

# Which Agenda? Medium of Instruction Policy in Post-1997 Hong Kong

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The mandatory use of mother tongue education in Hong Kong after 1997 met strong objections from the local community. While the government put forward a comprehensive educational agenda to justify the implementation of the policy, this paper raises the question of whether the change in language policy was mainly driven by an educational agenda, or whether there were other underlying agendas. To address the question, the history of the medium of instruction in Hong Kong is reviewed, and the experience of three decolonised Asian countries, Malaysia, Singapore and India, is discussed. The paper suggests that the political agenda has always played an important role in language policy formulation and implementation. In view of the important role that language plays in nation building and social reconstruction, it is inevitable that Chinese medium instruction will become more and more important. How the government will balance the need to strengthen the national identity of Hong Kong people and the need to maintain the international outlook and economic development of Hong Kong will have a major impact on the review of the new medium of instruction policy in 2001.

## The Current Situation

For more than two decades, the choice of the medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools was left to the schools. However, in 1997, the government announced that starting from September 1998, Chinese would be the default medium of instruction for all schools. Those schools which wanted to use English as a medium of instruction had to apply to the Education Department (the equivalent of the Ministry of Education at national level) for approval. They needed to satisfy the criteria laid down (see the following section). The rationale for this change of policy is that mother tongue is the best medium for learning.

Out of a total of 421 government and government-subsidised secondary schools, 124 applied to use English as the medium of instruction. One hundred applications were approved. Twenty out of the 24 schools which did not obtain approval appealed against the decision. An Appeals Committee was appointed by the government to handle these cases. Subsequently, 14 appeals were allowed. Currently, there are 114 schools using English as the medium of instruction (hereafter EMI schools) and 307 schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction (hereafter CMI schools).

This new medium of instruction (hereafter MOI) policy has aroused unprecedentedly strong emotional reactions from members in almost every sector in the community. Schools see this policy as taking away their autonomy and as socially divisive. A survey conducted by the Hong Kong Subsidised School Council in 1999 shows that 66% of the principals disagreed with the policy. Many of the CMI schools are resentful that they have become second-class schools and

their students, second-class students. In early 1999, we administered two sets of questionnaires to all 307 CMI schools, one to the school administrators and the other all secondary one (Grade 7) content subject teachers. Out of the 152 school administrators who responded (a return rate of about 50%), 52.7% indicated that their schools had suffered a loss of better ability students and 32% indicated that the academic standard of their student intake had declined. Parents who could not get their children into EMI schools see the policy as denying their children access to higher education and well-paid jobs. In addition the business sector has objected vehemently and warned that this would lead to a decline in English standards. Consequently Hong Kong's competitiveness and its status as an international city would be compromised.

The responses from the community are perhaps predictable. Parents have always wanted English medium education. The business sector has always demanded more and better English. Schools have always wanted to have autonomy over their school policies. Mother tongue has always been recognised as the best medium of instruction. What is it that has caused the government to change its policy? Was it really motivated by an educational agenda, as the government has claimed? Or was it motivated by a political agenda, which the government has denied? It has been widely acknowledged that underlying an issue as sensitive as language policy, there are political, social, economic and educational concerns. What is interesting is which agenda comes to the fore and which gets pushed into the background, when and why.

In this paper, we shall address the question of whether it is the educational agenda which prevailed over other agendas in the change of language policy in post-1997 Hong Kong, or whether policy change was driven by other agendas. In trying to make sense of the new policy, we shall draw upon the experience of language policy changes in ex-colonial countries in Asia since gaining independence. We shall also review the history of the medium of instruction policy in Hong Kong, its underlying agendas, the dynamics between these agendas, and how they have shaped the formulation and implementation of the policy.

### **New MOI Policy: An Educational Agenda**

To justify the policy change, the government put forward a strong educational agenda. In the *Medium of Instruction Guidance* issued by the Education Department to schools, the educational benefits of mother tongue teaching were listed. It says,

with the use of Chinese as MOI lifting language barriers in the study of most subjects, students will be better able to understand what is taught, analyse problems, express views, develop an enquiring mind and cultivate critical thinking. Mother-tongue teaching thus leads to better cognitive and academic development. (September 1997: 3)

Three criteria were laid down which schools must meet if they wish to become or remain EMI schools. The first criterion is that not less than 85% of their student-intake should belong to Group I and/or Group III in the Medium of Instruction Assessment Grouping (MIGA). The groupings are based on students' performance in their primary 5 and 6 internal school assessments in

two subject groups, English and Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Group I pupils belong to the top 40% of both Chinese and English subject groups. They are supposed to be capable of benefiting from either English or Chinese medium education. Group III are those within the top 40% of one subject group and within the top 50% of the other subject group. They are supposedly capable of benefiting more from Chinese medium education but can also learn effectively in English. The rest belong to Group II who can supposedly only benefit from Chinese medium education. The second criterion is that the content subject teachers must be able to conduct lessons effectively in English. Their capability is to be certified by their principals. The third criterion is that the school has in place programmes and strategies to help secondary 1 (grade 7) students to switch from learning through Chinese to learning through English.

The criteria used for vetting applications from schools were based on several research studies. The first criterion was based on two studies on the effectiveness of various language media and modes of presentation in junior secondary levels in Anglo-Chinese schools.<sup>2</sup> The various media were English only, English, Cantonese and bilingual, and the various modes were Chinese, English, English with Chinese gloss and Chinese with English gloss. The results of both studies showed that only about 30% of the students with top English proficiency could perform effectively when the text and the medium were in English. They also showed that another 30% or so had serious difficulties coping with English medium but would be able to work effectively in the Chinese medium. The rest of the students came somewhere in between. The effects of different media of instruction were more significant in heavily language dependent subjects like history but less significant in subjects such as science (see Johnson *et al.*, 1985; Brimer *et al.*, 1985)

The findings of the above two studies were confirmed by a longitudinal study of 7500 junior secondary students over a period of two years on the amount of English spoken in class, students' comprehension of English instruction and the textbooks. The results showed that there was a correlation between language proficiency and academic achievement in other subjects. Students with a high level of English proficiency coped well in English medium education whereas those who had low English proficiency suffered. This study further showed that more and more Cantonese was used in instruction in Anglo-Chinese schools. Teachers often resorted to Cantonese to explain complex concepts as Cantonese or mixed code<sup>3</sup> was more effective in promoting classroom interaction (see Ip & Chan, 1985). All three studies suggest that for students to benefit from English medium instruction, their English proficiency must have reached a threshold level. Otherwise, their academic achievement would suffer badly.

The first criterion also requires students to perform well in Chinese in order to benefit from an English medium education. This criterion was theoretically motivated by the concept of 'Common Underlying Language Proficiency' proposed by Cummins and Swain (1986). Their study showed that skills acquired through L1 can be transferred to L2. Hence good performance in Chinese and in learning through Chinese predict high ability to cope with learning through English. Indeed, in Brimer *et al.*'s study (1985), Chinese proficiency was strongly correlated with English proficiency.

The second criterion is that the English of subject content teachers should be

proficient enough to conduct lessons effectively in English. This criterion was based on findings from classroom observations that many teachers, especially in science and mathematics, have limited English proficiency and therefore have difficulties teaching entirely through English. In other words, the prevalent use of mixed code in English medium schools was a result of the lack of an adequate command of English not only of students but also teachers.

The third criterion is that schools should have in place support strategies and programmes, such as the bridging programme. This was based on the observation made by researchers that there is a gap between the students' English proficiency and the demands of the secondary curriculum on their English. Consequently teachers have to resort to Cantonese, especially when they are dealing with complex concepts. To bridge the gap, researchers proposed that assistance should be given to enable students to switch from Chinese medium to English medium in the form of a 'bridging course' (Johnson & Swain, 1994).

In addition to the studies reported above, there were a number of research studies which reached the same conclusion (see for example Siu, 1979; Siu & Mak, 1992; Ho, 1986). There is little doubt that the new MOI policy is backed up by educational research evidence. The beneficial effect of mother tongue education was indeed testified by school principals after the policy was implemented in 1998. In the 1999 survey on CMI schools reported in the previous section, out of the 142 teachers who responded (return rate about 63%), 71.4% of the teachers reported that after using CMI, the students were more motivated to learn and able to engage in higher-order thinking. Eighty-five per cent of the school administrators also indicated likewise.

### **Educational Agenda or Other Agendas?**

From the above discussion, it appears that the decision made by the government to mandate the adoption of mother tongue education in schools was indeed driven mainly by an educational agenda, as it claimed. In response to the observation that the new MOI policy was a political decision, the government argued that the policy was laid down in 1990 in the Education Commission Report No. 4 (ECR, 1990). According to them, it was sheer coincidence that the implementation date should fall after the change of sovereignty and not before. However, the debate over the medium of instruction in school education in Hong Kong has been going on for more than a century. In almost every education report of one kind or another, educational consultants have recommended on educational grounds that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction. In the past hundred years, the government had always used the demand for English by parents and the need for English in the economic development of Hong Kong as reasons for not taking the recommendation on board. It appeared as though social and economic agendas prevailed over the educational agenda. But were they the only agendas or were there other agendas? What caused the government to change its position now despite the unprecedentedly strong objections from parents, the schools as well as the business sector? Was it a sudden realisation on the part of the government that it should put the educational interests of students before everything else?

It has been pointed out by many language policy studies that the choice of the

medium of instruction in schools is never simply an educational issue. It is intertwined with social, political and economic concerns. Ferguson *et al.* (1977: 150) observes, '... decisions on language questions are notoriously influenced by emotional issues such as tribal, regional and religious identification, national rivalries, preservation of elites and so on'. Central to the decisions on language policy is the choice of the medium of instruction because it determines who will participate in power and wealth. As Weinstein (1984) remarked,

Education policy is increasingly politicised because of the language issue, and the language issue arises because of ... an attempt to integrate previously separated or even segregated populations together ... Schools are the gateway to participation in the political and economic system, and they help to build a sense of national identity. (p. 115)

But how relevant are these observations to Hong Kong? The history of the MOI policy in Hong Kong shows that they are highly relevant.

### **Hong Kong pre-1997**

For more than a hundred years, educators, local and overseas, have advocated using Chinese as a medium of instruction in schools in Hong Kong. Way back in the 1860s, F. Stewart, the first ever Inspector of Government schools brought in by the Hong Kong Government to supervise government schools, pointed out that too much emphasis had been placed on English in schools at the expense of learning Chinese and cautioned that there should not be any attempt to 'denationalise' the young people of Hong Kong (Annual Report 1866, cited in Bickley, 1990: 294). He pointed out that learning content subjects through a foreign language will adversely affect the quality of learning and that studying Chinese would help students to learn English better. However, his caution and recommendations were not heeded by the government (see Tsui, 1996).

More than half a century later, in the, 1930s, another British education inspector, E. Burney, in view of the disproportionate amount of time spent on teaching English, recommended that

educational policy in the Colony should be gradually reorientated so as eventually to secure for the pupils, first, a command of their own language sufficient for all needs of thought and expression, and secondly, a command of English limited to the satisfaction of vocational needs. (Burney, 1935: 25)

### **White Paper, 1965**

In 1963, R. Marsh and J. Sampson, appointed by the government to examine the education needs of Hong Kong, remarked that using English as a medium of instruction imposed a very heavy burden on students and they recommended that, with the establishment of a Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1964, there should be more Chinese medium schools where English is taught as a second language (see Marsh and Sampson, 1963: 107). However, the Working Party on the Recommendations of the Report responded as follows:

We appreciate the importance to Chinese youth of making a thorough study of their own language and cultural heritage, and the educational

advantage of learning through the mother tongue. Indeed, we consider that many of the pupils in Anglo-Chinese secondary schools are unable to benefit fully from the education provided because of the difficulty of studying through the medium of a second language. Nevertheless, we are reluctant to endorse this recommendation in the face of marked parental preference for Anglo-Chinese secondary education, the fact that the English language is an important medium of international communication and that a knowledge of it has undoubted commercial value in Hong Kong. (Hong Kong Government, 1965: 83, para. 245)

The Working Party was fully aware of the importance of using the mother tongue for learning and the adverse effect of learning through English on students educationally. However, parental preference and the economic development of Hong Kong were used as the reasons for refuting the recommendations made by Marsh and Sampson. The social and economic agendas were put forward by the government as overriding educational concerns. In the subsequent White Paper on education in 1965, the whole issue of the medium of instruction was not even mentioned in the main text of the Report.

### **White Paper, 1974**

In 1973, the Report of the Board of Education on the expansion of secondary school education in Hong Kong in the next decade (referred to as the Education Green Paper) made the following observation:

The medium of instruction bears significantly upon the quality of education offered at post-primary level. Pupils coming from primary schools where they have been taught in the medium of Cantonese have a grievous burden put on them when required to absorb new subjects through the medium of English. We recommend that Chinese become the usual language of instruction in the lower forms of secondary schools, and that English should be studied as the second language. (Hong Kong Government, 1973: 6, para. 16)

The subsequent White Paper on Education Policy published in 1974 did not adopt the recommendations made in the Green Paper, but again put forward parental concern and Hong Kong's economic development as justifications. However, there was an apparent shift in the government's position. Instead of just turning down the recommendation, they left the choice of medium of instruction to schools.

On educational grounds there are strong arguments for maintaining that the medium of instruction for children aged 12–14 should be Chinese. However, there are other considerations. Hong Kong is a commercial and industrial centre which has reached a high level of technical and professional sophistication and has established close contacts all over the world. It is undeniable that Hong Kong, if it is to maintain its progress, will continue to need people at all levels in commerce, industry and the professions who are at home in English as well as Chinese. For these practical reasons, the standards of Chinese and English must be maintained, and indeed, if possible, improved, and parents are likely to demand that they

should be ... It is the Government's intention that individual school authorities should themselves decide whether the medium of instruction should be English or Chinese for any particular subject in junior secondary forms. (Hong Kong Government, 1974: 7, para 2.16, 2.17)

In 1974, for the first time, the public school leaving examination, Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, was available in either English or Chinese. The modification of the government's position is not surprising if we consider the wider sociopolitical context at the time. Up to the seventies, the British had maintained an old colonial style of government in which they saw themselves as colonisers and the Hong Kong people the colonised. A very important aim of maintaining English education was to produce English speaking Chinese elites who could serve as brokers between the governed and the governing. The Governor Hennessy, soon after his arrival in Hong Kong, publicly declared that the primary aim of the government was to provide English education and that vernacular education should be left to voluntary and private bodies (Pennycook, 1998). This aim had been very much the guiding principle for their educational policy despite the fact that over time, there had been more public provision for vernacular schools. The social discontent over colonial rule culminated in a social disturbance in 1966 and a riot in 1967. After this, the British realised that they had to change their style of government. The replacement of David Trench by Murray McLehose in 1971 marked a turning point in its approach to public policy formulation. As Cheng and Wong (1997) point out, since the early 1970s, the colonial government had tried to strengthen the legitimacy of its colonial rule by public consultation. The mechanism of public consultation later evolved into the setting up of advisory committees with appointed non-government officials sitting on them. Vocal critics of the government were sometimes appointed to these committees but they were always the minority. Public consultation often took the form of issuing a consultation document and a consultation period during which the public could submit in writing comments and suggestions. The Education Green Paper in 1973, for example, was a consultation document.

The early 1970s was also a time when China began to play a more prominent role in international politics by its 'ping-pong diplomacy'. In 1972, China's joining the United Nations had a strong impact on Hong Kong people. The Chinese as an Official Language Movement also took place in the early seventies. Thousands took to the streets to demand the recognition of Chinese as an official language. There was an increasingly strong sense of awareness of the Chinese identity of Hong Kong people. In 1974, under public pressure, Chinese was established as an official language.

Given the social and political sentiments at the time, it would not have been possible for the government to keep ignoring the educational agenda, which was emotionally charged, despite the fact that it still held social and economic agendas above everything else. The government also needed to establish the legitimacy of its policies by incorporating views expressed in the public consultations. Therefore, the government took the 'heat off' by shifting the responsibility of choosing the medium of instruction to schools and by allowing more flexibility in choosing the medium at subject level. The government knew that this flexibility would not lead to fundamental changes. When English was still the only work-

ing official language, when a good command of English, and not Chinese, was still the most important requirement for joining the civil service, and when the most prestigious university was English medium, what would parents crave for and what choice would schools make? The government probably had answers to these questions. Although the setting up of the Chinese University in 1964 did bring about an increase in the number of Chinese medium schools from 79 to 114, it was outnumbered by English medium schools which increased from 89 to 229.

In 1982, a panel of overseas educationists conducted a comprehensive review of education in Hong Kong and they pointed out that it was unrealistic to use a second language to deliver universal education in a largely monolingual society.<sup>4</sup> The Report described the situation in education as 'lamentable'. It put forward strong educational arguments against English medium education as follows:

Many Chinese speakers find it almost impossible to master English at the level of proficiency required for intricate thinking; and yet pupils from non-English speaking Chinese families have to express themselves in English at school. Under these conditions, more emphasis tends to be placed upon rote learning. If a pupil is expected to reformulate that which he or she has learned in English but has few words at his or her command to express these thoughts, what can be done except to regurgitate verbatim either notes taken during lessons or slabs from textbooks? ... Many of the problems associated with schooling in Hong Kong – excessive hours of homework, quiescent pupils – are magnified, even if not caused, by the attempt to use English as a teaching medium for students. (Llewellyn *et al.*, 1982: 26–7)

The Report suggested that the mother tongue is the best medium for teaching and learning because it is the language of thought and expression and because it 'reflects the soul and culture of a people' (p. 25). It proposed a compromise between adopting mother tongue for all junior secondary education, and making English medium available to only a selected number of schools by adopting entirely mother tongue education in the early compulsory years and moving towards bilingualism after primary six which entailed a progressive shift to genuinely bilingual programmes with half of the subjects taught in English and half in Chinese by F.3 (grade 9) (p. 30).

### **The ECR Reports**

The subsequent Education Commission Report No. 1 (ECR, 1984), however, largely maintained the status quo by recommending that the choice of the medium of instruction be left to individual schools. However, in contrast to the 1974 White Paper, positive discrimination in terms of resources would be given to CMI schools to strengthen English teaching. Amongst other resources, additional teachers of English would be provided to allow smaller class teaching and guidelines would be provided to schools to help them to decide on the medium of instruction. The Report argues as follows:

From an educational point of view, an inadequate command of languages hampers learning. From a wider economic and political perspective,



Chinese is likely to assume greater significance while English will still be essential as an international means of communication in commerce and industry. For Hong Kong to retain its position as a leading international centre of finance, trade and industry, we are convinced that bilingualism is essential. (ECR, 1984: 35)

The Report also argued against mandating Chinese as the medium of teaching and learning by saying that 'education should allow the greatest possible development for students having regard to their different needs and aptitudes' (p. 45). It proposed that one way to address parental pressure for English medium education was to remove the distinction between Anglo-Chinese and Chinese Middle schools and the language indicator for the public school leaving examination, Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

In the meantime, educational research commissioned by the government, as well as conducted by academics themselves, all showed that using the mother tongue had advantages over using English as a medium for learning. It was this clear evidence that led Brimer *et al.* to argue against leaving the choice to schools. They said,

To leave the decision to the schools or the parents is seen to be unjustified given the clear evidence of the disadvantaging of the majority of students by continuing English medium. (1985: 84)

These research findings, however, did not seem to have any major impact on the policy at the time. In the Education Commission Report No. 2 (1986), after reporting the research findings, the recommendation was to stick to the proposals made in the first Report (EC, 1984). The provision of positive discrimination and the removal of labels showed a more positive stance towards mother tongue education, but there was no fundamental change. And the parents were no fools. In the early 1980s, when the Chinese University started to take in more and more English medium students, the number of Chinese medium schools dropped and, in 1988, there were only 57 left (see So, 1992).

In 1990, when the fourth report (EC, 1990) was published, the government took a major change in direction. Instead of leaving schools to decide on the medium, the government, for the first time, mandated that schools would be provided with guidance on the medium to be adopted. A time-line was laid down which allowed the schools to prepare for the transition. From 1991–1993, schools would still be given the freedom to choose the medium. From 1994–1997, advice would be given to schools on the appropriate medium for their students according to their ability. From 1998 onwards, however, schools would be 'firmly guided' by the government on the choice of the medium of instruction.

Education Commission Report 4 emphasised the difficulties that children encounter in learning through English and that Chinese is undervalued as a medium of instruction. It says,

there is pressure for children to learn English and to learn in English, since this is seen by parents as offering the best prospect for their children's future. Many children, however, have difficulty with learning in English; and conversely, Chinese is undervalued as a medium of instruction and the

importance of the Chinese language skills is not sufficiently recognised. (p. 93)

Although the Report also mentioned that Hong Kong is an international business, financial and trading centre and that there should be enough people who can speak both English and Chinese, it pointed out that the interests of the students should come first. 'In catering for the needs of our economy, we believe that the interests of the majority of our students should not be sacrificed' (p. 102). This statement was made at a time when there was an outcry from the business sector about the declining English standards in Hong Kong. In 1990, for the first time, a consortium of big firms including the largest and politically most influential bank in Hong Kong, launched the Language Campaign to improve English standards in schools. The change in language policy therefore stood in stark contrast to the call for improvement in language skills at primary and secondary levels (see Tsui, 1996).

Parental objection, something which the government had always used as a reason for not mandating Chinese medium in schools, was seen as not insurmountable. The fourth Report argued,

We believe that the expansion of tertiary places and the provision of bridging courses to help Chinese-medium students adjust to English-medium tertiary education should improve this situation. Moreover, as Chinese is increasingly placed on an equal basis with English for legal and administrative purposes, the civil service is localised and the awareness of a Chinese identity is enhanced towards 1997, parental views may change over time. (EC, 1990: 102–3)

The paradox between the call by business to improve English standards and the government's change of policy cannot be understood unless we look at the wider political context. The Joint Declaration was signed in 1984 and the future of the Hong Kong became very clear. There were no more 'dreams' of the extension of colonial rule beyond 1997.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the Joint Declaration, the government started to prepare for its retreat from Hong Kong by taking measures such as the localisation of top government officials and the more widespread enforcement of bilingual versions of government documents. It is by no means a coincidence that the implementation of 'firm guidance' should have been in 1998, a year after the handover in 1997. Despite the fact that the government denied that it was a political decision, the change of sovereignty in 1997 and the corresponding change in the status of Chinese and awareness of the Chinese identity were actually cited as reasons for the possible change in parental attitude. What is interesting is that the educational agenda has been presented as prevailing over the economic and social agendas.

## **Conclusion**

The history of medium of instruction policy in Hong Kong shows that underlying the policy formulation and its modifications there had always been the political agenda. Yet not once in the policy papers did it come to the fore. It had always been social and economic agendas which were presented to the public for refuting sound educational arguments. It was only when the educational agenda

and the political agenda converged that the former was attended to. This is not to suggest that the political agenda is the only force at work. Quite the contrary, it is precisely because there are often other forces at work that the government was able to present different agendas to the public to defend its policy at different times.

In the following section, we shall examine the language policy changes in former colonial countries when they gained independence and see what insights they provide for Hong Kong.

### **Medium of instruction policy in decolonised countries**

When colonial countries became independent, a major problem that they had to tackle was finding a national language to symbolise national unity and identity. In multi-ethnic countries, finding a lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication and maintaining a balance between the interests of these ethnic groups are essential to political stability. In other words, the social and political agendas are paramount.

#### *Malaysia*

Before Malaysia became independent, the elite schools used English as the medium of instruction whereas the vernacular schools used Malay, Chinese or Tamil. After its independence, in 1957, Malay became the national language but English was allowed for official purposes for ten years (Ke, 1991). Despite the sizeable proportion of Chinese (38%) and Tamil speaking Indians (10%) (Omar, 1995), Malay eventually became the sole national and official language. This was governed not so much by the nature of the language, Chinese and Tamil being 'exoglossic', that is, originating from outside the Malay world, whereas Malay is 'endoglossic'. It was driven by the pressure from the Malay nationalists to raise the status of the Malays. There was a serious racial tension between the Malays and the Chinese which was epitomised by the riot which broke out in 1969. In order to gain support from the Malays who were the majority, the government introduced drastic measures in the medium of instruction policy. In the colonial days, the English medium schools were elite urban schools attended mostly by Chinese and Indians. The majority of the Malays were excluded because they lived mostly in rural areas and were apprehensive of the proselytisation of the Christian mission schools (Loh, 1970). Hence, the Malays were shut off from the opportunities for career advancement because of their lack of command of the English language (Husin, 1981). At the time of independence, only 1% of the school-going population had access to English medium schools. In other words, English was a rare commodity which was largely in the hands of the Chinese and the Indians. The adoption of Malay as the sole national language and the medium of instruction therefore served to redress the balance between the three ethnic groups in terms of participation in key state institutions and access to wealth (Crouch, 1996). Chinese and Indians were expected to become Malay-knowing bilinguals, rather than English-knowing bilinguals in the colonial days, and were expected to function effectively in Malay (Conrad & Ozóg, 1993).

From 1970 onwards, Malay gradually replaced English as the medium of education. By 1982, the first cohort of school-leavers had gone through the entire

school education in Malay and, in 1983, Malay became the only medium of instruction in universities for the first time (Mead, 1988). This change in university education, coupled with the imposition of the Malay quota on university entrance and government scholarships, resulted in a sharp increase in the participation of Malays in the professions between 1970–1990 (Crouch, 1996).

For three decades since its independence, the Malaysian language policy was very much shaped by its political agenda. The Malay government staged and planned the replacement of English by Malay as the medium of instruction from primary right up to university level. However, the 1990s saw a reinstatement of English as an important medium of education and it has now been redesignated as the second most important language in Malaysia. This is because since the adoption of Malay as the sole medium of instruction at all levels, there was a general decline in English standards (Omar, 1999). Graduates of Malaysian universities have been losing out in competition with graduates from overseas universities because of their poor command of English. In 1993, the Prime Minister Mahatir granted freedom to academic institutions to teach in English, especially for science-based subjects (Omar, 1995). The government is now also inviting foreign universities to run their programmes in Malaysia and to set up off-shore branches. This kind of programme has brought about the use of English as a full medium of instruction in higher education (Omar, 1999). This change of policy is clearly driven by an economic agenda. English is necessary for the economic and technological advancement of Malaysia. If Malaysia is to achieve the goal of becoming an advanced and industrialised country by 2020, then it cannot do without English (Lee, 1995). However, no less important is the political agenda. The old MOI policy has disadvantaged the Malay graduates in competition with overseas graduates, many of whom are Chinese returnees who had been forced to seek higher education overseas. If the old policy were to continue, the balance between the ethnic groups would be tipped in favour of the non-Malays.

### *Singapore*

Like Malaysia, Singapore was faced with the problem of finding a national language which would be symbolic of its unity and identity. In 1959, the Singapore population consisted of 75% Chinese, 15% Malay and 6% Indians. Thirty per cent of the Chinese population spoke Hokkien as their mother tongue but 78% of the entire population could understand the dialect (Kuo & Jernudd, 1988). If language policy was determined by linguistic considerations, Chinese (and Hokkien) should have been the national language, since it was the language of the majority. However, the Singapore government decided otherwise. Instead, it adopted the language which was spoken by only 15% of the population, Malay, as the national language. All four languages, that is, English, Chinese, Tamil and Malay, were designated as official languages. The reason for the latter policy was obvious: to ensure that no ethnic group would be disadvantaged. The choice of Malay as the national language had to do initially with the decision of the government to become part of Malaysia because of its uncertainty about whether Singapore would be able to survive on its own (Tickoo, 1996b). However, even after Singapore severed its link with Malaysia in 1965, Malay remained the national language. A very important reason is that the Chinese majority were

mainly immigrants from China and they showed a strong emotional affiliation with their mother country (Yip & Sim, 1990). To make Chinese a national language would make it difficult for Singapore to establish its own distinct identity as a nation.

Upon separation from Malaysia, Singapore redefined the nature of its economy as relying on export-oriented manufacturing and attracting foreign investment. For its economic development, Singapore needed a large work force English-knowing bilinguals. Learning a second language was already compulsory for primary education in 1960 and for secondary education in 1966. After this, there was a gradual increase in the number of subjects taught in English, even in non-English medium primary and secondary schools. In 1975, the only other university, Nanyang University, which was a Chinese medium university specially established by a Chinese clan for Chinese medium school graduates, began to offer courses in English as a parallel stream (Tickoo, 1996b). The merging of the Nanyang University with Singapore University in 1980, to become the National University of Singapore, which is an English medium university, marked the end of Chinese medium instruction as a viable alternative for schooling. In 1983, 99% of the enrolment in primary schools was English medium (Soon, 1988). In 1987, English became the medium of instruction throughout the entire education system. For all pupils, English is learnt at first language level. At the same time, Mandarin was maintained in the system at L1 level for the brightest students and at a lower L2 level for the less able students.

The development of the language policy in Singapore was carefully planned and staged. In less than 20 years since its independence, English has become far more important than the other three official languages and has virtually replaced Malay as the national language. It has become the dominant working language for supra-ethnic communication as well as for modern technology and business operations. The choice of Malay as the national language and the gradual replacement of Chinese medium education by English medium right up to university level were very much part of nation building and social reconstruction. They were conscious attempts to sever the strong emotional ties that the ethnic Chinese had with the People's Republic of China. The adoption of English as the dominant working language was driven by an economic as well as a political agenda. English is an ethnically neutral language and therefore is the best vehicle for 'reducing ethnic tensions and building a supra-ethnic national equilibrium in a multilingual, multi-religious society' (Tickoo, 1996b: 441). English is also the language of science, technology and business. The mastery of English by virtually every Singaporean put the country in a very competitive position in Asia. The maintenance of the teaching of Chinese in elite schools was driven by the need to get into the China market. However, this would not have happened if Singapore had not established its own identity and had not successfully severed the emotional ties of its people with China.

### *India*

When India became independent, the government designated Hindi as the official language of the country, 'the official language of the union' (King, 1997) and the lingua franca for the numerous ethnic groups. It also recognised 14 major regional languages as the languages of India. However, English continued to be

an associate official language of the country. There had been attempts to establish the supremacy of Indian languages over English. The University Education Commission Report published in 1949 suggested that 'English be replaced as early as practicable, by an Indian language as the medium of instruction in higher education' (Krishnamurti, 1998: 311). Subsequently, the Education Commission (1964–66) stipulated that the mother tongue (regional language) should be used up to the highest level for instruction and examination and that English should be taught both as a subject and as a library language at higher levels. However, the policy was never effectively implemented. Many states adopted the regional language as an optional medium beside English up to undergraduate level in arts and sciences. In some small states, English is the sole medium of schooling and in other states, English is learnt at a much earlier age and for a longer period of time (Tickoo, 1996a). By the beginning of the 1980s the number of English medium schools had increased 17 times since independence (Pattanayak, 1981).

Despite the fact that the first Prime Minister, Nehru, was insistent that Hindi and not English would be the national language because of its symbolic value, he took a liberal, or rather a pragmatic, approach to the medium of instruction policy. He warned against suppression of a language and coercing people to use a language. He knew that India could not function without English because English is a key to economic development and it is the language of international communication, science and technology, trade and commerce (King, 1997). Unlike Malaysia, English has remained the medium of instruction for higher education despite the fact that students have been given the option to use their own language. In professional courses English has always been used as the medium because English is still the most reliable source of knowledge in science and technology. The importance of English has not diminished since independence. Quite the contrary, it has become more popular today than before independence. Now, English is still the lingua franca of India. It is still the working language of the government, the middle-class businessman and the language for intellectual communication. It will take a long time for Hindi to replace English as the link language, if this ever happens (see Krishnamurti, 1998).

The continuing dominance of English in India is due to fact that compared with Malaysia and Singapore, government intervention was less strong. The designation of Hindi as the national language was in fact objected to by most of southern India (King, 1997) and there was no systematic attempt by the government to establish the status of Hindi through its medium of instruction policy. The economic development of India was clearly a more important agenda for the Indian government than national unity. Given that English has now become an international language rather than a language of colonial domination, it would not be surprising if, like Singapore, English becomes virtually the national language.

The language policy developments in the above three countries show that the change of sovereignty is always coupled with a change of language policy because language is an essential means of nation building and social reconstruction. It serves to balance, or to redress the balance, between the interests of different groups, and to maintain political stability. In achieving this, the medium of instruction in schools is a very important vehicle. All other agendas, be they

social, economic or educational, will come to the fore if they converge with the political agenda. If they do not, then they get pushed into the background. Singapore is a case of a convergence between political and economic agendas whereas Malaysia is a case of the political prevailing over the economic agenda until the 1990s when the two agendas converged. In other words, the economic agenda was pushed to the background until the government had achieved the political purpose of redressing the balance between the Malays and non-Malays.

### **Peering into the future**

Unlike Malaysia, India and Singapore, Hong Kong is not a country and it is not a multi-ethnic city. It does not have the problem of finding a national language. It already has one: written modern standard Chinese (MSC) and spoken Putonghua. Nor does it have the problem of finding a lingua franca amongst Hong Kong people. Cantonese is the lingua franca. Chinese has been the official language since 1974, and English will continue to play an important role. The Chief Executive, Tung Chi Hwa, has declared the language policy to be trilingualism (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) and bi-literacy (Chinese and English). One would have thought that there would be no problem with the national identity since 98% of the Hong Kong population is Chinese. However, things are not as simple as they appear.

First of all, although Chinese has been one of the official languages for more than a quarter of a century, in practice, it had never been a fully working official language until 1997. The law was not translated into Chinese until very close to the handover. Even when government documents became available in Chinese, the English version was the original and bona fide version. This was only beginning to be reversed very recently. There is little doubt that Chinese is now enjoying a higher status than before but not an equal status with English – although officially it is. Secondly, there is the question of national identity. In the past three decades, Hong Kong has developed its own identity. This was brought about by a conscious attempt on the part of the colonial government after the 1966 social disturbance and the riot in 1967 to inculcate a sense of belonging to Hong Kong. The term ‘Hong Kong people’ was coined at the time.

In addition, Hong Kong people established a sense of pride in themselves because of the rapid economic development of Hong Kong which placed the city on the international map. The language of Hong Kong identity is Cantonese, and to a certain extent, a mixed code of Cantonese and English. This can be seen from the decrease in home dialects from 17% to 7.1%, and the increase in speakers of Cantonese from 86.2% to 95.8% between 1961 and 1991, which was mainly brought about by the increased educational opportunities and schooling (see Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 1998). It has its own variety of Cantonese which is different from the Cantonese spoken in Guangzhou. While the lingua franca for Hong Kong is Cantonese, the lingua franca for China, of which Hong Kong is now a part, is Putonghua. The preservation of the use of Cantonese in oral communication in education, government and administration has become a political issue. For example, whether Cantonese or Putonghua should be used when the Chief Executive and his officials swore their oath on 1 July 1997 was a bone of contention, so was the language used by the Chief Executive to deliver his first policy speech in October 1997.

While it was generally accepted that Putonghua should be used because the ceremony marked the resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong, there was a strong feeling in the community that the policy speech should be in Cantonese. A possible reason is that Cantonese is taken as symbolic of the preservation of 'two systems' in the 'one country two systems' principle. As Pierson (1998: 107) observes, 'Cantonese could have ... a symbolic value ... Cantonese might ... become the symbol of freedom, democracy and independence'. The debate over whether Putonghua instead of Cantonese should be used as the medium of instruction in CMI schools has just started. Educational arguments have been put forward by people with opposing views. Economic arguments have also been put forward. However, underlying the debate could well be the political agenda of how far Hong Kong should or could retain its own identity and autonomy.

Thus, the SAR government is faced with the problem of raising the status of Chinese and enhancing the Chinese identity of the Hong Kong people. The experiences of the decolonised countries suggest that the medium of instruction in schools is a powerful means of nation building. There has been the suggestion that the SAR government should go even further and eliminate public provision for EMI schools, at least up to junior secondary level, and that there should be a Chinese stream in university education. Yet at the same time, the SAR government is faced with the problem of maintaining the international outlook of Hong Kong and its competitiveness in the international market which demands more and better English. The chief executive of one of the biggest banks in Hong Kong voiced his concern at an international conference to celebrate the handover in 1997, as follows,

If Hong Kong is to remain the great economic success that it is in the competitive global economy, it is vital for its voice to be heard and its products to be promoted. A good command of English is essential for that, especially among the territory's leaders. (Au, 1998: 180)

In the past three decades, Hong Kong has grown from a largely monolingual community to a bilingual community. According to two sociolinguistic surveys conducted in 1983 and 1993, the percentage of people who indicated that they could speak English rose from 43.3% to 65.8%. Schooling was found to be the vehicle for bringing this about (see Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 1998).

Parents and schools are fully aware of the need for English and that schooling is the gateway to the participation of power, prestige and wealth, as Weinstein (1984) points out. Parents are now fighting to get their children into English medium schools. All schools, especially CMI schools, are putting a great deal of resources into English language teaching. According to our survey of CMI schools, 86.5% of the schools have made use of extra-curricular activities to provide more opportunities to learn English. In addition, 78.2% are strengthening their English curriculum by measures such as reducing the student-teacher ratio particularly for English classes, and 78.9% are enriching their library resources for English learning.

Since the implementation of the policy, the SAR government has been trying to persuade the community to support mother tongue education by publicising the success stories of CMI schools through the electronic and printed media, and



by providing generous resources to CMI schools for English enhancement. For the first time in history, EMI schools feel threatened. At the same time, the government is trying to show that English is still a very important working language. It has launched an English in the workplace campaign by encouraging employees in the service sector to improve their English. Putonghua has now become a subject in the school curriculum.

Schools and parents are now holding their breath while they wait to see whether the government will relax the policy to allow more English medium instruction in schools or whether it will lay down even more stringent requirements and further reduce the number of EMI schools. Which way the government will go depends on the sociopolitical developments in Hong Kong and which agenda will prevail.

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### Notes

1. The English subject group comprises all subjects taught and examined in English and the Chinese subject group comprises all subjects taught and examined in Chinese. Since the majority of the primary schools in Hong Kong are Chinese medium, the English subject group consists of only English language. Cultural subjects such as music and craft are excluded. In order to ensure comparability across all schools, the internal assessment results are scaled by an academic aptitude test (AAT) which is administered to primary 6 pupils each year.
2. Prior to 1984, Hong Kong schools were named according their medium of instruction: Anglo-Chinese schools and the Chinese Middle schools. The former used English and the latter used Chinese as a medium of instruction. In 1984, this distinction in name was removed and all of them were called secondary schools. However, the distinction in the teaching medium still exists.
3. Mixed code refers to intra- and inter-sentential switching between English and Cantonese.
4. Compulsory education for primary was introduced in 1971, and it was extended to junior secondary in 1978.
5. We are referring to the delegation led by S.Y. Chung, the then Senior Executive Councillor, to lobby the British Government to extend its rule over Hong Kong.

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