

Classroom Language Use in Hong Kong's English-Medium Secondary Schools

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In recent years the long-standing debate over the medium of instruction (MOI) in Hong Kong's secondary schools has been reinvigorated by the introduction of a controversial language policy which requires the majority of the territory's schools to adopt Chinese as the teaching medium. Under the new policy, only 114 schools are permitted to continue teaching in English. The government's decision to force most English-medium schools to switch to Chinese while retaining an "elite" English-medium stream has been criticised for being discriminatory and divisive. Since the policy was announced, much attention has been given to the changes which the former English-medium schools will need to undergo in order to adapt to Chinese-medium instruction. However, much less attention has been paid to the implications of the policy for the schools which will retain English as the MOI. The study reported in this article, which investigates language use in the "new" English-medium stream, was designed to find out the extent to which these schools' MOI policy was in fact translated into classroom practice in the years immediately preceding the introduction of the new policy.

Key words: language policy; language in education; medium of instruction

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Introduction

In the past three decades, the issue of the medium of instruction (MOI) in Hong Kong's secondary schools has been a source of community-wide debate. Broadly speaking, two schools of thought have dominated discussion and debate over the MOI issue during this period. On the one hand, those who favour the use of Chinese have argued that students learn more effectively when taught through their mother tongue, a view which has been underpinned by empirical evidence from research conducted in Hong Kong schools since the late 1970s (e.g., Ho, 1992). On the other hand, those who support the use of English (notably the business community) have maintained that high levels of proficiency in the language are essential to the maintenance of Hong Kong's status as a leading industrial, commercial and financial centre. The territory's pragmatic parents, though aware of the educational and cultural advantages of Chinese-medium instruction, have also traditionally favoured English-medium schools because the use of the second language as the MOI provides their children with the best opportunity to acquire high levels of proficiency in English, which, because of its important role in government, business and tertiary education, is perceived to be the key to socio-economic advancement in Hong Kong. The colonial government's position on the MOI during the post-war period was to support in principle the use of Chinese, but in practice to allow the continued expansion of the English-medium secondary stream in acknowledgement of the wishes of territory's parents and business community (e.g., Hong Kong Government, 1974).

Since the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to China in mid-1997, debate over the MOI has been reinvigorated by the introduction of a controversial language policy which requires most of the territory's English-medium schools to switch to Chinese. The new policy also stipulates that those schools wishing to continue teaching in English must demonstrate that their teachers, students and support structures satisfy the requirements necessary for the effective use of English as MOI (Education Department, 1997). In early 1998, Hong Kong's Education Department an-

nounced that 114 schools would be allowed to continue teaching in English, while the majority of the territory's secondary schools (around 300) would be required to use Chinese as the MOI for all subjects apart from English. As might be expected, the decision to force most of the territory's English-medium schools to switch to Chinese caused a storm of controversy, with parents of students now forced to attend Chinese-medium schools being particularly vociferous in their opposition to a policy which they believed to be high-handed, discriminatory and divisive.

When the new policy was announced, it was assumed in some quarters that the decision to promote Chinese-medium education was a natural consequence of China's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong. In fact, the new policy was the culmination of initiatives introduced in the early 1990s by the outgoing colonial regime (Education Commission, 1990; Education Department, 1989), and was formulated largely in response to concern among teachers and policy-makers during the 1970s and 1980s about the problems which many students experienced when studying academic subjects in English (e.g., Cheng et al., 1973; Yu & Atkinson, 1988). These language-related problems resulted in a significant shift in classroom practices in the English-medium stream during this period: while English continued to be the main medium of written communication, the usual mode of classroom instruction and interaction in content subjects involved switching between and mixing English and Cantonese (the mother tongue of over 90% of Hong Kong's population).

Although little research was conducted into classroom language use in Hong Kong before the early 1980s, there is some evidence that mixed-mode instruction was prevalent in many English-medium schools in the 1970s (e.g., Hinton, 1979), a decade which saw a dramatic increase in enrolments in the English-medium stream (from 145,849 in 1970 to 371,282 in 1980). Studies of secondary classrooms carried out in the 1980s revealed a steady decline in the use of English for the teaching of academic subjects, and an increase in Cantonese and Cantonese-English mixed code (Cantonese admixed with English terms) (Johnson, 1983; Johnson et al., 1991;

Shek et al., 1991). For example, Johnson (1991) found that the proportion of teacher talk in English in junior secondary content subjects dropped from 43% in 1981 to 15% in 1990, while the use of Cantonese and Cantonese-English mixed code increased from 48% to 65% and 9% to 20% respectively. Research into the MOI in English classes carried out in the past decade has revealed that English tends to be restricted to the formal presentation of lesson content in whole-class situations, while Cantonese tends to be used for the discussion and explanation of ideas and information initially presented in English (Lin, 1990; Pennington, 1995; Pennington, 1999; Pennington et al., 1996).

The increasing use of Cantonese and mixed-code in the English-medium stream since the 1970s not only resulted from the apparently limited academic and linguistic skills of many Hong Kong students. It would appear that many local teachers have lacked the confidence and communication skills needed to teach effectively in English, particularly the younger generation of teachers who themselves received their education in a mix of English and Cantonese. Even teachers who are highly proficient in English, and are committed to using the language as a teaching medium, are often forced to make extensive use of Cantonese to ensure that they can cover (and their students can understand) the heavily academic content of Hong Kong's teaching and examination syllabuses, which have often not been adapted to the needs of students in a mass education system. In view of the constraints under which teachers have been forced to operate since the introduction of universal secondary education in the late 1970s, the use of Cantonese in the classroom has been a necessary and inevitable expedient.

Since the late 1980s, the widespread use of mixed-mode instruction in the English-medium stream has been identified as the principal reason for the less than satisfactory English and Chinese language skills of many secondary graduates (Education Commission, 1990), a problem which has been the source of community-wide concern for much of the last three decades. The demand for graduates with high levels of proficiency in English has been a particular concern for the territory's tertiary institutions and the in-

fluent business community (Johnson, 1998), and it would appear that these two sectors played an important role in prompting the government to abandon its *laissez-faire* language policy in favour of a clear policy which requires schools to make consistent use of English or Chinese as MOI, and thereby (in theory) finally eliminate mixed-mode instruction from Hong Kong classrooms.

Since the announcement of the new policy in September 1997, discussion over the MOI issue has centred on the pedagogical changes which the former English-medium schools will need to undergo in order to adapt to the use of Cantonese and Chinese as the media of oral and written communication. However, somewhat less attention appears to have been paid to the implications of the new policy for the schools which will retain English as the MOI, presumably because it is believed that the 114 English schools will continue to do what their stated institutional policy has always said they do, namely teach academic subjects and English through the medium of English. The study reported in this article, which investigates the language use of teachers and students in the “new” English-medium stream, was designed to find out the extent to which these schools’ official MOI policy was in fact translated into classroom practice in the years immediately preceding the implementation of the new policy.

The Study

The study reported in this paper was designed to provide a picture of language use in the schools which the Education Department has allowed to continue teaching in English. The study focuses on the medium of oral communication rather than the language of reading and writing since the use of spoken English and Cantonese has been the main source of concern for educators and policy-makers. It is assumed here that the language of written communication in the English-medium stream is (and always has been) mainly English. The crucial issue has been the media through which the knowledge, information and ideas embodied in English teaching/learning materials have been presented and discussed in the classroom. According to

the new MOI policy, code mixing and switching in the classroom should be eradicated from both the English and Chinese streams. Therefore, the sole language of oral communication in the 114 English-medium schools should be English (apart from in Chinese subjects).

Collecting reliable data about classroom communication is extremely difficult. Previous studies have made use of such methods as audio-taping of lessons, classroom observations and self-reports of language use (by both school authorities and individual teachers). The data for this study were derived from a questionnaire survey of a sample of tertiary students who had just graduated from the 114 English-medium schools. The questionnaire required the students to report on the classroom language use of teachers and students in academic subjects and English in Forms 4-5 (i.e. their Certificate of Education course) and Forms 6-7 (i.e. their Advanced Level course). Since the first stage of the new policy was implemented in September 1998, these students (who were in Forms 4-7 between September 1994 and March 1998) could be regarded as the last cohort to pass through the old "mass" English-medium stream.

The subjects were 262 first-year students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU). Of these 262 students, 158 had studied in Forms 4-5 in the schools which are permitted to retain English as the MOI, while 128 had attended these schools in Forms 6-7. The lower figure for Forms 6-7 can be explained by the fact that 30 students had moved to other schools (which are not on the list of 114 schools) after completing Form 5. Altogether, 77 of the 114 schools in the "new" English-medium stream are represented in the study. Although the subjects were required to state the name of their school, the questionnaire did not make explicit (or implicit) reference to the purpose of the research project; it merely indicated that the study would enable HKPU to form a clearer picture of the language background of first-year undergraduates. There is no reason to believe (and the findings do not suggest) that the subjects answered the questionnaire in the knowledge that the study was directly related to the new MOI policy.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections: classroom language use in academic subjects (e.g., History, Physics) and English classes. In order to gather precise data about the MOI in academic subjects, the questionnaire required the respondents to identify one subject in both Forms 4-5 and Forms 6-7, and then report on the use of English and Cantonese by the teacher and students for different purposes in a typical lesson. For each item on the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to tick the most appropriate option from the following scale: Always English; Usually English but with some Cantonese words/phrases mixed in; English and Cantonese in roughly equal amounts; Usually Cantonese but with some English words/phrases mixed in; Always Cantonese. (These descriptors have been slightly simplified in Tables 2-3, 5-10.) The questionnaire was designed and piloted in the spring of 1998. The final version of the questionnaire was administered to students from a range of disciplines at HKPU in September and October 1998. Each group of subjects completed the questionnaire during their English class under the supervision of their English teacher.

Findings and Discussion

Classroom language use in academic subjects

The first section of the questionnaire required the subjects to report on language use in one academic subject in Forms 4-5. As can be seen in Table 1, the respondents reported on a wide range of Arts, Science and Commercial subjects, although there is a preponderance of Mathematics and Science subjects.

Table 1 Academic subjects taken by students in Forms 4-5

Subject	No. of Students	Subject	No. of Students
Mathematics	24	Additional Mathematics	7
Chemistry	23	Principles of Accounts	6
Biology	20	Commerce	5
Economics	19	English Literature	3
Physics	18	Computer Studies	1
Geography	17	Government & Public Affairs	1
History	13	Human Biology	1

The findings relating to teachers' language use are summarised in Table 2. Perhaps the most notable feature is the great variation in the use of English and Cantonese for different purposes. The range of classroom practices among teachers is particularly evident in managing the classroom, giving instructions and discussing ideas with the whole class. The only function where a clear picture emerges is item 6, where most of the subjects reported that their teachers "always" or "usually" used Cantonese when talking to individual students about their work. The findings indicate that only a minority of the subjects received the kind of "pure" English-medium instruction envisaged by the designers of the new policy. If the "always" and "usually" English percentages are combined, we can see that between 17% and 55% of the subjects reported that their teachers mainly used English to fulfil the six functions listed in the questionnaire. The findings indicate that English was used more than Cantonese for whole-class teaching (item 1) and giving instructions (item 2), while teachers tended to prefer Cantonese for managing the classroom (item 5) and talking to individual students (item 6). English and Cantonese apparently had roughly equal roles in answering students' questions (item 3) and whole-class discussions (item 4).

Table 2 Teachers' language use in academic subjects in Forms 4-5

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Teaching the whole class	28%	27%	17%	25%	3%
2. Giving instructions to the students	29%	18%	17%	23%	13%
3. Answering students' questions in front of the whole class	19%	24%	18%	32%	7%
4. Discussing ideas with the whole class	15%	24%	23%	27%	11%
5. Managing the classroom	21%	13%	13%	21%	32%
6. Talking to individual students about their work	6%	11%	12%	36%	35%

Apart from describing their teachers' use of English and Cantonese, the subjects were required to report on the language which they used to interact with their teacher and classmates. The picture of student language use which emerges from Table 3 is much clearer than the one in Table 2. While there is still considerable variation in the use of English and Cantonese in situations where students interacted with the teacher (items 1-3), it is clear that when students participated in pair and group work activities (item 4-5), and particularly when they engaged in work-related discussions with their classmates (item 6), they mainly used Cantonese. The only situation where the use of English outweighs Cantonese is when the subjects were answering their teachers' questions. This is the only item where a significant percentage (30%) of the subjects claimed to use "pure" English. Only a handful of the subjects reported using "pure" English in small-group activities, while none claimed to have discussed work with classmates exclusively in English.

Table 3 Students' language use in academic subjects in Forms 4-5

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Answering the teacher's questions	30%	14%	21%	29%	6%
2. Asking the teacher questions	16%	14%	15%	40%	15%
3. Taking part in whole-class discussions	14%	15%	16%	37%	18%
4. Taking part in pair-work activities	4%	10%	15%	44%	27%
5. Taking part in group-work activities	3%	8%	17%	46%	26%
6. Discussing classwork with classmates	0%	6%	8%	41%	45%

The subjects were also asked to report on language use in one of the Advanced Level courses which they took in Forms 6-7 (Table 4).

Table 4 Academic subjects taken by students in Forms 6-7

Subject	No. of Students	Subject	No. of Students
Physics	23	Mathematics	5
Geography	21	Principles of Accounts	5
Chemistry	18	Business Studies	4
Biology	13	Applied Mathematics	2
Economics	13	Computer Studies	1
Pure Mathematics	8	Mathematics & Statistics	1
History	7	Psychology	1
English Literature	6		

As in Forms 4-5, perhaps the most significant feature of the findings relating to teachers' language use is the wide variation in the use of English and Cantonese for various purposes, particularly for answering questions, discussing ideas with the class, and managing the classroom (Table 5). It would appear that teachers in Forms 6-7 made slightly greater use of "pure" English than in Forms 4-5, especially when teaching the whole class (item 1), and slightly less use of "pure" Cantonese, particularly for talking to individual students about their work (item 6). However, overall the findings indicate that only a minority of the subjects experienced a genuine English-medium education during their Advanced Level studies. When the "always" and "usually" English figures for each of the first five items in Table 6 are combined it can be seen that between 43% (item 5) and 66% (item 1) of the subjects reported that the medium of instruction and interaction was predominantly English. However, only around a fifth of the subjects reported that their teacher in Form 6-7 used mainly English when talking to them individually about their work (item 6). Despite the apparent increase in the amount of English used in Forms 6-7 when compared with Forms 4-5, the findings clearly indicate that mixing and switching between Cantonese and English (in varying degrees) were still common features of the classroom discourse of around a half of the subjects' Advanced Level teachers.

Table 5 Teachers' language use in academic subjects in Forms 6-7

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Teaching the whole class	37%	29%	15%	18%	1%
2. Giving instructions to the students	34%	23%	15%	19%	9%
3. Answering students' questions in front of the whole class	26%	25%	20%	26%	3%
4. Discussing ideas with the whole class	20%	27%	22%	25%	6%
5. Managing the classroom	23%	20%	9%	21%	27%
6. Talking to individual students about their work	9%	12%	19%	41%	19%

The findings relating to students' language use in Forms 6-7 reveal considerable variation in the use of English and Cantonese in teacher-student interactions (Table 6), particularly in situations where students asked questions and participated in teacher-led class discussions (items 2-3). As was found in Forms 4-5, there is much less variation in student-student interactions, especially in work-related discussions. As might be expected, the slight increase in teachers' use of English in Forms 6-7 is mirrored in the students' language use. A comparison of items 1-3 in the "always" English columns of Tables 3 and 6 reveals a slight increase in the percentage of subjects who reported using "pure" English to communicate with their teachers. However, the items (4-6) relating to the language of student-student interactions in both tables are virtually the same, which suggests not only that very little "pure" English was used in Forms 6-7, but also that the proportion of students using "pure" English remained constant over a four-year period. If the figures in the "always" and "usually" English columns in Table 6 are combined it can be seen that between 6% and 54% of the subjects claimed to have used mainly English to communicate with their teachers and classmates in their Advanced Level subjects. When the findings for Forms 4-5 and Forms 6-7 are compared, there appears to be a slight in-

crease in the use of English (always/usually) in pair/group work activities and class discussions, and a somewhat greater increase (around 10%) in students' use of English when answering and asking questions (see items 1-2, Tables 3 and 6). However, despite the slight increase in the students' use of English for different purposes in Forms 6-7, the findings clearly indicate that the majority of the subjects used Cantonese or Cantonese-English mixed code to communicate with their teacher and classmates, while between 12% and 23% of the subjects reported that they used English and Cantonese in roughly equal amounts.

Table 6 Students' language use in academic subjects in Forms 6-7

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Answering the teacher's questions	34%	20%	13%	26%	7%
2. Asking the teacher questions	23%	16%	19%	30%	12%
3. Taking part in whole-class discussions	16%	15%	23%	33%	13%
4. Taking part in pair-work activities	4%	12%	17%	46%	21%
5. Taking part in group-work activities	3%	12%	18%	47%	20%
6. Discussing classwork with classmates	1%	5%	12%	46%	36%

The findings in Tables 2 and 5 reveal considerable variation in teachers' use of English and Cantonese for various purposes. Previous studies of language use in Hong Kong (using different data collection methods) have also found a wide range of classroom practices among teachers of content subjects (e.g., Johnson, 1983). A number of factors have been identified to explain this variation: the culture, policies and traditions of individual institutions; the policies of particular departments within certain schools; the academic level, sex and social background of the students; the nature of the subject matter (e.g., Arts, Science); and the experience, teaching styles and language proficiency of individual teachers.

Although the students in the present study represent an “elite” group of English-medium schools, the findings clearly point to a wide range of classroom practices. Some of the differences in teachers’ language use can be attributed to the ways in which the subjects interpreted the wording of the five categories on the questionnaire (“always” English, “usually” English, etc.). The subjects’ difficulty in matching questionnaire category with their memories of classroom instruction and interaction would have been compounded by the fact that they were required to base their judgement on a “typical” lesson given by a particular teacher over a two-year period. However, even allowing for the imprecision which inevitably stems from the design of the questionnaire, the picture of language use that emerges from the findings is clearly one of considerable variation, and is thus consistent with the findings of most studies of classroom discourse conducted in Hong Kong since the early 1980s.

When considering these findings in relation to the new language policy, which stipulates that only English should be used in the “new” English-medium stream, it would appear that only a minority of the subjects received the kind of English-rich classroom environment envisaged by educational policy-makers. Although the new policy aims to eradicate code mixing and switching from English-medium schools, given the sociolinguistic conditions which currently prevail in post-colonial Hong Kong — where Cantonese is the majority language, and where the status of Cantonese/written Chinese is rising *vis-à-vis* English — it would be unrealistic and unreasonable to expect Cantonese-speaking teachers and students to interact in the classroom without any use of the mother tongue. If we accept the argument that some use of Cantonese in English-medium classrooms is necessary and desirable (for both academic and social purposes), it would mean that the subjects who indicated that their teachers “always” or “usually” used English for different purposes experienced a classroom language environment which is the best that Hong Kong’s schools could realistically be expected to offer for the acquisition of English. If we approach the findings from this perspective, it can be seen that in Forms 4-5 between

a third and half of the subjects were taught mainly in English, while in Forms 6-7, which only the best students enter and where class sizes are correspondingly smaller, the proportion is slightly higher. These findings therefore indicate that in Forms 4-7 perhaps the majority of the subjects attended classes where their teachers taught mainly in Cantonese or made roughly equal use of English and Cantonese.

If we examine the extent to which English and Cantonese were used to perform the six classroom functions, we can see that English tended to be used most frequently for teaching the whole class and giving instructions; in other words, where the flow of information and ideas is in one direction, from the teacher (as the instructor) to the students (as mainly passive recipients of this discourse). The use of English as the predominant medium for the transmission of lesson content is consistent with the findings of other studies of classroom language use in Hong Kong. What is also noticeable about the findings is that in situations where teachers and students interacted, either to discuss or clarify lesson content, English was reportedly used less (and therefore Cantonese and a mix of English and Cantonese correspondingly more), particularly in situations where the teacher talked to individual students about their work. The key role which Cantonese plays in making English-medium subject matter more accessible and meaningful, and in enabling teachers to create a friendly, supportive atmosphere, has been noted in studies of Hong Kong classrooms (Lin, 1996). It should be pointed out that the questionnaire focused on situations that involved presenting or discussing academic subject matter, or managing the classroom, and not the less formal (though perhaps equally important) aspects of teacher talk, such as telling jokes, relating personal experiences and chatting about school news, which help teachers establish good relations with their students. Given the trends in Tables 2 and 5, where only a small percentage of the subjects' teachers apparently used English to discuss work individually (i.e. probably the most informal of the six situations), it would be reasonable to argue that if the subjects had been required to report on the medium of informal teacher talk, it is likely that the overwhelming majority would have indicated that it

was predominantly in Cantonese. Such an item was not included in the questionnaire because it was assumed that even the designers of the new policy, who are evidently intent upon imposing linguistic purity in the schools, would not object to the use of the Cantonese for non-academic purposes.

When we examine the subjects' self-reports of classroom language use several trends seem to emerge. In the first place, there is a fair degree of variation in the language of teacher-student exchanges but much less variation when students interacted in small groups. The only situation where a significant percentage of the subjects "always" or "usually" used English was in answering their teachers' questions in front of the whole class. However, what this finding cannot reveal is the amount of English used, and the quality of the students' contributions. Studies of language use in English classes have indicated that while students generally answer questions in English, because of the restricted nature of the questioning in Hong Kong's traditionally teacher-dominated classrooms, students' responses are often limited to ritualistically displaying knowledge in a single word or clause (Pennington, 1995, Wu, 1993). Given the findings of previous studies of classroom discourse, it would be reasonable to assume that most of the subjects who reported using mainly English to interact with their teachers in Forms 4-7 were not given (or were reluctant to take) the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions freely in English.

While between a third and half of the subjects appear to have used English to communicate with their teachers, only a minority reported using English to interact with their classmates in small-group activities. It would appear that student-student interactions, whether task-focused or more loosely structured discussions, were conducted mainly in Cantonese. Given the limited use of English for academic-related interactions, it would be reasonable to assume that virtually all non-academic discussion and chatting between students was in Cantonese. As was pointed out above, while the questionnaire was designed to provide information about the languages which students used in different situations, it did not set out to investigate how often English or Cantonese was used; nor did it seek to assess the

quality of students' contributions to small-group activities. In the light of previous studies of Hong Kong classrooms, it would be reasonable to assume that the subjects were given limited opportunities to participate in group work. Even though curriculum documents in most subjects recommend a learner-centred classroom approach, in practice most teachers tend to adopt a didactic approach because it is perceived to be a more effective way of preparing students for public examinations. Although the transmissional approach (allied to a steady diet of examination practice) is perceived to be boring and of limited educational value, it is generally favoured by students, who often view with suspicion any approach which is not immediately relevant to the examination syllabus. What this means is that even those subjects who reported using mainly English to interact with their peers in Forms 4-7 may have used their English only occasionally, while the vast majority of the subjects appear to have used English hardly at all.

Classroom language use in English classes

Hong Kong's secondary schools have traditionally provided their students with two contexts in which to learn English: (1) through its use as the MOI in academic subjects, and (2) in English classes where the target language is the explicit focus of teaching and learning. The new language policy is mainly directed towards the first context, since it is felt that the high standards demanded by Hong Kong's academic and business communities can be achieved only by using English effectively as the MOI in academic subjects (Johnson, 1995). Despite the prominent place which English enjoys in the curriculum, it is believed that students' exposure to English when it is taught as a subject cannot alone guarantee high levels of proficiency in the language, even when both teachers and students make consistent use of English as the medium of instruction and interaction (as policy documents recommend). However, as was noted in the introduction, studies of language use in English classes conducted in the past decade have revealed that mixed-mode

instruction has also apparently become the norm for many Hong Kong English teachers. Given the apparent shift from English to Cantonese in English classes in recent years, it is interesting to examine the responses of the respondents to the second section of the questionnaire, which focused on language use in English classes.

Table 7 Teachers' language use in English classes in Forms 4-5

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Teaching the whole class	79%	15%	4%	1%	1%
2. Giving instructions to the students	77%	12%	7%	3%	1%
3. Answering students' questions in front of the whole class	71%	21%	6%	1%	1%
4. Discussing ideas with the whole class	70%	18%	8%	3%	1%
5. Managing the classroom	71%	15%	8%	4%	2%
6. Talking to individual students about their work	48%	24%	15%	10%	3%

The findings relating to teachers' language use in Forms 4-5 clearly reveal that the overwhelming majority of the subjects' teachers used English to instruct and interact with their students (Table 7). In marked contrast to the findings for academic subjects in Forms 4-5 (see Table 2), there is little variation in the use of English and Cantonese for different purposes, with a remarkably high percentage of the subjects reporting that their teachers "always" used English to communicate with their students in whole-class situations (items 1-5). While the use of English is consistently high, it appears that teachers made particular use of English for the formal presentation of lesson content (item 1) and the communication of instructions (item 2), whereas the percentage of respondents who reported that their teachers "always" used English to clarify (item 3) or discuss (item 4) this content with their students, or to manage the classroom (item 5) is slightly lower. The only situation in which English was not consistently used was when

teachers talked to individual students about their work (item 6), but even here 48% of the subjects claimed that such discussions were “always” conducted in English, which is a marked contrast to content classrooms in Forms 4-5, where it was found that only 6% of the respondents’ teachers “always” used English (item 6, Table 2).

Teachers’ apparent insistence on using English in whole-class situations is reflected in the findings relating to students’ language use in Forms 4-5, when, as Table 8 indicates, the vast majority of the subjects mainly used English to answer questions (item 1), ask questions (item 2), and take part in class discussions (item 3). When the subjects worked in pairs and groups (items 4-5), which may not have been regular activities, English was apparently used less consistently, but even so, over half of the subjects claimed that these tasks were performed mainly in English. In marked contrast to academic subjects (items 4-5, Table 2), only a minority of the subjects reported that Cantonese was the main medium of task-focused pair and group work in English classes in Forms 4-5. As might be expected, the situation in which the subjects made least use of English was in fairly informal, work-related discussions with their classmates, but even in this situation it is perhaps surprising (in the light of previous research) that around a third of the respondents reported that such discussions were mainly conducted in English.

Table 8 Students’ language use in English classes in Forms 4-5

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Answering the teacher’s questions	77%	12%	8%	3%	0%
2. Asking the teacher questions	67%	20%	10%	3%	0%
3. Taking part in whole-class discussions	59%	22%	13%	5%	1%
4. Taking part in pair-work activities	22%	36%	28%	9%	5%
5. Taking part in group-work activities	19%	39%	27%	13%	2%
6. Discussing classwork with classmates	11%	21%	29%	26%	13%

When we examine the findings relating to the language use of English teachers in Forms 6-7, it is immediately apparent that the overwhelming majority of the subjects reported that English was the sole medium of instruction and interaction (items 1-5, Table 9). Only a very small percentage reported that their teachers used Cantonese or a roughly equal mix of English and Cantonese to communicate with students in whole-class situations. Even in relatively informal discussions with individual students, whose main purposes would presumably be to clarify, explain or elaborate on topics presented and discussed with the whole class, a very substantial percentage of the subjects claimed that their teachers conducted such interactions mainly in English (cf. item 6, Table 2).

Table 9 Teachers' language use in English classes in Forms 6-7

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Teaching the whole class	91%	5%	2%	2%	0%
2. Giving instructions to the students	87%	6%	5%	1%	1%
3. Answering students' questions in front of the whole class	86%	9%	3%	2%	0%
4. Discussing ideas with the whole class	87%	8%	3%	1%	1%
5. Managing the classroom	82%	8%	6%	2%	2%
6. Talking to individual students about their work	62%	16%	12%	8%	2%

In their reports of their own language use in Forms 6-7 most of the subjects claimed that they interacted with their teacher mainly in English (items 1-3, Table 10). As in Forms 4-5, the subjects apparently made less exclusive use of English for small-group activities, but when the percentages in the "always" and "usually" English columns are combined it can be seen that a substantial percentage of the subjects claimed that group work was conducted mainly in English, while in informal discussions (item 6) almost a half reported that English was the main medium of communication.

Table 10 Students' language use in English classes in Forms 6-7

Situation	Always English	Usually English	English & Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
1. Answering the teacher's questions	87%	9%	2%	2%	0%
2. Asking the teacher questions	80%	13%	5%	2%	0%
3. Taking part in whole-class discussions	69%	19%	8%	4%	0%
4. Taking part in pair-work activities	34%	34%	23%	8%	1%
5. Taking part in group-work activities	36%	35%	19%	8%	2%
6. Discussing classwork with classmates	18%	29%	28%	16%	9%

The findings in Tables 7-10 clearly reveal that English was the usual MOI in the vast majority of the subjects' English classes. These findings may indicate that the use of mixed-mode instruction in English classrooms noted in other studies may not have been as widespread as previously believed. It is worth noting that much of the evidence for the use of mixed-mode teaching in the "old" English-medium stream was derived from a relatively small number of classrooms (including those at junior secondary level, which is not the focus of the present study). While the data derived from these classroom-based studies are extremely valuable, the picture of language use that emerges from them may not have been very representative of Hong Kong English classrooms during the 1990s. Even quantitative studies with large sample sizes (which, though lacking the fine detail of the qualitative studies, might be regarded as being in some degree "representative") have certain limitations. For example, the samples in the studies by Lai (1994) and Evans (1997) were large and fairly representative of the "old" English-medium stream, but both focused only on English classes in Form 4. What is also significant about these two studies is that they both present a picture of classroom communication in English lessons in the early 1990s, that is, before the implementation of important changes to the public

examination syllabuses in the mid-1990s, which (in order to encourage oral communication) gave a more prominent place to speaking and listening in English than had previously been the case. It is possible that the relatively high use of English found in the present study is the result of teachers placing more emphasis on oral communication than they had done in the past, when speaking skills were either neglected in the public examinations, or received such a low weighting (compared with reading and writing) that teachers could conveniently ignore them without disadvantaging their students.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate classroom language use in the group of secondary schools which are allowed to “retain” English as the MOI. The findings presented in this paper are based on the reflections of a sample of students who attended 77 out of the 114 schools in the “new” English-medium stream in Forms 4-7 in the four years immediately preceding the introduction of the new language policy. When we examine the findings relating to language use in English classes the picture is fairly clear: English was the main medium of classroom communication at senior secondary level. In the case of English classes, then, it would seem that institutional policy was translated into classroom practice. However, when we turn to the MOI in academic subjects, which is primary focus of the new language policy, the picture is somewhat mixed. The most notable characteristic of the findings relating to teachers’ language use is the great variation in the use of English and Cantonese for different purposes. It appears that English was used most often for the formal presentation of lesson content and the giving of instructions, whereas Cantonese tended to fulfil a more negotiative, explicatory function. Given the great range of teachers’ classroom practices, it is perhaps not surprising that there is also considerable variation in the subjects’ self-reports of language use, with English apparently having a greater role in answering questions, and Cantonese being used more than English for asking questions and interacting with the teacher in whole-class

discussions. In contrast to the findings relating to the media of teacher-student communication, the subjects' self-reports of language use in interactions with their classmates are very clear: the vast majority conducted small-group activities mainly in Cantonese.

The findings of this study should be viewed with some caution. In the first place, the research method employed is open to question on a number of counts. The findings were based on the reflections of a sample of university students on language use in their last four years at secondary school. The fact that the subjects were distanced in both time and space from the classrooms on which they were reflecting inevitably casts some doubt on the accuracy of the data. Another limitation is that the questionnaire focused only on Forms 4-7, and not their junior secondary years. The absence of information about language use in Forms 1-3 necessarily means that caution needs to be exercised when making generalizations about language policies and practices in the "new" English-medium stream. However, it might be reasonable to argue that if only a minority of the subjects of this study reportedly experienced a genuine English-medium education in Forms 4-7, it is unlikely that they would have had greater exposure to English in content subjects in Forms 1-3, when, compared with their senior years, they would presumably have been less proficient in English, and when their teachers may not have been as well-qualified and experienced.

In view of these limitations, we need to be cautious when drawing conclusions about and considering the implications of the findings of the study. However, even when we take into account these limitations, the results do nevertheless suggest that in the four years immediately preceding the implementation of the new policy only a minority of the schools in the "new" English-medium stream appear to have been making consistent use of English as the MOI in academic subjects. Most of the respondents appear to have attended schools where a wide gulf existed between institutional MOI policy and classroom practice. In other words, classroom language use in these schools may not have been greatly different from that which prevailed in the majority of classrooms in the "old" unreformed English-medium

stream. However, whereas most schools from the era of “mass” English-medium education have been forced to switch to Chinese, the findings of this study indicate that a significant percentage of the 114 schools which have been permitted to “retain” English as the MOI may not have been offering the kind of genuine English-medium education required by the new language policy in Forms 4-7 (and thus presumably in Forms 1-3 as well) in the very period (1994-1998) when they were seeking to demonstrate their ability to make effective use of English as the MOI. This suggests that for perhaps the majority of the schools in the “new” English-medium stream, the implementation of the new English-only language policy is likely to bring about changes in classroom practices every bit as significant as those which will be experienced by the former English-medium schools in adapting to Chinese-medium instruction. Whereas teachers and students in the “old” English-medium schools will have to adapt to the use of written Chinese in academic subjects, many of those in the “new” English-medium schools (though able to continue using English instructional materials) will find that communicating exclusively in English will be a radical departure from their previous classroom practices.

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