IN THE PERIOD OF CHANGE- IMPACTS OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICIES ON HONG KONG STUDENTS’ LEARNING MOTIVATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

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In 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned from Britain to China. Henceforth, Hong Kong was no longer a British colony, but a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China. Throughout the years during the British governance, English was used as the major medium of instruction (MoI) for secondary education. Regardless of strong public resistance, the mother tongue education policy was implemented in Hong Kong shortly after the political handover. Since then, Cantonese (the local language) replaced English (the ex-colonizer’s language) as the major medium of instruction in mainstream secondary schools. However, the government initiated a ‘fine-tuning’ policy eleven years after, which allows a more extensive use of English in Hong Kong classrooms. Under such a critical period of change, this study was conducted to examine the impacts of the new policy on students’ learning motivation and achievement. This paper reports the results gathered from a questionnaire survey collected from 100 students and interviews with four experienced teachers, through which, the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy is evaluated.

Keywords: Hong Kong, medium of instruction.

Introduction

Hong Kong is a city in southern China where more than 90% of its population is ethnic Chinese. In 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned from Britain to China. Henceforth, Hong Kong was no longer a British colony, but a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China. Throughout the years during the British governance, English was used as the major medium of instruction (MoI) for secondary education. As a gesture of decolonization, mother tongue education was implemented shortly after the political handover. This policy mandated the majority of the local secondary schools to switch the MoI from English to Cantonese (the local language). However, after the mandatory mother tongue education policy
had been implemented for more than 10 years, the government proposed to ‘fine-tune’ the policy in 2010, which relaxed the restriction on the use of instructional language and allowed a more extensive use of English in CMI classrooms. Under this critical period of change, this study was conducted two years after the implementation of the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy as a preliminary evaluation of the policy. The study consists of a questionnaire survey with a total of 100 CMI students from 5 schools and also interviews with four experienced teachers. The former aimed at exploring students’ views towards the two main languages used in Hong Kong schools (i.e. English, Cantonese), while the latter helped provide teachers’ observations on the impacts of the MoI policy on students’ learning motivation and achievement.

**Background of the medium of instruction policy**

The medium of instruction policy has always been an issue of public debate in Hong Kong. Throughout the years during the British governance, 90% of the secondary schools in Hong Kong used English as the medium of instruction (MoI) although many of them taught in a mixed-code of English and Cantonese in reality. One year after the change of sovereignty, the mandatory mother tongue education policy was implemented in 1998. Under the new MoI policy, all secondary schools had to use Cantonese as the instructional language by default unless they could prove the capability of both their staff and students in teaching and learning through the medium of English. Since then, only 114 schools retained the EMI status while more than 300 schools transformed into CMI. Henceforth, Cantonese became the MoI in 75% of the schools in Hong Kong while English maintained the role as an MoI only in around 25% of the secondary schools. Yet English was still taught as a core subject in all schools. Nevertheless, the mother tongue education policy was compulsory only for S.1 to S.3. From S.4 or above, all schools were given the liberty to choose their MoI, which many schools reverted to EMI in response to parental pressure.

Although the mother tongue education policy was mandatory only for junior secondary levels, it was met with strong resistance from the public when implemented as it was commonly believed that the policy would deprive CMI students of the chance to acquire the essential linguistic capital (i.e. English), and would consequently reduce their competitive edge in the future and led to social stratification. As pointed out by Evans (2009):

> It is widely believed that students assigned to EMI secondary stream are given an unfair head start in life whereas students in the CMI stream are denied access to valuable linguistic capital and therefore the prospect of educational and occupational advancement.
In addition, the policy was criticized as being divisive for the labelling effects it created, which enhanced the status of EMI students as the elite and lowered that of the CMI students into second-class achievers. As stated in Li (2010):

CMI students are the most vulnerable stakeholder groups, for they are the ones who bear the brunt of stigmatization. Many have to cope really hard to overcome the psychological barrier of being socially labeled ‘second best’. (p.80)

The first cohort of students under the mandatory mother tongue education policy finished their secondary education in July 2003. According to the information released by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authorities, although candidates from CMI schools obtained better results in a number of subjects in the HKCEE (GCSE equivalent), 90% of them showed a notable decline in the English subject (Apple Daily News, 2003, August 6), which aroused great public concern. Another longitudinal study, which traced the general academic achievements of students in CMI and EMI schools, was launched by the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

After the mandatory mother tongue education policy had been implemented for more than 10 years, the debate on medium of instruction was revived in 2008 when the government proposed to ‘fine-tune’ the MoI policy so as to allow a 25% increase of English language use in the classroom. The main aim of which, according to Li (2010), was to minimize social divisiveness. From September 2010 onward, the labels of EMI and CMI schools started to fade away and schools were allowed to use either English or Cantonese as the instructional language for different subjects or classes, as deemed appropriate.

Purpose of the present study

When the mother tongue education policy was newly implemented, two secondary school principals observed that CMI students feared English and did not feel interested in learning it due to reduced exposure to the language (Ming Pao Daily News, 2001, February 20 and 21). Poon (1999) also pointed out that mother tongue education had adverse impact on students’ motivation in learning the English language since it was only one of the subjects learnt in school. Eleven years elapsed since the mother tongue education policy was implemented, and two years after the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy was introduced, the present study was conducted in 2012 to explore the impacts of the new MoI policy as perceived by both students and teachers. This study includes a questionnaire survey collected from a total of 100 CMI students from 5 schools. In addition, four experienced teachers were invited to provide their observations on the effectiveness of the MoI on students’ learning, both in content subjects and the English language classes. This study is meant to be a pilot evaluation of the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy. It is hoped that the results can throw light on future policy-making in language education.
Research Methods

As the ‘fine-tuning’ MOI policy was implemented in 2010, the first cohort of students under this policy was undertaking their third year of studies in secondary schools (S.3) when this study was conducted at the end of 2012. Five English language teachers from an in-service teacher training course, who were working in local CMI secondary schools, were invited to distribute a questionnaire to one class of S3 students in their schools. At the end, a total of 132 questionnaires (ranging from 20 to 43 in each school) were collected. To keep a balanced representation of each school in the sample, only 20 questionnaires from each school (a total of 100 questionnaires) were chosen at random for analysis. The questionnaire consists of a total of 13 statements, through which, students rated the two instructional languages (i.e. English and Cantonese) on a four-point scale ranging from 4= very much to 1=not at all disagree. Means were calculated under each language to reveal students’ language attitude and preference as a group. Any means greater than 2.5 (the mid-point) will indicate a positive tendency of the respondents.

As regards the interviews with teachers, two English teachers from two sample schools which took part in the questionnaire survey were interviewed. In addition, two science teachers and vice-principals of two other schools, who were responsible for the implementation of the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy at their schools, also agreed to be interviewed. The two English teachers had more than 5 years’ experience in teaching while the two vice-principals had worked in the education sector for more than 15 years. The four teachers were interviewed individually. Conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed, through which, the impacts of the MoI on students’ learning motivation and achievement were examined in both content subjects and the English language.
Research findings

In this section, findings as emerged from the statistical analysis of the student survey will be described first, then to be followed by the analysis of the teacher interviews:

The questionnaire survey on students

*English valued for its instrumental values*

As shown in Table 1 below, students are affirmative about the instrumental values of English in Hong Kong. They are well aware that English is a gatekeeper to higher education and better jobs in the future (items 1 & 2). Despite the fact that they find English difficult to learn, students tend to express strong willingness to put in time and effort to learn it (items 5 & 4). They would also feel very proud for being able to speak English fluently (item 6), showing that the language is highly valued for its prestige and instrumental values.
Table 1. Students’ attitudes towards English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Cantonese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>English/Cantonese can help me much in getting better opportunities for further studies.</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>English/Cantonese can help me much in getting better career opportunities in the future.</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I wish to master English/Cantonese.</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I am willing to put much time and effort in learning English/Cantonese.</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>2.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Learning English/Cantonese is difficult</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I feel proud to be able to speak English/Cantonese fluently</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning best through the mother tongue

Despite students’ positive attitude towards English, their responses shown in Table 2 below appear to suggest that Cantonese is a more effective language for learning. Students tend to enjoy and participate more actively in class activities and they can understand the subject contents more easily when lessons are taught in their mother tongue. However, they believe that using
Table 2. Effects of MoI on students’ learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Cantonese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I enjoy the lessons delivered in English/Cantonese.</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I participate actively in lessons delivered in English/Cantonese.</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can well understand the lessons delivered in English/Cantonese.</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I can learn better through English/Cantonese.</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I can get better results in the public exam through using English/Cantonese as the MoI</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Using English as the MoI helps improve my English ability</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>If I were free to choose, I would want English/Cantonese to be the teaching medium for all subjects.</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
English as the MoI can help improve their English ability, which eventually will enable them to get better results in public examinations. Despite all these, they tend to show stronger preference for Cantonese (their mother tongue) as the MoI if they were free to choose.

In brief, students favour their mother tongue as the learning medium. However, they believe that using English as the MoI is more advantageous for their future studies and career.

**Interviews with teachers**

This section reports the views of the four teachers interviewed. In the following, the main points suggested by the interviewees will be summarized and illustrated with extracts taken from the interviews. For easy referencing, the two vice-principals are named as P1 and P2, and the two English teachers as E1 and E2 respectively.

**Students’ learning motivation and achievement in content subjects**

*Higher motivation level in CMI classes*

As gathered from the interviews, the two vice-principals found the mother tongue a more effective teaching medium which stimulates more active response from students and thus facilitates better learning atmosphere in the classroom. As P2 has said:

‘Mother tongue education is bound to be more effective. I heard from other teachers that once when English is used as the instructional language, students become passive. The motivation and participation level of students is definitely higher in CMI lessons.’

Even with stronger encouragement from the school government, students do not seem to show keen interest in learning through English. As cited by P2, attitude of the weaker students is especially negative:

‘The fine-tuning MoI policy does not have an awakening effect on students. For the weaker classes especially, when we tried to teach through English, some students said, ‘Don’t talk English sir, I don’t know English!’

After the implementation of the mother tongue education policy for more than 10 years, students of this generation seem to have given up on English!’
To sum up, no obvious impacts of the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy on students’ learning motivation seem to have been observed. As P1 has pointed out:

‘Motivation is individualized. Some students find it encouraging to be able to study in English while some find the language an obstacle. So far, I found no distinct differences triggered by the ‘fine-tuning’ policy.’

No obvious difference observed in students’ achievement

Likewise, no obvious difference has been observed regarding students’ examination achievement in content subjects. As in the case of the school of P1, students do not seem to show serious problems in subjects offered in English as these subjects are usually less linguistically-loaded:

‘No obvious difference has been observed yet. After all, the fine-tuning policy is about 25% more English time only. Those subjects offered in English are less linguistically-loaded e.g. Maths, Science and IT.’

However, as noted by P2, students in his school suffered from a setback in EMI subjects:

‘We administered a survey which shows that students are willing to try EMI but the outcome in exams was not really desirable.’

Motivation and Achievement in English language

Some improvement observed

As gathered from the teacher interviews, the teachers did not find any obvious difference in students’ motivation in learning the English language under the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy. As explained by E1, students themselves were not aware of the change of policy since they undertook the ‘fine-tuning’ curriculum from the first day when they entered the school. Therefore the new MoI policy does not stimulate any significant change on their learning attitude. As compared to past-year students before the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy, the current students do not seem to show especially keen enthusiasm in learning English. The situation varies class by class and year by year, there is no consistent pattern that the teachers can tell.

Yet, as far as achievement is concerned, teachers agree that some improvement has been shown in English. As observed by P1, students have shown better ability in writing a science report:
‘EMI is bound to be useful in improving students’ English ability since they are immersed in the language. Recently, I read some science reports written by students and found that they could express cause and effect clearly in correct sentence structures.’

Similarly, E2 found better vocabulary use in students’ works:

‘They don’t get higher marks in English exams, but I found students generally having more vocabulary as a result of greater exposure to English e.g. words like valley, population density, that they have learnt from the geography lessons.

No clear causal relationship with the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy

However, teachers found it hard to draw any positive correlation between the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy with students’ motivation and achievement in learning English. Both E1 and E2 claim that students’ performance varies cohort by cohort and there is no one reason that they can pin down to, especially when there are other intertwining factors, e.g. drop in student number. As pointed out by E2:

‘It is hard to compare students before and after the fine-tuning policy because other factors are intervening. For example, our new intake is better this year because of reduced number of classes offered, so student quality is comparatively better. This however is not related to the implementation of the fine-tuning policy.’

In brief, teachers have observed some improvement as regards students’ performance in the English language, yet students’ motivation in learning English varies from cohort to cohort and therefore no causal relationship can be drawn with the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy. Yet, it is generally believed that EMI education is beneficial to students as it helps improve students’ English ability and thus enabling them to obtain better results in the university entrance exam which are conducted in English. As P1 said:
'EMI should be good as far as improving English ability is concerned. This is particularly important for our school as we offered EMI education for senior secondary levels. Greater exposure to English and subject vocabulary will definitely help them in public exams.'

Conclusion

This paper set out as a pilot evaluation of the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy two years after its implementation. This policy enables Chinese-medium schools to increase the use of English as a medium of instruction in the classroom by 25%. As revealed from the questionnaire survey gathered from 100 students and the interviews with four experienced teachers, it can conclude that both students and teachers found Cantonese (the mother tongue) the preferred instructional language as far as pedagogical effectiveness is concerned. Yet both students and teachers welcome the ‘fine-tuning’ MoI policy as they believe that a greater exposure to English will help them achieve higher English proficiency and thus better results in public examinations. Although both teachers and students favour using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, they are well aware of the function of English being a ladder to a brighter future. Instead of challenging its role as a gatekeeper, both parties are trying hard to comply with the reality and they welcome the opportunity to increase the use of English as a medium of instruction although no obvious impacts have been observed yet on students’ learning motivation and achievements. In brief, what P2 said below can help to provide a concise conclusion for this study:

‘The effect of the fine-tuning policy is positive, although it is only a small step. It’s better than absolute mother tongue instruction after all, which disadvantaged students from entering universities. The direction is correct. At least it helps dilute stigmatization on students.’
References


