ACHIEVING BILITERACY AND TRILINGUALISM WITHOUT MOI-BASED BIFURCATION OF THE SCHOOLS: A PLEA FOR THIRD-ALTERNATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to address the issue of Medium of Instruction (MoI) in Hong Kong with reference to the promotion of biliterate (Standard Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) skills in its schools. It starts with the premise that neither the status quo ante September 1998 nor the status quo post August 1998 is desirable or inevitable. And it ends with an indication and a plea that to achieve the language-in-education (LiE) agenda of the SAR; there are better, more viable third-alternatives to tracking the schools into Chinese-medium instruction (CMI) and English-medium instruction (EMI) streams.

(1) The Background. The status quo of LiE of Hong Kong ante September 1998 was characterized by an over-whelming number of secondary schools which claimed to practise EMI. Most of the investigators of the MoI issue in Hong Kong are agreed that the popularity of EMI secondary schools are largely a product of the following inter-related factors: (1) the language policy of the British administration, (2) the status and function of English in Hong Kong and in the international communities of the professions and higher education as well as trade and commerce, (3) the demographic and economic characteristics of Hong Kong, (4) the attitude of Hong Kong parents towards education, (5) the perception of the public that EMI facilitates the development of English proficiency and that (6) most of the schools run by prestigious sponsoring bodies of education in Hong Kong practise EMI. However, as to the question of which of the aforementioned factor(s) is/are primary, views of the investigators are quite diverse. For example, some regard the language policy of the British regime to be a primary factor (e.g. Cheng et al., 1973; Fu, 1975; 郭 1998); many
like Cheung (1990) believe the crux of the problem lies with the majority of Hong Kong parents who are more concerned about their children to get ahead than to get an education; a few like So (1984) accords priority to historical (particularly the change of regime in China in 1949) and infrastructural (i.e. demographic and economic) factors.

Similarly, most of the investigators of the issue are agreed that the EMI schools have been over-selected in the sense that a large number of students at these schools are learning through a linguistic medium that they have not yet mastered and not a few teachers of these schools are teaching in a linguistic medium of which they have not developed a firm grip. This over-selection has given rise to a wide range of consequences many of which have been considered undesirable by educators. Here it may suffice to identify just three of them: First, in order to compensate for the lack of English skills on the part of students and/or teachers, much of the classroom talk in many schools is conducted in mostly Cantonese and/or a mix of English and Cantonese. Many investigators believe such practices are not conducive to developing proficiency in English, which, as noted earlier, has been the raison d’être of EMI in the schools (Johnson, 1983).

Second, the over-selection turns the processes of teaching in many EMI schools into a dreary chore of translating textbook texts to students many of whom, in turn, have to resort to crude coping measures such as rote-memorization of key words and phrases to survive (Johnson, 1997). Third, the down-side of EMI has given rise to a widely held belief that EMI may have serious damaging effects on students’ cognitive and linguistic developments (Siu et al. 1979).

However, partly because of the aforementioned disagreement among the investigators and partly because of the magnitude of the vested interest involved, there has been no satisfactory answer to the question What should be done to tackle the over-selection of EMI schools and its undesirable consequences? Therefore a viable policy option has yet to emerge. In spite of these constraints, the government through the Department of Education (DoE) has been experimenting with a number of measures ever since the promulgation in 1982 of the report of the Llewelyn Commission which was asked to examine, among other major educational issues, the use of the EM in Hong Kong schools. The latest attempt of the DoE to resolve the issue is to implement a MoI-based tracking of the entire secondary education system. This attempt has become a central feature of the status quo post August 1998. The essential details of this new MoI policy are spelled out in the document Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools issued in September 1997. The implementation of this policy, which is to be done in a phased manner, will in a few years’ time lead to a drastic reduction of the number of EMI secondary schools and the streaming of the secondary schools into government-sanctioned CMI and EMI streams. After the announcement of the new policy, some stakeholders applauded the DoE’s policy to require secondary schools to use Chinese as a MoI (e.g. The Association of Chinese Middle Schools; the Hong
Kong Federation of Education Workers); a few had reservations about its policy to exclude the schools from adopting a mixed mode approach–i.e. adopting CMI and EMI for different subjects—to resolve the issue (This option was brought up in the deliberations of the Appeals Committee of the Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools, re: Ming Pao 11 March 1998). But a far greater number of stakeholders were critical of the way schools are being tracked into streams of CMI and EMI (e.g. The Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union; see also Cheung 1997). In view of the magnitude of resistance against the streaming approach in its new policy, the government announced on 13 March 1998 that a Joint Working Group on MoI would be established and “the Board of Education and the Standing Committee on Language Education & Research would be invited to carry out jointly a study on promoting and implementing the Government’s MoI objectives and to make recommendations in a year’s time.” (Press Statement from the Secretary for Education & Manpower’s office) In early September 2000, the Education & Manpower Bureau announced that, based on the recommendations of the Group, the streaming policy will be maintained until the 2003/2004 school year. It appears that the status quo post August 1998 has yet to be regarded as the way forward to resolve the MoI issue.

Actually, promulgated with the new MoI policy was a confirmation of the government’s intention to promote biliteracy and trilingualism. In the “Forward” of Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools, it is stated that “Our aim is for our students to be biliterate (ie master written Chinese and English) and trilingual (ie speak fluent Cantonese, Putonghua and English) [emphases in the original]”. Later in January 1999, the Education Commission issued the consultation document Review of Academic System: Aims of Education wherein under §3.4 it is stated that “We wish to ... ensure the attainment of basic standards: School education should enable every student to acquire a basic level of competence in knowledge and skills, including biliteracy and trilingualism ...”. The importance of these statements is that it is the first time in the history of Hong Kong that the DoE and a high-powered advisory body put on public record the commitment of the government to foster, in addition to skills of Cantonese, English, and Written Standard Chinese (WSC), the skills of Putonghua as well among all the students of Hong Kong. Amidst the turbulence generated by the new MoI policy, a two-language agenda has evolved into a three-language agenda but not much attention has been given to examine how these two important policy developments would impact on each other. Nor have there been clarifications to date concerning what exactly is meant by “a basic level of competence in” biliterate and trilingual skills.

The promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism among the students of Hong Kong is a bold and far-sighted move and sets the LiE policy of the government on the right course. But the government has unwittingly undermined the success of this bold move by its adoption of a MoI-based tracking of the secondary schools. It
is indeed intriguing to find the government indulging in a simplistic form of monolingual reductionism in education while at the same time making the fostering of bilingual abilities a major aim of its education policy. The fact that these two closely related policies appear to be out of sync indicates that the major issues related to its LiE policies have not yet been thoroughly thought through and sorted out.

This paper attempts to help sort out the important issues, re-cast the MoI issue in a proper perspective, pin-point its crucial relationship with the promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism and show the stakeholders that there are better third-alternatives to the present MoI-based tracking of the schools into exclusively CMI and EMI streams. Once the fundamental issues are sorted out, it will become evident that a sound MoI policy does not necessarily entail a choice between the status quo ante September 1998 and post September 1998.

This paper is organized around five postulations, they are (a) It is neither necessary nor advisable for the HKSAR government to make use the mother tongue hypothesis as a principal tenet for the formulation and promotion of its MoI policy. It is also counter-productive to define the MoI issue in a dichotomous (mother tongue vs. other tongues) fashion which, among other things, drives the government further down the direction of monolingual reductionism. (b) Tracking the schools into monolingual streams both vertically (along the axis of time) and horizontally (on the basis of MoI) limits their capacity to foster biliteracy and trilingualism. (c) The parents’ demand for EMI should be met rather than repressed; to ridicule their perception concerning the correlation between EMI and English proficiency and to condemn the extent of sacrifice that they are willing to make to avail their children of an EMI education would simply put the government in a state of denial and alienate it from the population-at-large. (d) In spite of their over-selection, EMI schools have made a significant contribution to the spread of English skills in Hong Kong and it must be reckoned that their popularity is a product of forces much larger than government policy, and (e) the success of the promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism is vital to the retention of the status of Hong Kong as the leading metropolis of China. Being an essentially monolingual, Cantonese-speaking society, Hong Kong will have to learn, as a society, to incorporate bilingual (vs. monolingual) norms in its judgment of matters concerning language and education. The rest of this paper is an elaboration of these postulations.

(2) It is neither necessary nor advisable for the HKSAR government to make use the mother tongue hypothesis as a principal tenet for the formulation and promotion of its MoI policy. It is also counter-productive to define the MoI issue in a dichotomous (mother tongue vs. other tongue) fashion which, among other things, drives the government further down the direction of monolingual reductionism. In the opening paragraph of the document Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools, the
A plea for third-alternatives

government justifies its new MoI policy by making a strong statement concerning the educational benefits of mother tongue teaching without specifying the meaning of the term “mother tongue” in the context of Hong Kong. The 24th of March 1997 must have been a happy day for local advocates of mother tongue education (MTE) because after decades of promotion, it appears that the government has finally incorporated the mother tongue hypothesis in the making of its LiE policy. The Promote MTE Campaign in Hong Kong is in many ways a continuation of the Promote Chinese as an Official Language Campaign. The latter campaign was launched in 1970 and achieved its objective in the form of the enactment in 1974 of the Official Languages Ordinance which declares both the English and Chinese languages the official languages of Hong Kong. As for the Promote MTE Campaign, one may use the publication of the pamphlet At What Cost? in 1973 to date its launch. But it was not until 1978-1979 that one saw the Campaign gaining public and therefore government attention. One of the agents that put it in the spotlight was the Hong Kong Examinations Authority. Up to and including 1978, students who wished to sit the Chinese University Matriculation Examination conducted by the university had to have, among other qualifications, at least a grade E in both Chinese and English (Syllabus A or B) in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

In June 1978, the newly established Hong Kong Examinations Authority, which took up the administration of the examination from the university, announced that with effect from 1979 the requirements concerned were reduced to having at least a grade E in either Chinese or English (Syllabus A or B). Whereas the language qualifications required for sitting the Advanced Level Examination of the University of Hong Kong conducted by the university were a grade E in English (Syllabus B) or a grade C in English (Syllabus A) in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, there were no requirements for Chinese language qualifications. Such different treatments of Chinese and English in the entry requirements of the two of the most important public examinations in Hong Kong helped refocus, four years after the enactment of the Official Languages Act, the public’s attention on the de facto status of the Chinese language in society at large and in education in particular.

In 1979, public attention on MTE gathered further momentum with respectively the release of aforementioned Siu et al.’s research report on the effects of EMI on students’ cognitive development and academic achievement, the publication of the monograph Issues in Language of Instruction in Hong Kong (Cheng, 1979), and the holding of a symposium on the topic Language and Education in Hong Kong at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Ever since 1979, the issues of MTE and EMI have been widely covered by and debated in the media and have remained hot items in the agenda of LiE in Hong Kong.

Obviously the Promote Chinese as an Official Language Campaign has made a significant contribution to the empowerment of the Hong Kong Chinese people

Language and Education in Postcolonial Hong Kong

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and to the elevation of the status of the Chinese language in Hong Kong. Similarly, the Promote MTE Campaign has made an important contribution to drawing the attention of the public and of the government to the many undesirable effects of the over-selection of EMI schools a large number of which fail to offer an authentic and effective EMI education to their students. Leaders of both campaigns made extensive use of the mother tongue hypothesis to further their cause. Which is understandable because the hypothesis could in a nutshell expose the inequity and the cost of using a non-native language as a MoI. Furthermore the concept mother tongue has proven to be an effective tool for minority leaders to motivate and unite their fellowmen to struggle against oppressors of a different ethnic extraction; and for revolutionary governments to send a message to its citizens that they have now through the revolution become the master of their own fate.

But given the fact that in the Basic Law the Chinese language has already been given its proper place in the SAR and that the SAR government is neither struggling against groups of different ethnic extraction nor revolutionary in its pedigree, it is not clear why it has chosen to make a high-profile use of the hypothesis to define, highlight and promote its new MoI policy. Not only is the term mother tongue emotive and provocative, it is also imprecise as it could be understood in many different ways. For example, the term mother tongue is usually understood to be a person’s first language. Which means it is the language to which a person is first exposed and the language of which s/he has developed a stronger grasp (Richards, 1985; hereafter referred to as the common definition). The common definition makes good sense in a monolingual frame of reference but in sociolinguistically complex situations where languages are sometimes being learnt simultaneously from the time of infancy, the temporal priority of one’s stronger language is not necessarily a given. As the world and especially metropolises like Hong Kong are getting more and more complex sociolinguistically, the monolingual frame of reference and the assumptions that underpin it have been found increasingly wanting. For example, in today’s world of widespread mass migration, the language first learned by people might not be their stronger language. For those migrants who leave their native place while still an infant, the language first learned by them might have been forgotten in their later life. These are SWONALs (Speakers Without Native Languages). And there are a growing number of them in Hong Kong among its new immigrants from the Chinese mainland. In a bilingual frame of reference, there is nothing unusual about cases where the languages of one’s parents are not his/her stronger languages. In fact more often is the case that people’s stronger languages are the languages of their peers. The language shift to Cantonese in the past fifty years among the children of the non-Cantonese-speaking immigrants from the Chinese mainland has attested to this interesting feature of language acquisition in sociolinguistically complex societies.

Furthermore, people may have more than one mother tongue. The fact that the term mother tongue is usually understood in the singular underscores again the
inadequacy of the monolingual frame of reference in dealing with the sociolinguistic complexities of contemporary metropolises. Indeed among the members of the middle class in these metropolises, it is not uncommon to find in their linguistic repertoire more than one language of which they have a strong grip. Moreover people in these metropolises may not choose to use their mother tongues (the common definition) to perform certain functions. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the context of work and formal functions. In these domains many people may find it necessary, convenient and appropriate to conduct their businesses in a language other than their mother tongues (the common definition). In other words, many people’s stronger language for the performance of certain functions may not be their mother tongues (the common definition). To take into account of these situations, the concept mother tongue has been understood more broadly as a speakers’ usual/preferred language for certain functions in particular contexts (hereafter referred to as the revised definition). For example, for many Hong Kong lawyers, at home their preferred language is Cantonese, whereas at work it is English. Therefore both languages could be taken to be their mother tongues according to the revised definition. And such scenarios are more common than many MTE advocates would want us to believe.

What constitutes “the mother tongue/the stronger language” is dependent upon the context and the function concerned. Therefore, in addressing the question of which language constitutes the appropriate MoI for a people, it would be necessary first to determine whether the term mother tongue is to be understood according to the common definition or the revised definition. Since these two definitions are pitched at the individual level whereas MoI-related decisions have implications for the social group concerned, it would also be necessary to pin down the understanding of the term at the group level where it has respectively a broad definition as well as a narrow definition. China offers a good example for the former definition. In the Chinese mainland, it is taken that Putonghua is the mother tongue of all Han Chinese because according to the broad definition, it is the linguistic variety which serves as a boundary-marker for the entire Han-Chinese nationality regardless of the fact that many members of the group neither speak nor comprehend it. As a result the mother tongue of the Han Chinese is a tongue that is not learnt from parents at home but from teachers in school; whereas the tongues learnt at home are regarded as the dialects of this tongue.

As for the narrow definition, a good example may be found in Taiwan of the post-Chiang era. In the past ten years there has been a strong growth of ethnic consciousness in Taiwan. To the Hakkas and Hokkiens of Taiwan who are determined to project their “other-ness” in the community of Han Chinese, they would incline to subscribe to a narrow definition by which one’s mother tongue is taken to be that linguistic boundary-marker of their ethnicity that is normally learnt at home and spoken by most if not all of its members.
This exposition on the possible definitions of the term mother tongue may be elaborated further but for now it should suffice the purpose of showing the dilemma the government has created for itself through its loose use of the term: given the centrality of the concept in its new MoI policy, one would expect the government to provide a precise definition of the term in its policy statements; but perhaps because of the aforementioned nature of the term, it has chosen to leave it loosely defined and as a result the fashion in which the term has been used has generated much confusion and embarrassment in Hong Kong.\(^{21}\)

The problem of definition is further compounded by the fact that MTE as an ideology tends to be exclusive.\(^{22}\) Indeed if it is taken that the mother tongue is the best medium for the education of the young, then any attempt to allocate status and function to another language in education will be met with suspicion and resentment. It explains why once the mother tongue hypothesis is factored into the deliberation of LiE policy in Hong Kong, there is a tendency to define the policy options in a dichotomous fashion because according to the logic of the hypothesis, the use of a language other than the mother tongue is by definition counter-educational and smacks of being a sell-out to utilitarian and/or political considerations. Such logic tends to crowd out other important factors in educational planning, which may have serious consequences as Bull points out so eloquently in his critique of the UNESCO committee’s mother tongue hypothesis:

“The Committee, rather obviously, strongly believes that what is best for the child psychologically and pedagogically should be the prime point of departure in planning for universal education. This proposition appears, however, to be somewhat unrealistic. What is best for the child psychologically may not be what is best for the adult socially, economically or politically and, what is even more significant, what is best for both the child and the adult may not be best or even possible for the society.” (1964: 528)

Lest it be misunderstood, Bull is not rejecting the mother tongue hypothesis per se. He simply highlights the fact that the hypothesis holds only when all things are being equal and that in real life ceteris paribus conditions are rare. In many polities, according primacy to the hypothesis in making educational decisions carries a downside that MTE advocates tend to ignore. That is in actual practice an education received exclusively in one’s stronger language may entail costs at other levels. For polities like Hong Kong, would it indeed be appropriate if students were led to believe that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain by having their entire education through CMI?\(^{23}\) The case being made here hitherto is that (a) while the mother tongue hypothesis is a very potent tool for political activists in ethnic and revolutionary politics, for policy-making it lacks precision when used in sociolinguistically complex situations, therefore (b) it may not be very helpful to use it as a central tenet for making policies related to LiE in Hong Kong, and (c) under certain conditions in sociolinguistically
complex communities, students’ stronger language may be neither the only appropriate medium—as its exclusive use might lead to inequitable social stratification—nor the preferred medium—as its exclusive use might not deemed helpful vis-à-vis the students’ aspirations—for their education. The second and the third points will be elaborated further below.

If one examines the new MoI policy from the perspective of the entire educational system, it appears that in practice what the policy does is simply to extend CMI, which has been the prevailing mode of MoI at pre-school and primary levels, to the secondary level. In other words, the present CMI-dominant primary sector and the EMI-dominant secondary sector will be, in a few years’ time, replaced by a CMI-dominant primary and secondary sector with a small compartment of EMI secondary schools (Figure 1 refers). This CMI mode is characterized by using WSC as the language of textbooks and assignments/assessment, and Cantonese as the verbal medium in the classroom. This is by no means MTE in its more authentic form and begs the question Whether or not it is necessary to employ this value-laden hypothesis as the cornerstone of a weak version of MTE.

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<th>August 1998 &amp; Before</th>
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<td><strong>Primary Sector</strong></td>
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<td>EMI (Appro. 30%)</td>
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*Figure 1: MoI-based Streaming of Hong Kong Schools: The Change after September 1998*

That this extension will reduce many of the undesirable effects of the over-selection of EMI schools is well taken. But this new measure also puts a twist to the question “At what cost?” and raises many issues of fundamental importance: Is it really the intention of the government to sanction a bifurcation of the secondary education system into CMI and EMI sectors? Is the government aware of the long-term socio-political implications of such a bifurcation? Could the government ignore for long the contradiction that a MoI policy founded upon the mother tongue hypothesis should require a fraction of the schools to
teach most of the subjects exclusively in English? How is the goal of biliteracy and trilingualism to be fulfilled if the schools are tracked into monolingual CMI and EMI streams? Will the learning of English be adversely affected in the CMI schools in spite of the additional resources they receive to strengthen their teaching of English? Will the learning of Chinese be adversely affected in the EMI schools which do not enjoy the benefits of having additional resources to strengthen their teaching of Chinese? With the high-profile promotion of the mother tongue hypothesis, will there be room for the schools to experiment with different means of promoting Putonghua other than teaching it as a subject?

Because of space considerations, the following discussion is mainly confined to the question: Would an extension of CMI into the secondary sector by such a large measure and the associated tracking of the schools into monolingual streams facilitate the promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism in Hong Kong?

(3) Tracking the schools into monolingual streams both vertically (along the axis of time) and horizontally (on the basis of MoI) limits their capacity to foster biliteracy and trilingualism. A common frustration among people concerned about Hong Kong students’ level of English proficiency may best be summarized by a paraphrase of Tollefson (1991:7): Why, in spite of the significant amount of resources being spent by government and the considerable length of time in which English is being taught and sometimes used in the schools, do thousands of Hong Kong school graduates fail to develop a high level of English proficiency that would enhance their career prospects? To a lesser extent many people have a similar frustration with students’ standards of WSC as well.

So (1998) puts the frustration over the standards of English in perspective by documenting the fact that while the quality of English of its students may not be found to be of a particularly high quality, Hong Kong has made big strides in the down-ward spread (along the social spectrum) of English proficiency at a functional level in the past fifty years. For example, according to Choi (1998: 185), “about 14,000 [EMI School] Form 5 candidates [of the Hong Kong English School Certification Examination] took English Language . . . in 1966 and the passing percentages were 61.8% [and] 11.1% were awarded a credit or distinction (i.e. grades A-C). [Whereas] in 1996, 75,000 school candidates [of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination from both CMI & EMI schools] took English Language (Syllabus B) . . . and the percentages awarded grade E or better were 52.5% . . . The corresponding grade-C-or-better percentage . . . was 7.2%.” Given the standards for grade C of English Language (Syllabus B) are pegged to that of a GCE O-Level pass (Choi 1998: 187) and are therefore relatively stable over time, one may adduce from these figures that the number of Form 5 students achieving GCE O-Level standards in English language has increased by about 350% (from about 1,554 to 5,400) between 1966 and 1996. During the same period, the percentage of the school candidates enrolled at EMI schools increased from 72% to more than 90% (So 1992:70).
other words, the great majority of these Form 5 graduates were from EMI schools. Whether or not the same magnitude of spread of English proficiency could also be achieved via a CMI-dominant instead of an EMI-dominant system is a matter of debate. But the fact remains that this particular spread has been achieved mainly through the efforts of EMI schools, especially the authentic ones, and given the sociolinguistic ecology of Hong Kong at the time (e.g. see So 1998), their contribution could hardly be dismissed.

So (1987) also postulates that the upward-spread of English proficiency (along the skills spectrum) has been hampered by tracking the schools into monolingual streams both vertically and horizontally. From the post-war years until 1998, the MoI-based vertical and the horizontal tracking of the schools produced a linguistic ecology in the schools where the classroom language experience of the students were largely monolingual: the language for authentic communication was either Chinese or English, seldom both. Therefore when the majority of the primary school leavers furthered their education in EMI schools, their previous classroom language experience in a Cantonese-WSC environment provided them with little foundation for another monolingual classroom experience in English; Cantonese by habit and by necessity remained therefore dominant in classroom talk initially and for many of these students, they never got beyond this talk-in-Cantonese and reading-&-assessment-in-English mode. The extension of CMI into the secondary sector reduces the number of students affected by the linguistic mismatch, but for students at EMI schools and for those who move on to EM universities, the mismatch remains except from now on these students constitute a smaller fraction of the population.

In addition to the linguistic mismatch, another outcome of the MoI-based tracking of the schools has given rise to an apparent imbalance in linguistic skills among the secondary graduates, which has been taken for granted but yet to be documented and researched. The imbalance refers to the general impression that vis-à-vis their counterparts at EMI schools, CMI schools tend to produce graduates with a stronger grasp of WSC and a relatively weaker grasp of English, and vice versa in case of the EMI schools, notwithstanding claims in recent years that the secondary school graduates of Hong Kong are good in neither WSC nor English. If the vertical and horizontal tracking of schools are to be continued, it is unlikely that the linguistic mismatch and imbalance will be redressed. The heart of the problem lies in the dichotomous and exclusive nature of the new MoI policy which would intensify the monolingual experience of students in the schools and impose unnecessary constraints respectively on making use of these target languages as authentic means of communication, and on the joint use of the languages as MoI at both primary and secondary levels. It is against such backgrounds that many educators are pessimistic about the effects of promoting Putonghua by teaching it as a subject for one to two hours per (a six-day) cycle from primary-one to secondary-five.
Given the local sociolinguistic conditions, if biliteracy and trilingualism are part of the desired educational outcomes, the use of these languages for authentic communication must permeate the entire course of the primary and secondary education, albeit in varying degrees of intensity according to different backgrounds of the schools. The development of such a new linguistic ecology in the schools would entail a revision of the school curriculum to enlarge the range of application and use of the languages concerned by students at both primary and secondary levels. Which in turn would mean that MoI-based tracking and streaming should be abandoned as the leading organizing principle of our school system. Otherwise by default the mismatch between the demand for EMI and students’ proficiency in English will persists; an unbalanced grip of Chinese and English with a smatter of Putonghua will remain the major characteristic of the school graduates of Hong Kong.

(4) The parents’ demand for EMI should be met rather than repressed; to ridicule their perception concerning the correlation between EMI and English proficiency and to condemn the extent of sacrifice that they are willing to make to avail their children of an EMI education would simply put the government in a state of denial and alienate it from the population-at-large. In spite of their over-selection, EMI schools have made a significant contribution to the spread of English skills in Hong Kong and it must be reckoned that their popularity is a product of forces much larger than government policy (e.g. see So 1984). English proficiency being a social desideratum in Hong Kong requires no further elaboration and as such one must learn to grapple with the paradox that it is exactly because the Hong Kong children’s English has been found wanting that they are being sent by their parents to EMI schools to further their secondary education. If their children could pick up English at home or in the streets, we will not have to grapple with this vexing issue of MoI today. As educators we may disagree with the practice of these parents but it would be wrong if we believe we could rectify the situation by taking the EMI option away from them. One may ridicule these parents as lemmings driven by the herd-instinct and obsessed with the profit-motive. But the fact is that Hong Kong parents’ aspiration for EMI for their children is based on the same logic—that proficiency in a target language may be significantly enhanced by using it as a MoI—that drove the Anglophones in Montreal to seek the assistance of Wallace Lambert to devise an instrument to enable their children to achieve a higher level of French proficiency (Lambert, 1972). Just like learning English in Hong Kong, learning French for Anglophone children in Montreal was and still is very hard to do well because of the social segregation between the Anglophone and Francophone communities there. However, a viable option has been made available for the Anglophone parents to fulfill their aspiration for higher French proficiency for their children because some members of the educational community understood and respected their desire and devised an instrument to meet the challenge, albeit immersion programmes like most remedies also carry a cost.29
Similar to the immersion programmes the EMI schools in Hong Kong also attempt to develop higher English standards among their students by using it as a MoI. If the majority of the CMI schools could demonstrate that the same level of English proficiency could be achieved among the majority of their students without the necessity of using EMI, the parents of Hong Kong would not have found EMI schools that attractive. But the lackadaisical performance of CMI schools in promoting English proficiency must be understood in the light of the fact that worldwide, especially in societies with a sociolinguistic profile similar to Hong Kong, teaching a non-indigenous language as a subject has not been found effective to spread fluency in the language among a significant portion of the school population. Indeed if in a bilingual metropolis like Montreal—which is situated in a French-speaking province of a country with a federal government strongly committed to the implementation of its bilingual policy—Anglophone school children of middle class background still fail to attain a satisfactory level of proficiency in French, what is the chance for a mostly monolingual city like Hong Kong—which is situated next to a Cantonese-speaking province of a country subscribed largely to a monolingual language policy—to be able to develop biliteracy and trilingualism among its school children?

As noted earlier, many EMI schools have failed to properly execute their MoI policy and there are many problems associated with EMI. But the bashing of EMI schools in the past couple of years from sources both inside and outside the government may have prevented us from assessing properly the historical role of the many EMI schools which have made genuine efforts to provide an education and at the same time help spread English proficiency among the local population. Ever since Hong Kong became a crown colony, there have been not a few graduates of EMI schools who have become skilled in English without showing any signs of significant negative cognitive, educational effects. The question is whether these schools could be replicated in sufficient numbers with necessary modifications to meet the objective of biliteracy and trilingualism. The answer to this question at present is negative. There are two ways of dealing with this issue. The way adopted by the government is to restrict students’ access to EMI. Since it requires a lot of political will and political cost to do so, the restriction ends up being too loose to have any credibility. Who with some knowledge of the local situation would believe and accept that these 114 secondary schools could teach their students exclusively in the EM? On the other hand, who could say with confidence that none of the teachers and/or the students in those schools which failed to obtain sanction from the DoE to instruct their 1998 cohort in the EM can properly conduct and benefit from EMI respectively?

An alternative to the present policy is to enhance the system’s capability to conduct both CMI and EMI. One laudable aspect of the new MoI policy is the government’s acknowledgement of and commitment to providing assistance to teachers to conduct CMI. Contrary to popular belief, teachers who are Chinese still require training to enable them to teach effectively in the CM. On the other hand, if there are indeed an insufficient number of teachers to teach effectively.
in the EM to meet the popular demand for EMI, for a resourceful government, one obvious measure is to develop ways and means to increase the number of such teachers. Refusing to do so would put the government in a state of denial of the fact that there remains a popular aspiration for EMI in Hong Kong and it is the product of forces much larger than government policy. The popularity of EMI schools in Hong Kong after the transfer of sovereignty has demonstrated the inadequacy of the view that attributes the primary cause of the over-selection to government policy. One should not continue to mislead the government into thinking that the demand for EMI may be capped by policy and propaganda. In the formulation of its new MoI policy, it appears the government has adopted an ahistorical and astructural approach, which is unfortunate. The popular demand for EMI is deeply rooted in the historical milieu of Hong Kong and in the status enjoyed by English worldwide. The fact that so much reference material that students at secondary and tertiary levels have to consult are only available in the EM further belies the appropriateness of forcing the schools to teach either in Chinese or English. These are very large forces that drive people’s MoI choices and affect the outcomes of education in polities like Hong Kong. If the government persists in its MoI policy to restrict the majority of the students’ access to EMI, the structural inequality so ensued may one day jeopardize the socio-political stability of Hong Kong.

(5) The success of the promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism is vital to the retention of the status of Hong Kong as the leading metropolis of China. Being a SAR of China, there is no question about the need for the school graduates of Hong Kong to attain a high level of proficiency in WSC and Putonghua, in addition to achieving proficiency in Cantonese in its full measure.

On the other hand, as China’s major window to the West, it is crucial that the school graduates can master the skills of conducting themselves in English with confidence. It is envisaged that whether one likes it or not in the next millennium the English language is going to be the lingua franca of members of international communities in trade & commerce as well as in science and technology. Being able to use English and use it well will be a mark of membership of these communities. For people without such a mark, it would be difficult for them to gain access to these communities. For example, the World Wide Web where the common medium is English is growing in leaps and bounds and there are already millions of Web sites by the end of the millennium. A growing proportion of inter-institution, inter-personal communication as well as commercial transaction such as retail sales will be done via the Web. Hence the run-up to the end of this millennium has seen the emergence of an ideology of English as a tool of empowerment. (Tollefson, 1991:11) As So (1984) observes, to many people in Hong Kong in the better part of the Twentieth Century, EMI and the factors associated with it played a pivotal role in their upward mobility. If there were any changes to this situation in the next millennium, it could be that the role played by English in people’s upward mobility would be greater rather than smaller.
Ever since 1979, many educators concerned with the undesirable effects of the over-selection of EMI schools have questioned whether or not as a society Hong Kong has over-estimated the importance of English. While much of this questioning has served the purpose of generating a search for a corrective of the over-selection, part of it has also been rather misleading. Some typical examples of the misleading bits are views phrased in rhetorical questions like (a) Most Japanese do not speak English well but Japan is a world power. (b) Many Filipinos speak English well but The Philippines is poor and weak; and (c) Many well-developed countries like Germany do not find it necessary to resort to EMI to attain a good level of English among their citizens.

Given the insidious influence of these misconceived views in the education community over the years, their debunking has become necessary. First and foremost EMI and a high level of English proficiency have never been taken as both a necessary and sufficient cause for the prosperity of Hong Kong. To conceive them as such is simply a convenient way for some critics of the over-selection of EMI schools to get themselves a balloon to shoot down. What has been said about the spread of English proficiency vis-à-vis the prosperity of Hong Kong is that it is evidently a positive factor. No more and no less.

Second, the critics of EMI are making a comparison between apples and oranges: Hong Kong thrives primarily on tourism, trade and the provision of financial services, where English proficiency of the workforce is a major asset. Whereas the economic base of the well-developed countries like Japan and Germany is much broader and the contribution of internal consumption to their economy is much greater. For these countries, it may indeed be true that the level of English proficiency among its workforce is a less important factor in their overall well being. However, while it is true that the average Japanese does not speak good English, it does not mean that many of them are not trying hard to learn it well. For example, in Japan there are still more than a dozen branch campuses of U.S. tertiary institutions offering thousands of Japanese students English-language training, and courses leading to different levels of academic qualification, in spite of the recent economic down-turn and in spite of the fact that the Ministry of Education has steadfastly refused to recognize such branch campuses as legitimate academic institutions. We should take note of such efforts because for us the question to ask is not “Why does Japan do relatively well without widespread English proficiency?” but rather “Where would Japan be today had its middle class mastered the skills of speaking English well?” Similarly, the question to ask is not “Why does The Philippines remain relatively weak while English proficiency is widespread there?” but rather “Where would it be today had it not had such an attribute in its national profile?”

It would also be wrong to mislead the public into thinking that countries like Germany engender widespread English proficiency without resorting to special means. In 1991 the Commission of the European Communities of which
Germany is a member made a strong statement affirming the significance of the promotion of trilingualism among the citizens of the member states (1991: 33):

Language competence is regarded as being of central importance to the creation and progress of Europe . . . Higher education institutions should present a multi-lingual voice to their clientele . . . Language competence is necessary to support mobility, economic and administrative interaction and cooperation in practically every sphere of activity . . . It would appear reasonable that all Community citizens should have the opportunity to acquire communicative competence in at least one Community language in addition to their mother tongue and that substantial portions of the population should be expected to acquire a knowledge of two Community foreign languages.

Although the use of the target languages as a MoI in the schools is not a central feature in the promotion of trilingualism in the European Union, much resource has been spent on instituting programmes to provide the citizens with opportunities to learn the target languages in situations where the languages can be used for authentic communication.

Moreover, the use of a non-native language as MoI is by no means a rare phenomenon. Mandarin (i.e. Putonghua) is now the dominant MoI in Taiwan although at the end of its governance by Japan in 1945 the number of Taiwanese who spoke it as a usual language was around one per cent (黄 1993: 97). Similarly English is now the dominant MoI in the entire educational system in Singapore where according to its 1957 population census only 1.8 per cent of its total population were native-speakers of English (Chua, 1964). In Holland, advanced courses at tertiary level are widely taught in English (Crystal, 1997: 103). Even the nationalistic governments of Indonesia and Malaysia are now opening up their country to universities like Monash to operate offshore campuses on their soil.

(6) Pointers to a Future with Additive Bilingualism. It has been shown that the present MoI-based bifurcation of the schools under the guise of promoting MTE is not the right way forward. To qualify to be the right way forward, the LiE policy should facilitate the achievement of biliteracy and trilingualism, accommodate the concerns of the MTE advocates and have the support of the majority if not all of the stakeholders. In order to meet these criteria, the policymakers would have to sort out these three issues: (a) The flip side of the mother tongue hypothesis spelled out in this paper; (b)The need to provide opportunities for the use of the languages concerned as means for authentic communication in the schools, and in this connection (c) The need to make appropriate use of English and Putonghua as a MoI.
It is believed that the concept additive bilingualism provides a framework for the resolution of all these three issues. According to this concept, bilingual skills should be added to students’ linguistic repertoire only after s/he has developed fluency in the use of a basic/foundation language and that the learning of these additional languages should not impede the further development of fluency in the basic/foundation language. In other words, students of Hong Kong should start their education in Cantonese and WSC which will then be used as the building block for the learning and use of English and Putonghua through the latter course of primary and secondary education. The concept additive bilingualism is therefore well suited to be a guiding and organizing principle for a new LiE policy as it takes good care of the second and the third issues by providing room for the parallel use of more than one language as MoI in the schools. At the same time it accommodates the concerns of the MTE advocates because students’ basic/foundation language will serve as the bedrock for the building of this bilingualism. So unlike the mother tongue hypothesis which puts tension between the promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism and the promotion of MTE, the concept of additive bilingualism aligns the two objectives in the same direction. In this connection it is also proposed that the term mother tongue be replaced by less emotive terms like basic/foundation language in policy statements so as to create a more rational environment for policy discussion and implementation.

It is accepted that the government has the responsibility to ensure that the use of the CM, EM and the PM as a MoI is done in an appropriate manner. So it is taken that an “appropriate-medium test” is required to make sure that the use of multiple-languages in the schools is done properly. To administer the test, the government may target the students, and/or the schools, and/or the teachers. In its new MoI policy, the government has opted to target the students and the schools although teachers may be regarded as part of the schools. The reason behind the government’s choice is not hard to understand as the SSPA exercise provides the government with an opportunity to conduct the MIGA to stream students into EMI and CMI categories, and schools can then be categorized according to the type of students that they admit. While this practice may be administratively convenient, it has an enormous downside. As repeatedly mentioned in this paper, the dominant aspect of this downside is the tracking of the schools into monolingual streams.

It is believed that the administration of the “appropriate-medium test” does not necessarily entail a MoI-based bifurcation of the schools. One option the government may consider is to target the test at the teachers. Notwithstanding the fact that in Canada the immersion programmes are mostly instituted at kindergarten and primary levels, it is worth noting that the Anglophone students come to these programmes with zero or close to zero proficiency in the language used as the MoI (i.e. French); the programmes work largely because the teachers are skilled in French, in addition to English and are well trained in bilingual
instruction (Baker, 1996:333). It may therefore be more appropriate if the test is targeted at the teachers instead of students.

The principal merit of this option is that with the exception of those schools which for reasons of philosophy and/or tradition wish and have the ability to remain CMI/EMI schools, it would convert the abrupt, major MoI-switches in the majority of the schools in the present system of vertical tracking—either at secondary-one or at secondary-four—into a larger number of smaller switches because the unit of switch will no longer be schools but teachers and the subjects that they teach. For students learning in the EM/PM in these schools, there will be a leveling of the steep learning curve. At the same time, the two MoI-based streams in the present system of horizontal tracking will be integrated into a single spectrum with the CMI and EMI schools situated at its two ends and all the rest of the schools in between. For the schools distributed between the two ends of the spectrum, the labels CMI/EMI will be irrelevant because the MoI-related information that these schools provide for the public will simply be the number of teachers who are qualified to teach in the various mediums.

And the teachers do not have to be labeled exclusively as CMI or EMI or PMI either because they could seek certification to teach in more than one medium so that they may teach the same subject or different grades in whichever medium that the school deems fit. Indeed, what would constitute a better means to promote biliteracy and trilingualism than having biliterate and trilingual teachers? Having teachers as the unit of the “appropriate-medium test” would mean that it would not be necessary for parents to choose between CMI and EMI. And when the choice between CMI and EMI is behind us, then all the stakeholders will be able to really focus on education, instead of its medium.

It is conceded that because of the number of teachers involved, the teacher-based MoI selection in schools will take much more time to implement. But small steps in the right direction are much better than a big, decisive step in a wrong direction. After all, education is an enterprise that takes hundreds of years to perfect; there are no quick fixes.

It is also conceded that some stakeholders may not find this alternative attractive. Teachers initially may not welcome the “appropriate-medium test”. But if benchmarking, pre-service and in-service training are to be respectively part of the certification process of teachers and their professional life, there may be room to incorporate this test with these exercises in an unthreatening manner. The provision of appropriate incentives for the teachers should be considered as well. If indeed there is a general consensus that our future generation should be biliterate and trilingual, one would expect a significant number if not the majority of those personnel who mould this generation to be able, in due course, to demonstrate such attributes in their professional life. At this point in time, it
is perhaps also the only effective way for the SAR to enhance the linguistic capacity of the education system to meet its own LiE objectives.

In the past twenty years, many strong statements about the causal relationship between pedagogical practices and educational outcomes have been made in the local literature in the area of LiE. To put these statements in perspective, one may refer to an observation made by the most cited social scientist in history: “I don’t think modern linguistics can tell you much of practical utility . . . Psychology and linguistics have caused a great deal of harm by pretending to have answers to those questions and telling teachers and people dealing with children how they should behave.” (Chomsky, 1988)

Also, many advocates of MTE and MoI-based streaming do not have the benefit of a parent perspective or the perspective of a parent with children receiving their education in local schools. For their benefit this paper is concluded with a personal anecdote. My daughter is attending a CM school in Hong Kong. While she was in grade four, her performance in the subject English-language in the mid-term examinations was found lacklustre. When my wife met with her form-master to discuss her school performance, my daughter’s examination results in the subject was brought up and the master in earnest told my wife that if our daughter did not improve her English skills, she might end up having her secondary education in a CMI school. My wife and I hold no bias against CMI schools. We also have the option of sending our daughter to North America to continue with her secondary education. This encounter however has reinforced our belief that if the new MoI policy is allowed to go its full course, the ecology for CMI schools after 1998 could be worse than before. Our hearts go out to those parents whose children may not reach the benchmark that qualify them for the EMI schools, and who at the same time do not have the options of sending their children abroad to continue their education like we do.
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A plea for third-alternatives


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A plea for third-alternatives

NOTES

1 Hitherto, the MoI debate has been confined mainly to the secondary schools as it has been assumed, albeit not by this writer, that Chinese should remain the principal MoI for the primary sector. In the past schools that used Chinese as a MoI were usually called Chinese Middle Schools and those that used English as a MoI were usually called Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools. Since 1997, it has become more common to use the labels CMI and EMI to refer to these two types of schools respectively. To avoid confusion, the new labels are used for the periods both before and after September 1997.

2 For a summary account of these factors, see Fu 1975: Chapter 2, So 1984: Chapters 4 & 5.

3 For example, between 1983 and 1988, more than 90 per cent of the school population were enrolled in EMI schools. (So, 1992:70) This situation persisted until September 1998.

4 Many of the concerns raised by investigators like Siu and Johnson are legitimate and require the close attention of the stakeholders. However it is believed that some of the alleged consequences of EMI such as cognitive retardation and semilingualism may be over-stated. Space constraints preclude a discussion of these concerns here but in the case of semilingualism, it may suffice it to point out that the concept was first used to explain academic difficulties of minority students (Hansegard 1972), i.e. not the type of students that we have in the SAR. Ever since the concept gained currency in the early 1970s, many investigators have cast doubt on its theoretical value. Also, a precise operational definition of the term is still not in evidence.

5 To resolve the MoI issue, the Commission stipulated several options for the consideration of the government and appeared to be in favour of “a wholehearted push towards genuine bilingualism after P6, including the tertiary level” (Llewellyn, 1982: 29-30). Unfortunately, it chose to leave the phrase genuine bilingualism undefined.

6 In the document, the rationale that underpins the new policy is spelled out as follows: Mother tongue teaching has positive effects on students’ learning; Most students prefer learning in the mother tongue; Students learning in the mother tongue generally perform better than their counterparts using English as MoI; and students of traditional Chinese-medium schools consistently achieve a higher pass percentage than the territory-wide average in both Chinese Language and English Language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. This shows the positive impact of mother tongue teaching on the learning of Chinese and English as a subject. The gist of the policy is as follows: To encourage secondary schools to use Chinese as MOI; To discourage the use of mixed code, i.e. a mixture of Chinese and English, in teaching and learning.

7 As of September 1998, 114 schools were in the latter category (the number was 100 as of 1 December 1997 and revised up to 114 on 13 March 1998), about 300 were in the former category. These sanctions are applicable to only the secondary-one intakes of the schools with effect from September 1998.

8 These statements are anticipated by a speech titled 〈新時代香港教育的要求和挑戰〉 (The Demands on and the Challenges of Education for Hong Kong in a New Era) made by Mr. Antony Leung, whose public service portfolio includes Executive Council member, a former Chairman of the University Grants Committee and current Chairman of the Education Commission, to a seminar on 9 May 1997, in which he spelled out six demands on the education system one of which is to produce graduates with high levels of literacy in SC and English and high levels of oral fluency in Cantonese, Putonghua and English.

9 The term refers to the fact that in terms of language development and language behaviour, what consider to be normal for monolingual speakers may not be so for bilingual speakers. Accordingly a different normative frame of reference for assessing language development and judging language behaviour of bilingual speakers has to be developed so that bilingual speakers will be compared with bilingual speakers and that they will not be unfairly subject to the norms which are meant for monolingual speakers.
10 It is the date when the DoE issued the consultation document Medium of Instruction Firm Guidance for Secondary Schools.

11 A well-known version of the mother tongue hypothesis can be found in the report on a meeting on bilingualism and education convened by UNESCO in Paris in 1951: “It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than an unfamiliar linguistic medium.” (p. 11)

12 Indeed it is sometimes referred to as the Second Promote Chinese as an Official Language Campaign.

13 The full title of the pamphlet is At what Cost: Instruction through the Medium of English in Hong Kong Schools and is centred around a report on the findings of a questionnaire-survey and is “prepared” by Cheng Ngai-lung, Shek Kang Cheun, Tse Ka-kui and Wong Siu-lun.

14 The Chinese University Matriculation Examination was then re-titled the Hong Kong Higher Level Examination. It was conducted by the Examinations Authority from 1979 until 1992 when it was held for the last time.

15 The new requirements for the Higher Level Examination were implemented in 1979 only and the previous requirements for The Chinese University Matriculation Examination were reinstated in the Higher Level Examination with effect from 1980.

16 In 1980 the Hong Kong Examinations Authority conducted the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination which replaced the Advanced Level Examination of the University of Hong Kong but retained its language requirements. It was not until 1992 with the phasing out of the Hong Kong Higher Level Examination and with the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination becoming the entry examination to all tertiary institutions (except the Open Learning Institute/Open University) that a grade E in Chinese language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination became part of the entry requirement of the Advanced Level Examination.

17 For a more detailed discussion of the different definitions of the mother tongue, please see 1998.

18 For a debunking of the monolingual frame of reference which has been taken to be normative in the Anglo-American culture, see Grosjean 1982: Chapter 1; Baetens Beardsmore 1982: Chapter 4; Wardhaugh 1986: Chapter 4 & Edwards 1994: Chapter 1.

19 This shift towards Cantonese among the other Chinese ethnic groups in Hong Kong was first noted in T’sou 1978. For a more recent treatment of the topic, see So 1998.

20 By the narrow definition stipulated in this paper, nobody speaks the standard dialect Putonghua as a mother tongue, it has to be learnt in school. In terms of grammar Putonghua draws its norms from the exemplary literary works written in the Northern Vernacular since the Thirteenth Century. In terms of pronunciation, it derives its norms from the Beijing Dialect.

21 Given this background, it would not be hard to understand why Nobel Laureate Steven Chu (崔琦) was hailed in Hong Kong as a vindication of the efficacy of MTE even though: (1) he was a native from a province in central China and did not understand, let alone speak Cantonese when he came to Hong Kong as an adolescent. (2) In the 1950s verbal instruction at his alma mater The Pui Ching Middle School of Hong Kong was largely conducted in Cantonese, sprinkled inter alia with English phrases. Also, English textbooks for science subjects were extensively used after Secondary-3, a practice retained up to the present albeit the school has been repeatedly hailed by the DoE and the media as an exemplar of MTE.
A plea for third-alternatives

22 Had the Chairman of the Board of Education been told about this tendency of MTE, he would not have been surprised to find during a visit to Britain that the new MoI policy had been taken by the media there as an act of the HKSAR government to do away with English-medium education. (Ming Pao 16 January 1998)

23 It is indisputable that both students and teachers in Hong Kong will in general find it easier to conduct classroom activities in Cantonese and to have all reading materials provided in Chinese. But the quality of learning is also affected to a large extent by other factors such as the entry levels of students at the school. (Cooley & Lohnes, 1976:65). As EMI schools tend to admit students with higher initial abilities than their CMI counterparts (a factor that could become even more pronounced as a result of the implementation of the new MoI policy), it would be interesting to see in a few years’ time if the use of a more convenient MoI in CMI schools could indeed enable their students to catch up with their counterparts at EMI schools at the end of their secondary education. It would also be interesting to see if providers of prestige jobs which involve skilled use of English would, in recruiting their personnel, give equal weighting to educational credentials earned through learning in the CM and those earned through learning in the EM.

24 A more authentic form of MTE in Hong Kong will involve respectively the use of High Cantonese as the MoI of textbooks & assessment as well as classroom talk for all Cantonese-speaking children, and the provision of instruction in their respective dialects for all children of immigrants who speak a dialect other than Cantonese.

25 The classroom language experience of most of the students took the following form as a result of the tracking: at primary level the Chinese language (i.e. Cantonese-WSC) was taught as a subject and at the same time used as a MoI except for English which was learned as a subject. At secondary level at EMI schools, English was learned as a subject and in principle used as a MoI except for the Chinese Language which was learned as a subject.

26 The significance of the target language being an authentic means of communication can be seen, for example, from Byrnes et al. 1992 which puts this condition at the top of a list of 11 principles for effective additional language learning.

27 An indication of this assumption is that for many years the examination paper for the English Language in the Certificate of Education Examinations has two different syllabuses: Syllabus A and Syllabus B. The former is less demanding and it is widely understood that its target candidates are students from CMI schools.

28 It is believed this is an over-statement. For example, according to Johnson & Cheung 1995, although the reading literacy achievement of Hong Kong students in English is below international norms, their achievement in Chinese is “average at primary 4 and above the international mean at secondary 3.” (p.2)

29 For example, in most French total-immersion programmes students typically spend the first two years mainly learning to follow their teachers’ delivery in French. As a result, vis-à-vis mainstream students instructed in their stronger language, immersion students at this stage appear to be much more passive in class and interaction between students and teachers is at a much lower level. Furthermore, much English is used by the students in class, albeit not by the teachers. Usually the situation improves over time but if one assesses such programmes by focusing on this initial stage, then all s/he sees could be the adverse effects of not using the students’ stronger language as a MoI! Also, lest it be forgotten, what French immersion programmes have succeeded in doing is that their graduates achieve much better standards in French vis-à-vis their counterparts who learn it as a subject without significant cost to their academic development. But the standards so achieved are far below native-like control levels. For a critique of the linguistic outcomes of these programmes, see Hammerly, 1989.

30 The European Community became the European Union in 1993.
For example the Erasmus programme provides funds to enable students of higher education to spend part of their studies in an institution of another member state. Whereas the Lingua programme finances the exchange of staff, materials and students in secondary education between member states.

This is a modified version of the concept first put forward by Lambert (1977) to account for the differential outcomes of bilingual education.

Putonghua-medium.

Secondary School Placement Assessment

Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment. One major problem with MIGA is that it provides no direct measurement of the students’ English abilities as the assessment results are by a large measure a function of the results of the Academic Aptitude Test which does not measure the students’ English proficiency.

According to the new policy, to be qualified as an EMI school, no less than 85% of the secondary-one intake of the school has to be classified for three years prior to 1997 as either ‘able to learn effectively in either Chinese or English’ or ‘able to learn better in Chinese but may also learn effectively in English’.

In addition to its social divisiveness and its being a hindering factor for the promotion of biliteracy and trilingualism, it also generates a lot of anomalies in practice. For example, it forces teachers at 114 government-sanctioned EMI schools who may not be EMI-competent to use the EM to instruct their students. It will also take away the option of CMI schools to make use of English textbooks and/or reference materials in their teaching, especially in the science-related subjects.

The time and timing for the introduction of the PM and EM should not be standardized. So long as the teachers involved are competent in the use of the medium concerned, schools should be given space to improvise and to experiment so as to identify the best ways for them to achieve the bilingual objectives of the government’s LiE policy.

For a discussion on what the parents in Hong Kong want is a joint CMI and EMI for their children, see So (1992).