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On Struggles and Resistance: English-medium Education as Intrinsically "Good"?

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This article consists of a review and discussion of the literature on English-medium education and social differentiation in colonial contexts. A major question concerns the extent to which access to English, and its relationship to social inequality, are converging in diverse contexts (Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong) formerly under a specific colonial power (Britain). By engaging the review in comparative perspectives, the discussions challenge the confident assumption that English-medium education is intrinsically "good" in the discourse of English as an international language. English-medium education tends to promote unequal opportunity for students on the basis of social class; and class disparity is reinforced by the requirements for good English in society, in both study and work contexts. This article further argues that the unequal basis and

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consequences of differential access to English and the local struggles around English need to be redressed; and that the perspectives of the field of English Language Teaching with a prevalent interest in pedagogical issues need to be broadened.

Key words: English-medium education, social differentiation, colonial contexts

Language pedagogy is to some extent isolated from the sociology, and the professional training of English Language Teaching (ELT) has focused primarily on linguistics, psychology and education. As Phillipson (1992, p. 8) observes, "the majority of those working in the ELT field tend to confine themselves, by choice and training, to linguistic, literary, or pedagogical matters". The limitations that Phillipson sees in ELT are resonated in my concern over the prevalent interest in issues of language acquisition and pedagogy in Hong Kong. Whilst the state was largely concerned with issues of learning and teaching and language proficiency enhancement (e.g., Education Department, 1985a, 1985b, 1992, 1994a, 1994b), the universities were interested in attitudes and motivations in English learning and achievement (e.g., Bauer, 1984; Gibbons, 1979, 1984; Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Lyczak, Fu, & Ho, 1976; Pennington, 1998; Pennington & Yue, 1994; Pierson, Fu, & Lee, 1980; Yu & Bain, 1985). However, it may be argued that the investigation of these crucial issues of acquisition and enhancement, mostly drawing on theories of language learning and teaching, can be usefully contextualised in the sociology of education for a more theoretical perspective (e.g., Choi, 2003; Lin, 2001, 2008).

Broadening the Perspectives of the ELT Field

The narrative from a secondary teacher in the form of personal correspondence, which captures the complexities of school and classroom practices, directs me to the position of English within the culture of selective schools in Hong Kong:

> Guess what, I was "caught" speaking Cantonese during a lesson with sixth-form (aged 17) girls by the headteacher today! I was annoyed by the talkative young ladies who didn't seem to feel the enormous pressure of the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. Hence, after *speaking English* all the time during teaching, I switched to Cantonese to "lecture" the girls on their attitude — I found it rather difficult and less "to the point" to talk about those things in a *foreign* language. I switched back to the *"official"* medium of instruction right after I had seen the headteacher.
>
> Honestly, I'm rather bothered about the incident. It's like being phony — agreeing to abide to the guidelines set by the school authority on the surface; yet doing something else "underground". Well, I'll try hard not to live on luck 'coz it's very embarrassing when you have to switch to the *legitimate* language channel in the middle of a sentence in front of a whole class of students.
>
> (Teacher of chemistry, my emphases)

Reading such remarks and discussing these issues with the teacher informant, it appears to me that the dilemma that emerges here has little to do with the level of English competence of the subject teacher per se, but the perceived significance of the social dimension of English by selective schools. Underlying the linguistic orientation of these selective schools is the relationship of English to "class, education and culture, the materiality of its imposition on … students at secondary school, the complex implications of their eventual success in and through English" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 12). Beyond the legitimacy of school languages and the teacher's consciousness of public shame (both being reinforced through surveillance), there are complex issues to be explored about English-medium education, and its connections to instances of cultural variance within schools.

Similarly, two of Hong Kong's pioneering schools in the use of English as a medium of instruction expressed their resistance to switching to Chinese-medium teaching in view of their cultural tradition (*Hong Kong Standard*, 1997, March 24). What strikes me as interesting is the headteachers' confident assumption that English-medium education is intrinsically "good" for selective schools. This implicit assumption about English is further shared by non-selective Chinese-

medium secondary schools, as illustrated in a headteacher's account of dual-mode teaching:

> We've found that the students are able to learn in English, although some of them are *struggling with their vocabulary and problem-solving ability*.
>
> (*South China Morning Post*, 2000, November 24, my emphases)

What appears to be significant about this quote is the headteacher's natural assumption that English is beneficial to his lower-band students, despite their struggles around the "foreign" language. This position on the values of English, whether practical or symbolic, finds an echo in the discourse of English as an international language (EIL). It looks at the spread of English as *neutral, natural* and *beneficial* (Pennycook, 1994). The currently popular view that English is a universal language of global communication is well captured in my personal correspondence with native-speakers of English, for example:

> You relate learning English in Hong Kong to *colonialism*. But it is more importantly an *international language*. It is the main language of the United Nations; Dutch, Danes, Sweden, etc. are fluent in English though never ruled by England.
>
> (English sociologist, my emphases)

However, a serious flaw about the discourse of EIL is the assumption of equality in access to English within a particular group or country. As pointed out by Pennycook (1994, p. 12), there is "an assumption that individuals and countries are somehow free of economic, political and ideological constraints when they apparently opt for English"; and there is "a belief that by its international status English is even more neutral than other languages". Such assumption and belief leave us turning to the unequal relationship between English and other languages and its important consequences (Phillipson, 1992).

Two related issues have emerged here: first, the position of English to power and knowledge in school contexts requires an answer to questions about how to enable all students to have access to the "official" currency of English; secondly, the discourse of EIL (English

as neutral, natural and beneficial) neglects the unequal basis and consequences of differential access to English, as well as the local struggles around English in its local contexts (Lin, 2001, 2008; Pennycook 1994). Such a broadening of the investigation into the social aspects of English-medium education brings to the fore the concept of the worldliness of English. It is important to differentiate between the concepts of universalism (which requires the same treatment for all) and specificity (which allows for exceptions to be made) (Pennycook, 1994). We need to consider whether contextual specificities are at least as significant as any broader cross-national developments. To seek out ways of thinking about the position of English in the *world* will help us to understand issues of English/ELT differently (Phillipson, 1988, 1992). On the other hand, we may wonder whether these social instances are not in fact so diverse that they can only be discussed in terms of their *specific contexts* (Pennycook, 1994, 1998).

In this light, it is relevant to relate the forms of penetration of English and of their dominating positions in the colonial setting of Hong Kong to other national educational contexts over time. Malaysia and Singapore, for example, are interesting points of comparison in terms of English and social differentiation through post-colonial times. Issues of language, culture and education remain central points of debate — and continue to take on a particular salience in these former British colonies in south-east Asia. It needs clarifying that this article sets out to discuss the changing medium-of-education policies in Hong Kong with reference to other colonial contexts. Essentially, a major question concerns the extent to which access to English, and its relationship to social inequality, are converging in diverse contexts formerly under a specific colonial power. Comparisons can be made to "develop more sophisticated understanding of the peculiarities of national arrangements — focusing on the issues of resistance" (Whitty et al., 1998, p. 6).

English-medium Education and Social Differentiation

Analytic perspectives are drawn from the selected literature on language-in-education policies in bilingual or multilingual contexts,

with a particular interest in the relationship between English-medium education and social differentiation in three former British colonies over time. Contrasting Hong Kong's relatively homogeneous Chinese population (98%), both Malaysia and Singapore are characterised by linguistic diversity based on ethnic heterogeneity (Malaysian, Chinese and Indian).[1] They all present interesting cases for our understanding of how colonial school systems, and hence language policies in education, revolved around practical ethnic and/or socio-economic concerns. The provision of English or vernacular education in colonial contexts can also be seen as a political good to maintain social order. These politico-economic considerations result in differential participation in respective sectors of the economy (division of labour or role differentiation), and set up problems of integration (social solidarity and stratification).

Malaysia

It would be tempting to assume that language policies in the British empire favoured a massive spread of English in all its colonies. Rather, relevant literature reported that English was only intended for a small proportion of people, as in colonial Malaya (1786–1957). English-medium education served essentially the British administration, which demanded a class of English-speakers to mediate between the colonial officials and the masses (e.g., Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993; Pennycook 1996a; Wong, 2002; Yee, 1995). Socially and economically, though, English-medium education was ruled out as "an unsafe thing" for Malaya (Loh, 1970, p. 114). In other words, providing access to a language of power such as English — which will in turn provide access to those powerful domains in which English is used — might pose a serious threat to social order. As Pennycook (1996a, p. 135) puts it, "the argument revolves around the best means to achieve social stability, whether by means of giving or withholding literacy" in English. The rejection of an English-medium education for all had an important bearing to the labour market and the perceived politico-economic pressures in Malaya: "the immediate result of affording an English education to any larger number of Malays [with a knowledge of English and a disrespect for manual work] would be the creation of a

discontented class who might become a source of anxiety to the community" (Report, 1884, p. 171, cited in Pennycook, 1996a, pp. 138–139, my insertion).

Consequently, English-medium education was only available to the Malay elite, and the urban Chinese and Indians, leaving the majority to follow the vernacular education systems, and resulting in divisions along socio-economic lines. Whilst the Chinese system served the cultural needs of the Chinese, the Malay system turned the Malays into better farmers and fishermen, and the Tamil system offered an elementary Indian-oriented schooling on the rubber estates (Mukherjee & Singh, 1985). About 42% of the population worked largely in agriculture, fishing and forestry ("non-English demanding" categories) in rural areas. However, only the English system acts as a ladder to higher education, and offers a means of movement into the higher occupational categories (e.g., clerical and administrative services).

Thus, in attempting to eliminate social and economic imbalances after independence and to settle the race riots (1969), a common medium of instruction — Bahasa Malaysia — was adopted. English, after being an official language for ten years (1957–1967), was taught as a compulsory second language. As pointed out by Pakir (1994, p. 19), "the national curriculum is seen as one that encourages bilingualism in order to give pupils equal access to employment opportunities". Other vernacular schools, though remained, were regarded by many as "dead-end institutions"; the Tamil schools were considered the least economically viable by parents (Gaudart, 1987; Mukherjee & Singh, 1985). The status of English is further reinforced at tertiary level whereby students are required to acquire a second language; and English is the logical choice for the obvious advantages that it brings. Universities in Malaysia tend to have a preference for admitting applicants who have achieved at least a credit in English (Crismore, Ngeow, & Soo, 1996); whereas excellent performance in Chinese acquisition does not appear to carry a beneficial potential for students in gaining access to higher education (Tan, 2002).

Thus far, the two privileged languages in Malaysia are Malay and English. Presumably, the new national system has brought the greatest educational and occupational advantages to the Malay middle class, and

especially to the formerly English-educated elite with a cosmopolitan outlook. It is not surprising that the most successful political leaders with strong English backgrounds are considered models of standard spoken English (Crismore et al., 1996). As Pennycook (1994, p. 194) observes, "the struggle for Malay cultural, economic and political ascendancy was a struggle against Chinese and Indian economic power"; and the language most strongly associated with that power is English.

From the evidence based above, English has both instrumental and symbolic values. English is more than the crucial means to social and economic advancement, both within and beyond the country. English also carries power in the field of symbolic control, even in the new political regime of Malaysia. From the Malaysian case, we have seen how the division of labour interacts with racial classification, and functions to influence language policies in education, resulting in social differentiation and stratification. Whilst the Malays are channelled to humanities, the civil service and professional positions, the Chinese tend to go into self-employed business (Mukherjee & Singh, 1985). Although differentiation takes place along functional lines, it *does privilege* one ethnic or occupational group over another, and sets up problems of integration. The Malaysian case further illustrates "how different solutions to language problems may reduce or sustain injustice, inequality, and privilege" (Tollefson, 1991, p. 17). It turned out that the social and economic inequalities left by the British increased rather than diminished in the first ten years of independence in Malaysia, when "a reassertion of a previous Malay social order" and "the installation of a government sympathetic to British interests" were witnessed (Pennycook, 1994, p. 187).

Racial harmony has remained "Malaysia's most overriding political issue since bloody riots in 1969 fed by resentment among the traditionally poor Malay Muslim majority against the prosperity of the large ethnic Chinese minority" (*The Straits Times*, 31 August 2002). Amid other education reforms which aim at overcoming racial divisions, the prime minister has urged Malaysians to accept a reform "for schools to restore English as a major medium of instruction starting with mathematics and science, so the country can compete in a globalised economy" (*The Straits Times*, 2002, August 31). In keeping with the

discourse of EIL, English is perceived as more neutral than other languages with a view to achieving unity in Malaysia and global competitiveness. These initial outcomes of the review suggest the importance of relating language-in-education policy to broader issues of economic development and socio-political change, an aspect which the ELT field holds constant, and thus ignores.

Singapore

Similarly to Malaysia, ethnicity had come to be the principal division by which social difference was understood in Singapore (1819–1965) — despite national unity was a major concern (Pennycook, 1994). Contrasting Malaysia's more determined opposition to the spread of English under colonial rule, however, the Singapore education system has consistently functioned to promote English as the most important language, leading to the gradual loss of mother tongue (especially the Chinese language), as well as the falling Chinese language standards among the younger generations in post-colonial times.

Literacy in Malay (being the indigenous language) and English (mainly to serve the colonial administration) was the first to be developed in the early years of Singapore. The teaching of the Chinese and Indian languages was left mainly to the local (e.g., communal or religious organisations). Between 1867 and the Second World War, there was substantial expansion in education using English as the medium of instruction. However, access to these English-medium schools was very selective. During this period, "as the only avenue to secondary and higher education was through English, those who received their education in the local or ethnic languages were at a great social and economic disadvantage" (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993, p. 143). The arrangement of schools in different language streams thus created a strong demarcation among the ethnic groups, particularly between the Chinese-educated (being the majority) and the English-educated (forming an elite minority). After the Second World War, there were attempts to blend the major racial groups into a national whole under the pressure to constitute a Singapore-centered identity (Wong, 2002). Primary education was made available in English, Malay,

Chinese and Tamil in government sponsored schools. However, the government valued English-medium education far more than other local or ethnic languages, as reflected in the discriminatory practice in resource financing: "64% of the total educational expenditure (1957) was used on English schools, 24.1% on Chinese schools, 4.2% on Malay schools and 0.3% on Tamil schools" (Gopinathan, 1974, p. 30, cited in Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993, p. 143).

In the aftermath of Chinese student unrest (1955), the Singapore government aimed at "unity in diversity" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 255) by recognising that "all the local, ethnic languages and cultures have an important role in contributing towards the development of a Singaporean national culture and ideology" (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993, p. 144). Bilingual education was subsequently introduced at primary level, and trilingual education for the secondary, towards independence, with a second language made available in all schools: English in the Chinese-, Malay- and Indian-medium schools; and a local, ethnic languages (Chinese, Tamil or Malay) in the English-medium schools. Malay was offered at the secondary stage for at least two years. In this regard, English — the language of science, technology and international commerce — was prioritised by the Singapore government from the start.

Since independence, Singapore has adopted four official languages — English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil — in keeping with the organising principles of multiculturalism and multilingualism. However, Malay (the national language) and Tamil are not as privileged as English or Mandarin. The status of Tamil has remained low; whereas the Malay language was used for "inter-communication at the lower levels of society" in the early days of independence (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993, p. 145). There is also a functional divide between English and Mandarin: the former is associated with urbanisation, modernisation and mobility (the instrumental domain); whereas the latter constructs social solidarity by transcending the diversity of social experience which ethnic differentiation sets up (the cultural domain). Mandarin was preferred with the concern that "if Chinese 'dialects' [2] persisted, the Chinese-speaking communities would remain fragmented and that English would become a lingua franca within the Chinese community"

(Saravanan, 1997, p.154). Such decisions, taken in the economic and social management of human resources, were to ensure political and social stability in Singapore, as well as its ethnic and cultural diversity and social harmony.

From the Singapore case, the dominance of English from the start is couched in terms of its usefulness and "neutrality" (the discourse of EIL), and in terms of Singapore's practical needs (cultural maintenance and the development of human resource). Essentially, the multiracial character of its population made it necessary for the Singapore government to maintain national unity and culture based on racial groupings. The four-language (English, Chinese, Malay and Indian) streams, revolved around English as a second language, were able to achieve this end towards independence (1965). However, English retained its central position as the required language in all schools after independence. The dominant status of English in Singapore was further strengthened by its adopting English as the first language (1987). Practically, unlike Malaysia or Hong Kong, Singapore has virtually no natural resource. Its prior concern with "manpower" needs fits with the function of English, which is associated with the economic and social concept of modernisation: the meritocratic, bureaucratic and individualistic form of life as a prerequisite for technological and economic growth (Feinberg & Soltis, 1985; Silver, 2005).

It may be concluded that pragmatism (English as a neutral language necessary for economic growth), multiracialism (English as a neutral language that bridges ethnic diversity), and meritocratism (competence in English is associated with social mobility and socio-economic status) define the organising principles of schools and the language policy in education in Singapore (Pennycook, 1994). Here, as with the Malaysian case, the principles of equal opportunity and social solidarity play an important role in language policy planning in Singapore. However, it is benign to single out only the apparently integrative consequences, and to neglect other possible disintegrative outcomes. It is important to understand how the education system in Singapore has functioned to (re)produce socio-economic inequality in the classification and stratification of students through English. In the Report of the Ministry of Education (Goh Report) (1978), the bilingual policy was reformulated by

having all primary-three students learning through English in four ability groups (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993): a "gifted" stream for the selected few (taking English and Chinese at first language level); a "normal" stream for the average and above average (taking English as the first language and their ethnic language as the second language, and spending three years on the rest of their primary education); an "extended" stream for the weaker learners (taking the same languages as the "normal" stream, and spending five years on the rest of their primary education); and a "monolingual" stream for the weakest (developing literacy in English only). The stratification of students continues at the secondary stage following similar lines of division, with the "gifted" students (top 10% of the cohort) taking both English and Chinese at first language level; and the "express" and "normal" students (in equal proportion) completing the O-levels in four and five years respectively.

The Singapore education system is one marked by examinations and streaming. In order to reinforce biliteracy, students are being examined and channelled into different academic ability groups, according to their language competence, at both primary and secondary levels. As pointed out by Pakir (1992, p. 243), "languages count for more in the examination and are taken into account by the gatekeepers at the institutions of higher learning" in Singapore. Significantly, those who are incapable of managing two languages (English and Chinese) are unlikely to gain access to higher education (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993). Although the Singapore government promotes literacy in Chinese as well as in English, the crucial criterion for the stream that will decide one's future career path is English. Other than the unequal allocation of resources for English- and Chinese-medium schools, "credentials from the state examinations for Chinese schools were not convertible to higher education opportunities and thus economic rewards and social status" in post-war Singapore (1945–1965) (Wong, 2002, p. 245). By contrast, the English-educated commanded a much higher income than the Chinese-educated across different age and gender groups (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993).

The streaming policy (1978) has generated a favourable attitude towards English among parents, propelled by social and economic considerations. This is reflected in the parents' attempt to expose their

children to English use at home, in keeping with the "Speak Good English Campaign" (launched in 2000) with a view to acquiring Standard English in lieu of Singlish (Ban, Pakir, & Tong, 2004). In effect, the proportion of people speaking English at home rose from 19% in 1990 to 23% in 2000. Clearly, there is a social class bearing to the streaming policy which favours children from professional homes in which English is used. There was a disproportionate representation of students (65%) from English-speaking homes (who formed only about 21% of the population) in the "gifted" stream. This was compared to 21% of those speaking English and/or Mandarin, and 3.6% of those speaking a Chinese dialect, Malay or Tamil, being placed in the "gifted" stream (Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993). These data illustrate that social class is highly relevant to the production of differences in English-medium education in Singapore. It may be concluded that a social classification is inherent in Singapore and that its meritocratic education system, which channels students into ability streams and courses of study, and cements social stratification (Kwan-Terry, 1991). These remarks echo classical sociological concerns with unequal education and the reproduction of the social division of labour (Bourdieu, 1976; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

It is important to locate differential orientations and unequal access to English in former British colonies in their specific contexts, an aspect which the ELT field overlooks. From the Malaysian and Singapore cases, the position of English was tied up with the struggles between Chinese and Malay middle classes, and between the English- and Chinese-educated respectively. From this evidence base, it would seem insufficient to "assume that the bestowal of language or literacy is inherently in the interests of the recipients, since the educational processes and contexts of use of languages are bound up with a range of cultural and political ways of doing and thinking" (Pennycook, 1996a, p. 133).

Hong Kong

Language policies in education need to be discussed against imperial interests (e.g., the spread of English and of Western knowledge) and the

coloniser's concern with the social and political stability of the colony. As with Singapore, there were significant commercial and political reasons for the directions that education took in colonial Hong Kong.

We can locate the British interest in maintaining Hong Kong as a trading port for which a provision of English-medium education was necessary. However, with a view to producing a small number of intermediaries to serve the colonial governments and British firms, colonial authorities sponsored a limited number of English schools, and mostly neglected the educational demands of the Chinese masses (Wong, 2002). Equally important are the impacts of political changes in China on schools in Hong Kong. Against the unrest in China (1911) and the growth of Chinese nationalism, the British government was intent on bringing all Chinese-medium schools under much closer supervision (Pennycook, 1996a, 1998). Every school was required to register with the director of education, follow government regulations, and yield to official inspection, according to the Education Ordinance (1913). This enactment was to "counter the Chinese revolution's undermining impact on the conservative ideas and traditional values taught by Hong Kong's several hundred vernacular schools, which to that point had remained unassisted and uncontrolled by the government" (Chan 1994, p. 32). The establishment of Hong Kong University (HKU) with an emphasis on *English morality* (1912), and the promotion of *Confucian orthodoxy* (emphasising social hierarchy and subservience to patriarchal authority) in the local school curriculum (1919), were different means of ensuring social and political stability of the colony.

Similarly to Singapore, the position of English in Hong Kong was — and still is — tied up with the struggles between the English- and Chinese-educated. Despite the promotion of vernacular education by the coloniser, there was a powerful disdain for Chinese education, against a belief in the importance of teaching English as the global language of communication, politics and business (the discourse of EIL) (Pennycook, 1996a). This common consciousness is reflected in the strong demand for English-medium education, by both parents and schools, beyond colonial times.

Between 1960 and 1985, the dominance of English in the territory was marked by the soaring increase of English-medium secondary

schools from 57.9% to 90.5%. In 1997, that is, 13 years after the Education Department gave the English-medium secondary schools the option to switch to mother-tongue education following the recommendation of the Education Commission's first report (1984), the figures somewhat changed. Among the territory's 402 secondary schools, about 200 (49.8%) schools were using English as their medium of instruction, compared to 117 (29.1%) schools using both Chinese and English (which might be in the form of mixed-coding and/or using Chinese or English by subject) (*Hong Kong Standard*, 1997, March 24). Currently only 114 secondary schools are eligible for special English-medium exemption under the new guidelines (Education Department, 1997a), that is, down from 200 schools that offered English instruction (a reduction of almost 50%). Notably, these English-medium schools are higher-band (top-performing) schools [3] and/or the famous Catholic schools that produced many of today's top business and government leaders. Despite the change in figures, these official statistics manifested the over-riding position of English-medium education over Chinese-medium education in colonial and post-colonial contexts. There continued to be intense public pressure to increase admission to English-medium secondary schools. According to an unpublished survey from a headteacher, more than 78% of parents objected to the school switching to the Chinese medium (*Hong Kong Standard*, 2 December 1997).

There was also a demand on the part of schools for their students to be taught in English, as illustrated in the results of the Hong Kong Attainment Tests [4] (HKATs) (1986–1996) (Education Department, 1997b, p. 44), and of the Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment [5] (MIGA) and the schools' choice of language (Education Commission, 1994, pp. 21–22) (Tables 1 & 2). The results of both the HKATs and MIGA confirmed the common-sense assumption that students would be able to learn more effectively in their mother tongue. However, most schools still preferred English-medium education, as indicated in their choice of language.

Table 1 Results of MIGA (1994)

Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment (MIGA) (1994)		% of students
Group I	Those in the top 40% in both subject groups, who are considered to be able to learn through either English or Chinese.	33.2
Group II	Those not in the top 40% in either subject group, or who are in the top 40% in one but not the top 50% in the other. These students are considered to be able to learn better through Chinese.	58.8
Group III	Those in the top 40% in one subject group and the top 50% (but not the top 40%) in the other. These students are considered to be able to learn through Chinese, but could probably also cope with English medium education.	7.49
Not grouped	_	0.33

Source: Education Commission, 1994, p. 21.

Table 2 Choice of Language Medium (1994)

Choice of language medium (1994)	No. of schools	% of secondary-one places
Chinese medium	52	12
English medium	111	28.5
English medium except cultural and practical subjects	112	27.9
Chinese or English by class	15	4.2
Chinese or English by subject	99	26.6
Chinese or English by class or by subject	3	0.7

Source: Education Commission, 1994, p. 22.

The average HKAT English scores were found *consistently* lower than the Chinese scores at the junior secondary stage (aged 12–14) over the years. The MIGA showed similar results. Only 33.32% of the students were considered to be able to learn through both English and

Chinese (Group I), compared to 58.6% who would benefit more from Chinese-medium education (Group II). Although all the secondary schools were advised on the language ability of their secondary-one (aged 12) intakes, only 12% of the secondary schools opted for Chinese-medium education, compared to 56.4% for English-medium education. [6] The schools' choice of language medium might depend on how they perceived the significance of English relative to Chinese in public life, that is, the linguistic orientation of the school, irrespective of the actual attainment of the students. Perhaps, the greater the preference for English-medium education, the more these schools realised English as a status marker, and as a language of power, prestige and position in Hong Kong.

As with other former British colonies (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore and India), this common consciousness privileges the role and function of English in Hong Kong (e.g., Boyle, 1997; Gibbons, 1987; Ho, 1979; Kwo & Bray, 1987; Lee, 1978; Luke & Richards, 1982; Morrison & Lui, 2000; Tsui et al., 1999; Westcott, 1977). However, of most significance about the privileging of English in colonial contexts is the discriminatory admission to education through the medium of English. Unlike Singapore's streaming policy which requires even the weakest students to develop literacy in English (the "monolingual" stream), English continues to be strongly classified as a viable language among academically oriented learners in Hong Kong. [7] Although language is not the sole arbiter of academic ability, the more able students tend to be drawn to the selective form of education, which maintains their social superiority (Education Department, 1994a; Education Department & HKU, 1985).

The classification and stratification of students through English continues through post-colonial times. The language streaming policy (1994) was replaced by the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy (1998), a year after China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong. Chinese became the mandatory medium of instruction in government and government-aided secondary schools. However, those schools which had been operating successfully with English-medium teaching might continue with such practice should they so wish. They should fully satisfy the requirements necessary for the effective use of English

as the medium of instruction, considering students' language competence, teachers' capability in the management of English, and schools' support strategies and programmes. On the basis of these criteria, about a quarter of Hong Kong's secondary schools were given special English-medium exemptions for their first-year intakes (aged 12) in September 1998. This new policy, which hinges on a strong utilitarian discourse about the centrality of English for maintaining the economic competitiveness of Hong Kong, has overlooked the unequal basis and consequences of differential access to English, the language of power and wealth (Choi, 2003). In the field of production, English (as a colonial and international language) provides access to privileged careers in public service and the economy. In the field of symbolic control, English constructs social consciousness and identity by creating an invisible perspective, which regulates how the acquirers read, evaluate and create texts. Despite the local struggles around English in everyday use, the strong insulation between being successful or not in English creates clearly bounded categories, and gives access to alternative realities in terms of educational and career futures.

The classification and stratification of students through English also extends to their transition to higher education and the labour market — and continues to determine the underlying principles of a social division of labour. There is a demand for graduates to maintain and build on their comparative advantage in order to meet various challenges through the development of biliteracy and trilingualism (University Grants Committee, 1996). Success is expected to be based on the cosmopolitan outlook and English-language skills of graduates. As with Singapore, the function of English is associated with the economic and social concept of modernisation, in keeping with the higher ideals of education —"well-stocked critical minds capable of major contributions to the culture, democracy, science and economy of developed societies" (Sutherland, 2002, p. 25).

From the Hong Kong case, the transition from colonial status appears to have strengthened the social division among schools along the line of language. The selection or classification of students has been recognised as a function of their English language proficiency — and English-medium education is considered ineffective for the majority of

students, especially for low achievers. The entrenched prestige of local English-medium schools — as positional goods — has produced a persistent devaluing of Chinese-medium schools, prompting the Education Bureau to consider relaxing the rules governing schools' teaching language (*South China Morning Post*, 2008, March 8). What awaits investigation is the social origins of this distribution and the unequal relations between the English- and Chinese-educated (e.g., Choi, 2003; Lin, 2001), that is, how the social structure (regulative context) becomes part of individual experience, whether of success or struggles (instructional and interpersonal contexts), in the site of English acquisition.[8] On the note of struggles and resistance, an essential starting-point is to make the English language "accessible, meaningful, relevant" and "less alienating for students who are in the dilemma of having limited English resources and yet desiring an English-medium education for its socioeconomic value" (Lin, 2001, p. 155).

Concluding Remarks

English-medium education has involved colonial dimensions; different colonial histories have led to different relationships with their colonisers' language. Access to English, and its relationship to social inequality, are *converging* in diverse contexts (Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong) formerly under a specific colonial power (Britain). In other words, Hong Kong education is situationally unique but not completely different from other national educational contexts. The review generally confirms that social class [9] (though not strongly brought out) operates differently in English-medium education, and that class disparity is reinforced by the requirements for good English in society.

The review further lends itself to the emergence of sociological concepts and major arguments. Concepts relevant to the present inquiry include classification, differentiation, stratification and social reproduction. Four major arguments have emerged from the review. First, the colonial language policies were based on the coloniser's particular types of knowledge about its colonies (Rahim, 1986). Secondly, the promotion of English and vernacular education polices were in line with broader colonial policies of social stability and

exploitation (as a mechanism of exclusion or as a tactic to sustain privilege) (Pennycook, 1996a; Tollefson, 1991). Thirdly, language policies in education in colonial contexts were constantly designed to maintain the inequitable social conditions. Fourthly, the demand for English-medium education mainly came from the parents and schools rather than colonial authorities. The hegemony of English on parental choice of schools and the selection of students by English-medium schools would be an interesting dimension to the issues under exploration.

Finally, the review raises an analytical issue: the importance of disaggregating "summarising" terms such as "colonialism" (as a site of production) and "English as an international language" (English as neutral, natural and beneficial). Only when these generic terms are disaggregated is it possible to study the relative consequences of the various features which made up the conditions for production and reproduction through English-medium education (Pennycook, 1996b; Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). This analytical issue is needed before empirical investigation.

Notes

1. Both Hong Kong and Singapore are Chinese-dominated; whereas Malaysia is Malay-dominated.

2. These refer to Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, the mother tongues of many Singaporean Chinese, termed "dialects" by the government.

3. Bandings — the ranking of pupils based on academic results — have been reduced from five to three to lessen the labelling effect on students of such rankings since September 2001. As was in England, "the former Inner London Education Authority used to operate a 'banding' system which sought to ensure that all schools had a reasonable balance of levels of academic ability among their intakes" (Whitty et al., 1998, p. 120).

4. The Hong Kong Attainment Tests (HKATs) were a series of standardised tests for primary and junior secondary levels (aged 6–14) in the three core subjects of Chinese, English and mathematics developed by the Educational Research Section of the Education Department. These tests

were administered yearly by primary and secondary schools to diagnose areas of strengths and weaknesses in these core subjects so that appropriate guidance, counselling and remedial teaching could be provided. The test results also helped to monitor standards across years and levels. They have been currently replaced by the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA), which measures students' basic competence in Chinese, English and mathematics.

5. The Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment (MIGA) for the Secondary School Place Allocation (SSPA) was devised by the Education Department in 1994. The purpose was to provide schools with information on the language and learning abilities of their secondary-one (aged 12) intake. This would enable schools to make their choice of language medium: Chinese medium, English medium, English medium except for cultural and practical subjects, Chinese or English by class, Chinese or English by subject, or Chinese or English by class or by subject. The grouping was based on internal school assessments — scaled by the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT) — of achievement in a "Chinese subject group" comprising all subjects taught and examined through Chinese (other than cultural subjects and physical education); and an "English subject group" comprising, for most students, only English language (Education Commission, 1994, p. 21). The AAT has been abolished since September 2000.

6. It is interesting to note that as many secondary schools opted for "Chinese or English by subject" (26.6%) as for "English medium" (28.5%) and "English medium except cultural and practical subjects" (27.9%). Unfortunately, the particular subjects to which the choice of English or Chinese medium applied were not specified.

7. Top-ranked schools and universities (e.g., University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) in Hong Kong take great pride in adopting English as the sole medium of instruction.

8. Unlike Singapore (e.g., Kwan-Terry, 1991; Kwan-Terry & Kwan-Terry, 1993; Pennycook, 1994) and India (e.g., Jayaram, 1993; Rahim, 1986; Sridhar, 1996; Tickoo, 1994), there is a lack of empirical concern with language and stratification issues in Hong Kong. Only vague and indirect reference to equality of education was found in policy reports (e.g., Board of Education, 1997) and state-initiated research (e.g., Education Department, 1985b; Education Department & HKU, 1985). Although relevant reviews (e.g., Gibbons, 1984; Lee, 1997; Luke & Richards, 1982; Yau, 1988) foregrounded questions of the social distribution of English attainment, they could hardly be considered as systematic studies (but speculations based on informal observations). In view of the importance of English in selection at both secondary and university levels in Hong

Kong, it is surprising that there was little research into the relations between social class and achievement in English (e.g., Yu & Atkinson, 1988a, 1988b; Yu & Bain, 1985). Even more surprisingly, very few discussions of the social basis of differential achievement in English were initiated by sociologists.

9. Social class interacts with ethnicity in Malaysia and Singapore.

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