The Changes of Language Policies in Hong Kong Education in the Post-Colonial Era

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Abstract—The purpose of this article is to examine the gradual changes in the language policies for the Hong Kong education system and their related issues. The first section will critically analyze the first and second waves of language policies in Hong Kong in the past few decades. The discussion will be followed by sections focusing on some of the major educational issues, including the economic drive of the policy-making and the equality of education opportunity, which have been concerned and generated by the aims and impact of the policies respectively. Finally, these issues will be summarised by an interaction theory based on the analysis of the students’ interest in different types of secondary schools in Hong Kong.

Keywords—Education System, Hong Kong, Language Policies, Post-colonial Era.

I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 20th century, the Medium of Instruction (MoI) in secondary schools in Hong Kong became one of the most complicated and controversial issues in the debates on language education (Ho, Morris, & Chung, 2005). Over the past two decades, this controversy has been highlighted, since the government implemented a new language policy in the late 1990s, which introduced Chinese as the Medium of Instruction (CMI) into all government and aided secondary schools. In particular, the official document on this policy, ‘Medium of Instruction: Guidance for Secondary Schools’ (hereafter referred to as the Guidance), which was published in 1997, emphasized the importance of the use of the mother-tongue (Chinese) in the junior secondary school curriculum. It is arguable that this proposal legitimized the mechanism of dividing the schools in Hong Kong into two main streams, namely CMI and EMI (English as Medium of Instruction) schools (So, 2000).

Unfortunately, as expected, this first wave of language policy aroused public opposition since it created the problems of language-bifurcation and labelling effect between CMI and EMI schools. In order to address these issues, in September 2010, the government introduced a ‘fine-tuning’ policy, entitled ‘Fine Tuning Medium of Instruction Arrangements for Secondary Schools’, as a framework for the qualified schools to ‘fine-tune’ (switch) their MoI from CMI to EMI. In other words, this second wave of policy intended to give greater autonomy to schools over choosing their MoI, in accordance with the criteria specified by the education authority, such as the requirement of the students’ language proficiency and the teachers’ qualifications (see the following sections for further information). Nevertheless, although the government made this effort to refine the language policy, the problems of the labelling effect and the unsatisfactory results in the students’ English language abilities still persist.

In order to study the rationale behind the changes and the specific issues concerning the language policies, the analysis of the process of policy-making in this article will focus on comparing and contrasting the two waves of policies (the language policy introduced in the late 1990s and its latest fine-tuning policy), their objectives and contents.

II. THE ECONOMIC DRIVE OF THE POLICY-MAKING

While human capital is considered one of the main factors in sustaining the economic growth and prosperity of Hong Kong, in the first wave of policy-making, students’ language proficiency, especially their English language standard, was considered to be the main objective of the whole scheme. In its entirety, the introduction of a language policy in the late 1990s aimed to nurture students to be bi-literate (proficient in both written Chinese and English) and tri-lingual (able to speak fluent Chinese, English and Putonghua) (Education Commission, 1997). In a similar vein, in the second wave of policy-making, the economic drive still had an impact on the policy formation. For instance, the ‘Report on Review of Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools and Secondary School Places Allocation’ (hereafter referred to as the Report), which was published in 2005, underpinning the subsequent introduction of the fine-tuning policy, explicitly stated that the MoI in the classroom should help students to ‘learn how to learn’ in the new senior secondary curriculum. Moreover, students should have a good command of both Chinese and English to enable them acquire the skills of collecting information, identifying assumptions and analyzing issues. Therefore, in sum, comparing the two waves of language policies, it seems that they shared a similarity in terms of making economic initiatives the prime objectives in the policy-making process.

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III. EFFECTIVENESS OF MOTHER TONGUE INSTRUCTION

Apart from the economic drive, the effectiveness of mother-tongue instruction in motivating students’ learning also stimulated the government’s formulation of the two waves of language policies. With reference to the research conducted by the Education Department (1994), mother-tongue teaching in Hong Kong was proved to have positive effects on students’ learning and can facilitate students’ understanding of subject contents. As a result, the rationale of the MoI policy under the Guidance was to encourage CMI in secondary schools and discourage the mixed mode of instruction. In fact, this rationale continued to influence the later fine-tuning policy. More specifically, the fine-tuning policy encouraged a flexible arrangement regarding the language medium employed in individual schools. The main principle of this policy was to ‘uphold mother-tongue teaching while enhancing students’ proficiency in both Chinese and English’ and to ‘increase students’ opportunities to be exposed to and use English at junior secondary level’ (Education Bureau, 2009, p.4). Under these objectives, the fine-tuning policy was considered to bridge the gap between CMI and EMI schools in Hong Kong.

IV. CRITERIA OF THE FINE-TUNING MECHANISM

In this section, we will explore the three criteria stated in the fine-tuning policy, which judge whether a school possesses the autonomy to transform its MoI from CMI to EMI. Specifically, the three criteria were: a) the students’ language proficiency, b) the teachers’ English qualifications, and c) the school-based support.

Concerning the students’ language proficiency, the Guidance states that, if schools admit at least 85% of their Secondary 1 students from the top 40% of Hong Kong students (this group of students was considered to be able to learn through both CMI and EMI), they will be permitted to choose their MoI from CMI or EMI. In fact, although this requirement was retained in the second wave of policy-making, the fine-tuning policy offered a greater flexibility to schools to use EMI for individual subjects, sessions or even classes if they failed to achieve this requirement (Education Commission, 2005).

Regarding the teachers’ qualifications, it seems that the English requirements for teachers (except for those who teach English as their major subject) became stricter in the fine-tuning policy compared to the first wave of language policy. Previously, teachers’ English competence to teach different subjects, such as mathematics, physics and history, was solely assessed by their school principals (Education Commission, 1997). However, in the fine-tuning framework, higher requirements were imposed on teachers if they adopted EMI to teach. According to the policy, teachers were required to have a Grade C (Level 3) or above in English Language (Syllabus B) of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and a Grade D or above in the Use of English in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) in order to become qualified to teach at EMI schools. At the same time, they were also requested to attend at least 15 hours of professional development activities every three years. Classroom observations were also conducted to assess their performance regarding using EMI to teach.

With respect to the school-based support measures, it is arguable that the government further ‘positively discriminated’ against CMI schools by providing more resources to enable them to improve their English learning environment. In addition to offering school-based support programmes to assist the students’ learning, the government also agreed to extend the percentage of lesson time during which EMI was used in the classroom from 15% in Secondary 1, 20% in Secondary 2 and 25% in Secondary 3 to 25% in Secondary 1-3 (Education Commission, 2005). Besides, the government also granted CMI schools a maximum of HK$3 million for six years, while only HK$0.5 million to EMI schools to improve their English learning environment (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005). It is believed that the government was eager to increase CMI students’ exposure to English under the fine-tuning policy.

V. THE MYTH OF EQUALITY OF EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY

In the context of the Hong Kong education system, although the government pledged to provide 12-year free education to all students, equality of educational opportunity has become one of the main concerns aroused by the MoI policies. According to Levin’s classification of equality, it can be divided into: equality of educational access, ‘the provision of similar educational facilities for all students’ (Levin, 1976, p.151); equality of educational participation, ‘different social classes have the equal access to participate in education in both a qualitative and quantitative sense’ (p.153); equality of educational results; and equality of educational effect on life chances. In theory, education is a ‘platform’ for providing equal chances to succeed and eradicating inequality in the society. Cynically, it is arguable that the two waves of language policies in Hong Kong have intensified the inequality in terms of educational access, academic results, participation and life chances. On the one hand, the division of CMI and EMI schools, stipulated in the Guidance, has ‘dictated’ the English learning environment of the students in the classroom. EMI students definitely have more exposure to English than those in CMI schools, since they are taught almost all subjects in English, except for Chinese Language and Chinese History. Although the fine-tuning policy allowed the relatively high-achieving students in CMI schools to use EMI to learn, on the other hand, it, even, in effect, intensified the inequality since a further streaming mechanism was imposed in individual schools.

According to the Report, there was a significant decline in the students’ performance in English in CMI schools (Education Commission, 2005). Moreover, the overall pass rate for the subject ‘Use of English’ in HKALE has dropped...
substantially since 2004 (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007). Statistically speaking, the results of the students in 2004 revealed that the change in language policy might be one of the factors behind the decline of the students’ language performance. While one of the prerequisites for entry to university in Hong Kong was a pass in Use of English, students who studied in CMI schools constantly suffered a huge disadvantage.

In fact, Tang (2008) claimed that ‘students in EMI schools had a far better chance to receive university education than their counterparts in CMI schools’ (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2008, p.16). In other words, there was an inequality of educational participation between CMI and EMI students. Comparatively speaking, the life chances of students from CMI schools are comparatively lower than those for students from EMI schools, and their social mobility is also comparatively lower than that of the latter.

VI. SUMMARY

In conclusion, the development of the language policies in Hong Kong was an ongoing process which involved various socio-economic and socio-political issues. After the People’s Republic of China (PRC) resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government introduced the first wave of language policy in 1998. Due to the problems of the labelling effect and the threat of challenges in the globalization era, the government decided to revise the scheme by introducing the fine-tuning policy in 2010. This revision of the language policy was beneficial from the functionalist perspective, especially for competent students who studied in CMI schools. In addition, the stratification between CMI and EMI schools was functional in allocating students into the different language learning environments to which they were best suited.

However, according to interaction theory, this kind of stratification created a labelling effect on CMI schools, regardless of the quality of their teaching and learning. CMI schools suffered from this labelling effect in the competition for the best students. From the ‘equality’ point of view, the change in the language policies could not ensure equal opportunities for CMI students who were eager to improve their academic performance and language proficiency. Instead, the change in effect intensified the inequality existing in individual schools. Since English proficiency was one of the entry requirements for admission to university in Hong Kong, CMI students who were not allowed to use EMI to learn in secondary school were placed at a huge disadvantage. From Marx’s perspective, language policy can be seen as a means of sustaining the existing institutions. Accordingly, it is recommended that the government should consult different groups of people in order to maximize the benefits of the language policies, which will benefit society as well.

REFERENCES