

Language policy of Hong Kong: Its impact on language education and language use in post-handover Hong Kong

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The language situation in Hong Kong is knowingly complex. Language policy has always been an unresolved thorny issue. In this paper I will first provide an overview of Hong Kong's language policy in the pre-handover period. Then I will examine the language policy since the handover in 1997. I will also look at the impact of the latest language policy on language education and language use in Hong Kong. The newly published language education review report entitled 'Action plan to raise language standards in Hong Kong' (SCOLAR, 2003) will be reviewed.

Defining language policy

The term 'language policy' is at times interchangeably used with other terms such as 'language planning' and 'language-in-education policy' (Baldauf, 1990, 1994; Cooper, 1989; Kaplan, 1990; Rubin, 1984). Poon (2000a) made an attempt to clarify the murky conceptual terrain of the language planning field by proposing a Model of Hierarchical Order of Language Planning and Language Policy.¹ 'Language planning' and 'language policy' are "two different yet related concepts", which "share some common characteristics" (Poon, 2000a, p.119). They are both top down, "involving deliberate and organized efforts to solve language problems, which very often have a social, political and/or economic orientation" (p.116). The major difference between these two constructs is that language planning is "a

macrosociological activity ... at a governmental and national level" *only* whereas language policy can be "either a macro- or microsociological activity ... at a governmental and national level or at an institutional level" (pp.116-117). That means language planning must be government-led, and language policy is not necessarily so. Language planning deals with status planning and corpus planning² while language policy deals with corpus planning and acquisition planning.³

Within the framework of Hierarchical Order of Language Planning and Language Policy, language planning, which undertakes the same processes of identification of problems, analysis, policy setting and predicted outcomes as language policy, assumes a higher order than language policy in the policy area of language. Specific language

¹ For details, see Poon's (2000a) chart on p.123 (Appendix : Figure 3.3).

² According to Kloss (1969), 'status planning' focuses on the standing of a language "alongside other languages or vis-à-vis a national government" whereas 'corpus planning' is concerned with "the nature of the language itself" (p. 81), i.e. the structure and form of a language.

³ 'Acquisition planning' refers to the planning of acquisition of a language. The issues of medium of instruction, bilingual education, second language acquisition, and foreign language learning and literacy education are related to acquisition planning.

policies derive out of language planning. Nevertheless, language policy may operate at either a governmental or an institutional level in the absence of language planning. Therefore, language policy covers a wider range of situations than language planning, which is government-directed and deals with status planning and corpus planning only. There are four types of language policy: (1) the normal type of government-led language policy that emerges out of language planning and that deals with corpus planning; (2) the government-led language policy that deals with acquisition planning in the absence of language planning; (3) the government-led language policy that deals with

corpus planning in the absence of language planning; (4) the non-government-led language policy that deals with acquisition planning or corpus planning in the absence of language planning.⁴

Language-in-education policy is a species of language policy in the realm of education, just like language policies in other realms such as in government administration, in the judiciary and in business.

Medium of instruction policy is a species of language-in-education policy, which deals specifically with the instructional medium in class.

Overview of language policy in pre-handover Hong Kong

After carefully examining the government documents and the language policy scene prior to 1997, Poon concludes that "Hong Kong has no language planning, but it does have language policy" (Poon, 2000a, p.116). By 'language policy' she refers to the second type as described above - viz. the government-led language policy that deals with acquisition planning in the absence of language planning. To be more exact, Hong Kong's language policy prior to the handover was basically language-in-education policy, among which the most prominent ones were medium of instruction policy and language enhancement policy.

Language situation prior to the handover

The language situation in pre-1997 Hong Kong was highly complex. 'Diglossia' (Fishman, 1971; Ferguson, 1972) and 'superposed bilingualism' (So,

1989) best describe the language scene since early colonial days till the late 1980s.⁵ The diglossic situation in Hong Kong refers to different statuses and functions allocated to English and Chinese. Despite the small English population as opposed to the large Chinese population,⁶ English enjoyed a supreme status in the colony. Chinese could not compete with English even after it was made a co-official language in 1974 when the Chinese Ordinance was enacted. Traditionally English functioned as a 'high' language in the domains of education, government administration, legislature and the judiciary while Chinese was used as a 'low' language at home and in social communication by the majority of the population (Fu, 1987; Lord, 1987; Luke and Richards, 1982; So, 1984, 1989). 'Superposed bilingualism' refers to the bilingual

⁴ For details, see Poon's (2000a) chart on p. 125 (Appendix: Figure 3.4).

⁵ Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1842 and returned to China on 1 July 1997.

⁶ According to 1991 population census, 95% are ethnic Chinese and only 2.2% use English as their usual language (Census and Statistics Department, 1991, p. 41).

situation imposed on Hong Kong society through the process of colonization rather than as an outcome of a natural bilingual setting. English was made the *sole* official language for more than 130 years. Even after Chinese was 'legalized' and made a co-official language in 1974, English was regarded as more supreme, and the English version of government documents was treated as the final correct version when arguments arose. English medium instruction in the colonial days was a typical example of 'superposed bilingualism'. The issue of medium of instruction policy will be discussed below.

Hong Kong entered its late transition period in the early 1990s. The language scene underwent changes amid great economic, social and political developments. The oppositional stand of the two languages - English and Chinese - for each other as described above subsided. With Hong Kong's growth as an international centre of trade and commerce, accompanied by an escalating literacy rate,⁷ English became much more widely used in the territory (Johnson, 1994). English was no longer perceived then as a colonial language but, rather, as an international language permitting universal communication (Johnson, 1994; Lord, 1987; Penington and Yu, 1994; Pierson *et al.*, 1980). Similarly, perceptions of Chinese⁸ underwent changes. With the emergence of Hong Kong as a world economic centre, Hong Kong people increasingly asserted themselves and cultivated a definite sense of identity (Johnson, 1994, p.178) for their indigenous language and the local culture

in the forms of Cantonese pop songs, films and soap operas, which positively invaded mainland China and other overseas Chinese communities.

The economic and political developments in mainland China also impacted on Hong Kong's language scene. Following China's open door policy instigated in 1978, more and more immigrants, tourists, officials and businesspeople flooded to Hong Kong. Putonghua (the national spoken language in mainland China) subsequently emerged as the third most popular spoken language in the territory. The former *diglossia* then yielded to *triglossia*, with English as the 'high' language and 'Cantonese' and 'Putonghua' as the 'low' languages.

The changing economic status of Hong Kong as an international city boosted the demand for bilingual people (Johnson, 1994). 'Superposed bilingualism' gave way to 'bilingualism'. People saw a genuine need to improve their English. English medium instruction was originally superimposed on students, but later turned out to be a most preferred choice of students and their parents (Poon, 1999, 2000a). Bilingualism became an issue of concern of the government in the 1990s (Education Commission, 1990, 1994, 1995, 1996), albeit its emphasis mainly on the English language skills.

Medium of instruction policy

Medium of instruction has been the most thorny and tricky issue in Hong Kong education. Historically students were required to shift from

⁷ According to 1991 population census, 60.9% of the Hong Kong population aged 15 and over received education up to secondary level and above compared to 51% in 1982.

⁸ 'Chinese' as understood in the context of Hong Kong means written Modern Standard Chinese and spoken Cantonese, a dialect spoken in the southern part of China.

Chinese to English in Secondary 1 if they chose to study in an English-medium school (formerly called Anglo-Chinese schools). The shifting of the medium of learning posed immense pressure on students, especially on Secondary 1 students. On the one hand all of a sudden they had to cope with most subjects delivered in English. On the other hand they had to continue the struggle with the mismatch between written Chinese (Modern Standard Chinese) and spoken Chinese (Cantonese) (Poon, 1993, 1999; So, 1989; Tse *et al.*, 1995),⁹ and with classical Chinese texts - which are archaic, difficult and considerably different from Modern Standard Chinese - introduced in the secondary curriculum. Why did the majority of students choose to study in English-medium schools? Prior to the 1970s when English was the *sole* official language, it was colonialism that instilled the supreme value of English in people's minds. To obtain a pass in English in the Hong Kong Certificate Education Examination¹⁰ was a requirement for entering the civil service. Since the 1980s when the status of English changed from a colonial language to an international language (Johnson, 1994; Lord, 1987), the demand for English-medium schools was even greater because

English skills were required for the business sector as well as for the civil service. That was why the number of schools that claimed to use English-medium was soaring and the number of Chinese-medium schools went down to 12% only in 1994 (Education Commission, 1994, p.22).¹¹

Traditionally the Hong Kong government under the British rule adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude towards medium of instruction (Poon, 2000a). For the very first time in history the Hong Kong government formally proposed using Chinese as the medium of instruction in lower junior secondary and documented it in the 1973 Green Paper (Board of Education, 1973). Because of public pressure, the proposal was toned down in the White Paper (Board of Education, 1974), and schools were given the autonomy to select their own instructional medium. There was, in fact, no implementation plan included in this medium of instruction policy, thus rendering it a policy *on paper* only.

The *laissez-faire* policy pertaining to medium of instruction persisted until the 1980s, which saw the decline of English standards and emergence of use of mixed code¹² in English-medium schools as a result of nine-year compulsory education, which

⁹ Modern Standard Chinese and Cantonese are considerably different in lexis, syntax, pronunciation and phonology. Hong Kong students think in their mother tongue Cantonese, the written form of which is not recognised as standard written Chinese. They have to learn to write in Modern Standard Chinese, the spoken form of which (Putonghua) they do not speak. Therefore, they cannot write what they think and say.

¹⁰ Similar to the O-Level examination of Britain's GSCE.

¹¹ Prior to September 1994, schools were free to choose their own medium of instruction. Many schools which claimed to use English medium actually used a mixed code of English and Chinese instead of English only (Education Commission, 1990; Ip and Chan, 1985; Johnson, 1983; Johnson, Chan, Lee and Ho, 1984; Johnson and Lee, 1987; Lin, 1990; Pennington, 1995; Poon, 2000a).

¹² The following are some common types of mixed code teaching practised in the Hong Kong classroom (Poon, 2000a, p. 209):

- Within sentence switch - a chaotic mix of English and Chinese within a sentence.
- Simultaneous sentence switch - one sentence in English, followed by immediate Chinese translation.
- Simultaneous idea switch - teach an idea in English first (which probably lasts for a couple of minutes) and then switch to teach the idea.
- Phase switch - use English to begin a lesson, then use Chinese to develop a lesson and then revert back to English to conclude a lesson.

started in 1978. In 1990 the Education Commission proposed a streaming policy in its fourth report to stream students of different language abilities into three different types of school, namely the English-medium school, the Chinese-medium school and the two-medium school (Education Commission, 1990). Again for the first time in history the Hong Kong government put forward a clear-cut medium of instruction policy with a framework and detailed implementation plan. The plan was scheduled to start in September 1994 after three years' preparation and expected to operate in full swing in the academic year 1997-98. The main objective of this policy was to rectify the problem of mixed code (which was regarded as a contributing factor to the declining English standards) brought about by the previous *laissez-faire* policy with a view to placing students in the 'right' schools in terms of medium of instruction.

Poon (2000a) did a thorough study on the streaming policy *per se* as well as its implementation in schools. Poon found many factors that signified that the streaming policy was not likely to be implemented to a large extent territorially. She also found that use of mixed code was predominant in the majority of the so-called English-medium schools then.

However, the streaming policy suddenly came to a halt and was replaced by the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy in 1998. This will be further elaborated below.

Language enhancement policy

A less controversial but equally important language-in-education policy in the pre-handover period was language enhancement policy focussing particularly on English language. One undesirable

effect of nine-year compulsory education, which was in effect in 1978, is undeniably the declining language standards of students especially English standards. On the one hand the Hong Kong government was not willing to admit this fact and argued that it is "the gap between demand and supply [that] has led to a perception that language standards are falling" (Education Commission, 1994, p.15; Education Commission, 1995, 1996). On the other hand it has made strenuous efforts since the early 1980s to combat the declining language standards. Both the Education Department and the Education Commission even set up working groups to investigate the language issue in 1988 and 1993 respectively, and four full reports exclusively on language issue were published prior to 1997 (Education Department, 1989; Education Commission, 1994, 1995, 1996) in addition to the Education Commission Reports no. 1, 2 and 4 that contributed some sections on how to enhance the language standards of students (Education Commission, 1984, 1986, 1990). The following are some examples of measures of language enhancement implemented prior to the handover: revising the Chinese and English syllabuses in primary and secondary schools, introducing task-oriented curriculum to the English curriculum, increasing library funds for language learning in schools, providing additional Chinese and English language teachers in secondary schools, trying out the Expatriate English Teachers scheme in secondary schools, recruiting expatriate lecturers of English for Colleges of Education, implementing language enhancement programmes and setting up self-access language centres in universities (Education Commission, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1995, 1996), and the like. There was,

however, not much sign of improvement in the area of language learning, especially in English.

Language policy since the handover

Hong Kong has experienced dramatic changes on all fronts since its reversion to China on 1 July 1997. The language policy scene is one of the arenas that witness such changes. Medium of instruction and language enhancement continue to be the foci of concern of the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region)¹³ government. Two language policies – the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy and the biliterate trilingual policy – were put forward after the handover. Similar to the pre-handover period, these two policies were originally meant to be language-in-education policies only, and they belong to the second type language policy - viz. the government-led language policy that deals with acquisition planning in the absence of language planning. However, unlike the previous period, the scope of the language-in-education policies is gradually broadening to the wider societal level that includes language policies in the workplace. While maintaining the focus of acquisition planning, language policies in the post-1997 years begin to look into the area of corpus planning. The recent review report on language education entitled 'Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong' released in June 2003 marks a new direction for Hong Kong's language policy.

Compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy

On the brink of the changeover of sovereignty when implementation of the streaming policy, which

started in September 1994, was in full swing as mentioned previously, there was a dramatic turn in the language policy arena. The Hong Kong government suddenly issued a consultation document ('the Firm Guidance') in April 1997, proposing a *compulsory* Chinese medium instruction policy (Education Department, 1997a). Due to strong opposition from schools, students and parents (*Ming Pao Daily*, 3 May 1997; *Sing To Daily*, 3 May 1997, 13 May 1997; *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 1997), the 'Firm Guidance' was subsequently revised as the 'Guidance' in September 1997 to make allowance for some schools to be exempted from the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy (Education Department, 1997b). Under this policy 114 schools were granted exemptions and approximately 70% of schools were made Chinese-medium. So the number of Chinese-medium schools was escalating in the last ten years, from 12% in the laissez-faire period to 38% as projected by the Education Department in 1994 when the streaming policy was enforced, and further up to 70% in 1998 when the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy was enforced.

The 'Firm Guidance' and the 'Guidance' were originally meant to help fully implement the streaming policy according to the framework stipulated in the Education Commission Report no. 4 in 1990 (Education Commission, 1990). They in effect actually abolished the streaming policy and

¹³ This is the official name for Hong Kong after 1 July 1997.

proposed a new direction for Hong Kong's medium of instruction policy – the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy. Poon argues that "it was a political move - a gesture to appease China. Hong Kong was on the brink of returning to China: it seemed legitimate to enforce the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction especially when a myriad of problems have arisen during implementation of the streaming policy" (1999, p.139). The Chinese medium instruction policy was welcome by some educational bodies for different reasons, such as Professional Teachers' Union of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Government Secondary Schools Principals Association on educational grounds, and Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers on patriotic grounds (*Ming Pao Daily*, 30 May 1997; *Wen Wei Po Daily*, 25 March 1997). Nonetheless the policy was poorly received territorially by students, parents and schools. In a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups during July and August 1997, 55% of the respondents, who were students and parents, admitted Chinese medium instruction was more effective, but 73% believed English standards would be lowered and 50% thought it would hurt their chances of finding a job and getting a place in university (*South China Morning Post*, 19 September 1997). Some schools and some Parents-Teachers Associations even advertised in the newspapers reiterating their firm support for English medium education (*Sing To Daily*, 3 May 1997).

Some tertiary institutions were commissioned by the former Education Department of Hong Kong to track students' performance through longitudinal

studies. Their findings indicate that the intended benefits of Chinese medium instruction (e.g. more lively interaction between teachers and students and more effective teaching and learning in classrooms) are being achieved (SCOLAR, 2003, p. 33).

Meanwhile there were other large-scale quantitative studies and small-scale qualitative study conducted in the latter part of 1999 by the following official, academic, professional and voluntary bodies respectively (*Ming Pao Daily*, 14 May 1999, 13 June 1999; *Wen Wei Po Daily*, 2 November 1999): (1) the Education Commission's Standing Committee On Language And Research (SCOLAR) and the Board of Education; (2) the Support Centre for Using Chinese as the Medium of Instruction at the University of Hong Kong; (3) the Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council; (4) the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers; (5) and the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong.¹⁴ The findings of these surveys do not necessarily corroborate with those commissioned by the former Education Department. About half of the teachers surveyed in two different studies (Studies 2 & 4) agreed with the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy, but two thirds of schools surveyed disagreed with this policy (Study 3). The support rate from principals fell from 85% in 1998 to 65% in 1999 (Study 4). 90% of parents from English-medium schools supported English-medium education while 70% of parents from Chinese-medium schools supported Chinese-medium schools only. According to these studies, the positive side of the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy entails better teacher-student relationship, better motivation of students to learn, students being more

¹⁴ For further details of the findings, see Poon, 2000a, pp. 359-363.

willing to express themselves in class. Some negative outcome is: poorer self-image on the part of students (Study 5 supported this but Study 2 did not), a higher student attrition rate, and a decline in the quality of student intake.

A formal evaluation of the Chinese medium instruction policy was scheduled to be conducted by a Review Committee comprising members of the former Board of Education and SCOLAR in the 2001-2002 school year. Based on the Review Committee's recommendation, the Hong Kong government would decide whether to maintain this language-in-education policy. As mentioned previously, medium of instruction is more than an educational issue in Hong Kong involving the interests of different parties. Immense pressure is likely to be put on the government either to continue with or to change the policy.

As in the past, the Hong Kong government's stand towards the medium of instruction has been shifting. At one point in 1999, one year after implementation of the Chinese medium instruction policy, the government wanted to tighten the control over the school's medium of instruction based on a draft proposal of the Review Committee (*South China Morning Post*, 5 July 1999). Those schools that have got exemptions from the Chinese medium instruction policy would be further monitored and the English ability of all their teachers would be examined to guarantee genuine English medium instruction in these schools. The figure of 114 English medium schools was likely to shrink under the tightened vetting mechanism. One legislator and Review Committee member anticipated only a few schools should be allowed to teach in English (*South China Morning Post*, 5 July 1999).

However, the views of the Review Committee were so divided that the Hong Kong government decided to put off the formal review for two years because a long-term medium of instruction policy should be considered in conjunction with the review of the Secondary School Places Allocation System in the school year of 2003-2004.

In the recently released final review report on language education entitled 'Action plan to raise language standards in Hong Kong' (SCOLAR, 2003), the support for Chinese medium instruction policy is reiterated, but the Committee's position towards the use of English medium is less tough than before. It says: "If schools wish to use a second language as the MOI [medium of instruction], they should ensure that the preconditions mentioned in paragraph 3.2.3 above are fulfilled" (SCOLAR, 2003, p.34). Whether the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy will become a long term policy is yet to be seen.

Biliterate trilingual policy

By 'biliterate trilingual' is meant two written languages and three spoken languages. In the context of Hong Kong the two written languages refer to Modern Standard Chinese and English, and the three spoken languages refer to Cantonese, Putonghua and English. The biliterate trilingual policy was first proposed in the Education Commission Report (1996). No framework nor any implementation plan was put forward, not even when it was officially announced in the first Policy Address delivered by the Chief Executive of the new Hong Kong SAR in October 1997. Initially the biliterate trilingual policy was proposed as a language-in-education policy. The focus was on training students to be biliterate trilingual.

The measures that have been taken since then are *ad hoc*. In the area of promoting language proficiency, a NET (Native English Teachers) scheme¹⁵ was launched in the 1998-99 school year to enhance the English language environment in local schools. Under this scheme each publicly funded secondary school has been provided with a NET recruited from overseas since 1998-99. This scheme was extended to primary schools in 2002-03, but due to financial constraints not all primary schools are entitled to a NET. Only those successful applicants will get one and need to share with another school. 'English in the air' permits English teaching and learning through TV and radio programmes. In addition to English, Putonghua has been greatly promoted after 1997. It was made a compulsory subject in the school curriculum in 1998, and was included in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination as an elective subject in 2000. A Putonghua channel was set up on Radio Hong Kong, a government radio station, to promote a better Putonghua environment.

To ensure the quality of language teachers, the language benchmark tests were first proposed in the Education Commission Report no. 6. The reason for setting language benchmarks is that to date there have still been a large proportion of language teachers not yet subject-trained,¹⁶ and accordingly

the quality of language teaching cannot be guaranteed. The benchmark tests were meant to provide an incentive to the serving language teachers when they were initially proposed in the Education Commission Report no. 6. Nonetheless, when the policy was translated into practice by the ACTEQ (Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications) Task Force, the benchmark tests carried with them an overtone of penalty for the serving language teachers, who felt that their teaching career would be threatened if they failed the tests. That explained why when the first live benchmark tests for both English and Putonghua teachers¹⁷ were announced, they were strongly resisted by the teaching profession and 6,000 teachers took to the street in June 2000. Similar to the medium of instruction policy, the language benchmark policy was politicized and rendered more than an educational issue. Subsequently the Hong Kong government made some concessions and granted exemptions to the serving English teachers and those new teachers who are English majors. But by 2004-05 all those who wish to become English teachers will have to pass the benchmark test prior to joining the profession. By the same token, all those serving English teachers will have to be benchmarked either through exemptions or through training by 2006-07.

¹⁵ This scheme is, in fact, a modified version of the EET (Expatriate English Teachers) scheme that started in 1987-88. The terms of service of the EET were better than the NET.

¹⁶ According to the 2001 Teacher Survey conducted by the former Education Department of Hong Kong, the breakdown of the serving subject-trained English language and Chinese language teachers (i.e. holding a relevant degree plus relevant teaching training qualifications) respectively is as follows:

English language teachers: 828 (9%) (Primary Schools); 2056 (36%) (Secondary Schools)

Chinese language teachers: 1231 (10%) (Primary Schools); 2629 (50.5%) (Secondary Schools)

¹⁷ The first live tests took place in March 2001. They were scheduled to be held once a year, but an additional one (the fourth tests) were held in September 2003.

Research work on both languages has been conducted. For instance, three tertiary institutions were commissioned by the Former Education Department in 2001 to develop an English enhancement programme for Chinese-medium school students and conduct studies on the effectiveness of such a programme in Chinese-medium schools, and on good practices of facilitating English-medium learning in English-medium schools. SCOLAR has also conducted studies on the Chinese competency of primary students, and on the comparison of Cantonese and Putonghua as medium of instruction.

In addition to its *ad hoc* nature, a further characteristic of this period's language policy is its extension from the education sector to the wider community. The Workplace English Campaign and the territory-wide Putonghua promotional activities are the first language policies beyond language-in-education policies that Hong Kong has ever had. Of these two initiatives, the Workplace English Campaign is much wider in magnitude. This Campaign was initiated by the business sector in response to the Education Reform proposed by the Hong Kong government in 1999. A 'Coalition on Education in the Business Sector' was formed by the Federation of Hong Kong Industry and 10 Chambers of Commerce to examine Hong Kong's education system and propose ways to improve it from the perspective of the business sector (*Ming Pao Daily*, 3 September 1999). The Hong Kong government fully supports the Coalition's initiative, and officially launched a one-year 'Workplace English Campaign' on 28 February 2000 (*South China Morning Post*, 29 February 2000). This is the first time in history that the business world has

joined hands with the government to reform Hong Kong's education system in general, and to raise the English standards in particular. The three major components of the Campaign are: (1) to subsidize employees of four types of working force who need English at work – secretaries, clerks, frontline service personnel and receptionists/telephone operators, who account for about one-third of Hong Kong's workforce – to take English courses and to sit for the relevant English tests; (2) to set up language benchmarks for the above four job types as well as for executives, administrators and associate professionals such as computer operators, engineering technicians, nurses and law clerks; (3) to launch the business and schools partnership programme. A total of 62 million dollars were put in this Campaign. The Campaign is popular among the employees. As for the workplace English benchmarks, their acceptability among employers is still not satisfactory according to the chairperson of the Steering Committee on Workplace English Campaign and SCOLAR, Michael Tin (*Ming Pao Daily*, 27 September 2001).

'Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong' (2003)

As mentioned previously, until the release of SCOLAR's 'Action Plan' in June 2003 the biliterate trilingual policy having been in place since 1997 was *ad hoc* and remained largely in the domain of education, albeit some attempts to promote English in the workplace and Putonghua in the community.

The 'Action Plan' is on the one hand guided by the spirit of biliterate trilingual policy, and on the other hand an implementation plan to carry out the biliterate trilingual policy. It is a breakthrough in terms of language policy as practised in Hong

Kong. It departs from the previous language policy in the following respects:

- (1) It adopts the employer's perspective as opposed to the former perspectives from the government administrators, language experts and educators, obviously because SCOLAR is headed by a prominent figure in the business sector. It is spelt out explicitly that 'We should never underestimate employers' demands as a driving force behind improvement in language standards' (SCOLAR, 2003, p. 26)
- (2) It emphasizes the output of language learning and teaching, thus bringing in some new initiatives to assess language competencies of learners at various stages, such as basic competency assessment, standards-referenced public examinations, adoption of recognized overseas English tests (e.g. IELTS,¹⁸ ALTE,¹⁹ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Formerly the focus is on the input, so a huge sum of money has been put into language enhancement both in schools and universities as mentioned previously.
- (3) In the new framework the expected language competencies "should be clearly defined using descriptors (i.e. statements describing what a person at a particular level of proficiency can do) and be accompanied by exemplars (i.e. samples of written work or recordings of conversations illustrating what a person at that level of proficiency can generally do)" (SCOLAR, 2003, p.7). Such clear-cut descriptions of language learning outcome are lacking formerly.
- (4) All the former language policies focus on English language only whereas the new framework also

pays heed to Putonghua. The Hong Kong Authority of Examination and Assessment has been commissioned by SCOLAR to develop a Putonghua proficiency scale that would provide a common frame of reference for specifying the levels of Putonghua proficiency expected of Secondary 3 and 5 students as well as the working adults. In addition, the 'Action Plan' also "fully endorse[s] the Curriculum Development Council's long-term vision to use Putonghua to teach Chinese language" instead of Cantonese (SCOLAR, 2003, p.36).

- (5) The language policy in the post-1997 period favours Chinese medium instruction and downplays the importance of English medium instruction. Although the Chinese medium instruction policy is still being upheld, English medium instruction is not perceived too negatively in the 'Action Plan'. Three preconditions pertaining to the teachers' English proficiency, the students' English proficiency and support measures are laid out as a basis for possible use of English as a medium of instruction (SCOLAR, 2003, p.32).
- (6) Formerly language policy covers only the school sector and the tertiary sector. The 'Action Plan' provides a more comprehensive framework encompassing different stages of a person's language learning experience, from pre-primary to school and/or university, and then from study to work. Language learning is life-long and language requirements are everlasting.
- (7) The scope of the language policy as stipulated in the 'Action Plan' has been broadened from the traditional language-in-education policy to

¹⁸ International English Language Testing Scheme.

¹⁹ Association of Language Testers in Europe.

language policy in a wider sense.

(8)The type of language policy has also been extended from acquisition planning to corpus planning. Formerly all language policies remain at the level of planning language acquisition. Little effort has been expended on the standardization of the structure and pronunciation of Chinese as used in Hong Kong. It is suggested in the ‘Action Plan’ to teach

standard Cantonese pronunciation (p.45), “to distinguish the difference between standard modern Chinese writing and the colloquial Cantonese-influenced Chinese writing” and “to adhere to the national standard in modern Chinese writing” (p.45), and also to teach “the simplified Chinese characters to facilitate communication with the mainland and other regions” (p.43).

Impact of the post-handover language policy on language education and language use in Hong Kong

Before the new policies proposed in the ‘Action Plan’ are endorsed and implemented, we should revisit the two major language policies that have been in place since 1997, i.e. the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy and the biliterate trilingual policy, and examine their impact on English language education, Chinese language education and language use in Hong

Kong.

Impact on English language education

The Hong Kong Policy Research Institute was commissioned by SCOLAR to conduct a survey on students’ attitude and motivation for language learning in March 2002. The following table is a summary of the findings:

	Percentage of students with ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ motivation to learn languages		
	Students’ self-perception	Parents’ perception	Teachers’ perception
Chinese Language	47%	35%	11%
English Language	44%	26%	8%
Putonghua	25%	20%	N/A*

(*Only Chinese and English language teachers were surveyed.)

(SCOLAR, 2003, p. 29)

The students surveyed are well aware of the importance of language competence in life, but their motivation is not high. According to their teachers and parents, their motivation is indeed very low. SCOLAR attributes the low motivation to three

factors: heavily examination-oriented culture in education, the teaching method and the curriculum (2003, pp. 29-30). Apart from these three reasons, there is, in fact, a myriad of other factors that may contribute to students’ poor motivation, for

instance, distractions from TV, computer games and ICQ, lack of family support, peer influence, etc. Beyond all these, I am going to look into the factor of language policy.

There have been about five years since the biliterate trilingual policy and the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy were introduced in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Under the biliterate trilingual policy, more support has been given to strengthen the environment of the three languages both at school and outside school. In the context of English learning, the following measures have been provided to schools: the NET (Native English Teachers) scheme, 'English in the air', additional resources allocated to Chinese-medium schools for English enhancement, the cross-curricular teaching packages especially designed for Chinese-medium schools to facilitate their switch of medium of instruction in senior secondary education and to enhance English learning. Presumably schools, Chinese-medium schools in particular, should have a better environment conducive to English language learning after 1997, and thus students should have higher motivation for English learning.

However, far from the expected outcome, students' motivation to learn English remains at a low level as evident in the recent survey (SCOLAR, 2003). Poon (1999, 2000b) argues that the Chinese medium instruction policy has an adverse effect on English language learning. She reports the experience of a secondary school principal, whose school adopted English medium instruction prior to 1986 and shifted to Chinese medium instruction since then. He admitted that his present students are less motivated to learn English than the previous ones. The main reason is that English is now only a subject and students' proficiency in

English will not affect the results of other content subjects. Formerly his students were eager to improve their English because English was the medium of instruction, upon which hinged the results of other content subjects. This principal's view is echoed by other principals and English teachers whom I have personal contact with. They all regret that their students have lost enthusiasm in English language learning since their schools were forced to shift their medium from English to Chinese in 1998 under the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy.

The Chinese medium instruction policy does not merely weaken students' interest in English, but also limits their exposure to the language. Exposure is an important contributing factor to language acquisition. Chan's (1997) large-scale study involving 59 schools and more than 5000 students in Hong Kong supports the claim that the relationship between the actual amount of English used by teachers during lessons and students' progress in the language is statistically significant. "To achieve adequate levels of metalinguistic awareness, it is not enough to teach language as a subject" (Baetens Beardsmore, 1998). The cases of Malaysia and the Philippines are illuminating. Malaysia changed its medium of instruction from English to Malay in the wake of the 1969 riot, twelve years after its independence. After putting this 'all Malay' policy in place for more than three decades, it is found that the standards of English have fallen and the number of English speakers has been considerably reduced (Ozog, 1993). Hence the Malaysian government decided to switch back to English again, at least for Mathematics and Science subjects, starting January 2003 (Kuppusamy, 2002). Likewise, the Philippines

experienced a decline in English standards but to a much lesser extent after switching the medium of instruction of certain subjects from English to the national language after its independence in 1946. The percentage of the Filipinos who claimed to be able to speak English dropped from 65% in 1980 to 56% in 1990 (Gonzalez, 1998). Gonzalez's observation is indeed a message for the Hong Kong government to consider:

The lesson emerging from these post-colonial situations is that for a society to continue competence in L2 it must continue using it as a medium of instruction and not merely as a subject for study. Once the L2 is relegated to a subject for study rather than a medium of instruction, conversational competence ceases and only the difficult path reading through translation and using a dictionary becomes the alternative. (Gonzalez, 1993, p.17)

The compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy is in effect weakening English language learning in Hong Kong albeit the part played by the biliterate trilingual policy to strengthen it.

Impact on Chinese language education

The compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy is meant to raise the status of the Chinese language and Chinese-medium schools, which used to be regarded as second-rate schools in pre-1997 when English-medium schools were predominant. Contrary to the expectation of the policy maker, the labelling effect is even more conspicuous after the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy is in place. The English-medium schools, which are now in smaller numbers, enjoy a much higher status than ever before. Although there is no direct correlation between the students' perception of the school and their motivation to learn a subject, it is

surprising to find that students' motivation to learn the Chinese language is still so low from the survey cited in the previous section. It is even more astonishing to hear the comments of some principals and Chinese language teachers that I have personal contact with: Students in Chinese-medium schools now find learning of other subjects through Chinese too easy, and their incentive for learning Chinese has further dipped since the introduction of the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy.

One major focus of the biliterate trilingual policy is to promote Putonghua as a subject in schools and in the long run as a medium of instruction for the Chinese language subject. Research indicates that students show improvement in Chinese writing in addition to Putonghua proficiency when Putonghua is used as the medium of instruction for the Chinese language subject although students do not have significant gain in their general performance in Chinese language compared with those using Cantonese as a medium to learn Chinese language (K.C. Ho, 2002; W.K. Ho, 2002).

Impact on language use in society

As mentioned previously, the language policies in the post-1997 era – the Chinese medium instruction policy and the biliterate trilingual policy – started off as language-in-education in schools. The former is school-specific. The latter is initially confined to education with neither a framework nor an implementation plan. With the launching of the Workplace English Campaign in 2000, the biliterate trilingual policy gradually has gained momentum and is spreading to society. Two major outcomes of the Workplace English Campaign are the setting up of English language

benchmarks for various professions, and English training for workers in the service sectors. As there are an increasing concern about the declining English standards of employees and an escalating English demand from the workforce,²⁰ the English requirement has been tightened in order to enter some professions, for example, the school teachers, the civil service (*Ming Pao Daily*, 16 November 2001; SCOLAR, 2003), the legal profession (Wan, 2001). This implies that employees will have to work harder to enhance their English proficiency in order to secure a job in the present stringent job market. Nonetheless, it does not imply that English use as a genuine second language in people's daily lives will become widespread in the territory²¹ because of the language policy.

Likewise, under the biliterate trilingual policy territory-wide Putonghua promotional activities

have been launched, and a Putonghua proficiency scale with descriptors and exemplars will be developed to specify the levels of Putonghua proficiency expected of both the students and the working adults (SCOLAR, 2003). Putonghua has become more wide-spread in the territory in recent years, but not necessary due to the Hong Kong government's language policy although it has a role to play in setting proficiency levels. It is due more to the increasing demand of Putonghua at work as a result of tourism and economic amalgamation between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta. More and more working adults feel the need for improving their Putonghua. Compared with English, Putonghua, the written form of which is familiar to Hong Kong people, is a much easier spoken language to learn.

Conclusion

In sum, I have traced the language policy of Hong Kong in the colonial days, which provides a context for understanding the language policy in the post-1997 era. I have reviewed two major language policies prior to the handover, viz. the medium of instruction policy and the language enhancement policy. The language policies in this period favour English, and Putonghua was not put on the agenda until the 1990s. Besides, they are

basically language-in-education policies. The two language policies in the post-handover period that I have examined are also related to medium of instruction and language enhancement. They are the compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy and the biliterate trilingual policy. The language policies in this period are more balanced between Chinese and English, and maybe at times more inclined towards Chinese. The nature of language

²⁰ See, for example, the 2001 Business Outlook Survey conducted by The American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, the Business Prospect Survey 2001 conducted by the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, and the 2000 Establishment Survey on Manpower Training and Job Skills Requirement conducted by the Census and Statistics Department.

²¹ English is used neither as a second language nor as a foreign language in Hong Kong. It is somewhere between the two, mainly because English is used quite widely in the territory but confined to the domains of business, education, government administration, the judiciary and the media. English is seldom used as a means of communication among the Chinese in Hong Kong. Luke and Richards (1982) assign the status of an auxiliary language to English used in Hong Kong..

policy has changed. It has been extended from language-in-education policy to language policy encompassing the education sector as well as other sectors in society.

The recently published 'Action Plan' (2003) signifies a further change in the policy-maker's perception of language use and in the nature of language policy as practised in Hong Kong. By putting upfront the employer's perspective in setting the language policies, the economic value of English and Chinese (mainly Putonghua) is emphasized. Little has been done about promoting the cultural aspect of the languages. The emphasis on the employer's demands would further aggravate the predominant examination culture in light of the economic downturn and high unemployment rate in Hong Kong.

Corpus planning is for the very first time proposed in the language policy document of Hong

Kong. With corpus planning in place, the status of Putonghua greatly enhanced and Putonghua as medium of instruction being introduced, it is anticipated that language policy in Hong Kong will take a further big stride into the realm of status planning. Will Putonghua gain its status as an official spoken language? Will Putonghua replace Cantonese as an official spoken language? Will the simplified Chinese characters become the official written Chinese script? Or more radically, will Putonghua and its written form – Modern Standard Chinese – replace English as the *sole* official language in Hong Kong? These are possible questions to be addressed by the policy-maker. If status planning were put on the agenda, a new chapter would be turned in Hong Kong's language policy scene. Poon's statement that "Hong Kong has no language planning" (2000, p. 116) should be reverted.

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香港的語文政策：對香港回歸後的語文教育和語文使用之影響

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摘要

由於受到歷史和社會經濟發展種種因素的影響，香港的語文狀況是相當複雜的。本文首先回顧過去三十年來香港政府的語文政策，主要分為兩大類，即教學語言政策和提升語文水平政策。論文的重點是分析香港回歸以來在語文政策上的變化和發展，進而探索語文政策對語文教育及社會整體語文狀況和使用的影響。

APPENDIX

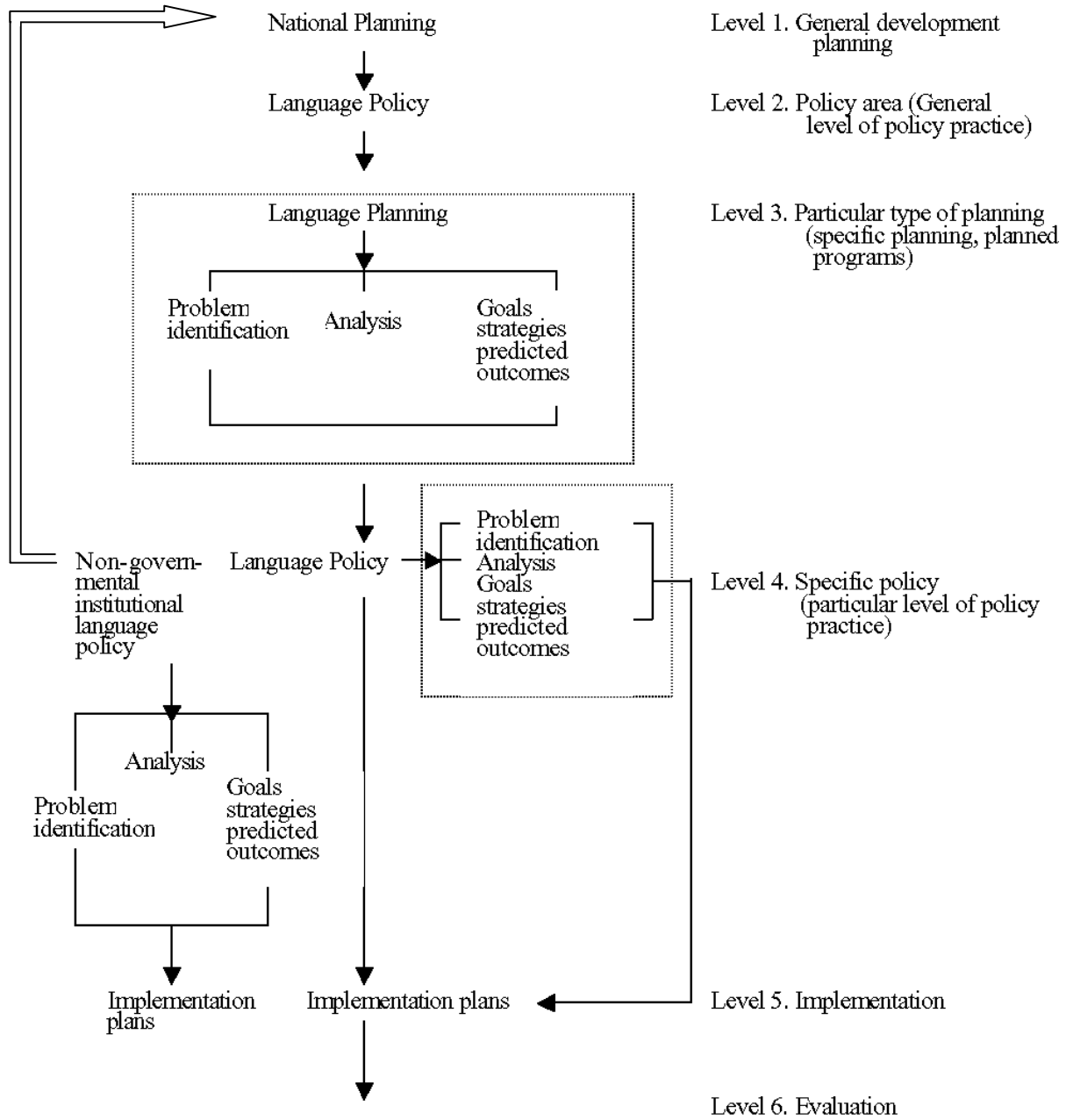


Figure 3.3 Hierarchical Order of Language Planning and Language Policy

Taken from Poon, 2000a, P.123

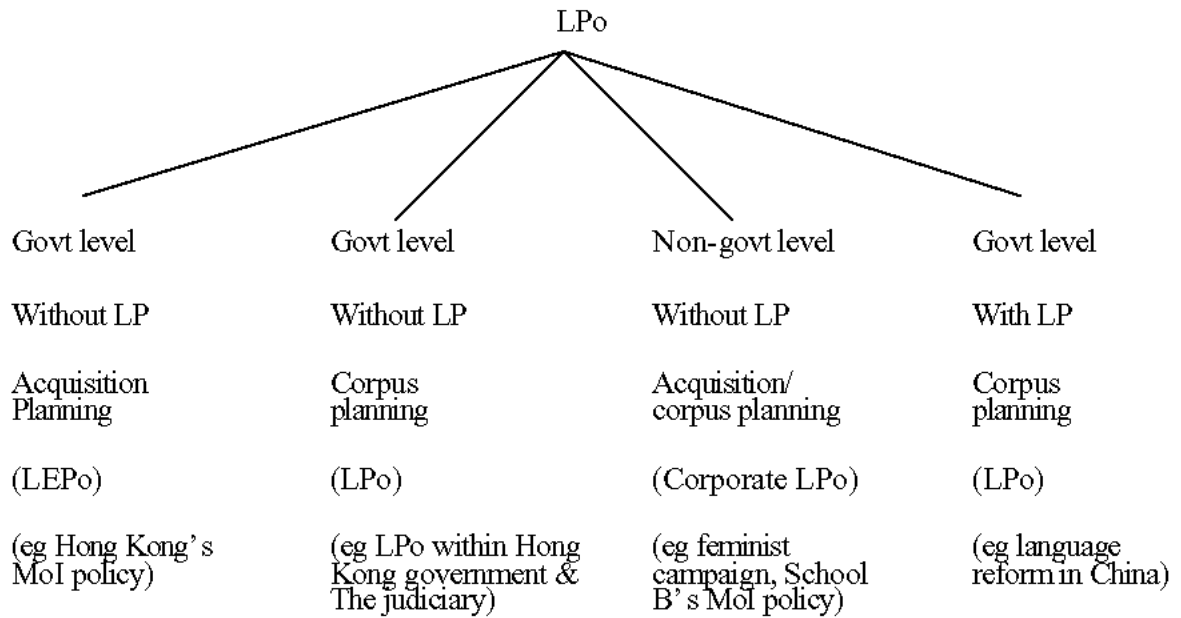


Figure 3.4 Four Types of Language Policy

Taken from Poon, 2000a, P.125