

3 | Innovations in ELT Curricula and Strategies of Implementation in Hong Kong SAR

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INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT OF HONG KONG SAR

The rationale behind the ongoing curriculum reforms in Hong Kong cannot be adequately understood without taking into account key sociolinguistic factors at work in society. We will therefore begin by giving a brief outline of the language situation in Hong Kong before turning to details of the most recent curriculum development in ELT.

A good decade has elapsed since the sovereignty of Hong Kong returned to China on July 1, 1997. During the marathon negotiations between Chinese and British officials in the run-up to the handover, many critics were skeptical of the unprecedented ‘one country, two systems’ sociopolitical arrangement. In the past 10 years, however, there are clear signs that this model of decolonization and renationalization has worked reasonably well for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR). For one thing, the central government in Beijing has lived up to its promise of ‘Hongkongers governing Hong Kong.’ Under the leadership of a Chinese Chief Executive, Mr. Tung Chee Hwa, the Hong Kong SAR government managed to steer through difficult times occasioned by the economic downturn in Asia (1998 to 2003), and come to terms with the ‘SARS saga,’ an international health crisis which caught the Hong Kong SAR government unprepared in March, 2003, and which for several months put Hong Kong in the spotlight of media attention worldwide. From 2004 onwards, the economy has gradually picked up again. As of the time of writing, barely two months before the tenth anniversary of Hong Kong SAR’s reunification with mainland China, a confident, newly elected Chief Executive, Mr. Donald Tsang, seems poised to lead ‘Asia’s World City’ to new heights towards a more prosperous, equitable and harmonious society.

From a sleepy fishing village in the 1840s to an international metropolis and financial center in a new millennium, Hong Kong’s success story is

arguably *sui-generis*. Natural resources being negligible, Hong Kong has always thrived on trade, that is, imports and exports. For over two decades since the 1960s, the former British colony literally made a name in the world of commerce through the impressive performance of an outstanding manufacturing sector: a great variety of goods won the trust and admiration of consumers worldwide; and for many, the etiquette 'Made in Hong Kong' was synonymous with 'price-worthiness' if not 'high quality.' Indeed, Hong Kong's economic prosperity during this period could be gauged by the world famous title: 'The Pearl of the Orient.' From the late 1980s onwards, as a result of many local businesses moving their manufacturing base to adjacent parts of Guangdong province in an attempt to remain competitive by reducing costs of production, the principal types of economic activity gradually shifted from manufacturing to service- and knowledge-based. Today, few would dispute that the continued well-being of Hong Kong hinges on how well Hongkongers can cope with the challenges of a knowledge-based economy, of which the need for a biliterate and trilingual workforce is one hot topic which has attracted a lot of media attention.

Throughout its documented history since colonial times, Hong Kong is predominantly a Chinese society; the non-Chinese population has rarely exceeded five per cent. Since the absolute majority of Hong Kong Chinese (around 90 per cent) speaks Cantonese as their usual language, Cantonese has always been the *lingua franca* among dialect-speakers (Li, 2006). One consequence of this relatively homogeneous demographic pattern is the majority's strong sense of loyalty to Cantonese, such that speaking English at the inter-sentential level is generally perceived as highly marked (except in the presence of non-Cantonese speakers). From the point of view of language learning, such a popular perception makes it difficult for Hong Kong Chinese learners of English to find naturalistic circumstances under which they could practice using English learned in class.

Chinese Hongkongers' general reluctance to use English entirely for intra-ethnic communication has significant implications for its status in this former British colony. Being a co-official language as well as a medium of teaching and learning in about 30 per cent of secondary schools, English in Hong Kong has the conspicuous characteristics of a second language. On the other hand, the fact that local Chinese seldom use it among themselves (except in Cantonese-English mixed code, see Li & Tse, 2002) makes it more like a foreign language. For a majority of Chinese students, including many who are educated in English-medium schools, English tends to have little reality beyond school work and hardly any relevance to their lifeworld.

This is essentially why, rather than being a typical second or foreign language, English in Hong Kong has been variously characterized as an 'auxiliary language' (Luke & Richards, 1982) and a 'value-added language' (Li, 1999).

From the point of view of Hong Kong's man-(and woman-)power development, the needs for English have been a factor of the dominant types of economic activity as well as employers' high expectations of their employees' English proficiency. Before the mid-1980s, when the job market was dominated by work positions in the manufacturing sector, the demand for highly proficient speakers of English was not so high. This is why, despite the fact that only two to three per cent of the matriculation-level students were qualified for university education, there did not seem to be a shortage of university graduates with an acceptable level of communicative competence in English. As a result of a gradual shift from a manufacturing- to a service- or knowledge- based economy, however, the demand for a workforce capable of communicating with non-Chinese clients in English has been steadily on the rise. It was partly against this socioeconomic background that, within about a decade until the handover, the number of degree-granting institutions was gradually increased from two to eleven, while the admission rate of secondary-school leavers into local universities was gradually expanded from two to 18 per cent (see below).

As far as the language situation is concerned, little has changed after the handover. English remains an official language alongside Chinese. In a number of key domains such as government, law, education and business, English is arguably the dominant language, although there is some indication that some of the functions in these domains are gradually giving way to Chinese (e.g., the ceremonial function of Putonghua on such important occasions as the National Day). In the education domain, for a long time the medium of instruction policy has been a bone of contention between different stakeholders. Most Chinese parents are guided by a belief that earlier and more exposure to English would help enhance their children's English proficiency development, and so they tend to prefer to have their children educated and taught through the medium of English (Evans, 1996; Li, 2002). Research in bilingual education, however, has shown that the actual learning outcomes of English-medium education in terms of proficiency development in English (and Chinese) leave much to be desired (see, e.g., Johnson, 1997). Lacking in home support and in the absence of a conducive language environment in which English would be used naturally for intra-ethnic communication among Hong Kong Chinese,

coping with English-medium education proved to be cognitively demanding and often counter-productive for the majority of average students from modest families.

For over two decades, disappointing results of school-leavers' English proficiency development, university graduates included, have been a regular source of resentment on the part of leaders of the business sector and employers, whose voices are often amplified in both print and electronic media. This 'complaint tradition' fuels a widespread perception in society that the standards of English are declining (Bolton, 2003). As many scholars have pointed out, however, such a perception is unfounded, for it fails to take into account the gradual expansion of tertiary education since the mid-1980s, resulting in a shift in the function of university education: from educating only a tiny percentage – *la crème de la crème* – to nearly one-fifth of all matriculated students. In other words, the popular perception that today, university graduates' English proficiency is no match for their peers' in the past, may be explained by the simple fact that a much higher percentage of young people are receiving university education. A correlate of this expansion is that the number of people claiming to have a knowledge of English has increased sharply. As Bolton (2003) observes, "The 2001 census indicates that 43 per cent of the Hong Kong population now claim to be able to speak English. Of these, 3.2 per cent claim English as a 'usual' language, and 39.8 per cent claim to speak English as 'another' language" (Hong Kong Government, 2001; cited in Bolton, 2003, p. 87).

In what follows, we will first outline the education system in Hong Kong SAR before describing the curriculum changes in the past decade which form an integral part of the ongoing education reforms. We will then briefly report on the effectiveness of the curriculum changes to date. The chapter will end with a number of salient pedagogical and policy issues of concern to local ELT professionals.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN HONG KONG SAR

Education in Hong Kong is available to all children. It can last for up to 21 years, starting at age 3. Of this period, nine years are compulsory education and supported by the government. The Hong Kong SAR Government's policy is to:

provide equitable access to nine years' free and universal primary and junior secondary education to all children in the

relevant age group, and as from the 2002/03 school year to provide subsidized senior secondary education or training to all Secondary 3 students who are willing and able to continue. (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007)

Curriculum development of the Hong Kong education system has undergone a number of changes in the past 40 years. It was previously based exclusively on the British system of education and followed the changes that happened to the UK curriculum as it transformed from a Grammar school/secondary modern system into a secondary comprehensive system. Since the mid-1980's the Hong Kong education system has emerged in its own right and, with the return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, there have been significant developments to reflect a more international approach to curriculum design and a stronger emphasis on Chinese culture and language.

Currently, the system of education in Hong Kong is as follows: Children may attend kindergarten for up to 3 years. This is non-compulsory although most parents will try to secure and pay for their children to be admitted to a kindergarten. Formal education begins at around age 6 with six years of primary education. This is government sponsored and compulsory. At around age 12, children move on to secondary school which is divided into three phases: junior secondary (3 years), senior secondary (2 years), matriculation (2 years). Only junior secondary education is compulsory and students may leave school after Secondary 3. Most students choose to proceed onto senior secondary, which is non-compulsory, and they then compete for places for matriculation. In the next two years, students make preparation for the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE), the results of which are used as the basis for determining admission into a local university or post-secondary institution.

If students choose not to follow the matriculation to university route, they may opt for vocational training courses or enter the workplace either after Secondary 3 or Secondary 5. A summary of the current education system in Hong Kong may be found in Table 1.

Early Education

All kindergartens in Hong Kong are privately run. They can be divided into two categories: non-profit-making kindergartens and private independent kindergartens. Until recently, the cost of kindergarten or pre-school education was entirely parents' responsibility. Even so, many parents choose to send their children to some form of nursery or kindergarten if they could afford to.

TABLE 1
The Education System of Hong Kong SAR, 2007

Level	Length	Label	Type	Focus
Kindergarten	3 years	None	Non-compulsory	General
Primary	6 years	Primary 1-6	Compulsory	General
Junior Secondary	3 years	Secondary 1 – 3	Compulsory	General
Senior Secondary	2 years	Secondary 4 & 5	Non-compulsory	Specialized
Matriculation	2 years	Secondary 6 & 7	Non-compulsory	Specialized
Tertiary	Depends on degree		Non-compulsory	Specialized

(adapted from Wikipedia, 2007)

Nurseries are open to children aged 2-5 (N1-N4); alternatively, parents can send their child to a kindergarten from age 3-5 (K1-K3). Both are institutions offering pre-primary education, but kindergartens are generally seen as better organized compared with nurseries, where children are led to interact in games and play groups. With few exceptions, the instructional medium at pre-primary level is Cantonese. In 2006 the Hong Kong Legislative Council passed a bill supporting pre-school education and now parents can apply for a subsidy of HK \$10,000 (ca. US \$1,280) per school year to support the cost of their children's early education (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007d). Competition is keen to get children into kindergartens with a good reputation. This is the beginning of the competitive climb up the educational ladder in Hong Kong.

Primary Education

Children begin their formal education at around age 6 with admission into primary school. The core subjects at this level are Chinese, English, Mathematics and General Studies (Social Studies, Health Education and Science). Some primary schools with a religious background may also offer religious education. The medium of instruction (MOI) in most primary schools is Cantonese. English is taught as a second language. Only a small number of primary schools (less than 10 per cent) are English-medium. Students attend compulsory primary school education from age 6 to 12 when they move onto secondary school.

Secondary Education

Secondary education in Hong Kong is divided into three main phases: junior secondary, senior secondary, and matriculation. Students have to attend the first phase until they have completed Secondary 3, aged around 15. For students who wish to pursue a non-academic type of education they may opt out of the secondary school system and join an Institute of Vocational Education (IVE) and train for a profession. Most students try to proceed onto the next phase of secondary school where they then have to choose the type of specialization they want to study: Science, Arts, or Commerce. Students' choices of subjects at this level will direct them to the type of HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination) exams which are taken towards the end of Secondary 5 (around age 17). Based on the students' examination results they are allowed to proceed onto the third phase of secondary school: Secondary 6 and 7. At the end of Secondary 7 (around age 19) students sit for their HKALE, the results of which are used as a de facto university entrance test.

There are eight key learning areas at secondary school: Chinese Language Education, English Language Education, Mathematics Education, Science Education, Technology Education, Personal, Social and Humanities Education, Arts Education, and Physical Education. Within each of these areas there are a number of sub-categories, for instance after Secondary 3, Science is divided into Biology, Chemistry and Physics. Each of the subcategories forms a HKCEE or HKALE paper. In total 45 subjects are examined. A student can take up to 10 subjects in the HKCEE, and usually between three to four subjects in the HKALE.

The Hong Kong Government does not publish textbooks for use in the school system. Instead, private and commercial publishers, with curriculum guidelines provided by the Curriculum Development Institute (CDI), publish textbooks at primary and secondary levels specifically for the Hong Kong market. These textbooks are written mostly by local teachers and writers. The English language textbook market is huge and dominated by a few international publishers such as Cambridge, Longman and Oxford, which is one reason why the production of local textbooks is generally of a high standard. Publishers are active in promoting their ELT books, and all schools are allowed to decide which textbooks they will use each academic year.

Tertiary Education

Competition to gain a place to study for a first-degree is fierce in Hong

Kong. And even though the territory has eleven institutes offering degree programs, only about 18 per cent of secondary school graduates can gain entry to tertiary education. Eight of these institutes are publicly funded: Chinese University of Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Lingnan University, University of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong Institute of Education. In addition, three other institutes award degrees. They include Open University of Hong Kong; Shue Yan College (recently upgraded to university), and Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

The majority of tertiary institutes operate an English-medium instruction (EMI) policy, although Chinese is also used as a supplementary language and in some cases used exclusively depending on the nature of the degree program, for instance, Chinese Literature.

In addition to the tertiary institutes mentioned above, there are a number of sub-degree program providers in Hong Kong. These institutes allow for a substantial number of students to continue with their post-secondary education, which is in-line with a government policy to sustain the development of Hong Kong as a knowledge-based economy (see <http://www.emb.gov.hk> for further details about the education system in Hong Kong).

Primary and Secondary Education in the Private Sector

Hong Kong boasts 22 International Schools at both primary and secondary school levels. The largest of these schools is the English Schools Foundation (ESF) which operates 20 separate campuses across Hong Kong, and is open to students of different ethnicities. Currently, there are students from over 55 different nationalities attending ESF schools. All International Schools are fee-paying, and many of them charge high fees which are generally beyond the means of ordinary families in Hong Kong. Most of the International Schools use English as the medium of instruction; this applies not only to schools in the ESF system, but also others such as the Korean International School. Some schools, such as the French International School, offer lessons in other languages, for example, French, German, and Mandarin.

Variety of English Taught in School

The schools system in Hong Kong used to be based on the British system,

and the variety of English promoted in schools was predominately British English. Since the 1990s, however, younger learners of English are increasingly exposed to American English following the globalization of American entertainment products such as songs, TV drama series and films. Returnees from North America, too, also tend to use American or Canadian English, which are commonly encountered in business circles.

CHANGES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN HONG KONG SAR

In this section we will briefly outline the main changes that have taken place in English language education in Hong Kong over the past twenty years or so, as shown below. These changes have been brought about by a number of factors.

- a) There have been significant suggested changes to the approaches to teaching English, and textbooks are now prepared based on these new approaches. Hong Kong teachers have had to change their teaching approach, from a more traditional grammar-translation approach to one characterized by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) techniques. Along with the ways in which English is taught in schools, there have also been changes to the examination system (e.g., School-Based Assessment and Standards-Referenced Reporting; see below).
- b) At the tertiary level, most universities in Hong Kong have embarked on internationalizing their campuses and attempt to attract foreign students to come and study, typically on short-term exchange programs. Although most universities have English-medium policies, greater attention is now being paid to the teaching and learning of content subjects through the use of English.
- c) As mentioned, since the mid-1980s the Hong Kong economy has changed from being manufacturing-based to service- and knowledge-based. This has come about due to the rapid development of mainland China and the relocation of most factory work from Hong Kong to Guangdong Province. Today, the local workforce is driven by a need to develop English language skills in the workplace in such areas as tourism, economics and finance, and logistics.

The English language is a complex issue in Hong Kong SAR given its ambiguous status of being neither a typical foreign language nor a bona

the second language. Following the return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 there has been a greater emphasis on instilling Chinese values and characteristics in the community and on helping students develop better Putonghua skills. However, Hong Kong is still a major international city and relies on English for much of its trade and commerce, in addition to tourism. The need for good language skills in English is as high as, if not higher than, pre-1997. In efforts to promote a high level of English language ability in students and the community at large the Hong Kong SAR Government has undertaken a number of initiatives. These initiatives have taken place in schools, tertiary institutes, and in the workplace (see Table 2). We will discuss each of these initiatives in turn.

TABLE 2
Hong Kong SAR Government Initiatives to Enhance English

<i>Initiatives to Enhance English</i>
<i>Provisions to enhance English in schools</i>
- Reform of the curriculum guidelines for primary and secondary schools
- Redevelopment of the public examinations
- Introduction of the Medium of Instruction policy
- Employment of Native English-speaking Teachers (NETs) ²
- Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT)
- English Enhancement Scheme
<i>Provisions to enhance English in tertiary institutes</i>
- Additional funding to universities for language enhancement programs
- Reimbursement of fees to undergraduate students who take the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test
<i>Provisions to enhance English in the workplace</i>
- Launching of the Workplace English Campaign (WEC)
- Launching of Continuing Education Fund (CEF)

Provisions to Enhance English in Schools

Reform of the Curriculum Guidelines for Primary and Secondary Schools

In every educational context curriculum guidelines need to be reformed from time to time based on the latest research findings and also in order to meet the changes of contemporary societies. The Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council (CDC) has embarked on several major curriculum renewals in the past 20 years and there are other major changes in the pipeline (see 'Future Developments' below). Currently, curriculum guidelines for primary and secondary schools are seen as an integrated process of helping students move through the various stages of linguistic development from Primary 1 (age 6) to Secondary 7 (age 19).

Although there are major changes to the curriculum at both primary and secondary levels (CDC, 1999, 2001, 2002), teachers are encouraged to

build on existing good teaching and learning practice. The main approach advocated for teaching English in Hong Kong since the early 1980s has been to use a weak form of the communicative approach (CDC, 1981, 1983; Richards & Rogers, 2001). However, although this approach has been advocated, and school textbooks have tried to cater to this approach, many teachers have relied on a more traditional grammar-translation method largely due to the exam-driven learning culture (Miller, 2000). This is why there seems to be a constant conflict of 'best practice' as advocated by the CDC and a tendency to use translation and memorization techniques in order to pass examinations.

The current objectives of the curriculum guidelines beginning at primary level are for students to (a) attain the basic standards and to strive for excellence; and (b) take initiatives to learn in a creative way and develop positive attitudes and values associated with the language.

The current guidelines attempt to shift the focus of teaching away from compartmentalization of subjects to integrating students' learning; to move away from textbook learning to a more task-based approach; and to encourage students to learn outside the classroom context (Miller, Tsang & Hopkins, 2007). In order to meet these guiding principles the CDC has drawn up a plan of how the syllabus can be arranged. This includes encouraging students to learn in three main strands: the Interpersonal Strand, the Knowledge Strand, and the Experience Strand. The Interpersonal Strand focuses on getting students to learn English so that they can exchange ideas, maintain relationships, and to get things done. This might be seen as a social dimension of learning English. The Knowledge Strand concentrates on having students solve problems and use English to find things out. This might be seen as the more academic aspects of language learning. The third strand, the Experience Strand, encourages students to use English to express their ideas and be creative with the language. This might be characterized as a more personal dimension of learning.

Based on these three strands to learning English the CDC guidelines have four Key Stages for students to reach. Each Key Stage has target tasks to be achieved before moving on to the next. Key Stage 1 is Primary 1-3; Key Stage 2 is from Primary 4-6; Key Stage 3 is from Secondary 1-3; and Key Stage 4 is from Secondary 4-5. The target level of proficiency achievement for Secondary 6 and Secondary 7 is laid down in the curriculum guide for the 'Use of English' subject in the HKALE examinations.

Redevelopment of the Public Examinations

There has always been an uneasy relationship between curriculum guidelines and English language examinations in Hong Kong. This variance is attributable to the more ethereal aspects of the curriculum guidelines (e.g., encourage students to be creative with the language), and the practical aspects of setting norm-based criteria to assess language proficiency. One of the main conflicts between advocating a communicative approach in the early 1980s and the public examination was that very little weight was given to the oral component of the test. Until 1994, the oral component of the HKCEE was only 10 per cent (increased to 18 per cent in 1996). This resulted in teachers not paying much attention to developing their students' oral skills and students feeling inadequate in social or workplace contexts where they had to use spoken English. The introduction of a new oral format to the English language test of the HKCEE in 1993 and 1994 was an attempt to address the weakness of students' oral proficiency (see Miller, 2001) by encouraging teachers to give more attention to this area of language development in class. In other words, by giving more weighting to the oral component in the public examinations it was envisaged that there would be a 'washback' effect in the teaching of spoken English in schools (Messick, 1996).

Some of the main problems with developing oral tests for use in Hong Kong are: (a) the large number of students who take the HKCEE each year (over 100,000 students in 2006, see Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007b), (b) the practical implications of testing such large numbers of students, and (c) the difficulty of maintaining testing standards. This is why oral tests are increasingly done in groups; typically groups of four students are given a discussion topic and asked to talk about the topic while two examiners monitor and assess each candidate's language use.

Although the effectiveness of changes to the teaching and learning of English by the introduction of the new oral test are questioned by some (see Cheng, 1998), there is definitely a perception now that teachers do need to devote some of the class time to activities to help students develop oral skills. Students are also increasingly aware of the need to improve their oral proficiency if they are keen on getting good scores in public examinations.

More recently, there are two important government initiatives to bring assessment with learning outcomes into line: School-Based Assessment (SBA) and Standards-Referenced Reporting (SRR). The rationale of SBA is in part to alleviate the pressure of determining students' academic results through a 'one-off' public exam, but more importantly because:

Certain components of some curricula cannot be assessed

within the context of a written examination, and this can be complemented by SBA. An even more compelling reason for SBA is that it emphasizes the assessment of a wide range of abilities of students including the process of their learning and growth, thereby strengthening the tie between assessment and teaching and utilizing assessment as a support to teaching. The validity of assessments is therefore greatly improved. Teachers are undoubtedly the most suitable people to assess the process of students' learning and growth. (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007b)

Since 1978, SBA has been adopted with regard to a small number of subjects, but it is expected to be implemented in stages to all 24 subjects of the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) by 2016. The weighting of SBA in different subjects contributing to the student's public assessment results varies, depending on the nature of the assessment task (e.g., at the HKCEE level, project work of various subjects accounts for 20 per cent to over 30 per cent, while the portfolio for 'Visual Arts' accounts for 50 per cent of the public assessment results). Clear guidelines and assessment procedures have been made available (including online) to teachers in order to ensure fairness and minimize teacher-bias (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007b). With regard to SBA guidelines for the English language subject, there will be a final round of review and consultation in early 2008.

The rationale of SRR is spelled out in SCOLAR's (Standing Committee on Language Education and Research) *Action plan to raise language standards in Hong Kong: Final review report* (2003) as follows.

The [Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment] Authority has recently decided to convert its examinations, where appropriate, from norm-referenced to standards-referenced. In a standards-referenced assessment, the performance of a candidate is compared to a set of performance standards, and grades are awarded according to the standard attained by the candidates... The Authority now plans to introduce standards-referenced HKCE examinations for both Chinese and English in 2007. (See sections 2.4.1-2.4.3) (pp. 14-15)

Accordingly, like teachers of other subjects, teachers of English are encouraged to follow a set of clear descriptors when assessing and

reporting their students' academic performance. Through the adoption of SRR, it is hoped that what a given grade or score means in terms of the student's ability level in a specific skill area will be maximally clear to all stakeholders, including teachers, prospective employers and the students themselves.

Introduction of the Medium of Instruction Policy

In September, 1998 the Hong Kong SAR government introduced a new language policy into secondary schools. In the past, most secondary schools described themselves as 'Anglo-Chinese' (Evans, 1996) and claimed that the teaching of all subjects, except Chinese language and Chinese history, was conducted in English (Gibbons, 1982). Under the new policy, over 70 per cent of secondary schools were required to change their status and use Chinese as the medium of instruction; the remaining 30 per cent were allowed to continue teaching in English and became known as EMI schools. This significant change in language education policy had been discussed many times in the past, in fact as far back as 1880 (Evans, 1996), but it was not until after the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China in July, 1997 that mother-tongue teaching in the majority of secondary schools in Hong Kong was formalized.

Although Chinese-medium (CMI) education became more formalized after 1997, it was the British administration that prepared the groundwork for the change to mother-tongue education in Hong Kong with the 'Llewellyn Report' (1982), which accepted "as a fact that the mother tongue is, all other things being equal, the best medium of teaching and learning" (Llewellyn, Hancock, Kirst, & Roeloffs, 1982, p. 28). In reality, even though most secondary schools were referred to as 'Anglo-Chinese' pre-1997, implying that all subjects other than Chinese language and history were taught in English, only a few top schools actually taught in English. Therefore, the language situation in Hong Kong schools prior to 1997 was confusing for both students and teachers. Education Department (now the Education and Manpower Bureau, EMB) guidelines that promoted English as the medium of instruction were interpreted 'freely,' with the result that in some schools English was used all the time, while in other schools it was hardly used at all. One of the reasons for this inconsistency in implementing the medium of instruction guidelines and for the lack of a unified policy of language education was related to the status of English in Hong Kong society (see 'The sociolinguistic context of Hong Kong' above).

Employment of Native English-speaking Teachers (NETs)¹

In line with using a communicative approach to the teaching and learning of English, some schools in Hong Kong have employed native speakers of English for many years as a way to bring the 'real' use of English to their students – that is, by creating opportunities for local students to interact with native speakers of English (see Boyle, 1997). However, in the late 1980s and again in 1997, the then Education Department formalized a policy to introduce Native English-speaking Teachers (NETs) to all schools in the territory. The aim of this policy was to provide each secondary school in Hong Kong with at least one NET. Schools which adopted Chinese as the medium of instruction were encouraged to hire two NETs. In 2000, the NET scheme was extended to primary schools. Probably owing to declining birth rates, with the consequence that some primary schools find it increasingly difficult to recruit enough students, an appointed NET teacher is generally shared by two primary schools (Luk & Lin, 2007, p. 207). NETs are recruited directly by the EMB online via their website and adverts in overseas newspapers. EMB targets North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK primarily. However, NETs are also recruited from other countries if they apply. Currently, there are over 800 NETs working in the Hong Kong school system.

Initially, the purpose of introducing NETs into the schools was not well planned and there was a degree of uncertainty how they might be used: in some schools the NETs were only given oral lessons, whereas in others they took on the duties of regular English teachers in the school such as being class masters and doing playground supervision. In some schools NETs were expected to adapt to the local school culture, whereas in other schools the NETs' overseas teaching experience was valued as innovative, and they were often looked upon as models for teacher development (see Boyle, 1997; Luk & Lin, 2007 for more details). Slowly, the NET scheme has taken on a more formal role and the current thinking of the role of NETs is 'net-working' (*NET-WORKING. Examples of good professional practice within the NET scheme*, 2000)

- to enhance the English language proficiency of individual students;
- to demonstrate contemporary approaches to the teaching and learning of English in their work with students; and
- to share professional ideas with their fellow English teachers.

The NETs have now developed a professional network among

themselves and share their ideas of how they work in their schools. In addition to their regular classroom teaching, NETs add value to the learning of English in Hong Kong schools by

- arranging and supervising excursions around town that involve students in project work using English;
- broadcasting public announcements daily, for example, during morning assemblies and on special occasions in school;
- helping with English Days or English Weeks in school;
- participating in the development of English corners of classroom or libraries; and
- assisting students to prepare school newsletters in English.

Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT)

In the year 2000 the EMB introduced a new English proficiency test for all teachers of English. This is known as the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT, also commonly referred to by teachers of English as the ‘benchmark test’). Held annually, the LPAT test has the primary objective of ensuring that all teachers teaching English in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong meet a basic level in the language proficiency and are able to teach effectively using the language. Although a basic level of 3 on a 5-point scale is set as the minimum acceptable level, teachers – pre-service and in-service alike – are encouraged to prepare for the test and upgrade their own language proficiency and attain as high a score as they can. Various specialized LPAT preparation courses are offered at some tertiary institutes. The format of the test is known to teachers and each year a report on the success rate and common problems teachers have is published by the EMB (see <http://www.emb.gov.hk>).

The LPAT has five sections: Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Classroom Language Assessment (pre-service teachers could only take the first four). In each of the main skill areas teachers are tested in a criterion-referenced (or standards-referenced) manner on various ELT topics and themes. In the Classroom Assessment section teachers are observed twice in class and rated on their ability to use grammar; pronunciation, stress and intonation; language for interaction with students; and language for instruction to students (for details of the language standards (‘benchmarks’) for teachers of English at different levels, see Coniam & Falvey, 2002).

Although the intention of the LPAT is to ensure that all teachers teaching English in Hong Kong schools have a basic acceptable level of language

proficiency themselves, and are able to teach effectively in the target language, the pressure on teachers to perform well on this test has generated additional stress onto the teaching profession and the effect of enforcing such a language test on teachers in helping students develop better language skills is as yet unknown (Glenwright, 2005).

English Enhancement Scheme

Introduced in 2006 and administered through the Language Fund, the English Enhancement Scheme is another government initiative to provide additional financial support to secondary schools to improve the quality of the learning and teaching of English. Accordingly, CMI schools may obtain funding of up to HK \$500,000 (ca. US \$64,200) over a maximum period of six years (capped at HK \$3 million, ca. US \$385,000), to “build up the capacity of schools for raising students’ English proficiency and to achieve sustainable effects even after the completion of the Scheme” (EMB Circular Memorandum No. 47/2006, p. 3). Among the principal criteria for funding are two types of evidence: (a) “a whole-school approach in building up an English-rich language environment” (p. 4); and (b) effective measures to boost “the overall capacity of the school in enhancing students’ proficiency in English” (EMB Circular Memorandum No. 47/2006, p. 4). Below are some of the suggested areas in which the funding could be used as part of a holistic school-based plan.

- strengthening the professional development of teachers
- creating an English-rich language environment
- effectively deploying English language teachers
- developing a holistic curriculum plan
- building up a collaborative and reflective teaching culture for both English language teachers and content subject teachers (EMB Circular Memorandum No. 47/2006, p. 7-8).

Under the English Enhancement Scheme, similar funding support is made available to EMI schools as well. Since the schools in question are already English-medium, the ceiling of funding is capped at HK \$500,000 (ca. US \$64,200; EMB Circular Memorandum No. 48/2006).

Provisions to Enhance English in Tertiary Institutes

Additional Funding to Universities for Language Enhancement Programs

In addition to the University Grants Committee’s (UGC) annual

provisions for funding to all universities for English language development courses, over the past decade the UGC has spent an additional one billion Hong Kong dollars (ca. US \$128.2 million) on special language enhancement schemes within the universities (Berry & McNeill, 2005).

All university students are required to have a minimum pass in 'Use of English' at the HKALE. The pass level is set according to the university's general entrance requirements and the program the student applies for. However, on entry to university all students must take further language courses in order to upgrade their language skills and to prepare them for English for Academic Purposes. The additional funding for language enhancement has been used to develop state-of-the-art self-access centers (Gardner & Miller, 1999), hire additional language tutors, develop ESP courses, and assist students to take internationally recognized language tests.

The universities are encouraged to explore innovative ways in which students' language skills can be improved, and each year all universities have to account for the ways in which they use their language enhancement block grants via their Language Enhancement Reports.

Reimbursement of Examination Fee for Students Taking IELTS

For several years the EMB supported the idea of an exit language test for all students to take and funded the preparation and piloting of such a test (Berry & Lewkowicz, 2000). However, the UGC eventually decided to adopt the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test and now all students are encouraged to take IELTS prior to graduation. At City University of Hong Kong, for example, it is stated that the cost of the test may be reimbursed provided the student agrees to have the following statement printed on their transcript: "The student is in possession of the result of IELTS taken on (date) under the University Grants Committee's Common English Proficiency Assessment Scheme" Although the IELTS test is not compulsory for university students, many employers are now using it as a measure of potential employees' proficiency level. This gives undergraduate students an extra incentive to do well in a de facto 'exit test.' Instrumental as the motivation certainly is, for individual students it does mean more exposure to English in terms of additional hours of classroom instruction in English.

Provisions to Enhance English in the Workplace

Launching of the Workplace English Campaign (WEC)

As well as funding a variety of initiatives to improve the standard of students

and teachers' English proficiency in schools and universities, the EMB has also developed a scheme for the workplace. The Workplace English Campaign (WEC), officially launched in the year 2000, is steered by a special working party of the Hong Kong SAR government known as the SCOLAR – see http://cd1.emb.hkedcity.net/cd/scolar/html/new_index_en.htm). The aim of WEC is to heighten public awareness of the necessity of English proficiency at work especially in the areas of business, finance and tourism. The WEC was mostly aimed at middle to low level workers in specific industries in Hong Kong. Six categories of jobs are specified as requiring some level of English proficiency: clerks, frontline service staff, receptionists/telephone operators, secretaries, low-proficiency job types, and associate professionals. A series of workplace benchmarks for the use of English at work was proposed. These benchmarks then serve as reference for the workforce to set targets for their own language improvement and to give employers a measure by which to recruit new staff or train existing staff.

Companies can apply to SCOLAR for funding in order to have tailor-made language courses designed and delivered to their staff, or to cover up to 50 per cent of the cost of sending staff to study recognized language training courses. After the course the staff can then sit for the WEC benchmark exams. For jobs which require high levels of English as an international language there are higher levels of benchmarking to achieve. Each job type is graded according to the level of English required: from level 1 to level 4 in written and spoken English. The Hong Kong Workplace English Tests are aligned with other international tests of English for business purposes (see Lockwood, 2000).

Launching of the Continuing Education Fund

In June, 2002, to encourage life-long learning as a means to enhance the competitiveness of working adults, the government launched the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) whereby local adults aged between 18 and 60 pursuing recognized continuing education and training courses are eligible for reimbursement of 80 per cent of their course fees (capped at HK \$10,000; ca. US \$1,280), on condition that the courses are successfully completed. The CEF is managed by the Student Financial Assistance Agency under the EMB. Among the most popular courses for which reimbursement claims were made are language courses, especially English and Putonghua. As of February, 2007, over 350,000 applications for reimbursement were received, and the amount disbursed has reportedly exceeded one billion Hong Kong dollars (ca. US \$128.2 million) (Lee, 2007; cf., <http://www.sfaa.gov.hk/cef>).

Other Initiatives to Promote the Learning of English

In addition to major initiatives to enhance the teaching and learning of English in Hong Kong as outlined above, the Hong Kong SAR government also supports a variety of other activities through SCOLAR, the EMB and local radio and television stations.

- a) *Teacher Development Grants*. In-service teachers of English may apply for a grant to support their further professional development (e.g., studying recognized courses). Up to 50 per cent of the cost of the teacher development course is reimbursed to teachers. Also, the EMB, via various tertiary institutes, offers occasional teacher development courses and workshops. A case in point is the Teachers' Update Course (TUC) offered at City University of Hong Kong, which is a free one-day professional development seminar for any secondary school teacher to attend. In 2006, over 400 teachers attended the English language seminar (see <http://144.214.48.16/tuc/guideline.jsp> for TUC 2007).
- b) *English on Air*. Hong Kong has one dedicated English language radio channel 'Radio 3,' a bilingual radio channel 'Radio 4' (i.e., some programs are entirely in English, others entirely in Cantonese, still others in Cantonese-English mixed code), and two local English television channels, and so in principle students and teachers alike have access to authentic English language material with local content. Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) has promoted the development of English for students via a variety of special programs. One highly successful radio program written for school students was 'Songbirds' written by Dino Mahoney (see, <http://www.rthk.org.hk/rthk>, and Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). 'Teen Time' is another daily one-hour news magazine radio program specifically aimed at young listeners. It is aired on Radio 3 of RTHK from 9pm to 10pm Monday to Friday. Teen Time is sponsored by the EMB. The program has a corresponding newspaper section in the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) where the Hot Pics of the week's programs are featured. Teen Time has been on air for 14 years and includes interviews with local students and celebrity interviews, music, features of interest to the youth of Hong Kong, and information related to studies and work. Apart from being an infotainment program, Teen Time also serves students to improve their listening skills in a fun and relaxing manner. SCOLAR also supports a range of other English language programs on both radio and television in Hong Kong.
- c) *The English Festival*. Following the launching of the successful Putonghua Festival, the English Festival was started in 2005 and has attracted

widespread interest among students, teachers and the community at large. The Festival offers students the opportunity to showcase their language skills in areas such as debating, public speaking, creative writing, poetry and rapping. Over 60,000 students and teachers participated in various English Festival activities in 2006. The aim of this event is to encourage students to 'pick up' English outside of class by means of various fun and motivating extra-curricular activities.

- d) *The SCOLAR Debating Program*. This program is designed to enhance school teachers' skills in organizing and promoting debating skills among their students. Debating or group discussion is a major component of the HKCEE oral examination and teachers are encouraged to equip their students with the necessary skills to be able to engage in a discussion on a variety of topics.
- e) *Making English newspapers available to secondary students at reduced rates*. This is a private or commercial initiative. There are two English dailies in Hong Kong: *The South China Morning Post* and *Hong Kong Standard*. The reading of local English language newspapers is widely promoted by local schools. They are made available to secondary school students at reduced costs, and this seems to have been fairly effective in promoting students' reading habit and developing their reading skills.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

As evident from the above description of activities to enhance the teaching and learning of English in Hong Kong, much effort is being made at a variety of levels and we can be sure that the Hong Kong SAR government, in collaboration with schools, tertiary institutes and various other organizations will continue to support English language education in Hong Kong. However, there is one major initiative which will soon begin which is expected to have a powerful influence on many aspects of language education in the territory. By year 2012 the whole structure of the education system in Hong Kong will undergo a major revision. The system will change from the current model of 3+2+2+3 (see Table 1) for secondary and tertiary education, to a new system of 3 years junior secondary school, 3 years senior secondary school, then 4 years tertiary education, hence the 3+3+4 model. This structural change is motivated principally by three main concerns. First and foremost, by collapsing two public examinations (HKCEE and HKALE) into one (HKDSE, 'Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education'), it is hoped that the new curriculum structure would reduce undue pressure generated by public exams,

and at the same time provide more room for learning and better-quality education in terms of a broader knowledge base and a more solid foundation for whole-person development. Second, it is thought that the 3+3+4 system will better cater for diverse learning needs of students and a broader range of abilities. Finally, unlike the current 3+2+2+3 system, it is believed that the 3+3+4 system will provide a smoother articulation with the mainstream higher education systems in the world, notably those in mainland China and North America (see <http://www.emb.gov.hk/334>; Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007c).

Under the new 3+3+4 system, students will only have two levels of secondary school education (3+3) followed by one additional year at the university (i.e., from previously three years to four years). In order to align itself with the new system a major revision of the school and university curriculum is currently underway. The revisions of the secondary school curriculum are set out in *English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6)* (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007a). The new secondary school curriculum is divided into two main parts: Compulsory Part (roughly 70% of the timetable) and Elective Part (roughly 30% of the timetable). The three key learning strands are still maintained in both parts – Interpersonal Strand, Knowledge Strand, and Experience Strand. However, while the Compulsory Part will focus on the essential contents of the English language – forms and functions, language skills, language strategies, generic skills, and promotion of positive values and attitudes to learning English – the Elective Part offers students the opportunity to study English by way of areas which interest them most. Students may take four or five electives during their three years of senior secondary school. Examples of electives are as follows (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007a, pp. 29-30).

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Language Arts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning English through Drama • Learning English through Short Stories • Learning English through Poems and Songs • Learning English through Popular Culture |
| Non-language Arts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning English through Sports Communication • Learning English through Debating • Learning English through Social Issues • Exploring English through Workplace Communication |

At the university level, changes to English language training are still being considered. However, as students will have one year less of learning English at secondary school (i.e., classroom input of English will most

likely be reduced by up to 400 hours), they may need to have additional learning resources at the university in order to be adequately prepared for coping with programs taught in English. Against this background, all tertiary institutions will need to address problems engendered by students' learning through the medium of English.

We believe the new changes to the school curriculum will enhance some aspects of English language education in Hong Kong. For example, students may spend less time studying to pass public exams and focus more on communicative aspects of language learning and use. Furthermore, the new curriculum is designed with all levels of learners in mind and not just for those who are academically inclined. Curriculum design has to be dynamic and organic in order to meet the changing needs of contemporary society. The new curriculum design to be introduced into the Hong Kong educational system is an attempt to meet these needs. The outcome of such changes, however, will not be apparent for some time to come.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections we have attempted to give an overview of the situation of English language education in Hong Kong. We have used a mostly descriptive format and have kept our critique to the minimum. However, as academics working in the area of English language education, we believe that the principal government agencies (EMB, CDC, and SCOLAR) are doing a reasonably good job in offering a host of activities for teachers to upgrade their language skills, as well as promoting the learning of English by all students in the education system. Notwithstanding these efforts, there is still a popular perception that the standard of English is declining in Hong Kong (the 'complaint tradition,' see Bolton, 2003). As mentioned, such a widespread perception is unfounded. Much of this may be explained by the simple fact that education of the elite has given way to education of the masses, and that socioeconomically Hong Kong has moved from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. Consequently, greater expectations are made of school-leavers by employers, both local and international, notably in the white-collar workplace.

In our positions as (associate) professors working on language education degree programs (BATESL, MATESL, MAESP) at City University of Hong Kong, we often have the opportunity to discuss issues with in-service teachers of English – issues related to ELT in Hong Kong schools. From

these discussions we have identified a number of frequently talked about issues and concerns.

- a) Large classes: English language teachers are still often faced with classes of 35 plus students. While most teachers see the pedagogical merits of adopting a more communicative approach to language teaching (Miller & Aldred, 2000), they find it difficult to implement it with such large classes. While flexible grouping is a feasible coping strategy, maintaining discipline and keeping the noise level down in class is a real challenge and, for many teachers, a higher-order priority. Under the leadership of Mr. Donald Tsang, the new Chief Executive as from April, 2007, there is some indication that the issue of class size is among the key educational issues currently being scrutinized.
- b) Mixed-mode and mixed-code teaching: Teachers regularly face pressure from students to use Cantonese in the English lesson. The use of Cantonese in English lessons has more or less become institutionalized in many schools so that students expect explanations in their mother tongue (L1). Given this situation, students are rarely exposed to the 'real' uses of the second language and continue to seek support in their L1 at all levels of their learning. For instance, many students in schools and universities rely on annotating English handouts and lecture notes in Chinese, including the pronunciation of unfamiliar vocabulary words. This continued reliance on Chinese translation even in EMI contexts makes it difficult for teachers to keep to the English medium in class. Also, many teachers find it more effective to use Cantonese to maintain classroom discipline. These teachers face a dilemma, however: on one hand, they need to use Cantonese as a subtle means of signaling rapport with students; on the other hand, they need to meet the EMB directive banning the use of (Cantonese-English) mixed code in class. In some real sense, therefore, the banning of mixed code has fueled a sense of guilty conscience among teachers, which may not be conducive to effective language teaching (cf., Li, 1999).
- c) Mother-tongue education: As mentioned, the majority of schools in Hong Kong now use Cantonese as the medium of instruction. However, there is still a perception that EMI schools are 'better' than CMI schools. This unfounded perception is widely shared among both parents and students, and teachers in CMI schools face increasing pressure to motivate their students and to convince them that they can become proficient users of English, and that it is a useful language to learn (Tsui, Shum, Wong, Tse, & Ki, 1999).

- d) Learners' attitudes: The issue of learners' attitudes towards learning and using English is one of the main obstacles teachers talk about. Many students who come through the education system in Hong Kong do not rate their English language proficiency very highly. These learners have been exposed to many hours of language classes, but do not see much immediate need for using English in their daily life. They tend to perceive English as having an instrumental function in society and so few develop deep learning approaches (Biggs, 1987). Hong Kong students often aim for achievement goals in their learning rather than mastery goals (Hidi & Harachiewicz, 2000). English is rarely used by Hong Kong students in social situations among themselves or with their families and so the perception seems to be that a functional use of language for study or basic work-related purposes is sufficient (Walters & Balla, 1998). If this is indeed the case, learners' attitudes towards learning English would not be conducive to some of the stated curriculum goals of becoming independent learners and being creative and flexible in their approaches to learning English.
- e) Pressure on Teachers: The EMB has been proactive in trying to provide stimulating and innovative curriculum changes. However, these changes have been met with resistance from some teachers who feel that the changes are too many and too often. Teachers in Hong Kong are faced with heavy teaching loads and large classes. Traditional methods are often still expected by students, parents and some principals in order to prepare for the all important public examinations, and the challenge of catering to the expectations of these groups while implementing new and innovative methods is more than many teachers feel able to do. There is also a feeling of resentment from many teachers that changes to the curriculum are often implemented in a top-down fashion (although there is always a consultation process before any proposed changes to the curriculum). There have been problems in implementing both the communicative approach (Education Commission, 1994) and the task-based approach (see Carless, 2002). One of the criticisms was that these new approaches were not well thought out for the local context, and had been imposed on the teachers and students with little prior consultation.
- f) Coping with increasing learner diversity: The impending 3+3+4 school system has generated considerable concern among secondary school teachers of English, in that the problem of learner diversity – already a major problem during the two years of senior secondary education under the current 3+2+2+3 school system – is expected to become even more acute as the problem of a wide range of student abilities will most

certainly be extended for one more year till the Sixth Form. While the education authorities are aware of this problem, there is as yet no effective means or general advice regarding how this problem could be handled.

In this chapter we have given an overview of the position English occupies in Hong Kong society from its early days as a language of the colonial power, to the contemporary uses needed for a knowledge-based society Hong Kong now is. We then described the main efforts that successive Hong Kong administrations have undertaken in the past 20 years to promote the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of English. As we can see, there have been many initiatives and there is no lack of government support. However, as pointed out in the section ‘Future developments,’ not all the initiatives have been embraced by various stakeholders. In sum, with regard to key issues related to ELT curriculum development in Hong Kong, the crucial problem is that, while there is tremendous societal demand for proficient speakers of English (and increasingly, of Putonghua) among the local workforce in such important domains as the government, law, education and business – indeed a *sine qua non* of the continued well-being of the SAR – the language learning environment is unfortunately far from being conducive to acquiring English, largely because being a predominantly Chinese society, Hongkongers are reluctant to use English entirely for intra-ethnic communication – unlike Chinese Singaporeans in this regard. To what extent will the Hong Kong SAR Government’s initiatives to implement curriculum changes in the past decade (e.g., mother-tongue education, the NET scheme, the English Enhancement scheme, Continuing Education Fund, SBA, SRR) turn the tide toward the goal of achieving biliteracy and trilingualism, of which proficiency development in English is an important part, only time will tell.

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NOTE

1. The precursor of the ‘Native English-speaking Teacher’ (NET) scheme was called

‘the Expatriate English Teacher Scheme’ (EETS). It was implemented in the late 1980s. The NET scheme is more recently re-titled as the ‘Native-speaking English Teacher’ scheme (http://www.emb.gov.hk/FileManager/En/content_1273/net-working.pdf; see also Boyle, 1997; Luk & Lin, 2007).

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