

# HONG KONG

## LANGUAGE POLICY

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### Languages in society

Hong Kong's geography makes it a predominantly Cantonese-speaking society, Cantonese being the dialect spoken by most of the inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta where Canton, the provincial capital of Guangdong, is located. According to the 1991 census, 88.7% of the population speak Cantonese as their usual language; another 10.3% speak as their usual language one of the following Chinese dialects: Chiu Chow, Hakka, Fukienese, Putonghua Shanghainese, and Sze Yap. It is of interest to note that only slightly over one per cent of the population speak Putonghua, the national (oral) language of China, as their usual language; altogether only 18.1% claim that they are able to speak it, compared with 95.8% in the case of Cantonese.

Although Hong Kong has been governed by Britain for about 154 years, the spread of English has been restricted to the local elite who acquire the language mostly by way of formal education. While the 1991 census reports that 29.4% of the people of Hong Kong are able to speak English, the percentage of people who have developed a firm grip on the language remains small; only 2.2% of the population speak English as their usual language. Following the practice within both Britain and its empire, there was no statutory provision for what constituted the official language(s) in Hong Kong between 1842 and 1974; English was by practice the sole language used for all official matters within all three (executive, judicial and legislative) branches of the government during the period.

In 1974, however, the government, under immense public pressure, enacted the Official Languages Ordinance which declares the English and Chinese languages 'the official languages of Hong Kong for the purposes of communication between the Government or any public officer and members of the public.' It also declares that the 'official languages possess equal status', and, subject to the provisions of the ordinance, 'enjoy equality of use.' In spite of extensive dialectal divergence within the Chinese language, the government chooses not to specify what constitutes the official variety of Chinese in Hong Kong. Instead, it leaves it to be determined pragmatically. Given the sociolinguistic situation in Hong Kong, Cantonese becomes the most often used verbal medium of official communication in practice. Although Modern Standard Chinese is claimed to be the norm in written communication, the variety of Standard Written Chinese in Hong Kong is slightly different from that used in China or Taiwan. It has been developed as a result of socio-cultural changes such as the emergence of an indigenous identity and modern western influence.

Although the past two decades have seen an increase in the use of Chinese in official transactions, the move towards equality in status and use has been slow. To a great extent, English remains the principal medium for intra-governmental written communication and records; it is still the language of the high courts; to a great extent it is the medium of assessment and examination for most educational institutions at secondary and tertiary levels; it is also the preferred language for written contracts and records in the commercial sector.

### Second language education

For historical and political reasons, second language is mostly understood as English language education in Hong Kong. Its provision takes two forms. First, English is part of the core curriculum which defines the compulsory subjects in primary and secondary education (age 6 to 17), in other words it must normally be taught as a subject in all primary and secondary schools. Second, English is also, by choice, a medium of instruction in about 10% of the schools at primary level, and over 80% of the schools at secondary level. However, in many of these English-medium schools, Cantonese is used to a varying extent together with English in classroom instruction, although textbooks and assessments are mainly in English.

### Foreign language education

The teaching of foreign languages as a subject is not part of the core curriculum for primary and secondary education. If taught at all at these levels, therefore, they are taught mostly as electives and French is usually the language offered. Courses in learning French, German and Japanese as foreign languages are offered by a few universities, but the scale of these programmes is relatively small.

## THE LANGUAGE EDUCATION SYSTEM

### Organisation of language education

Both Chinese and English are taught at each and every level to all students during primary and secondary education, with little variation within the system. The only major variation in terms of organisation is in the schools' policy on the medium of instruction. In the Chinese-medium sector, English is taught as a subject. Whereas in the English-medium sector, English is taught, at least in principle, as a medium of instruction.

## Curriculum, syllabus and materials

Schools in Hong Kong are not required by law to follow a particular language curriculum. In principle, schools may devise their own language curricula according to their own needs and aspirations, so long as their locally developed curricula have the endorsement of the Director of Education. However, in practice, very few schools develop their own Chinese and English curricula. Instead, they mostly follow past, established practices within the professions, which have been heavily influenced by public examinations, and also, to an extent, the advice of the Advisory Inspectorate of the Department of Education, and curricula guidelines and syllabuses produced by the Curriculum Development Council. The present Chinese syllabuses for Primary One to Secondary Five (age 6 to 17) were introduced in 1990. The English syllabuses for Primary One to Primary Six (age 12) were introduced in 1981, and those for Secondary One (age 13) to Secondary Five were introduced in 1983. The Chinese syllabuses are written with the assumption that the language is the mother-tongue of the students, whereas the English syllabuses are written largely within the framework of a communicative approach to learning English as a second/foreign language.

The curriculum for both language education and other subject areas is being reformed in Hong Kong. The Target Oriented Curriculum is being promoted by the government and, if fully implemented, will embody these features: learning targets; learner autonomy; communication; intellectual content rather than knowledge; and criterion-referencing in favour of norm-referencing. The materials for teaching and learning in schools, for both English and Chinese from Primary One to Secondary Five (age 6 to 17), are mainly textbooks produced by the educational publishers in Hong Kong under the guidance of a textbooks committee in the Education Department. These textbooks are normally selected from the approved list issued by the Department of Education. At post-secondary level, course materials used in the sixth form (or Secondary 6 and 7 for age 17 to 19) are considered as reference materials. The materials are usually developed by lecturers or experienced teachers and language experts. Like the reference materials used by university undergraduates, these course materials are not advised by the Education Department. The average Chinese/English teachers very rarely produce materials for learning Chinese/English at any levels, even though the Education Department encourages school-based development through a special award scheme. If such materials are required, they are usually procured directly from the market-place.

## Assessment of students

During the first nine years of free and compulsory education – Primary One to Secondary Three (age 6 to 12) – there are no formal assessments of students' proficiency in English and Chinese. The only measures that come closest to formal

assessment during this period are the Hong Kong Attainment Tests which are administered by the Department of Education to a random sample of students to monitor academic standards in Chinese, English and Mathematics. For most students, assessment for their Chinese and English is provided on a regular basis by their teachers. The frequency of such assessment is decided by the school. They may occur two to six times a year and are normally in a written format. At the end of Secondary Three (age 15) and Secondary Five (age 17), standardised, norm-referenced and centralised assessment of students' language proficiency is conducted by the Junior Secondary Education Assessment and Hong Kong Certificate of Education examinations, respectively<sup>1</sup>. For students who aspire to tertiary education (age 19), their proficiency in Chinese and English is again assessed by the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations.

### Teacher qualifications and support

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of teachers in Hong Kong. Non-graduate teachers are those who do not have a government-recognised university degree. Normally, they are qualified to teach only after completing successfully their training at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Entry to the Institute requires only a sufficient number of passes at the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (the public examination for students completing secondary education around the age of 17). Graduate teachers are holders of a government-recognised university degree, and by virtue of their graduate status are permitted to teach in schools even if they do not possess teacher education qualifications at the time. However, in time, they are expected to enrol on education diploma courses offered by the universities, and they would usually major in one subject and minor in another. Chinese and English majors almost always teach the senior levels in the secondary school.

Support for language teaching has been much improved in recent years. For example, in 1994, the Language Fund with an immediate initial allocation of US\$38.5 million dollars was set up to provide additional resources for improving language education, including upgrading support for language teachers. Regular in-service training for language teachers, for improving oral English proficiency or developing self-access materials, is provided by the language centres of the Advisory Inspectorate, the Curriculum Development Institute of the Education Department, and The Hong Kong Institute of Education. Postgraduate courses on language education are also available at most local tertiary institutions. In recent years, the British Council in Hong Kong has developed close collaboration with the government in the running of a wide range of activities in support of English teaching. Major, recurrent

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<sup>1</sup> The Junior Secondary Education Assessment System, introduced in 1981, was replaced by the Mean Eligibility Rate Allocation Method in 1988 after which the Hong Kong Certificate of Education examinations have become the only public examinations whereby students' language proficiency is assessed during their secondary education.

programmes send English teachers to Britain for six weeks each summer to improve their English skills, and Putonghua teachers to Beijing. Major infrastructural supports include the setting up of the Hong Kong Teachers' Centre in 1989 to promote professionalism and a sense of unity among teachers. There are also educational television programmes and a territory-wide computing network for English and Chinese teachers.

### Links and exchanges

Except for the usual links and/or affiliations between professional bodies in language education world-wide, structural links between local and overseas language teaching institutions and regular exchanges are still rare. One such rare instance was a trilateral agreement of collaboration, signed in the fall of 1996, by the Free University of Brussels, the Universiti Brunei Darussalam and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University to promote exchanges in bilingual education.

## TRENDS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

China will regain sovereignty over Hong Kong in July 1997, after which Hong Kong will become a Special Administrative Region. The Basic Law of the Special Administrative Region, promulgated in 1990, defines the official status of Chinese and English as follows: 'in addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.' Although English is at present the primary language in commerce and government, it is anticipated that it will probably become an auxiliary language after 1997, to be used basically for international communication and academic study at tertiary level. Since 1990, the Education Department has adopted a policy to encourage schools to use Chinese, as the basic medium of instruction in schools. There has been significant resistance to the policy among schools. Accordingly, 'firm guidance' from the government will be given to all schools in 1998 regarding the appropriate medium for them, based on information about the language proficiency of their Secondary One intakes obtained through the Medium of Instruction Assessment exercise. The target is to have 30% of the children at age 12 entering English-medium secondary education and the rest entering Chinese-medium secondary education. If the policy is successful, the English-medium sector in secondary education will be reduced to one - third of its

present size, whereas the Chinese-medium sector will be seven times bigger. The Target Oriented Curriculum, if successfully implemented, will lead to long-term changes to the teaching and learning of languages in Hong Kong. Another potential major change is that, as Putonghua was made a part of the core curriculum in 1995, students' Putonghua proficiency will be assessed in the Hong Kong Certificate of Examinations of 2001. Together with the impending political changes, it is expected that the teaching of Putonghua will soon take up a significant share of school time.

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