

Mother-tongue Education in Hong Kong

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Medium of instruction: A highly politicized issue

Medium of instruction (MOI) has been one of the most controversial issues after Hong Kong's retrocession to China in 1997. In 1998, 307 out of 411 government or government-aided secondary schools were required to use Chinese as medium of instruction. Measures were adopted under the so-called "Firm Guidance on Secondary Schools' Medium of instruction," which has indicated sanctions for non-compliance. The decision was met with protests and even threatened lawsuits by parents, students and teachers affected. Media were flooded with sensational news on popular reactions towards this policy and criticism from various organizations. All these have added to the initial uncertainty people felt towards Chinese sovereignty. Two years later, when it was about time to review the effects of this policy, the Education Department decided to use ten Chinese Medium schools for a bilingual teaching experiment. The motives of the change from "mother-tongue" to "bilingual" has been speculated widely. It is suspected that government has regretted its mother-tongue education policy and is now trying to pave its way to its final rescission. Medium of instruction has become a hot topic again. However, since this policy has been highly politicized, people have been distracted from the educational nature of this issue and the social historical factors surrounding it; the classroom reality – the most essential part of the picture, has been neglected in most of the discussions.

Social historical background of MOI

Mother-tongue education has been advocated by educators in the Western countries since the 1950s based on worldwide research on language in education. It has been recommended that education should

be provided in mother tongue “even where the mother tongue or first language is not the national or official language and even where the first language has no other function in the larger society” (Eastman, 1983, p. 83). As a matter of fact, mother-tongue instruction is usually proposed for minority people in a country where their first languages are not the mainstream language. For example, Spanish in the USA. Here in Hong Kong, Cantonese is definitely not the language for the minority – more than 88% of the population claim that they are Cantonese speakers. Then, why English has been favored as medium of instruction in this territory? Two main reasons may account for this: The prestigious status of English in Hong Kong and the belief that using English as medium of instruction means more exposure to the language, which would lead to a better mastery of this language. In addition to the fact that English is the world language and the mastery of it is associated with upward mobility, one should not forget that Hong Kong had been a British colony. In Hong Kong, English had been the sole official language for a long time – it was not until 1974 that Chinese was made co-official language. Other socio-economic factors have also contributed to the importance of English, for example, the flourishing of export business needs a large number of personnel speaking English (Yau, 1989). Because of the importance of English, many people would choose to have “education in a foreign medium at the risk of ineffective learning” (Yau, 1989, p. 283) rather than to have “education in one’s own mother tongue at the risk of insufficient exposure to the foreign language” (Yau, 1983, p. 283).

The development of MOI

The status of English in Hong Kong has undergone some delicate changes since 1997. The Basic Law stipulates that English may be used in official contexts “in addition to Chinese.” Besides, the increasing significance of Putonghua – the national language of China has made the picture even more complicated. It is simply too easy for the public to make the connection between the policy of mother tongue education and Hong Kong’s returning to Chinese sovereignty. As a matter of fact, if we take some time browsing through some government documents, we will find that it is indeed not a radical sudden decision – this policy has been developed over time. The

following information is provided by the Education Department (1997):

In 1984, Education Commission Report (ECR) No. 1, a policy was established to encourage secondary schools to teach in the mother tongue; In 1986, Government introduced support measures to schools using Chinese as MOI; In 1990, ECR4 endorsed the principles for MOI and recommended regular reviews to monitor progress and stronger measures to encourage Chinese-medium instruction and minimize mixed-code teaching; In 1994, Government started to advise schools on the language proficiency of their Secondary 1 intake to assist them in choosing an appropriate MOI; In 1994, Government announced a Policy Commitment to issue firm guidance to all secondary schools on MOI by 1997/1998; and In 1996, ECR6 re-affirmed the policy of mother-tongue teaching, supported the publication of advice on the appropriate MOI in 1997 for adoption by individual schools in 1998 and asked for clear indications of sanctions for non-compliance

From the above material we can see that this policy was actually developed during the colonial period, and it was planned to be implemented after 1997. It should be more of an educational issue rather than a political one. The government claimed that the MOI policy was based on educational research worldwide, which suggested that “with mother-tongue teaching, students will be better able to: acquire knowledge, analyse problems, express views effectively, develop an enquiring mind, cultivate critical thinking” (Education Department, 1999, p. 1). It is true that academic research worldwide has been in favor of mother-tongue instruction. According to Krashen, judging from “publications appearing between 1984 and 1994,” he found “that 87 percent of academic publications supported” the use of first language in teaching (Krashen, 2000, p. 3). According to language education specialists, the use of students’ first language in teaching can help students achieve better results in the learning of most subjects. Besides, since students can understand what is being taught better, their interest and motivation in learning would be enhanced. According to McGroarty (1996), “providing detailed,

accurate, and specific answers is one way to create a learning environment that enhances motivation” (p. 32). Some also argued that learning in one’s first language can help with the learning of second language, since “literacy developed in the primary language transfers to the second language” (Krashen, 2000, p. 1).

Policy making: mother tongue Vs English only, top down Vs bottom up

There has always been a discrepancy between the academic research findings and the public opinions over this issue, which are reflected in the media and at the same time influenced by the media. Krashen (2000) has observed that although academic research world-wide has supported teaching in students’ primary language, most newspaper and magazine opinion articles are against it. An extreme yet relevant example of how public opinions can take the lead and win in the language policy making is the “English Only” campaign in California, the United States. In 1998, the same year when MOI was implemented in Hong Kong, the famous Proposition 227 – “English for the Children Initiative,” which “abolishes all native language instruction by mandating that English learners be taught in English-only classrooms” (Gandara, 2000, p. 1), passed in California. This policy making, which took the form of voter initiative, had the majority (61%) voted for it (Garcia, 2000, p. 1). The leader of this movement, the Silicon Valley millionaire Ron K. Unz is now bringing the campaign throughout the nation. The purpose of this movement, according to Unz, is “to ensure that American children, no matter their native country, master English early” (Steinberg, 2000, p. 2).

There are two interesting points we can get through a comparison of the two policies in Hong Kong and California. First of all, they were both implemented in 1998, with the former mandating schools switch to first language teaching while the latter abolish the use of native language. Second, they were both highly controversial and met with heated debate and criticism, although the policy making procedures were completely different: in the Hong Kong case, the policy was made, as always, by the government – a top-down approach; in California, the initiative of Proposition 227 was an example of

“people making law” – a bottom-up approach.

As we can see from cases in Hong Kong, California and other places in the world, when language policies have been highly politicized, “the anticipated consequences are excessive and uniform” (Paredes, 2000, p. 8). The public has been distracted from the classroom reality: How is native language or English (non-native language) used in the Chinese medium, Spanish medium or English schools? In an English-only situation, how do teachers deal with students who cannot understand a particular concept in English? What are the students’ part in the whole picture, are they “as helpless as frequently portrayed” (Paredes, 2000, p. 8)?

The classroom practice and languages used in different programs

Research conducted in the classrooms has tried to answer some of these questions. It has been found that some form of native languages are used in many of the English medium schools in Hong Kong and other places where English is not the students’ first language. Even in the English-only programs in California, the law makers require the teachers teach in English “exclusively”, however, “if the students do not understand a word or phrase after a teacher repeats it three times, teachers are allowed to translate it into the child’s native language and then resume teaching in English” (Holloway, 2000). In Hong Kong, it is found that teachers in the English medium schools use the so-called “mixed-code” teaching. As a matter of fact, one of the main objectives of the MOI policy is to “minimize mixed-code teaching” (Education Department, 1997). People tend to take it for granted that mixed-code means “a mixture of Chinese and English” -- this is exactly how it is defined in some government document such as the “Guidance for Secondary School” (Education Department, 1997) and since it is not a consistent use of either Chinese or English, it is assumed to be damaging to students’ language development. According to some researchers, code mixing refers to “switching of language within sentences” (Sridhar, 1996, p. 59), which is different from the term “code switching”, which refers to the act of switching from one language to another. The importance of the difference between the two is that code mixing involves a more complicated

linguistic behavior, for example, one need to decide which part the mixed word can fit in with words in another language within one sentence. Some researcher even suggested: “it is arguable that the felicitous use of code mixing implies a more sophisticated linguistic competence than monolingual language use.” (Sridhar, 1996, p. 58). Recent research has identified several social functions served by code mixing, for example, identity marking. Here in Hong Kong, the reasons for using code-switching has been unanimously assumed that it is because teachers are not proficient in English and/or the students have difficulty understanding the concepts conveyed in English. Even if these assumptions are correct, the public need to be called to notice that in both cases, the purpose of using mixed code (or code mixing) is to provide the students the “comprehensible input” which is so essential not only in language classes (Krashen, 1985), but also in all kinds of learning situations. To provide students with comprehensible input can be the most important reason by mother-tongue instruction is needed.

We can see from the above analysis that programs labeled “English Medium Instruction” or immersion are really mixed-code or bilingual education. According to Krashen (2000), in these programs, “a substantial part of the day taught in the primary language” (p. 3). Therefore, “English-only” can be a misnomer.

Conclusion

The MOI policy has been developed over time and can be supported by academic research findings on language in education. It is unclear why Education Department would propose to experiment “bilingual” instruction on ten schools. According to Krashen (2000), “the best bilingual education programs include all of these characteristics: ESL instruction, sheltered subject matter teaching, and instruction in the first language” (p. 1). It does not sound too different from the mother-tongue instruction implemented two years ago. In order to enhance learning and improve students’ language ability, attention should be drawn to the real teaching and learning process in the classroom rather than the “labels” and terms which are only good for another turn of politicized debate.

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