

Marching on a Long Road: A Review of the Effectiveness of the Mother-Tongue Education Policy in Post-Colonial Hong Kong¹

Vickie W. K. Li^{2*} with Suzanne E. Majhanovich^{**}
The University of Western Ontario

Abstract

This paper reports a study of the effectiveness of the mandatory mother-tongue education policy in post-colonial Hong Kong. Special attention has been placed on students' academic achievement before and after the policy implementation in 1998 in order to find out if students learn better through their mother tongue without sacrificing their knowledge of the English language. A content analysis has been conducted on the relevant policy documents, and students' public examination results have been gathered to serve as a policy-effectiveness indicator. Findings reveal that mother-tongue education is beneficial to students' learning in some subjects, especially the language-intensive ones. However, students' performance in English learning has been adversely affected by the policy. We end with suggestions in response to the recently announced fine-tuning arrangements of the mother-tongue education policy.

Keywords: colonization, English-medium education, medium of instruction (MOI), mother-tongue education

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la obligatoriedad de la instrucción en lengua materna en el Hong Kong post colonial y evalúa su efectividad. El enfoque de este estudio se centra sobre todo en el éxito académico de los estudiantes antes y después de la implementación de la ley en 1998, por lo que analiza si los estudiantes aprenden mejor en sus lenguas maternas sin sacrificar su manejo del inglés. Para llevar a cabo este estudio, se analizaron tanto el contenido de los documentos legales, así como los resultados de los exámenes públicos que sirvieron de indicadores para definir si la ley ha sido efectiva o no. Los resultados muestran que la educación

¹ Received: January 30th, 2010 / Accepted: July 30th, 2010.

² Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Vickie Wai Kei Li, Faculty of Education, the University of Western Ontario, John George Althouse Building, 1137 Western Road, London, Ontario N6G 1G7, Canada.
E-mail: wli252@uwo.ca

en lengua nativa es benéfica en algunos temas, sobre todo los temas altamente relacionados con el idioma. Sin embargo, los resultados muestran también que la ley afecta claramente el nivel de inglés de los estudiantes. Para concluir, el artículo ofrece algunas recomendaciones en cuanto a las nuevas adecuaciones de la ley de instrucción en lengua materna.

Palabras claves: colonización, instrucción en lengua inglesa, medio de instrucción, educación en lengua nativa.

The highly complex linguistic situation in Hong Kong has made it difficult for language policy makers and educators to decide on which medium of instruction (MOI) to use in schools. According to the last by-census³ conducted by the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department in 2006, 90.8% of the Hong Kong population speaks Cantonese⁴ as their first language. However, the English language has occupied a prominent status in every aspect of Hong Kong people's lives for 156 years, since the British government governed the territory. The English language penetrated the domains of Hong Kong's "education, government administration, legislature and the judiciary" (Poon, 2004, p. 54). English learning thus has a high market value in the territory. This may explain why the Hong Kong government received strong criticism when it implemented the mandatory mother-tongue education policy after the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic China in 1997. The public remains skeptical about the effectiveness of the policy and fears that students' English proficiency will drop because of less exposure to the English language under mother-tongue education. Does the policy have an adverse impact on students' English learning?

Extensive research (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Cummins & Swain, 1986) has been conducted on the relationship between one's mother-tongue (L1) and second language (L2) learning and research findings have shown the positive influence of the L1 on learning an L2. This paper reports a study on the impact of the mandatory mother-tongue education policy on Hong Kong students' academic achievement, especially their English performance. The paper will first provide an overview of the MOI policy in pre- and post-handover Hong Kong.

³ *By-censuses* are those taken between the decennial censuses.

⁴ Cantonese is one Chinese dialect spoken in Guangzhou (China) and the nearby areas such as Hong Kong. The term Chinese language in this paper will refer to Cantonese in spoken form and Standard Modern Chinese in written form.

Next, the methodology adopted in the study will be presented, followed by a discussion of the findings. The paper ends with recommendations regarding the future directions of Hong Kong's MOI arrangement.

MOI in Hong Kong

Choosing the MOI for Hong Kong schools has never been an easy task for policy makers and educators. As Poon (2004) stated, "medium of instruction has been the most thorny and tricky issue in Hong Kong education" (p. 55), and in Tse, Shum, Ki, and Chan's (2007) words, "the most debated issue in Hong Kong education is the choice of language as medium of instruction" (p. 135). Why this is so? Hong Kong's colonial past may help give us some ideas.

Hong Kong was ceded to the British Empire in the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing soon after China's defeat in the Opium War. Similar to other crown colonies, Hong Kong's educational system is closely modeled on that of the United Kingdom. Boyle's (1997) work provides a detailed description of Hong Kong's education during the pre-handover period. During the early colonial period, the colonial government had minimal intervention in Hong Kong's education system and adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to schools' MOI, allowing schools to choose their own language of instruction.

Though the colonial government did not intervene in schools' MOI decision directly, its intention to promote English learning was quite clear. For example, the introduction of English-medium instruction in primary schools (the majority of which were already Cantonese-medium) and the English examination required for appointments to government clerical posts. As stated in Evans (2006), the colonial government claimed that an English-medium education would both enrich Chinese students' intellectual and cultural lives, and form "a bond of union" (p. 296) between the locals and the English-speaking communities. The establishment of the University of Hong Kong, the first English-medium university, in 1911, had further instilled the supreme value of English in the public's mind. The establishment of such a university naturally induced more parents to opt for English-medium secondary education for their children.

During the mid-1930s, the British government sent an Inspector of Schools, Mr. Edward Burney, to Hong Kong to examine the territory's education system. Burney strongly criticized the colonial government and stressed the importance of re-orienting the policy emphasis "to secure for the pupils, first a command of their own language sufficient for all needs of thought and expression" and "a command of English limited to the satisfaction of vocational demands" (Burney, 1935, p. 25). In view of this, the colonial government suggested Cantonese-

medium instruction up to students' junior secondary levels (secondary 1 to 3). Moreover, in accordance with this shift in thinking, a Cantonese-medium university, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, was established in 1963 to provide Cantonese-medium school students with access to university education.

Unlike before, the colonial government formulated a clear MOI policy during the 1990s, the last phase of colonial rule. The government announced its intention to issue "firm guidance on the MOI to all secondary schools for adoption" (Evans, 2000, p. 191). Four months before the handover to the People's Republic of China in July 1997, the colonial government proposed that only 100 secondary schools would be granted permission to remain in the English stream and the remaining 360 schools should adopt Cantonese as the MOI. The colonial government took a firm stance that time, and two months immediately after the handover, the Hong Kong government introduced the first and the most controversial educational policy in the territory, the mandatory mother-tongue education policy.

In September 1997, the Hong Kong government announced the mandatory mother-tongue education policy for secondary schools which stated that starting in the 1998/1999 academic year all secondary schools were compelled to adopt Cantonese as the MOI. In order to remain in the English stream, schools had to demonstrate to the government that they fulfilled the prescribed requirements concerning students' ability, teacher capability, and schools' support strategies under English education. In the end, only 114 schools could remain in the English stream. The remaining 346 schools had to switch to Cantonese-medium instruction. According to the Hong Kong Education Bureau, "mother-tongue teaching is generally the most effective learning tool for students" and through mother-tongue teaching, "students will be better able to understand what is taught, analyse problems, express views, develop an enquiring mind and cultivate critical thinking" (Education Bureau, 2007a).

Ever since the policy implementation, a number of studies had been carried out by official, academic, professional, and voluntary bodies respectively, and there is evidence that mother-tongue teaching has a positive impact on students' overall academic achievement (CUHK, 2006; Shum et al., 2005; Tsui, 2004). Although studies (CUHK, 2006; Shum et al., 2005; Tsui, 2004) had shown the educational benefits brought about by mother-tongue education, the public, especially parents, still reacted negatively to the policy, expressing concern about the low level of English proficiency that might have resulted from mother-tongue education.

Some studies (Poon, 1999 & 2004; Shum et al., 2005) look at the policy impact on students' English learning and argue that mother-tongue education would limit students' exposure to the English language and thus affect their achievement in English. As stated in Poon (2004), the mandatory mother-tongue education policy does not only "weaken students' interests in English but also limits their exposure to the language" (p. 65).

Research Questions

Twelve years have passed since the policy implementation. Did the policy exert any positive impact on students' academic achievement? To what extent is students' English competence affected by the policy? These are the two questions which guided the present study.

Methodology

Relevant documents on the mother-tongue education policy were collected from the Hong Kong Education Bureau website. The policy objectives were identified and students' results in the two public examinations, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), were gathered from the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2008a & 2008b) as a policy-effectiveness indicator. The HKCEE is a public examination taken by students at the end of their 5-year secondary education (secondary 1 to 5). The admission to secondary 6 depends on students' HKCEE results. The HKALE is taken by students at the end of their 2-year sixth-form (secondary 6 and 7) studies (see Table 1). The HKALE results determine whether students can get promoted to university.

Due to the time constraints of the present research, only 11 subjects were selected for analysis; these have been categorised by the researchers into three groups: a) language-intensive subjects (economics, geography, history, and biology); b) non-language-intensive subjects (*additional* mathematics in HKCEE, *applied* mathematics in HKALE, mathematics, chemistry, and physics); and c) language subjects (English and Chinese). These 11 subjects were chosen by the researchers as they are the most common core subjects provided by secondary schools for their senior secondary levels (secondary 4 to 7). By taking these subjects (the choice depends on whether the student is in the arts or science stream), students are able to meet the minimum requirements of most university programmes.

Table 1
Secondary Education in Hong Kong

Secondary Education							
"Form" (grade level)	Junior			Senior			
	1	2	3	4	5 (Students take the HKCEE at the end of their fifth form)	6	7 (Students take the HKALE at the end of their seventh form)

We give particular attention to students' results from 2003 to 2007 for the HKCEE and to those from the years 2005 to 2007 for HKALE. By doing so, a comparison can be carried out between HKCEE and HKALE results before and after the implementation of the mother-tongue education policy. While discussing the findings, we include opinions collected from other documents which include local newspapers and previous literature, hoping to present a comprehensive view of the policy to readers.

Findings and Discussion

Students' HKCEE and HKALE results are generally used by the public in Hong Kong to monitor the education standard in the territory. The results of these two examinations "provide an important reference for evaluating the effectiveness of mother-tongue teaching" (Education Commission, 2005, p. 10).

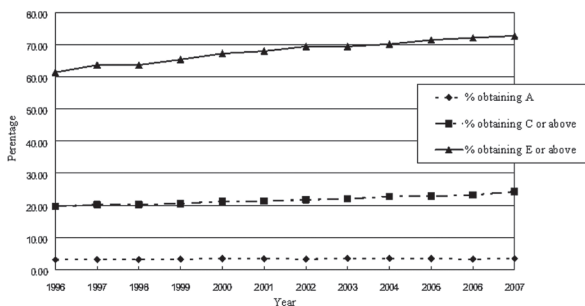


Figure 1. Percentage of candidates obtaining different grades in all subjects in the HKCEE.

Figure 1 shows that the percentage of students obtaining a passing grade (E or higher) in HKCEE has been increasing steadily. Though there is not a sharp increase in the percentage of students getting a grade C or higher, it is encouraging to see that the percentage is slowly rising.

The proportion of students obtaining an A (also called “distinction,” the highest grade one can obtain on the two public examinations in Hong Kong) has been quite stable. It may be said that the sustained increase in the percentage of students obtaining a passing grade reflects the positive impact of the mother-tongue education policy. In order to judge whether the policy has really achieved its goal of enhancing students’ academic achievement, we shall now look closely at students’ performance in individual subjects.

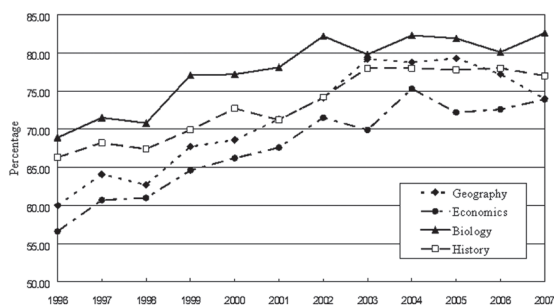


Figure 2. Percentage of candidates passing language-intensive subjects in the HKCEE.

Figures 2 and 3 show that students do have better results in both language-intensive and non-language-intensive subjects when compared with the results 11 years previously. The positive impact of mother-tongue teaching seems to be more significant for language-intensive subjects. In Figure 2, notable improvement is seen in the four language-intensive subjects. In general, students under English-medium education would “encounter a language barrier in expressing what they have learnt in the more language-loaded subjects, the subject History in particular” (Education Bureau, 2000, p. i). As can be seen from Figure 2, students’ performance in history has been improving over the years under mother-tongue education and the percentage has been maintained at around 78% of students passing the subject from 2003-2006. Does the policy have the same impact on the non-language-intensive subjects?

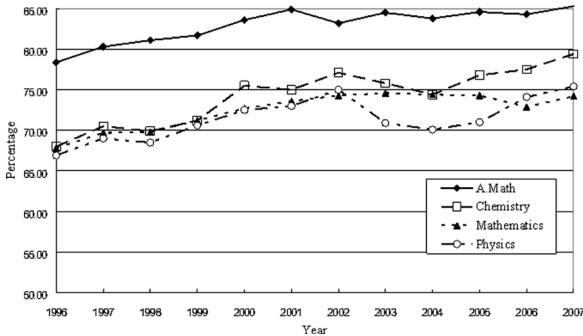


Figure 3. Percentage of candidates passing non-language-intensive subjects in the HKCEE.

Figure 3 shows that the positive MOI policy impact on these non-language-intensive subjects appears to be less salient than that on the language-intensive ones. One possible reason may be that these subjects are less linguistically demanding and thus a change in the teaching medium may have a less significant impact on them. Another possible reason may be the change of MOI in students' senior secondary forms. A considerable number of CMI (Cantonese as the MOI) students may switch to the EMI (English as the MOI) mode when they progress to secondary 4. As stated in the *Further Evaluation on the Implementation of the Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools Final Report 2002-2004* (hereafter referred to as the *Final Report*), such a switch to the English medium is "determined by two factors, namely, the nature of the subjects being studied and the academic ability of the students" and "it is evidenced by the findings that the percentages of CMI students switching to EMI mode are in congruence with the degree of literate [linguistic] demand of the HKCEE subject" (CUHK, 2006, p. ii). For the science-stream students, "the percentages of students switching to EMI mode are in descending order from Additional Mathematics, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, to Biology" (CUHK, 2006, p. ii). As for students in the arts and commerce streams, "the respective percentages are in descending order from Principles of Accounts [Accounting], Mathematics, Economics, Geography to History" (CUHK, 2006, p. ii).

The significant advantages brought by mother-tongue teaching in junior secondary forms (secondary 1 to 3) seem to have disappeared when students switch from CMI to EMI mode in their secondary 4. This is especially evident in the science subjects: physics and chemistry. When compared to physics and chemistry, students' performance in biology over the years seems to be better. As stated in the *Final Report*,

The value-added advantages over EMI students in science subjects in junior forms [secondary 1 to 3] remained up to Form 5 for CMI students who had remained in CMI mode in senior forms, but was lost for CMI students who had switched to EMI mode in senior forms as indicated by the HKCEE results in Biology. (p. iii-iv)

The low percentage of CMI students switching to the EMI mode in biology may help explain why the overall HKCEE biology results appear to be better than those of physics and chemistry.

Judging from students' HKCEE results presented above, we can say that the mandatory MOI policy seems to have achieved its intended goals for boosting students' academic performance. However, it is too soon for us to draw such a conclusion as we still haven't looked at the two language subjects. Before looking at students' HKCEE language performance, there is a need to explain the reporting systems adopted by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority and the new Chinese and English curriculum.

From 2007 onwards, the HKCEE Chinese and English language results began to be reported under a new system: the standard-referenced reporting system. Students' language performance is indicated using different levels, from level 1 to level 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest), instead of the previous grading system (A-F). In addition, the very top-performing level 5 students will be awarded a 5* (which is one level higher than a 5). Moreover, from 2007 onwards, students have been required to sit five papers (whereas only two were required of them in the previous years) in the Chinese language examination. In these exams, instead of answering questions on a set of prescribed texts, students have to "read widely from an extensive range of texts and answer questions that assess their competence in reading, comprehension, analysis and appreciation" (Education Bureau, 2007b). As for the English language, the two English language syllabi, A and B have been "brought together with a single set of common standards" (Education Bureau, 2007b) under the new English curriculum.

Table 2

Assessments for the Two HKCEE Language Subjects: Chinese and English

Before 2007		From 2007 onwards	
Grade	A	Level	5*
	B		5
	C		4
	D		3
	E		2
	F		1
	Unclassified		Unclassified

Based on the written descriptors of each level (1 to 5) and the distribution of students obtaining different levels⁵ in 2007 HKCEE English and Chinese performance, we can make an assumption that Level 5* is equivalent to grade A (in the previous grading system) while Level 1 is equal to an F (fail, see Table 2). For ease of comparison, students' results in the two language subjects in 2007 have been converted to their corresponding grade levels and included in Figure 4.

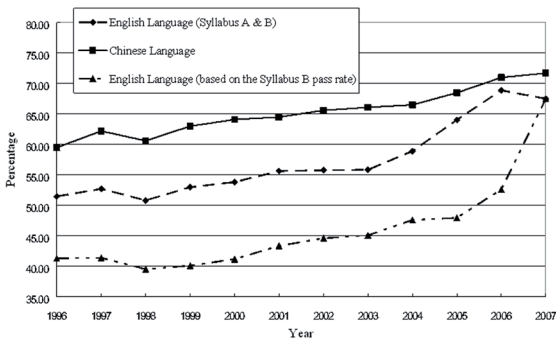


Figure 4. Percentage of candidates passing Chinese and English language in the HKCEE.

Figure 4 shows that the Chinese language passing rate has been increasing steadily from 2002 to 2004. Such improvement can be attributed to the increase in exposure to the Chinese language under

⁵ I use the term “levels” here instead of “grades” as I am referring to the 2007 results (in which students’ performance is assessed under the new “level” system).

mother-tongue education. The most significant improvement was achieved in the later years (2004-2007) as the positive policy impact on students' Chinese achievement may have needed a longer time to take effect. The impact of mother-tongue teaching on students' Chinese achievement is promising. How did the policy affect students' HKCEE English performance?

Before 2007, the HKCEE English language had two syllabi: A and B. Syllabus A was easier than the mainstream syllabus B. In general, EMI students opt for syllabus B while for most CMI students, their choice of whether to take the harder syllabus B is determined by their academic ability. Regarding the assessment of the two syllabi, results in syllabus A are recognized by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority as equivalent to results in syllabus B in accordance with the following table:

Table 3
Equivalence Between Syllabus A and B Grading Systems

Grades	English language syllabus A	English language syllabus B
	A	C
B	D	
C	E	

In order to get a general overview of students' overall English achievement, the passing rates of syllabi A and B are added together and shown in the dashed line (—♦—) in Figure 4. The English passing rate of the first post-MOI policy cohort of students increases just slightly, by 0.07% (from 55.75% in 2002, to 55.85% in 2003). It started to increase dramatically from 2003 to 2006, and hit its highest in 2006 at 68.8%, when the educational benefits of the MOI policy began to take effect.

The slight decline to 67.5% in 2007 can be explained by the abolishment of the two separate English syllabi, A and B, that year. Before 2007, the English syllabi A and B coexisted. Students taking syllabus A generally have lower English achievement. Starting from 2007 onwards, there was only one HKCEE English syllabus. While sitting the same English examination with their syllabus B counterparts, one might expect that the lower English-achievers may drag down the overall performance in the HKCEE for the English language.

Some opponents of the mother-tongue policy criticized the positive policy impact on students' English performance and stated that more students might have opted for the easier syllabus A, thus, resulting in the improvement over the years. In view of this, another line (- -

▲ - -) has been plotted on the same graph. For ease of discussion, the number of students who obtained a C or above in syllabus A has been included with those receiving an E or above in syllabus B (based on the conversion in Table 3). By doing so, we can see whether the English passing rate has increased or decreased over the years. Judging from the dotted line (- -▲ - -), the impact of mother-tongue teaching seems to be very encouraging for students' English learning. The passing rate has been rising since 2002.

To give a more complete picture of students' English achievement, we also include in Figure 4 the 2007 HKCEE English results. A level 2 in the 2007 HKCEE English language is considered as if it were an E in the previous grading system (see Table 2). If we just focus on the dotted line (- -▲ - -), it can be seen that the English passing rate hit its highest level in 2007. Such a tremendous increase may be explained by the fact that with the combination of the two syllabi in 2007, the performance of the higher achievers has pulled up the overall English passing rate.

Looking at students' HKCEE performance, it appears that students perform better under mother-tongue teaching without sacrificing their knowledge of the English language. However, is this positive policy impact a long-lasting or a transitory one? We shall now turn to students' HKALE results.

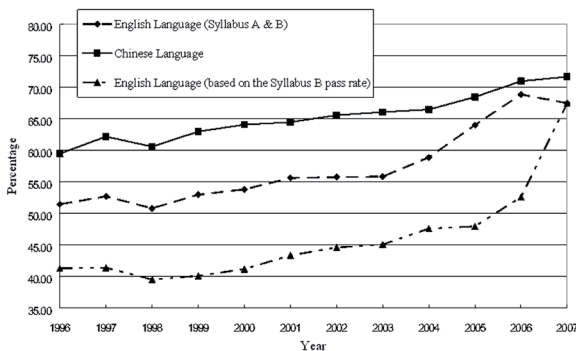


Figure 5. Percentage of candidates passing language-intensive subjects in the HKALE.

The HKALE passing rates in geography and history have been increasing over the years. The most significant increase can be found in history. The percentage of students obtaining an E or above in history has increased from 77.1% in 1996, to 86.2% in 2007. The passing rates in economics have also been slowly rising. Different from students' biology performance in the HKCEE, the HKALE biology passing rate

has been declining and dropped to its lowest in 2006, at 69.2%. Such a decline may be due to the fact that some CMI students may have chosen to further their senior secondary studies (secondary 6-7) in an EMI school.

Students who obtain good grades in HKCEE can choose to remain in the same secondary school or pursue their senior secondary studies at another school. Usually, they choose to go to EMI schools, which, at least in the public eye, are known to only accept the most academically outstanding students, and help to better prepare students for their university education, which is predominantly English-medium. The drop in HKALE biology passing rates may be attributed to CMI students' sudden change to the English stream. They have only 2 years to acquire a large volume of vocabulary and subject-specific language structures in English to be able to sit their HKALE.

Another possible reason for students' lower achievement in HKALE biology may be its higher-level thinking and the mastery of the language of science which the HKALE biology syllabus demands. Learning science in English has posed difficulties for students in the English stream. Yip, Tsang, and Cheung (2003) compared "the science achievement of Chinese students learning science through a second language, English, with that of students receiving instruction in their mother tongue, Chinese" (p. 295). The study found that "the English-medium students, despite their higher initial ability, were found to perform much more poorly than their Chinese-medium peers" (p. 295).

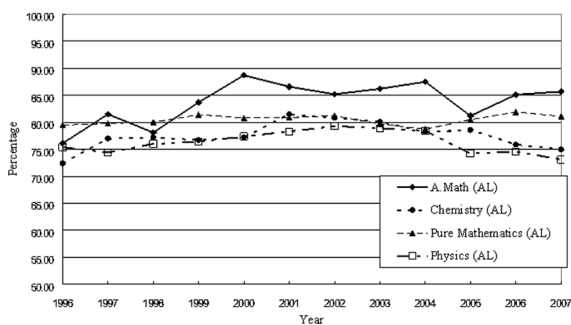


Figure 6. Percentage of candidates passing non-language-intensive subjects in the HKALE.

Figure 6 shows the passing rates in four non-language-intensive subjects in the HKALE. These subjects are less linguistically demanding. Students better performance in the two mathematics

courses may be due to the fact that these two courses involve the use of symbolic terminology that may not be too dependent on the MOI. The passing rates in chemistry have been decreasing since 2005 (the first post-MOI policy cohort of students taking the HKALE) and the passing rate in physics hit its lowest in 2007 at 73.1%. Such a decline may be attributed to two possible reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, some CMI students may choose to pursue their senior secondary education in EMI schools, which creates a language barrier in learning science subjects. Second, some CMI schools may switch to the EMI teaching mode at senior forms (secondary 4 to 7) and thus, their students will have to sit the physics and chemistry examinations in English, a change for which these students have not been adequately prepared.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the advantages brought by mother-tongue education seem to have lingered throughout students' secondary 4 and 5 studies, and thus the HKCEE passing rates in physics and chemistry are slowly rising. However, when students got promoted to higher forms (secondary 6 and 7), the positive impact starts to diminish. In the HKALE examinations, students are required to have a deeper understanding of the subject matter, and better communication skills.

A change in the MOI from one's native language to a second language may become a hurdle in students' understanding of the content subject. This group of students (who changed to the English mode) may master the general concept in the two subjects (physics and chemistry), but they may have difficulties in constructing and presenting the more abstract and complex ideas of science in English, as their performance will be frustrated by their limited English proficiency. How about students' performance in the HKALE language subjects?

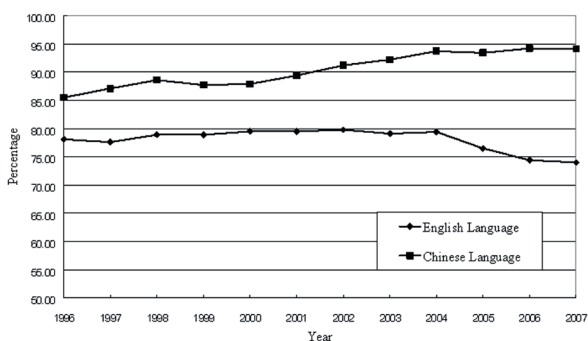


Figure 7. Percentage of candidates passing language subjects in the HKALE.

Figure 7 shows students' performance in the HKALE Chinese and English language. For the Chinese language, students' performance has been improving over the years. Students commencing their secondary 1 in 1998 sat their HKALE in 2005. The percentage of students obtaining an E or above has been increasing since then, and it had its highest outcome at 94.2%, in 2006. With the increase in exposure to the Chinese language in other content-based subjects, students' performance in Chinese language has been progressing steadily.

Students' English achievement has been completely different from their Chinese language achievement. As stated in *The Standard* and *the South China Morning Post* (SCMP), two local newspapers, the HKALE English passing rate has hit its lowest in 12 years. "The drop continues a decline that began in 2005, when students who entered secondary school in 1998—when mother-tongue education was introduced" and 2007's passing rate "was 4.3 percentage points below that of 1996" (SCMP, 2007).

As mentioned before, there were two English syllabi, A and B, before 2007. For students taking HKALE in 2005, 2006, and 2007, they either sat the syllabus A (the easier course) or the syllabus B (the harder one) paper in their HKCEE English examination. For students who sat the syllabus A paper and who were able to further their studies at the senior secondary forms (secondary 6 and 7), they had to sit the same HKALE English paper together with those taking the HKCEE syllabus B paper. The syllabus A batch was under immense pressure as they had to catch up with their syllabus B counterparts over a short period of time (just 2 years). The performance of the syllabus A batch may have affected the overall HKALE English results.

As mentioned earlier, some CMI students may choose to pursue their secondary 6 and 7 in EMI schools. The switch to EMI schools may affect their English learning as when they go into those EMI schools, they will have to learn other content-based subjects in English. In other words, they need to struggle with the English language in content subjects, and this may lessen their interests in learning the English language itself. This may explain the decline in students' passing rates in the HKALE English examination. The positive impact on students' English proficiency under mother-tongue education seems to have disappeared after students were promoted to senior secondary levels.

From the findings presented above, it can be observed that the advantages of mother-tongue teaching make a more significant impact on students' HKCEE results. When students got promoted to secondary 6 and 7, the educational benefits only remain in language-intensive subjects (except biology) and the Chinese language. As for students' English performance, the positive policy impact has diminished at higher secondary levels.

Future Directions of the MOI Arrangement

The Hong Kong government has been taking a strong stance on promoting mother-tongue education since the policy implementation; however, it appears to have shifted its policy direction. On March 16, 2008, the Symposium on Medium of Instruction was jointly organized by the Chartered Institute of Linguistics—Hong Kong Society—and the Savantas Policy Institute. At the symposium, the Education Bureau questioned publicly for the first time whether the English standard of Hong Kong students is satisfactory under the mother-tongue education policy. Michael M. Y. Suen, the Secretary for Education, expressed that “it is undeniable that we are still quite some way” from the target of enabling students to become proficient in both Chinese and English. He also said that “there is still plenty of room for improvement and we still need to think of more creative solutions” so as to enhance students’ language proficiency. It was made even more evident that the government had softened its stance when Suen stated:

We think we can allow schools, under certain conditions and according to the ability of their students, to have some flexibility in the medium of instruction to maximize students’ chances of exposure to English and to raise their motivation and interest in learning English, in order to fulfill our goal of enabling students to attain proficiency in Chinese and English. (Suen, 2008)

It seems that the government has admitted the adverse policy impact on students’ English learning and that it is not willing to continue to sacrifice students’ English for better results in other subjects. Three months after the symposium, the government announced the fine-tuning arrangements of the current MOI policy. The fine-tuning allows secondary schools to choose to supplement mother-tongue teaching with the use of English as the teaching medium across subjects. The use of English is allowed to be up to 25% of the total lesson time, excluding the lesson time designated for the English language. Such an arrangement has once again sparked a heated debate in the public sphere. After several consultations with stakeholders, on May 26, 2009, it was proposed in the Hong Kong Legislative Council, that the fine-tuned arrangements will come into effect in September 2010, starting from the S1 (secondary one) level, and progressing each year to a higher level of the junior secondary forms.

Apparently, the government has softened its stance over time and has accepted the fact that mother-tongue teaching would lessen students’ exposure to the English language. Will the new arrangements achieve their intended objectives to enhance students’ English achievement? It is still too soon for us to judge. Under the fine-tuned arrangements,

schools' MOI decisions hinge upon students' ability in learning through English. However, can we assess a student's capability in learning through English solely by his or her English performance? Does high English proficiency imply a greater capability in learning other subjects through English?

Conclusion

Though the Hong Kong government has stressed that the fine-tuning arrangements are different from the laissez-faire approach adopted by the colonial government, it is apparent that the government wants to make the schools shoulder the responsibility for streaming the students into different MOI modes. Michael Tien, the previous chairman of the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, expressed in one local Hong Kong newspaper (*Ming Pao Daily*) that the government actually made a "u-turn" on its MOI policy and it has turned the clock back 12 years to when the colonial government adopted a laissez-faire approach towards schools' MOI. Mode of instruction by class,⁶ according to Tien, will not enhance students' English proficiency. The fine-tuning will come into effect in September 2010, and yet the public remains skeptical about whether the fine-tuned arrangements will be able to enhance students' English learning. We believe that students' abilities and needs should be the primary concern when schools decide on the appropriate MOI.

As we can see from students' HKCEE and HKALE results over the years, Hong Kong students seem to have started reaping the rewards of the mother-tongue education policy. In view of this, it is our position that the government should uphold mother-tongue teaching and provide schools with supporting strategies to enhance students' English learning. The fine-tuned arrangements will completely take away the positive learning outcome under mother-tongue teaching.

For junior secondary students, they should continue to learn through their mother-tongue. As for senior secondary levels, schools should be given the flexibility to switch to the English medium if they fulfill the government's prescribed criteria regarding student ability, teacher capability, and support strategies under English education. Shifting the responsibilities of MOI decision to schools will just lead schools, teachers, parents, and students into more confusion. Unless clear guidelines are given to schools or a monitoring mechanism is devised to ensure that schools make the right decision on their MOI, the fine-tuning will just cause more problems than it solves.

⁶ That is, when a different language of instruction (either Chinese or English) is being used across classes in the same grade level.

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The Authors

***Vickie Wai Kei, Li** (M.Phil., M.Ed) had been a college lecturer in English in Hong Kong for four years. She is currently pursuing PhD studies in Education at the University of Western Ontario. Her research interests include language education policy and practice in post-colonial contexts, mother-tongue education, as well as second language teaching and learning.

****Suzanne E. Majhanovich**, Ph.D., is a Professor of Languages in the Faculty of Education, the University of Western Ontario. Her research interests include comparative and international education, language acquisition, and second language teaching and learning. She is the co-editor of *Comparative and Global Pedagogies: Equity, Access and Democracy in Education* (2008) and *Living Together: Education and Intercultural Dialogue* (2009). She currently chairs the Standing Committee for Publications of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) and is the editor of the journal *Canadian and International Education*.