

Investigating how the curriculum reform impacts on student learning in English language education in schools in Hong Kong

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Outline

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Introduction

- A broader perspective: 'Curriculum Reform' and 'Education Reform'
- "an important mission of education is to enhance the knowledge, ability, quality, cultivation and international outlook of the people of Hong Kong"

[Education Commission (2000). Learning or life, learning through life - Reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong, p. 3]

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Introduction (cont.)

- "to offer a quality school curriculum that helps students meet the challenges of a knowledge-based, interdependent and changing society, as well as globalisation, fast technological development, and a competitive economy"

[Curriculum Development Council (2001). Learning to learn – Life-long learning and whole-person development, p. i]

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Introduction (cont.)

- "The Commission is also conscious of the fact that Hong Kong's workforce will quickly lose its competitiveness in the Asia Pacific Region if nothing is done to upgrade the language proficiency of our students. There is an urgent need in Hong Kong to enhance the proficiency of Chinese (including Putonghua) and English of our young people in order to meet changing political, economic, social and cultural demands." (ECR6, 1995 & 1996, p. 6)
- Biliterate (Chinese and English) trilingual (Cantonese, English and Putonghua) policy formally announced in Chief Executive's Policy

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Research questions

Research questions:

1. What has the Hong Kong SAR government done to date to promote English under the education and curriculum reform?
2. Will the reform policy be automatically translated into classroom practice?

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Research method

- Qualitative research method
- Government documents, government statistics, newspaper reports, lesson observations, feedback from schools and teachers



Policy level

Problem:

Have the English standards of Hong Kong students declined?



Policy level (cont.)

Official responses:

- 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)
- “Given these changes, it serves no useful purpose to deliberate whether language standards have fallen or not” (SCOLAR, 2003, p. 5)



Policy level (cont.)

- The Secretary for Education, Michael Suen, acknowledged at a symposium that “English-language proficiency in Hong Kong had declined substantially, and something needed to be done to reverse the trend” [Back to basics (2008, March 31). *South China Morning Post.*, p. EDT17]



Policy level (cont.)

Indicators of declining English standards:

1. 2008 Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA)
 - English got the lowest scores among the three subjects assessed
 - More than 30% S3 students failed to achieve basic competency in English
 - 7.8% of S3 students reached the basic competency level when they studied in P6 in 2005, but their English had deteriorated after three years(HKEAA, 2008, TSA results)



Policy level (cont.)

2. HKCE and HKAL

- The number of candidates taking Syllabus A of English (HKCEE) after 1997 increased by nearly 4 times:
7567 (in 1997) → 29322 (in 2006)
(see statistics)
- Comparison of candidates' performance in English subject in 2006 (HKCE) and 2008 (HKAL) (see statistics)



Policy level (cont.)

3. ELPAT results (i.e. English Benchmark Test)

- The attainment rates of both the speaking and writing papers have been consistently low compared with the other papers
- In average only about 40% of candidates attained the benchmark of the two productive skills in English (i.e. speaking and writing) (See statistics of 2001-2009)



Policy level (cont.)

4. Empirical studies

- Evans, Jones, Rusmin & Cheung (1998): surveying and interviewing students, teachers, parents and businesspeople – rated their own abilities in English slightly below average, and these groups of people blamed each other for declining English standards
- Hung (2000): many grammatical errors due to mother tongue influence were found in university students' writing
- Stone (1994): university students were found to have insufficient word knowledge skills drawing from the data of ACER Word Knowledge Test



Policy level (cont.)

- Poon (2008): surveying English teachers of 10 secondary schools who have taught in those schools for at least eight years have witnessed the falling English standards of the students in their own schools
- “the results of this study are consistent with general anecdotal and research evidence suggesting that the English proficiency of Hong Kong undergraduates is low” (Stone, 1994, p. 97)



Policy level (cont.)

5. Employers' views

- Business Outlook Survey 2008 conducted by American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong: the level of English proficiency was one of the factors “that were low on performance ... but high in importance” (see statistics)
- Business Prospect Survey 2007 conducted by Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce: the respondents “reflected dissatisfaction with language skills (English 65.9% and Putonghua 45.8%)” (Chamber Press Release, 15 Nov, 2007)



Policy level (cont.)

6. Politician's view

Severe criticism of Stephen Bradley, the former British consul general, prior to his departing Hong Kong in March 2008: “It has significantly declined as a language in general use” (Wong, 2008).



Policy level (cont.)

Solution?

What has the SAR government done to raise the English standards since the launching of the curriculum and education reforms in the past decade?



Policy level (cont.)

Measures concerning schools:

1. an additional 4.2 million library fund was allocated to each school for the purchase of English (and Chinese) books, and teaching materials and teaching aids
2. English (and Chinese) Extensive Reading Schemes were launched to nurture reading culture in the schools
3. Multi-Media Language Centres were set up in schools to facilitate language teaching and learning

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Policy level (cont.)

4. a Language Teaching Support Unit was set up within the Education Bureau in 2003 to support language teachers at school in the areas of curriculum development, teaching methods and strategies, reflective teaching, collaborative teaching, assessment, etc.
5. CMI secondary schools were entitled to a total of additional HK\$ 3 million spreading throughout six years whereas EMI secondary schools got a one-off additional sum of HK\$ 0.5 million
6. HK\$ 0.6 billion was used to launch a NET scheme in 1998 to enable each secondary school to employ one NET, and the scheme was extended to primary schools in 2002

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Policy level (cont.)

Measures concerning school teachers:

7. Benchmark requirements for teachers' language competence in English (and Putonghua) were established in 2000, and the Benchmark Test started to be run in 2001. All serving language teachers must meet the benchmark from September 2006 onwards.
8. An overseas English immersion programme was made a mandatory component in the full-time Diploma in Education programme training English teachers in 2004-05. HK\$ 0.3 billion was put aside to subsidize the English major student-teachers for the immersion programme.

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Policy level (cont.)

9. HK\$ 1.1 billion was added to the Language Fund in 2006 to support English language teaching in secondary schools
10. HK\$ 0.3 billion was drawn from the Language Fund to set up the Professional Development Incentive Grant Scheme for Language Teachers. Each applicant will be reimbursed 50% of the tuition fee of an entire programme of study, up to a maximum of HK\$ 30,000

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Policy level (cont.)

Measures concerning university students:

11. Tightened entry requirement: a mandatory pass in both English (and Chinese) subjects in the HKCEE, and a pass in the Use of English paper in the HKALE
12. IELTS was adopted as the English Exit Test for all universities in Hong Kong starting from 2002-2003 on a voluntary basis.
13. Continue to offer mandatory English language courses to enhance the language proficiency of their students

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Policy level (cont.)

Measures concerning the workplace:

14. 'Workplace English Campaign'
 - launched on 28 February 2000
 - Duration: 1 year
 - Aim: to enhance the English proficiency of employees to meet the increasing demands of Hong Kong being an international centre of commerce, finance and tourism
 - Funding: HK \$ 62 million
 - Target groups: secretaries, clerks, frontline service personnel and receptionists/telephone operators
 - Three areas of work: English training subsidy scheme, business and schools partnership program, and benchmarking

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Policy level (cont.)

15. Society-wide measures :

- a project 'English in the air' launched by SCOLAR with commercial TV stations to produce some English TV programmes with English subtitles and related learning materials for teenagers during 2003-2004
- Activities held by different organisations with the sponsorship of SCOLAR, e.g. English Drama Fest, English Public Speaking Contest

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Classroom level

Query:

Will the policy be automatically transferred to classroom practice?

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Classroom level (cont)

Development stages of Curriculum Reform:

1. Short-term phase (2001/02 – 2005/06): Govt provides on-site school-based support and conduct 'seed' projects
2. Medium-term phase (2006/07 – 2010/11): Govt disseminates the experiences accumulated during the Short-term phase to help schools develop school-based curricula, and improve teaching and learning strategies
3. Long-term phase (beyond 2011): Govt continues to work in partnership with schools and help schools further improve the quality of education

(Curriculum Development Council, 2001, pp. ii-iii)

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Classroom level (cont)

Curriculum Reform documents:

- Learning to learn (2001)
- English Language Education curriculum guide (P1-S3) (2002)
- English Language Education curriculum guide (P1-P6) (2004)
- English Language Education curriculum and assessment guide (S4-S6) (2007)

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Classroom level (cont)

English language teaching prior to Sept 2006:

- Traditional: adopting audiolingual approach rather than communicative approach
- Grammar-based: drilling sentence patterns
- Dictation (especially in primary)
- Focus on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking
- Process writing
- Mol: Chinese was used to teach English in many primary schools

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Classroom level (cont)

Some phenomena related to ELT since Sept 2006:

1. The English lessons in *some* schools have become more lively than before
 - Shared reading
 - Children's literature and language arts
 - Dramatization
 - Communicative activities (e.g. games, role plays, pair work)
 - Phonics tasks
 - Etc.

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Classroom level (cont)

Some examples of schools using lively methods to improve English teaching and learning:

- 108 primary schools participated in an English project initiated by CECES (Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education & Services) to use stories and songs to teach English (Sing Tao Daily, 2006, 17 Nov)
- Using children's literature (*Ming Pao*, 2004, 31 August)
- Using drama (*Sing Tao Daily*, 2004, 27 Oct; *Ming Pao*, 2006, 24 Nov, 8 Dec)
- Using language arts (*Ming Pao*, 2008, Dec 16; *Sing Tao Daily*, 2009, July 31)
- Using IT (*Ming Pao*, 2007, 9 March)

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Classroom level (cont)

Is the phenomenon of lively English lessons in some schools an outcome of the government's policy?

- English 'Seed' projects conducted by CDI (28 covering 3 areas: curriculum planning and teaching and learning strategies, critical thinking and creativity & assessment for learning)
- Schools' own initiatives
- Initiatives of organisations and language experts

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Classroom level (cont)

2. Some problems with many so-called 'lively' English lessons (based on my lesson observations in both primary and secondary schools in the past few years):

- There is no clear purpose of using games, songs, role plays, pair work, etc., just for the sake of making the lesson 'lively' only
- Very superficial teaching, not much is taught in terms of English language learning
- Teaching effectiveness is hindered by teachers' English standards especially in a communicative classroom
- Some students start to become bored by the repeated use of games, songs, role plays, pair work, etc.

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Classroom level (cont)

3. Among those schools that adopt a more lively approach to ELT, there are more primary schools than secondary schools, and there are more DSS schools than aided schools.

4. Using the traditional approach to teach English is still dominant.

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Classroom level (cont)

Question:

Why has the English curriculum reform policy not been implemented territorially?

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Classroom level (cont)

1. Structural/'historical' reasons
 - Prior to the full implementation of benchmark requirement in Sept 2006, anyone could teach English as long as s/he could get a post, so there were many unqualified English language teachers.
 - Examination-oriented school system remains despite the reform: e.g. TSA
 - Class size

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Classroom level (cont)

2. Policy reasons

- Education reform has brought about heavy administrative work and burden for teachers (e.g. closing down of schools, short-term contracts)
- Compulsory Chinese medium instruction policy is a contributing factor to the decline of English standards of both the students and teachers



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Classroom level (cont)

3. Personal reasons

- Some teachers especially those who are retiring resist to change their pedagogy
- Some who have met the benchmark requirement by exemption or by taking courses are not necessarily good at English



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Recommendations

1. Problems brought about by Structural/'historical' reasons:

- To quicken the process of retraining unqualified English teachers
- To review TSA to reduce the possibility of drilling students

2. Problems brought about by policy reasons:

- To slow down Education Reform and reduce teachers' load
- To ensure a stable working environment



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Recommendations (cont)

- To give teachers especially English (and Chinese language) teachers more time and space
- To enhance the English standards of English teachers
- To encourage sharing and collaborative teaching but not to the extent of limiting their creativity in teaching through group preparation and standardized teaching materials
- To encourage competent English speakers to join the teaching profession
- To create a better English environment within schools and territorially



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Conclusion

- The greatest resource of Hong Kong is its human capital
- To raise the English standards of our students is imminent if Hong Kong wants to maintain its competitive edge in the globalised economy



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