declare that this research report represents my own work under the supervision of Dr. Yu Wai Ming, and that it has not been submitted previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

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## **The attitudes of teachers and students towards using Cantonese in English classes in Hong Kong**

This paper examined the attitudes of Hong Kong primary teachers and students towards using Cantonese as an auxiliary language in English classes. The study was conducted in a Hong Kong local school where the students and teachers were native Cantonese speakers. Three teachers and 28 students were involved in this study. Three research tools were employed for data collection: questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. The results revealed that the teachers generally held a negative attitude towards using Cantonese in English classes, whereas the students preferred to use Cantonese as an auxiliary language. How to use Cantonese effectively was discussed.

**Keywords:** attitudes, English teaching, use of L1, Hong Kong local primary school

### **1. Introduction**

It was quite a common practice that language teachers worldwide excluded the students' first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms but taught the students only in the target language (TL) (Cook, 2001; Daniels, 1990; Hawkins, 1981). The language teaching policy in Hong Kong is similar to this view as the *English language curriculum guide (primary 1-6)* (Curriculum Development Council 2004: 109) requires that all of the English classes should be held only in English, including the classroom English, instructions and the language for quality interaction in group discussions. However, some scholars were discussing whether the students' L1 should be totally banned in L2 classrooms, or it could be helpful instead (Hall & Cook, 2012).

This study aims firstly to understand what the attitudes of the primary school teachers and students towards using Cantonese in English classes are in Hong Kong; secondly, to find an appropriate language choice in their English as a foreign language (EFL) class to make the English teaching more effective. In this research, the students' L1 stands for their mother tongue and their strongest language, which is Cantonese. L2 and TL refer to English.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Banning L1 in L2 teaching**

Avoiding using L1 in the classroom has been taken for granted as the foundation of second language teaching (Cook, 2001). The first reason for the L2-only teaching method is that the teachers want the students to acquire an L2 in the same way as their L1 acquisition. As Hawkins (1981) claimed, instead of firstly thinking in L1, the L2 words should be associated directly with the objects. This idea is known as Direct Method. Another teaching philosophy that banned L1 use is to avoid L1 interference in L2 learning, which is realized by Audio-lingual Method. It sees L1 and L2 as two separate systems and argues that they should not be linked (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013). Therefore, L2 learning should happen with only L2 input in order to form the language compartmentalization with the L1 (Cook, 2001). The third reason is that L2-only can build an L2 communicative environment for the students (Lin & Mei, 2000). To achieve this, it was suggested that the teacher should maximize the L2 input as language samples for the students to learn and use by avoiding the L1 in the classroom (Cook, 2001). Because of the beliefs mentioned above, L2-only has been regarded as a standard in language teaching.

In Hong Kong, the language requirement appears to endorse a “target language only position” (Trent, 2013). It is recommended that the English teachers “should teach English through English and encourage learners to interact with one another in English” (Curriculum Development Council 2004, p. 109). Trent (2013) found that the English teachers in Hong Kong were the followers of this language policy. However, instead of completely following the English-only policy, the result showed that most of the teachers followed the policy in a flexible way (Trent, 2013). They continued to use Cantonese, the students’ mother tongue, as the auxiliary language in practice, even it made them face identity conflict with other stakeholders like the school authorities (Trent, 2013).

## 2.2. Effectiveness of using L1 in L2 classrooms

Instead of criticizing the teachers’ use of L1 in L2 lessons mentioned above, on the contrary, this usage is supported by the recent research. As pointed out by Hall and Cook(2012), monolingual language teaching was highly supported in the twentieth century, whereas using L1 as an auxiliary language in L2 teaching is advocated by some contemporary scholars and has been proved in many ways to be effective. The result also shows that using L1 is common in language classrooms and the teachers usually underestimate or under-report the L1 percentage (Hall & Cook, 2012).

In addition to the support from the scholars, the second language learners and the teachers also provided support by admitting that the L1 was inevitable in L2 teaching. Al-Nofaie (2010) looked into the attitudes of teachers and students towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms in a

Saudi intermediate public school. This research showed that both the students and the teachers held positive attitudes towards using L1 (Al-Nofaie, 2010). This was further proved by Trent (2013) when he pointed out that students' L1 did help and was practical in teaching a second language according to the research done in Hong Kong. In the Hong Kong students' opinion, the most significant advantage of the local teachers, compared with the native English teachers (NET), is their capacity for using students' mother tongue in teaching L2, especially in translating abstract vocabulary and explaining difficult grammar items (Ma & Ping, 2012). These elements make the learners' learning process more effective (Ma & Ping, 2012).

There are researchers who studied the effectiveness of using learners' L1 as an auxiliary language in L2 classrooms in a more experimental way. Bouangeune (2009) proved the effectiveness of using L1 in L2 vocabulary teaching by a vocabulary learning experiment among 169 undergraduate students. The result suggested that the students learning L2 vocabulary with L1 assistance performed better than the control group, and the English-only teaching method sometimes resulted in a widespread misunderstanding of the word (Bouangeune, 2009). Different from the previous research which looked into the effectiveness of using L1, Cummins (2000) found disadvantages of L2-only teaching method. Cummins (2000) studied the French-immersion education for the English-speaking students, and the results showed that the teachers tended to implement less cooperative learning and project-based strategies because of the concern that the students would use English in these activities. That the language of instruction was not the students' L1 led to the students' academic and behavioral problems, so the attrition rates from the program were relatively high (Cummins, 2000).

### 2.3. Use of L1 in L2 classrooms

In real practice, L1 is actually used in L2 classrooms to some extent though teachers are encouraged or required to use only L2 while teaching. Littlewood and Yu (2011) focused on the language use in the foreign language classrooms in Hong Kong and Mainland China context. The result showed the overall percent of L1 use in Hong Kong secondary schools was 20%, whereas in Mainland China it was 64% (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). The results in the Israeli medium schools varied from 6.8 percent to 75.6 percent of time (Inbar-Lourie, 2010). The participants were aware of the amount of their L1 use, and the language choices were premeditated by the teachers according to the students' needs (Inbar-Lourie, 2010). To cater for their needs, even the NET teachers who could not speak the students' mother tongue invited the more capable students to translate for the weak students (Ma & Ping, 2012). No matter what percentage of L1 were applied, all of the teachers attained the teaching goal successfully (Inbar-Lourie, 2010).

Several pieces of research have been conducted in different contexts to look into the areas in which the teachers applied L1 in L2 classrooms. Bateman (2008) believed that teachers should only use the words that had been officially taught for comprehensible input, and L1 words could be thrown in for unfamiliar vocabulary items. Bateman (2008) collected the teachers' opinions through questionnaires, and the results suggested that L1 was usually used for teaching new vocabulary, classroom management and giving instructions for classroom activities. In addition to this study, in other research, the participants also widely expressed their preference for using L1 in explaining grammar (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Al-Nofaie, 2010; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). L2

learners demonstrated good progress when learning grammar in L1 (Cook, 2001). Another common reason for using L1 is related to the preparation of examinations (e.g. Al-Nofaie, 2010; Yavuz, 2012). The result-based examinations prompted the teachers to use L1 to help the learners for preparation in order to get a good understanding of the coming examination (Yavuz, 2012).

In spite of the areas, the level of the learners influences the teachers' use of L1. Bateman (2008) argued that the use of L1 was more important with beginning students than with more advanced students. The primary level learners required more L1 help and were more negative of L2-only teaching (Crawford, 2004), and they benefited considerably from the help of L1 especially on reading and writing (Kim & Petraki, 2009). Kim and Petraki (2009) reported that the teachers and the students' ideal frequency of L1 use for the students at beginner, intermediate and advanced level respectively were frequently, sometimes, and a little.

Though the teachers and the learners expressed their desire of using L1 as an auxiliary language in their L2 classroom, at the same time, they hold the belief that they should limit the use of their mother tongue and they should maximize their use of the target language (Bateman, 2008). They were aware that using L1 might reduce the opportunities for students to practice English (Ma & Ping, 2012) and hinder them from learning the target language (Al-Nofaie, 2010), so L1 should not be the dominating language in an L2 classroom (Kim & Petraki, 2009). Though the participants emphasized the significance of using L1 in teaching as mentioned before, they also admitted the importance of using English to teach English in a communicative way (Yavuz, 2012).



### 3. This study

#### 3.1. Context and participants

The study was carried out in a Hong Kong local school that followed the English-only policy strictly. The school required the teachers to use English as the only language in English teaching for all year levels. Students in this school were almost all Chinese whose mother tongue and the dominating language in their daily life was Cantonese. Most of them had some English knowledge before they entered the school.

The study included three teachers, one primary four class of 24 students, and two students from primary two and primary five respectively. The three teachers were Holly, Amy, and the English panel head. All of them are experienced teachers who have taught all year groups of primary level. Regarding the four students interviewed, the two weak students, Jack and Nancy, were from primary 5 and 2 respectively; the two top students, Tom and Rose, were from primary 5 and 2 respectively. The students in the chosen P2 class were evenly divided into three groups (high achiever, medium achiever, low achiever) according to their examination results. One from the high achiever group and one from the low achiever group were chosen. Two P5 students were chosen and interviewed in the same way. Cantonese was the L1 to all of the participants.

#### 3.2. Research questions

The direction of this research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are teachers' attitudes towards using Cantonese in EFL classes with Cantonese

background primary students?

2. What are Cantonese background primary students' attitudes towards using Cantonese in EFL classes?
3. How can Cantonese be used effectively in teaching EFL?

### 3.3. Research methods

To answer the research questions, both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to data collection: interviews, questionnaires and class observations. The teachers' attitudes were studied through analyzing the semi-structured interviews qualitatively with the support from the class observations. The students' attitudes were studied through both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. This kind of mixed data collection methods compensated for widening the scope and deepening the insights of the study (Sandelowski, 2000). More details of the design will be explained in the following sections.

#### Questionnaires:

The questionnaires were designed following the form of Likert scale which was suitable for measuring attitudes (Jamieson, 2004). The questions were closed questions and the participants were chosen from four points (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) to express their attitudes, and there was no "neutral" choice in order to elicit clear ideas of their attitudes. There was also a multiple choice question of eight situations where the students wanted the teacher to use Cantonese. The questionnaires were completed by 24 students in a primary four class. The age and the year level of the primary four students were in the middle among the students in the whole school. They were neither English beginners nor proficient in English, so their

attitudes could represent the attitudes of all the students.

The questionnaires were firstly written in English and translated into Chinese since the students' mother tongue were Chinese (Cantonese), so it was easier for them to fully understand the questions. Before distributing to the students, the translation of the questionnaires was double checked by another education undergraduate student to avoid mistakes.

The results from the questionnaires were collected and were shown in the form of percentages.

Further comparison and analysis of the data is in the findings part.

#### Interviews:

Because there were mostly closed questions in the questionnaires, interviews were needed for collecting further and in-depth information and clarification. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four students and three teachers individually. Different from structured or unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to give the answer to the designed questions while the interviewers can add new thoughts on the topic at the same time (Merriam, 2009).

The level of the students interviewed varied from lower primary to upper primary, and high English achievers to low English achievers, which made the result more full-scaled. The teachers were all experienced who had an all-round understanding of the English situation for all levels of students in this school, and the English panel head represents the opinions from the school middle management level.

The language of the interviews was decided by the interviewees. All of the interviewees chose Cantonese to conduct the interviews instead of the English panel head who chose English. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for further analysis. The parts that were selected as the evidence of the study were translated into English.

#### Observations:

Observations were conducted for a whole semester informally. One useful episode was written down for supporting the analysis of the attitudes.

All data collected were confidentially kept on the researcher's computer until August 2017 (three months after submission of this report). After that, all of the recordings, transcripts, questionnaires and classroom observations will be deleted. In addition, all the names in this research are faked for privacy protection.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1. The teachers' attitudes towards using Cantonese in English lessons**

The study has revealed that the participated teachers in this study generally held a negative attitude towards using Cantonese in EFL classes with Cantonese background primary students. However, the teacher participants also admitted that it was inevitable to use a little bit Cantonese sometimes. Their attitudes towards using Cantonese in English lessons were not unchangeable. Instead, their attitudes could be highly influenced by the language policy.

#### **4.1.1. The teachers tended to avoid Cantonese**

For teachers, their opinion was that Cantonese usually should not be used in class, except when it was really necessary they might make a limited use of Cantonese. English should be the dominating, even only, language in the classroom.

#### 4.1.1.1. Preference of using English as the medium of instruction

English as the medium of instruction was highly supported by the teachers. Holly claimed: "You teach a language, of course using the target language to teach is the best way." (Holly, interview 2, December 2016) A clear expectation of language use in English lessons was expressed by the panel head: "In English lessons we expect everyone, every teacher to ask questions or communicate with their students in English, and we expect students to ask and answer in English." (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016)

Amy expressed the same expectation as the panel head did. She did not use Cantonese for instruction in English lessons and did not allow her students to use Cantonese either. To promote English-only in her class, she constantly followed the Dollar policy in the school, which is the 'currency' in the school and can be used for buying snacks in the school. The students can earn school dollars by speaking in English and actively use English: "(We have the Dollar policy because) we really encourage our students to use English for English lessons and use English to answer questions." (Amy, interview 3, December 2016)

#### 4.1.1.2. Reasons for banning Cantonese

The teachers explained the reason why they avoided Cantonese and insisted using only English in English lessons was that they wanted to provide the students with more English input and prevent the students' English learning from being influenced by Cantonese. For the reason that

the English classroom was the only place for the students to use English, the teacher tried to give as much English immersion as they could during the class time, as the panel head said: “I think in the place like Hong Kong, where English is only spoken in the classroom, we should stick to English-only.” (Panel Head, interview 1) The statement of Amy further explained the rationale behind: “Conducting English lessons only in English means more opportunities for the students to practise English.” (Amy, interview 3, December 2016) On the other hand, not only does the use of Cantonese decrease the English immersion opportunities for the students, but it might become the obstacle of the students’ learning process. The panel head claimed: “If they always speak in Chinese and think in Chinese, their sentences will be Chinglish. It’s difficult to change them. So it’s better for them to think everything in English then they write English sentences.” (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016)

#### 4.1.1.3. Training for the students

In order to create the English-only environment, the teachers needed to train the students to get used to the Cantonese-free English class and to stick to English-only policy. The panel head mentioned a student to whom English was very difficult, and her opinion towards teaching this kind of students in only English was that “of course you have to train.” (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016) Amy showed a training method for inhibiting Cantonese use in class. The students would be fined by the teacher if they spoke Cantonese:

If the students speak Cantonese in English lessons, the students will be fined one school dollar. So they try not to speak Cantonese on purpose. Some students are not used to it at the beginning, so I just kindly remind them at the first time and then warn for the second time. After that, they will be fined. When they understand that it is a routine, they will use English all the time. (Amy, interview 3, December 2016)

Her strict attitude was proved by the classroom observation 1, in which one student disclosed another student's use of Cantonese and the students was fined by the teacher (classroom observation 1). To ensure that the students use only English in English lessons, it was important for the teachers to stick to the English-only rule. Otherwise, it would be hard to control the students' language output: "If you speak Chinese to the whole class, that means you are giving them allowance: the school doesn't mind whether you speak English or not." (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016) On the contrary, if the teachers always stick to English, the students "are very used to it." (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016)

#### 4.1.1.4. Reasons for using Cantonese

Although the teachers generally held a negative attitude towards using Cantonese in the English lessons, they still admitted the limited use of Cantonese under certain situations. Holly asserted Cantonese was inevitable in real practice to all teachers:

The school did not say that Cantonese was allowed during the lessons, but I believe that it is okay to use a very limited amount of Cantonese. Even someone tells you that he or she can totally avoid using Cantonese, it is impossible. (Holly, interview 2, December 2016)

To sum up the opinions of three teachers, there were two major situations where Cantonese was inevitable: 1. when the content was hard to explain and 2. when the students were too weak.

Holly expressed the necessity of using Cantonese when the content was hard to explain: "If the students cannot understand you after five-minute of explanation, you have to use one or two

sentences in Cantonese to help.” (Holly, interview 2, December 2016)

Amy specified the hard-understandable content to logistic requirements. She believed that when it was not related to the understanding of the learning objectives but the logistics requirements from the school, Cantonese should not be totally banned:

Sometimes the school has the requirements on the format, and the students must follow the format. However, it is not related to the students' understanding of English...Facing this kind of logistics stuff is the only situation where I will use Cantonese because I want them to really understand and not to make mistakes.

(Amy, interview 3, December 2016)

Tom proved her statement: "She very rarely uses Cantonese, unless there are very special things to announce." (Tom, interview S2, December 2016)

When the students were too weak, Cantonese was also indispensable. However, using Cantonese was usually between two students in secret. One teacher said: "If there is a very weak student who cannot understand whereas others can understand, the student sitting beside can offer help in Cantonese." (Holly, interview 2, December 2016) In terms of helping the weak students more effectively, the panel head purposely seated them beside a capable student: "They (those weak ones) really need Chinese (Cantonese) to help them. So we will seat them beside a capable student who will explain things in Chinese (Cantonese). But only between two of them. The other students still have English, no Chinese (Cantonese)." (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016) To conclude, occasionally whisper between the two students was another situation where Cantonese can be spoken in English lessons.



The teachers generally expressed their preference for using English as the medium of instruction and showed a negative attitude towards using Cantonese in English lessons. Though the teachers admitted that there were situations where Cantonese was needed, they used it very limitedly. They try to minimize or avoid Cantonese use for the whole class and use English as the dominating or only language for teaching for a better learning outcome. Their negative attitude was opposite to the findings of the previous studies such as the study done by Al-Nofaie (2010) in the Saudi intermediate public school, where the teachers held the positive attitude towards using L1 in the EFL classes. It might be because the students in this school generally had some basic English knowledge before entering this school, and had higher English proficiency compared with other EFL learners, which made the teachers believe that using only English in teaching was applicable and effective.

#### 4.1.2. The attitudes were influenced by the policy

The teachers' attitudes were influenced by the language policy, especially when it was emphasized from the school level. They performed as the policy followers, which is in line with the result found by Trent (2013). The stricter the English-only policy (or a requirement from the school) is, the more negative attitude the teachers hold. Holly gave a clear statement of this point: "Of course (the attitude of using Cantonese) can be influenced by the school requirement. When the school discourages you to use Cantonese, you will use less. If the school does not mind, you will use more." (Holly, interview 2, December 2016)

Amy proved the influence by following the Dollar policy to avoid Cantonese during the

teaching time. Without a strict language policy/requirement, the teacher may get confused about language use, and generally use more Cantonese instead:

When I was teaching in another school, there was no such policy (requirement) of making teachers speak only English. I use Chinese and English. Sometimes I get confused too, how much time I would spend in teaching as using English and how much on Chinese. As a result, even you as a teacher you get confused, you are speaking either Chinese or English. And then you slowly turn more in Chinese than English. (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016)

According to the panel head's experience, a school language policy or requirement is significant in guiding the language use of the teachers. Without a clear guide, even the experienced teachers will be confused.

To conclude, the teachers' negative attitude towards using Cantonese in English lessons were highly influenced by the strict English-only policy. A policy, from either the government or the school, was necessary for guiding the language use of the teachers.

#### **4.2. The Cantonese background primary students' attitudes towards using Cantonese in EFL classes**

In this section, the students' attitudes towards using Cantonese in EFL classes is analyzed. The result revealed that the students had demand for Cantonese as an auxiliary language. However, they might overuse Cantonese in English lessons due to their strong preference for using Cantonese rather than English if there was no language restriction.

##### **4.2.1. Students' needs for Cantonese as an auxiliary language in English lessons**

Though the teachers generally stuck to using only English in English lessons, it seems that some students' English knowledge was not enough for the English-only lessons. For this kind of students, Cantonese was still needed as an auxiliary language to facilitate their understanding.

According to what has been mentioned by the teachers and seen in the class observations, the English lessons in this school were almost conducted only in English. However, many students showed a weak understanding of the lessons.

<b>Understanding level of English lessons</b>	<50%	50%-65%	65%-80%	80%-95%	95%-100%
How many percentages of English can you understand during the English lessons?	20.8%	29.2%	4.2%	25%	20.8%

**Table 1: Understanding level of English lessons**

Although there were 45.8% students indicated that they could understand most of the English instructions, half of the students could only understand around 50% or even less. Both low achieving students in primary 5 and 2 expressed their difficulty in understanding the English instructions: "For most lessons, I can only understand a little bit. There are many words I don't understand so I need to ask others after class." (Jack, interview S1, December 2016) "I can understand a little bit, around half." (Nancy, interview S3, December 2016)

The gap between the students' understanding level reached a degree of polarization. Half of the students could understand the lessons easily while others were struggling in figuring out the

meaning of the teachers' instruction. According to Krashen (1995), students should acquire a new language following the  $i+1$  theory, which requires comprehensible input with a bit beyond what they are now capable of comprehending. For the low achieving students, the class instruction was not a comprehensible input so they could get limited input from the lessons, whereas it was suitable for the relatively high achieving students. It might result in further polarization among the students.

<b>Effect of Cantonese</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. I can understand the class instruction better if the teacher uses some Cantonese.	4.2%	16.7%	50%	29.2%
2. I can understand the class content better if the teacher uses some Cantonese.	8.3%	16.7%	45.8%	29.2%

**Table 2: Effect of Cantonese**

Cantonese was reported as very useful in facilitating the students' understanding of the English lessons. The results revealed that most of the students can understand the class instruction (79.2%) and the class content (75%) better if the teacher uses some Cantonese. This finding was in accordance with Al-Nofaie's (2010) view that the learners' L1 could provide the students with better understanding.

<b>Students' Attitudes towards the medium of instruction in English lessons</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. I think English teacher should teach English only in English.	29.2%	33.3%	16.7%	20.8%
2. I prefer my teacher to use some	12.5%	12.5%	45.8%	29.2%

Cantonese during English lessons.				
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**Table 3: Students' Attitudes towards the medium of instruction in English lessons**

When the students were asked about English-only class or not, only 37.5% of them wanted a mostly English-only class, while 75% students showed their preference of being taught with some help of Cantonese. Jack showed his desire for Cantonese help: "It would be better if the teacher can use some Cantonese. I cannot understand in only English because there is no translation." (Jack, interview S1, December 2016) Nancy showed the similar attitude. She did not like English-only lessons since she could not totally understand the lessons without any help of Cantonese (Nancy, interview S3, December 2016).

Instead of using Cantonese as much as possible, the students also showed their ambivalence of the medium of instruction. Compared with the students who chose 'strongly agree' for the preference of using Cantonese (29.2%), the percentage of the students who chose 'agree' (45.8%) is much higher. This indicated the students' contradiction on language use. On the one hand, the students showed a strong desire for the help of Cantonese. On the other hand, they realized the importance of more English input. Jack and Nancy who showed their desire for Cantonese help above expressed their ambivalence towards the medium of instruction. Jack said: "I want the lessons to be conducted in English, because when I need to work in the future, there will be no translation for me, so I need to have a good English foundation now." (Jack, interview S1, December 2016) Nancy held the similar concern since she felt that more English input was good for her English learning (Nancy, interview S3, December, 2016).

Resorting to L1 has been proved as a natural phenomenon among the language learners (Scott, 2008). It was the fact that half of the students felt hard in understanding the English-only lessons and a majority of the students could comprehend better with the help of Cantonese, but they also desire more English immersion at the same time. It reveals that most of the students want the necessary help of Cantonese without the overuse of it, which is in line with the finding from Al-Nofaie (2010). Instead of totally banning or overusing it, L1 was an unavoidable learning auxiliary in a second language classroom (e.g. Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003, Al-Nofaie, 2010). Providing the students with adequate English input is important, but a reasonable amount of Cantonese is still needed for a better understanding of the lessons, especially for the weak students.

#### 4.2.2. Students' preference for language use in English lessons

Although the students realized the importance of more English input, they still had a strong preference for using Cantonese instead of English.

<b>Students' use of English in English lessons</b>	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I use only English to discuss with my classmates during English lessons.	8.3%	41.7%	37.5%	12.5%
2. I use only English to ask my classmates questions during English lessons.	8.3%	33.3%	50%	8.3%

**Table 4: Students' use of English in English lessons**

Not only did the students find it hard to understand the lesson sometimes without the help of Cantonese, but Cantonese was important to some students in their own utterances. According to the figures, although around half of students use only English in English lessons, the other

half students still found it difficult to use only English and needed Cantonese to facilitate their communication in reality. Regardless of that there was strict school requirement that students could use only English in English lessons, speaking in Cantonese still happened in secret among the students. Jack reported that he would use Cantonese with his classmates when he did not understand the lesson, as long as he was not caught by the English teacher.

<b>Students' preference for using Cantonese</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. If I can choose, I will use Cantonese to talk with my teacher and classmates during English lessons.	8.3%	12.5%	50%	29.3%
2. If I can choose, I prefer to ask my English teacher questions in Cantonese.	12.5%	12.5%	29.2%	45.8%
3. If I can choose, I prefer to do an activity with my group mates in Cantonese.	8.3%	20.8%	37.5%	33.3%

**Table 5: Students' preference for using Cantonese**

If the students can choose the language they use, the overwhelming percentage (79.3%, 75.8%, and 70.5% respectively) of students showed their preference for using Cantonese for communication.

Instead of obeying the English-only requirement from the teachers, the students actually did not use English all the time and showed a strong preference for using Cantonese, which was contradictory with the teachers' preference. This point will be further discussed in the next

section when I analyze the effectiveness of using Cantonese.

To conclude, the students generally held the negative attitude towards English-only lessons. Half of the students had difficulties without Cantonese as an auxiliary language. At the same time, they had the contradiction on language use themselves. However, they would still choose to use Cantonese if they had choices.

### **4.3. Effective use of Cantonese**

In this part, how to make an effective use of Cantonese is discussed. Cantonese, as the students' L1, is an inevitable auxiliary language in English lessons. However, instead of using it freely in English lessons, the use of Cantonese would better be restricted. For students, a strict language restriction is necessary in order to prevent the overuse of Cantonese by the students. For teachers, the situations where Cantonese help are needed by the students will be listed, and the appropriate way to use Cantonese is to use one or two words or sentences for brief explanations instead of using Cantonese as a dominating language.

#### **4.3.1. A strict language restriction**

According to the result discussed above, the teachers and the students had the contradiction about the language use in English class. The students preferred Cantonese whereas the teachers tended to conduct the lessons only in English. However, the teachers' permission of using Cantonese might cause problems. The panel head expressed her concern: "(If Cantonese is allowed in English lessons) the students are so ready to speak to you in Cantonese. Then, that's the problem." (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016) Therefore, the teachers restricted the use of Cantonese in the English class. The strict restriction might be the reason why there were



fewer students using Cantonese than the students preferring using it according to the results in Table 4 and Table 5. The students should bear in mind that Cantonese is prohibited so they try to speak English as much as they can. Therefore, a restriction of using Cantonese in the English lesson is significant in order to, as mentioned by the panel head, create the English speaking atmosphere (Panel Head, interview 1, December 2016), otherwise the class might be conquered by Cantonese instead.

#### 4.3.2. The situations and suggested ways of using Cantonese

The table below summarizes the students' preference of the teachers' use of Cantonese under different situations. On the basis of the students' preference which reflects their learning needs, a language use guideline for the teachers can be suggested.

<b>Students' preferring situations of using Cantonese</b>			
Explain difficult grammar points.	87.5%	Explain easy grammar points.	16.7%
Translate abstract words.	75%	Translate non-abstract words.	8.3%
Explain the requirement of a new class activity or a homework.	70.8%	Explain the requirements of all class activities and homework.	33.3%
Explain the instruction of the examinations.	66.7%	Free chat.	33.3%

**Table 6: Students' preferring situations of using Cantonese**

The above table showed that the students only want Cantonese help under certain situations where the content is too difficult to understand. It is in accordance with the teachers' opinion

that the content should be explained in Cantonese when the students really cannot understand.

Regarding the favorable areas for using Cantonese, explaining difficult grammar points headed the other areas (87.5%). A high achieving student proved this by expressing his feeling: “When the teacher was teaching second conditional using past tense as an example, some students might not understand, then the teacher needed to use Cantonese.” (Tom, interview S2, December 2016) This finding supports the belief that not only implicit but also explicit grammar teaching is necessary to fulfill learners’ needs and styles (Thornbury & Harmer, 1999). Sometimes it is important to remind the language learners by clarifying the rules of the target language so the students can acquire the language effectively, especially when there is no equivalence in the learners' mother tongue. Otherwise, the learners might be confused and use the language in a wrong way. Therefore, when there is a very difficult or confusing grammar point, teachers should employ the appropriate amount of Cantonese, "one or two sentences (Holly, interview 2, December 2016)" as mentioned by teacher Holly, to explain explicitly to the students to facilitate their understanding.

The second most-cited favorable area is using Cantonese for translating abstract words, with 75% students supporting it. Holly showed her agreement to using Cantonese for translating abstract words as well, as she mentioned: “When there are very abstract words, how can you use concrete subject to explain? When they cannot understand no matter how you explain, you really need translation.” (Holly, interview 2, December 2016) It has been proved that learning new words through translation is a clear and quick strategy (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Therefore, teachers can use Cantonese to translate for the students when it is necessary.

However, since the teacher wanted to create an English environment, they can also ask the more able students to translate for others. Holly gave an example: “If you do not want to speak in Cantonese, you can ask the class using ‘Can anyone of you explain this word in Cantonese?’” (Holly, interview 2, December 2016)

Explaining the requirement of a new class activity or a homework (70.8%) and the instruction of the examinations (66.7%) are another two important use of Cantonese. This might be because that when there were new requirements, the students wanted to make everything clear so they would not make mistake in the following activities due to their misunderstanding of the requirements instead of their subject knowledge. It is in line with Amy’s belief that Cantonese should not be banned when the content was not related to the subject knowledge in order to make sure that the students know the requirements well (Amy, interview 3, December 2016). Therefore, teachers can use Cantonese briefly when they introduce a requirement for the first time. It can reduce the students' confusion of the requirements, and it would be easier for the students to follow the teachers correctly, which is actually a benefit for their language learning which was conducted based on the students' needs.

To conclude, explaining difficult grammar points and abstract vocabulary are the two major areas that Cantonese are needed, following with explaining the requirement of a new class activity or a piece of homework, and the instruction of the examinations. However, it does not mean that the teacher can use Cantonese unlimitedly. Instead, only one to two necessary words or sentences can be used in order to avoid the English environment being destroyed. The teachers can even invite the students to translate in Cantonese so that the Cantonese utterance

from the teachers can be further reduced.

## **5. Recommendations**

From the result of this research, teachers generally followed the English-only requirement, while half of the students actually felt hard without Cantonese help. It is recommended that the language policy makers should consider the teachers' and the students' opinions to achieve the best teaching and learning outcomes. Instead of giving complete freedom of language choices to the teachers and students, a clear guidance that suggests a systematic way of using Cantonese as an auxiliary language should be given to the teachers. Since the teachers are policy followers, with the help of the professional guidance which considered the learning needs of the students, the teachers will perform better in language teaching. In the meanwhile, the autonomy should be given to the schools so that they can adjust the policy according to the schools' situation and implement a more school-based policy in English lessons.

Speaking of the effective use of Cantonese, language rules should be set firstly to avoid overuse of it and it should be used limitedly under certain situations by the teacher. As the students expressed their strong preference of speaking in Cantonese, a strict language restriction is needed to reduce the students' overuse of Cantonese in English lessons. The situations where the teacher can use appropriate Cantonese to help should fit the students' needs. The students expressed their wish of the teacher using Cantonese under certain situations: 1. explaining difficult grammar points 2. translating abstract words, 3. explaining the requirement of a new class activity or a homework and 4. explaining the instruction of the examinations. Another situation where Cantonese may help is that when the students were too weak. Therefore, the

teachers can use some Cantonese under these situations to fulfill the students' learning needs.

The limitation of this study was the small scales of the research, and it only looked into a school where the English level of the students was above average. Therefore, further studies may undertake on larger scales for a more holistic understanding of the attitudes of teachers and students towards using Cantonese in English classes in Hong Kong. Moreover, in further studies, the schools may be divided according to the schools' overall English level, so that a more precise understanding of the students' and teachers' attitudes and needs can be gained for different levels of schools.

Instead of looking into attitudes, further studies on a long-term experiment with pre- and post-tests with one group of students taught in only English and another group taught with Cantonese as an auxiliary language can be conducted. Therefore, the most appropriate medium of instruction can be figured out in a more experimental way.

## **6. Conclusions**

According to the result of the study, the teachers generally held a negative attitude towards using Cantonese in English lessons in order to create an English environment which they thought was beneficial to the students' learning, and they believed that the students needed to be trained to get used to English instruction. The language policy was a strong influence of their attitudes, as the stricter the policy was, the more negative their attitudes were. However, the result also revealed that Cantonese was inevitable in real practice. The teachers used Cantonese depending on the students' specific needs, especially when the students were too weak or the

content was too difficult to understand.

The students held positive attitudes towards the systematic use of Cantonese due to their needs for a better understanding of the instructions, and at the same time, they were conscious that more English immersion was important to their language development so they deny any overuse of Cantonese. However, though they realized the importance of more English immersion, they still secretly used Cantonese in English lessons and showed the strong preference for using Cantonese if they had the choice.

To achieve a better teaching outcome, the teachers should have restriction on language use, and meanwhile use Cantonese to help the students when 1. the students were too weak and 2. the content needed to be explained (explaining difficult grammar points, translating abstract words, explaining the requirement of a new class activity or a homework and explaining the instruction of the examinations). The language policy makers should consider the actual needs of the teachers and the students, and give more autonomy to the schools for implementing more school-based language policies.

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## 學生對在英文課堂上使用中文的態度

## The attitudes of students towards using Cantonese in English classes in Hong

1. 你這次考試英語 paper 1 成績是多少分? What is your English score of the paper 1 in the final examination?				
	非 常 不 同意 Strongly disagree	不 同 意 Disagree	同 意 Agree	非 常 同 意 Strongly agree
2. 我覺得英語課老師應該只用英語教。 I think English teacher should teach English only in English.				
3. 我在英語課上跟同學討論時只用英語。 I use only English to discuss with my classmates during English lessons.				
4. 我在英語課上問同學問題時只用英語。 I use only English to ask my classmates questions during English lessons.				
5. 我在英語課上很願意用英語問老師問題。 I am willing to ask my teacher questions in English during English lessons.				
6. 我覺得用中文跟老師說話更舒服。 I feel more comfortable when I talk to my English teacher in Cantonese.				
7. 如果我可以選擇的話，我會用中文跟老師和同學說話。 If I can choose, I will use Cantonese to talk with my teacher and classmates during English lessons.				
8. 如果我可以選擇的話，我更喜歡用中文問老師問題。 If I can choose, I prefer to ask my English teacher questions in Cantonese.				
9. 如果我可以選擇的話，我更喜歡在跟同學做小組工作時用中文。 If I can choose, I prefer to do an activity with my groupmates in Cantonese.				
10. 中文能幫我表達出一些我用英語沒法表達的想法和感受。 Cantonese can help me to express my feelings and ideas that I cannot explain in English.				
11. 我更希望我的英語老師可以在上英語課時說些中文。 I prefer my teacher to use some Cantonese during English lessons.				

12. 老師用中文可以幫助我理解課堂要求。 I can understand the class instruction better if the teacher uses some Cantonese.				
13. 老師用中文可以幫助我理解所教的內容。 I can understand the class content better if the teacher uses some Cantonese.				
14. 新教的詞應用中文給翻譯，不然可能會不懂。 New taught vocabulary should be translated in Cantonese or I might not understand it.				
15. 課堂指令應該用中文下達，不然可能會聽不懂。 Class instructions should be given in Cantonese or I might not understand them.				
16. 老師管紀律的時候應該用中文，不然可能會聽不懂。 Classroom management should be given in Cantonese or I might not understand it.				
17. 我覺得如果考試要求是用中文給會更舒服。 I feel more comfortable if examination instructions are given in Cantonese.				
18. 我只有用中英對譯的字典查英文單詞時，才能明白這個英文單詞的意思。 I understand English vocabularies only when I use a bilingual dictionary.				
19. 老師上課時有必要解釋一下中文和英文之間哪裡不同，哪裡相同。（比如在語法、詞彙的用法方面） It is necessary to explain the differences and similarities between Cantonese and English in Cantonese. (e.g.: grammar and the use of some words)				
20. 我覺得現在比低年級的時候更適應全英文教學了。 I feel I am more used to English instruction now compared when I was in lower grade.				
21. 我在家跟家人或者工人用英語溝通。 I use English to communicate with my family member or my domestic helpers.				
22. 你在英語課上，對於老師說的英文能聽懂多少？ How many percentages of English can you understand during the English lessons?	<50%	50%-65%	65%-80%	80%-95%
				95%-100%

23. 你希望老師在下列哪些時候用中文（可多選） I hope my teacher can use Cantonese under the following situations in English class: (you can choose more than one)					
解釋較難的語法問題。 Explain difficult grammar points.			解釋簡單的語法問題。 Explain easy grammar points.		
翻譯較抽象的詞語。 Translate abstract words.			翻譯不抽象的詞語。 Translate non-abstract words.		
解釋一個新的課堂活動或功課的要求。 Explain the requirement of a new class activity or a homework.			解釋所有課堂活動或功課的要求。 Explain the requirements of all class activities and homework.		
解釋考試要求。 Explain the instruction of the examinations.			閒聊。 Free chat.		

## Semi-structured interview questions

## Interview questions\_ teachers

1. What's the language policy in this school in terms of English lessons?

學校對英語課的語言政策是怎麼樣的？

2. Do you use any Cantonese in your English lessons? Including instruction, classroom management and any language output. Is your Cantonese use influenced by the language policy?

你會在英語課上用中文嗎？（在包括教課，管紀律以及一切語言輸出中。）你對中文的運用會不會受到語言政策的影響？

3. Do you think that student's L1, Cantonese, is necessary or unnecessary in the English class?

你覺得在英文課上，學生的母語（廣東話）是否有必要使用呢？

4. Under what kind of situations do you use Cantonese? (e.g.: high level vs low level achievers)

在什麼情況下你會用廣東話？（比如對不同英語水準的同學）

5. What is your opinion towards English-only policy?

你對英語課只能用英語這個政策的看法是什麼？

6. Does the school have any policy that allows you to use Cantonese in the English class?

學校有沒有任何政策允許你在英語課上使用廣東話的？

## Interview questions\_ students

1. Can you understand what your English teacher said in English classes?

你能聽懂英語課上老師說的英語嗎？

2. Do you want some Cantonese explanation sometimes? When do you want some Cantonese

explanation?

你會有時候希望老師用中文解釋一下剛剛用英語講的內容嗎？什麼時候會想要這個解釋呢？

2. Do you want the teacher to use only English in English class?

你希望老師在英文課上只用英文嗎？

## Appendix

### Sample of transcription

#### Panel head\_interview 1 (conducted in English)

1. They really need Chinese (Cantonese) to help them. So we will seat them beside a capable student who will explain things in Chinese (Cantonese). But only between two of them. The other students still have English, no Chinese (Cantonese).
2. In English lesson we expect everyone, every teacher to ask questions or communicate with their students in English, and we expect students to ask and answer in English.

### Sample of transcription with translation

#### Holly\_Interview 2 (conducted in Cantonese)

1. 當然會啦。學校不鼓勵你用中文的時候，你就會用少一點啦。如果學校不介意你用，那你不免就會用多點了。  
  
Of course (the attitude of using Cantonese) can be influenced by the school requirement. When the school discourages you to use Cantonese, you will use less. If the school does not mind, you will use more.
2. 你教一個語言，其實當然是用這個語言教最好了。  
  
You teach a language, of course using the target language to teach is the best way.

#### Amy\_interview 3 (conducted in Cantonese)

1. 我們很鼓勵學生用英文上課，經常用英文回答問題。

We really encourage our students to use English for English lessons and use English to answer questions.

2. 有時候呢，有些 format 是學校這樣要求的，但是呢，這些 format 是要求小朋友完全要跟的，但跟英文的理解能力是無關的.....這些 logistics 的東西呢，我們為了小朋友們完全明白，然後不想讓他犯錯，然後才說中文。

Sometimes the school has the requirements on the format, and the students must follow the format. However, it is not related to the students' understanding of English...Facing this kind of logistics stuff is the only situation where I will use Cantonese, because I want them to really understand and not to make mistakes.

#### Jack\_interview S1

1. 大部分都只能聽懂小小。因為有很多生字，我是聽不懂的，要回去問人。

For most lessons, I can only understand a little bit. There are many words I don't understand so I need to ask others after class.

2. 我覺得可能要用小小中文會好小小。因為只是用英文不明白，那些英文字沒得解釋。

I feel it would be better if the teacher can use some Cantonese. I sometimes cannot understand in only English, because there is no translation.

#### Tom\_interview S2

1. 例如 second conditional 那時候，要用 past tense 做例子，可能那個例子有的同學不是很懂，老師就會講中文。



When the teacher was teaching second conditional using past tense as an example, some students might not understand, then the teacher needed to use Cantonese.

2. 好少用中文，除非有特別的要講

She very rarely uses Cantonese, unless there are very special things to announce.

Nancy\_interview S3

1. 小小,一半左右。

I can understand a little bit, around half.

## Sample of classroom observation note

Observation	Notes
<p>Observation 1:</p> <p>2B:</p> <p>The teacher is teaching in front of the class.</p> <p>S1 raises her hand. The teacher let her speak.</p> <p>S1: “Miss Renee, he (S2) speaks Chinese!”</p> <p>T (looks at S2): “Chinese? You shouldn’t speak Chinese in my English lesson. You need to say sorry to me and give me one school dollar.”</p> <p>S2: “Sorry.” (Give the teacher one school dollar)</p>	<p>The teacher made a rule to prevent the students from using Cantonese during her English lessons. The students can be disclosed by others if he or she speaks Chinese. In this way, the students cannot speak Cantonese secretly.</p>