

Review and Reflection of Language Education Policy in Hong Kong

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Abstract: For historical and practical reasons, the language education policy in Hong Kong and Macau is characterised by "multilingualism". At present, bilingual education is spreading across universities and primary and secondary schools in many provinces and cities in mainland China, but faces a number of bottlenecks that need to be addressed, one of which is the policy on bilingual education. This paper examines the role of English in language education policies in Hong Kong, reviewing past and future language education policies in Hong Kong, the historical context of language education policies, the debates over language education policies, and the assessment of the successes or challenges of these policies.

Keywords: Language policy, Hong Kong, Multilingualism, Language education.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong, China's Special Administrative Region (SAR), is a city of 1104.3 km², situated on China's south shore, surrounding the city of Shenzhen in the Guangdong Province to the north, and surrounded to the east, south, and west by the South China Sea. Located 60 kilometers west of Hong Kong, on the opposite side of the Pearl River Delta, is another Chinese special administrative area, Macao. Geographically, Hong Kong, bordered by Japan and Korea to the north and Indonesia to the south, is situated at the midpoint of Asia in the Pacific Ocean. The main island known as Hong Kong Island (the second largest and most populous island), the Kowloon Peninsula, the New Territories (new towns on the periphery of the Kowloon Peninsula), Lantau Island (the largest island) and 233 small islands are all part of Hong Kong. Therefore, Hong Kong has also been described as an East and West meeting point, a place where Chinese culture coexists with Western culture.[1]. Language education policy has a long history in a typical cross-cultural, cross-contextual Hong Kong society. The key areas of the study of " *bi-literacy and tri-lingualism* " language policy are related to the complex historical background and realistic factors in Hong Kong. " *bi-literacy* " refers to two written languages, Chinese and English, and " *tri-lingualism* " refers to three spoken languages, Cantonese, English and Mandarin. First of all, the first part of the paper will present the language education policies in the historical process of Hong Kong, and give an overview of the language environment and historical background of Hong Kong. Secondly, The educational competitiveness and social status of English as a national and high variety in Hong Kong will be discussed. The third part will cover the debate on bilingual education in Hong Kong and discuss the relevant language of instruction policies and their impact on teaching and learning. Finally, we will discuss the successes and challenges of language education policies in Hong Kong, including the models of language teaching that are worthy of reference and the challenges of language teaching in Hong Kong.

2. Language Education Policy in Hong Kong

At present, Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong " *bi-literacy and tri-lingualism* ", with written Chinese and English and spoken Cantonese, Mandarin and English, is the government's language strategy. Cantonese is the primary contact language among the Chinese population of Hong Kong, while English is the primary communication language among non-Chinese residents. In comparison, the bulk of inhabitants in Hong Kong are non-native residents. People introduce their mother tongue to Hong Kong from mainland China and all over the world. In addition, developments around the globe are still affecting Hong Kong society, because the language heard in Hong Kong is not just Cantonese and English[2].

To some degree, 1997 can be seen as a dividing line in language education policy and the linguistic growth of culture in Hong Kong, some scholars have pointed out. The name of Hong Kong was that of a British colony prior to 1997. Language proficiency was an important prerequisite as a connection between the East and the West at the time. During British rule, several historical treaties of injustice between the Qing government and Britain, especially the Tianjin Treaty of 1858, included a provision relating to the socio-linguistic aspects of Hong Kong[3]. Article 50 of the agreement states:

Article 50:

All official communications, addressed by the Diplomat and Consular Agents of Her Majesty the Queen to the Chinese authorities, shall, henceforth, be written in English, They will for the present be accompanied by a Chinese version, but it is understood that, in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and Chinese text, the English Government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the correct sense, This provision is to apply to the Treaty now negotiated, the Chinese text of which has carefully corrected by the English original[4].

Article 50 of this treaty is the oldest text on the bilingual education policies of Hong Kong and the uneven role of Chinese and English in Hong Kong is easy to see from its clear colonial overtones. This strategy granted English priority over Chinese and acted as a national and widely diverse British control for almost 100 years in Hong Kong society[4]. Its pivotal role not only laid the foundation for the long-term adoption of English as the sole official language of Hong Kong, but also had a significant impact on subsequent language education policies and social and linguistic development in Hong Kong.

In 1853, the then Hong Kong Board of Education joined Dr. James and Reverend Odell and proposed the initiation of English education. Strengthening the relations between the vast majority of Chinese people in Hong Kong society and the tiny minority of Europeans, thus eliminating misunderstandings between China and the West[5]. During the Second World War, bilingual schooling in Hong Kong was disrupted by the Japanese invasion in the mid-1990s. The British Hong Kong Government founded the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1963 after the formation of New China in 1949. While the university needs the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction, the language of instruction in the classroom and textbooks are primarily taught and written in English, as the faculty is mostly sourced from teachers who speak English. In addition, universities and Hong Kong tertiary institutions require applicants to achieve a pass or above in English as a subject in their *Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (Hong Kong A-Level Examination)* results. This means that English language results are directly required for success in further study[6].

The Hong Kong government therefore hopes that students in Hong Kong can interact easily with individuals in commerce, science and technology from all over the world. [7]. In addition, other survey results also found that English is deeply infiltrated by the middle and upper classes in Hong Kong, apart from the administration's strategy of stressing the role of English as a top-level language in Hong Kong society. English has reached the rank of the top language in Hong Kong in terms of school instruction, the work environment, and written language,. Some key factors offer a valuable comparative context to understand why English has acquired this position in Hong Kong, according to You and Zhou[8], professors of sociolinguistics at Fudan University. First, since Hong Kong, China, is an international city with city leaders from overseas, and for over 100 years it has used English as the official language of politics and law. At the same time, English has become the number one language for international economic and cultural exchanges, and Hong Kong's evolving economic position as an international city has increased demand for bilingual Chinese and English speakers, and those who can transition linguistically to an English-speaking world have more opportunities for upward mobility[9], and these two circumstances converge to play an essential part. Secondly, there were more chances to get an education in the English language. By the 1970s, with English schools overwhelming the Chinese school intake, the education system in Hong Kong, China, steadily declined.

In short, Hong Kong's '*multilingual*' environment is inextricably linked to a number of complex historical factors[8]. The language education policies of Hong Kong were continually changing before 1997. The multi-context and cross-context language environment in Hong Kong was the product of dynamic and varied social and historical

reasons in the colonial and post-colonial times. Related analysis has summarized them and worked them out. For example, Li[2] found that the language education policies of the government are not only various, but also nuanced. The meaning, intent and importance of these measures, their aims of implementation, methods of implementation and effects are difficult to grasp. The political, historical and cultural aspects involved are complex, and some of these policies have been successful and some have not. At the same time, these studies show the link between Hong Kong's complex language and cultural policies and social shifts.

Subsequently, Hong Kong Bilingual Education Policy In the 2001 Policy Address of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, it was stated that this was the process of the government's decision to encourage bilingualism, demonstrating the Hong Kong government's commitment to increasing the number of bilingual students and workers in Hong Kong[3]. The framework of the strategic plan established in 2003 by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) in the early years is a direct reflection of the Hong Kong government's thinking back then. Historically, given its official and private membership, the Commission's advice and recommendations on areas such as language education and language of instruction in Hong Kong have been mainly, if not completely, implemented as an essential strategy by the Hong Kong authorities. The Hong Kong government hopes that learners in Hong Kong will interact easily with people from all over the world in terms of commerce, science and technology, concentrating on the following information. This description established the need for bilingual and trilingual systems in Hong Kong [7]:

First, at the individual level, language proficiency has a profound impact on cognitive and social development, academic achievement and career prospects. Language literacy is a significant element in socioeconomic prosperity at a societal level. Secondly, for over a century, in Hong Kong, Chinese and English have been commonly used. The opportunity to help close the language divide between the English-speaking foreign business community and the Chinese-speaking businessmen of Hong Kong and the Mainland is one of the reasons why Hong Kong has become a cosmopolitan city. Bilingualism and trilingualism provide Hong Kong with a strategic edge. Finally, in the light of globalisation and the growing openness of the Chinese economy, in order to face the demands of the future, it is especially important to develop the English and Chinese language skills of the citizens of Hong Kong[10].

As described above, the large process that defined the development and evolution of language education policy in Hong Kong can be summarized briefly. In general, the Hong Kong government followed a colonial approach to the language of instruction before 1997, during the colonial period in Hong Kong, fostering the English-speaking class in its role in an elite educational environment, with English as the primary language program. Focus was put on 'mother-tongue schooling' after the reunification in 1997, with a concurrent emphasis on Chinese and English.[11]

3. Debate on Bilingual Education in Hong Kong

The debate about bilingual teaching has been going on for a long time. Starting in the 1970s, Hong Kong had a common impression that the English proficiency of students in an English-dominated high school system was not commensurate with the time and money dedicated to teaching English[12]. Hong Kong's long-standing anxiety over "declining" English norms indicates that the region had a golden age at some time in the past[13]. Hong Kong's historical context has made people assume that English is the dominant language of science, technology and commerce, which has produced unique circumstances for the use of English in Hong Kong schools as the language of instruction and strengthened English's role in culture and education. The Hong Kong government has therefore taken a number of reform steps with far-reaching consequences in order to boost the 'declining' standard of English among Hong Kong citizens, which has drawn significant attention in recent years, and to achieve the aim of fostering multilingual talent.

In 1997, in order to meet the needs of Hong Kong's reunification with China, the HKSAR Government changed the English-only policy of the colonial era in terms of language policy and promulgated the "*Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools*" in September of the same year, specifying the target objectives of mother-tongue teaching and bilingual education with a balance of Chinese and English, and began to fully implement mother-tongue teaching. In accordance with the spirit of this policy[14], 122 of Hong Kong's 422 government-aided schools were approved as medium-sized English secondary schools. In the first year of junior secondary education in 1998, the remaining 300-odd schools were expected to introduce mother-tongue teaching and to expand it gradually to the third year of junior secondary education in the 2000 school year. As for the junior secondary category aged four years and higher, the language of instruction is not obligatory. Certainly, this new initiative represented a radical shift in Hong Kong's language education, since before that, the vast majority of secondary schools had always used English as an instructional medium for all subjects other than Chinese, literature and history. Therefore, the implementation of this new policy immediately provoked strong reactions from the Hong Kong community, especially from student parents, who articulated their outrage through newspaper columns and radio hotlines, accusing the government of formulating an arbitrary policy that was out of touch with social growth [15].

However, Hong Kong's language education policies have been evolving regularly for a long time for a wide variety of historical and realistic reasons, and certain policies are contradictory and conflict with each other. Moreover, the schools and universities in Hong Kong have a lot of teaching sovereignty. The sudden administrative steps were unable to modify the long-established "English is more important than Chinese" philosophy among the public in Hong Kong, but created uncertainty in Hong Kong's language of instruction. On the one hand, given the long-term status of English in Hong Kong, some parents are worried that the cancellation and reduction of English teaching would have a detrimental effect on the enrollment and graduation of their children[15]. In the other hand, those who favor the government's language education reform policies contend that enhancing the status of mother tongue instruction is more appropriate for learners to

enhance their ability to learn and is beneficial to improving their academic results[16].

Another view, from Hong Kong teachers and sociolinguists, is that the government should promote the use of mixed teaching languages. Unlike the previous two voices, they neither support Chinese instruction (CMI) nor insist on English instruction (EMI)[7], [17]. They claim that since 1978, in addition to a few Chinese institutions, the Hong Kong government has implemented nine-year compulsory schooling, most people use English as the language of instruction in English school, but many weak English students have not been able to cope with everyday learning standards, for the purposes of school teaching, teachers prefer to use Japanese or Cantonese in class[14]. In fact, most teachers resort to the use of mixed codes, where they mix English and Chinese in their speech. The range of usage varies from most of the time using English and some Chinese explanations to most of the time using Chinese and some English terms[1]. They also assume that in Hong Kong schools, the use of mixed languages was, and still is, not just unavoidable, but also preferable. For instance, Boyle's[18] research argues that teachers, regardless of government policies, should continue to use more mixed-teaching languages in the classroom.

4. Success and Challenges of Language Education Policy in Hong Kong

Obviously, under the complicated political, fiscal, cultural and historical context, the Hong Kong government continuously changes the language education program. In this phase, English's position and position play a significant role. Much English teaching in Hong Kong is also a model for students on the mainland to practice bilingual teaching.[19]. For example, Li Hui[2] considers the Chinese University of Hong Kong's "trilingual" language teaching policy a success. The Chinese University of Hong Kong's (CUHK) recommended language of instruction includes: outside the classroom, reading materials, discussions, laboratories, etc., can be taught in three languages (Cantonese, Putonghua, English) in different proportions. In addition, in the classroom, the language of instruction depends on the essence of each subject. Life sciences, engineering and architecture classes should be taught in English, in theory. In Chinese or Cantonese, social science subjects such as history, language and literature are taught. Local subjects that are taught in Cantonese may also be considered. In conclusion, the model suggested by CUHK is, she claims, versatile and not only relevant to the actual situation of language education in Hong Kong, but can also be used as a guideline in mainland China.[2].

In addition, language teaching and learning in Hong Kong is facing many challenges. For example, in 2009, the HKSAR Government formulated the "Medium of Instruction (MOI) Fine-tuning Policy Arrangement for Secondary Schools" (the "MOI Fine-tuning Policy"). An incoming Year 1 class of secondary schools with 85% (i.e. 29 students) or more of students wishing to be taught in English may be taught in English if the students' ability qualifies[7]. The year-by-year roll-out began in Year 1 of secondary schools in 2010-11. Under this framework, Chinese high schools and English secondary schools will be classified according to the needs of pupils, the skill of teachers, funding for schools, and readiness choices. However, will it contribute to the distraction of students inside the school by grouping language instruction in

classes, topics, cycles or mixed modes of learning? Secondly, could the alternate 'labeling effect' distract from the policy trend of 'three languages' and contribute to educational inequality?[14].

It is noteworthy that Li David Chor Shing[20] pointed out that The HKSAR Government has been spending considerable resources at various levels, including compulsory schooling, tertiary education and vocational training, to improve the capacity of the population to use *bi-literacy and tri-lingualism*, in order to enforce the language strategy of *bi-literacy and tri-lingualism*. In order to improve the capacity of the population to use bi-literacy and tri-lingualism, the HKSAR Government has spent substantial resources at various levels, including compulsory schooling, tertiary education and vocational training. More than 20 years have elapsed since the handover from 1997 to 2020, but the outcomes of the initiative "*biliteracy and trilingualism*" have not been sufficient. Raising the language requirements of Hong Kong citizens is a very critical step in consolidating Hong Kong's status as the world city of Asia[20]. Therefore, looking back at the past, present and future of Hong Kong's language education policy, many challenges still lie ahead.

5. Conclusion

Form the review of the current literature, it can be seen that the "*bi-literacy and tri-lingualism*" and multilingual environment in Hong Kong involve many complex historical factors. As the top-level language of Hong Kong society, English is an important part of the formulation and implementation of language education policies in Hong Kong. Secondly, this paper points out that the debate on the language of instruction in Hong Kong needs constant review and reflection to evaluate the reliability and effectiveness of language education policies. Finally, this paper discusses the valuable experience that English education in mainland China can draw from the bilingual education policy of Hong Kong. After 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region faced various linguistic and social challenges in implementing the policy of "*bi-literacy and tri-lingualism*". In addition, it is worth noting that the shortcoming of this paper lies in that, although this paper will sort out and summarize these problems, it does not put forward referable and valuable suggestions on education policies and supporting measures in Hong Kong. In the future research, I believe that only through a large number of studies can we deepen our understanding of language teaching in Hong Kong. At the same time, to determine whether these language measures can be effectively implemented, so as to put forward valuable suggestions in terms of education policy and support measures.

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