‘The best students will learn English’:
ultra-utilitarianism and linguistic imperialism
in education in post-1997 Hong Kong

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In September 1997, shortly after China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, the Education Department announced a policy which was widely seen as a restoration of ‘mother-tongue education’, but which, in reality, was an elitist language selection policy. This policy, which provided for the selection of the best primary school graduates for monolingual education in English, was designed to be a cost-effective way of training in English skills for those who had the economic and cultural capital to benefit from it. Meanwhile, the majority of students were barred from sufficient exposure to English, the language of power and wealth. In this paper, I shall show that this policy draws on a strong utilitarian discourse about the centrality of English for the economic survival of Hong Kong, which was engineered by business interests on the eve of the changeover in 1997, and which helped perpetuate a form of linguistic imperialism. Meanwhile, academics whose research was used to legitimize the policy, failed to problematize dominant language ideologies that have been used to justify pedagogically unsound practices and an inequitable language streaming policy. Through documenting the voices of individual educators, I am able to delineate counter-discourses which, albeit weak and isolated, nevertheless manifested much broader educational concerns than the narrow utilitarianism and the unquestioned privileging of the learning of English skills that underlay the current policy.

Introduction: language policy in education in post-1997 Hong Kong

In September 1997, the Education Department issued a booklet to secondary schools of Hong Kong, announcing a sweeping change regarding the medium of instruction. Entitled Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools, it stipulated that as from the following school year (September 1998), most schools should adopt Chinese as the medium of instruction (MOI). This was in view of the fact that ‘for educational reasons, the appropriate MOI for most students is their mother tongue’ (Education Department 1997: para.2.1). However, the document carries a significant provision for exemption for a minority of schools: ‘Nonetheless, Government fully appreciates that some schools have been operating successfully with English-medium teaching and have good results’ (Education...
These schools could apply to continue to teach in English if they so wished, on condition that they satisfied certain requirements regarding students’ language ability, teachers’ capability and the availability of certain ‘support strategies and programmes’ (Education Department 1997: para.2.4) for students.

Since the government of Hong Kong made a public announcement concerning the policy in early 1997, there have been heated discussions in the media about its potential repercussions. This gave way to emotional outcry in December 1997, when the government announced the names of 100 schools (out of a total of more than 400 in the territory) whose application for exemption from mother-tongue teaching was successful. Scenes of tearful teenagers and angry, disheartened parents of ‘elite’ schools which had failed to retain English teaching were captured on newspapers and TV, often against the backdrop of protest banners on the school premises. Twenty schools appealed and, among these, 14 were allowed to join the exclusive group of English medium-of-instruction (EMI) schools in January 1998, thus making a total of 114.

While EMI schools celebrated their ‘victory’, government propaganda hailing the educational benefits of learning in one’s mother tongue began to appear in the media. Of course, people are never expected to take government propaganda seriously, but this one lends itself to great cynicism. It carried within it a deep contradiction, in that what was best for children educationally (education in the first language) was NOT what was desired by parents. Nor were the educational benefits of first-language education given recognition in the selection system, which allocated primary school leavers to schools in five descending ranks: Band 1 (the top 25%) to Band 5 (the lowest 25%) schools. All the 114 EMI schools, without exception, were Band 1 schools. The message was starkly simple: only the best schools were allowed to teach in English; the rest were left to benefit from first-language education. What the government called the ‘mother-tongue education policy’ was, to all intents and purposes, therefore, a language selection policy.

Apart from the misnomer of ‘mother-tongue education policy’, there were a lot of other misunderstandings about this policy. Because the firm guideline for schools was issued in September 1997, right after China resumed its sovereignty over Hong Kong, some commentators mistook it for a drastic move by the new Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) government to promote Chinese nationalism in schools (see, for example, Tsui et al. 1999). This was not true because, as early as 1990, in the Education Commission Report No. 4, a commitment had already been made to implement a language selection policy (the best 30% of students would go to EMI schools, and the rest would receive mother-tongue education) ‘in full force’ by 1998–1989. The new SAR government could only be said to have been determined enough to actually require schools (or the majority of them) to drop EMI teaching. But that has nothing to do with the new government either. As mentioned above, the policy had been announced in the spring of 1997, on the eve of the handover. And, as far as the upholding of the superiority of English on Chinese soil is concerned, this language selection system signified nothing more than ‘business as usual’.

That the policy appeared to be new and drastic was because schools have never taken seriously the government’s half-hearted attempts to ‘encourage’ education in the first language, as announced in the Education Commission Report
The government has always explained its failure to enforce first-language education by its respect for ‘market forces’, i.e. the choice of parents and schools, which was overwhelmingly in support of EMI teaching. The present MOI policy represented, therefore, a change from a non-directional official stance to the adoption of a clear, elitist English selection system. Although this policy had been proposed as early as 1990, schools and parents did not take much notice of it because no preparatory measures were made to smooth out this drastic change. When the guideline was finally issued to schools in September 1997, it was as if it had appeared out of the blue.

Not surprisingly, this language selection policy proved to be highly unpopular with parents, who felt increased pressure to put their children into a much smaller number of EMI schools. Demand for places in expensive international schools increased dramatically, and many parents also contemplated sending their children overseas at a young age. These options were, of course, open only to a small proportion of high-income families. Meanwhile, local schools had to face different problems, depending on their teaching medium. EMI schools had to battle with the pedagogical difficulty of teaching Chinese students in English, notwithstanding the official rhetoric that the top students, whom these schools took in, were fully capable of ‘bilingual education’. As for CMI (Chinese medium-of-instruction) schools, the problem was one of lowered status among parents, and hence poorer student intake, in terms of academic ability.

In the spring of 2001, the Education Department announced what amounted to a significant retreat in the policy. A number of EMI schools were invited to experiment with supplementary teaching in Chinese in Form 1. This was a marked departure from the earlier stance, which had prescribed, in no uncertain terms, that close inspection would be made of EMI schools to ensure that they would follow the strictly monolingual English mode except for the Chinese subjects. At the same time, CMI schools were invited to experiment with teaching selected topics in English in the 2nd and 3rd years of secondary schooling so as to ease their passage to EMI teaching in senior forms.

Such a retreat in the MOI policy reflects the unfeasibility of the language selection policy as it was announced in 1997. This policy was clearly flawed in two ways. Firstly, it did not take into account the pedagogical needs of the students who had to learn in a foreign language (those of EMI schools), nor of those who had to adjust to learning in English at a later stage (those of CMI schools). Secondly, it had been drawn up with scant regard for the fact that English was a signifier of power and wealth in the post-colonial context of Hong Kong, and hence language selection at any stage of schooling was blatantly segregationist and socially divisive.

I am going to show in subsequent sections that such a flawed policy had come about mainly because it was designed for a narrowly utilitarian goal, i.e. that of teaching English in the most cost-effective and efficient manner, without regard to educational needs and socio-economic aspirations. I shall also show how this goal emerged from a strong discourse about the centrality of English for the survival of Hong Kong, engineered by business interests on the eve of the 1997 changeover. Needless to say, such a discourse helped perpetuate a form of linguistic imperialism whereby English remained an ultimate yardstick of ‘good education’. Before I move on to substantive analysis, however, let me first set my paper in a relevant theoretical context.
Theoretical context: linguistic stratification and discursive closure

This paper analyses the processes involved in the formulation of a language policy which perpetuates inequality and linguistic imperialism. My analysis rests on the premise that language use and linguistic capital is an important determinant of social and political power (Bourdieu 1991), and this works in at least two ways.

Firstly, the mastery of a certain language or language style signifies power and status. In a former colony of the UK such as Hong Kong, English continues to function as a gatekeeper to positions of power and prestige (Pennycook 1995: 40), since the change in sovereignty does not entail an overhaul of the social and economic structure that has existed previously. Or, as in the case of Singapore, the new ruling party actually reinforces English supremacy, successfully weaving it into the fabric of the state ideology of building a new meritocratic and technocratic society, while retaining and encouraging foreign capital by providing a ‘pleasant’ place for expatriates to live (Pennycook 1994: 223–258).

Secondly, as Fairclough (1989: 19–20) demonstrates, unequal social and political relationships are themselves sustained by the use of language in concrete social situations. I would argue, in this paper, that the language policy in question actually functions to reproduce an authoritarian pedagogical situation where power discrepancy between teacher and student is exacerbated by the superiority of the English-speaking teacher. As a result, didactic pedagogy and passive learning that characterizes teaching and learning via a foreign medium remains unchanged. Not only that, but the language policy itself is justified by the need of the local Chinese employee or salesperson to cater to English-speaking entrepreneurs or clients. This, of course, replicates the former colonial situation whereby locals (‘natives’) were rewarded for their command of the colonizer’s language (Phillipson 1992: 109–135). Of course, this political aspect of power inequality is well disguised by the widespread discourse that English is a neutral, global language of trade, science and technology, and an indispensable tool for international communication, well-sought after by non-English speaking communities themselves (Li 2000).

Language policy in education merits analysis, because social stratification based on language use is mediated by the school system, which often uses language as the ‘one criterion for determining which people will complete different levels of education’ (Tollefson 1991: 8). As I examine this policy, therefore, I shall highlight the ways in which it helps maintain an elitist and socially divisive structure.

The dominance of English rests heavily on the saturation of a certain linguistic ideology in the public discourses, so that it is generally accepted as ‘natural’ even by the underprivileged, non–English speaking classes (Fairclough 1989: 1–5, Phillipson 1992: 17–37, Pennycook 1995: 36–38). For this particular policy under discussion, the institutionalization of a highly selective system based on the command of English has proceeded in such a way that the reality of political and social inequality remains hidden behind pragmatic and technical considerations. This was done with the help of academic research as ‘expert’ backup, and also via the engineering of a favourable discourse by corporate interests prior to the 1997 changeover.

While language policy is propped up by implicit ideology, its existence as an ‘authoritarian allocation of values’ which ‘project[s] images of an ideal society’ (Ball 1990: 3) also means that its very formulation and implementation actually constitute a discursive practice which involves the closure of alternative options and views. I
shall show in later sections how a cost-effective programme of English training for the socially endowed (presented as the naturally endowed) took precedence over education per se, even for the ‘elite’ students.

Domination is fortunately never complete. Based on interviews of school principals and educationalists involved in Chinese-medium education, I shall try to show that counter-discourses and resistant practices, no matter how weak and invisible they are, do exist on the local school level. This language selection policy and the narrowly utilitarian discourse it rests on, therefore, never cease to be confronted by alternative educational values, albeit in small and hardly noticeable ways. But first let us examine how the policy was formulated.

Defining the English language selection policy

A report by an overseas visiting panel, the Llewellyn Report (Llewellyn et al. 1982), gave prominent place to the problem of language of education. It highlighted the dilemma of students being taught in English, a foreign language ‘synonymous with power and prestige’ (Llewellyn et al. 1982: para. III.1.7), in the context of a largely monolingual, Chinese society. The Education Commission, formed in response to the Llewellyn Report, put out its first report in 1984, which, among other things, carried recommendations for ‘encouraging’ schools to adopt mother-tongue education (Education Commission 1984). It was, however, not until 1989 that a thorough discussion of the MOI issue was made, and a much clearer stance taken. In that year, the Working Group Set Up to Review Language Improvement Measures, which was appointed by the Education Department, published its report (hereafter referred to as the ED Report; see Education Department 1989). The basic direction and tone of the English language selection policy was set.

Although the ED Report purported to review measures to improve language in general, the major discussion revolved around the issues of English learning and the use of English as the medium of teaching. As a measure to solve the MOI dilemma, the ED Report took up what Llewellyn et al. (1982: para. III.1.17) had described as a ‘pragmatic and less attractive mutation’, as opposed to the ‘principled and pedagogically sound option’ of imposing Cantonese as the medium of instruction in all junior secondary schools. This is, namely, to allow some schools to use EMI for a small proportion of students who ‘prove themselves to be able to benefit from learning in English’ (Education Department 1989: para. 2.3.2). For the rest, CMI should be adopted. A criteria-referenced test at primary six would be used to select students for ‘bilingual education’, i.e. EMI teaching. The practice that had already been adopted by some schools, whereby some subjects are taught in Chinese and others in English, would not be allowed to continue. Furthermore, it proclaimed that only 30% of students would have the English language capacity to use EMI at secondary school entrance. The basic feature of the language policy – rewarding a select few with an English education – was defined, as was the proportion of this minority (30%). In the ED Report, this proportion was said to have been established by research, but, as I shall show later, this was no more than a practical expediency.

The equating of ‘bilingual education’ with EMI teaching or ‘total immersion’, i.e. monolingual teaching in a foreign language, closes off exploration of alternative models of bilingual education that maintain the teaching of a certain proportion of
subjects in the first language, practised with success in other countries. As Lin (1997) argued, this rigid, dual-stream (monolingual Chinese or English) model is not only restrictive, but is also elitist and socially divisive. While denying EMI students the right to mother-tongue education, such a policy also deprives children from families lacking the ‘correct’ language resources of equal access to English, the language ‘of power and prestige’. Such discussions, which have been covered at least partially in the earlier Llewellyn Report, never appeared in the ED Report. The reason is simple, that is, the Working Group was much more concerned with how best, and the most cost-effectively, to promote the learning of English for an elite sector of the school population than with rights and equity for all schoolchildren.

Starting from the premise that ‘time of exposure to language affects proficiency in that language’ (Education Department 1989: para.1.3.1.1), the ED Report suggests that it would be wise to start EMI in secondary schools ‘for those students who prove themselves to be able to benefit from learning in English’ (Education Department 1989: para.2.3.2). Moreover, primary schools should be encouraged to teach English in a way as to enable students to learn in English later. This is despite the Working Group’s observation that it would be ‘wise to use Chinese in most schools because with teachers and students not up to a certain level, there would be strong resistance’ (to teaching in English) (Education Department 1989: para. 1.3.1.7). Intensive bridging courses would also be offered to those students who would enter EMI secondary schools, as well as ‘late’ entrants from CMI schools to tertiary institutions in order to enhance their English capacity. In contrast, there was no provision for pedagogical or related support (for example, the provision of better Chinese textbooks, the preparation of Chinese glossaries for different subjects, etc.) for the majority of schools switching to CMI teaching. Furthermore, the possibility of creating a more linguistically balanced higher education was never raised. This means, effectively, that the structure of advancement towards higher education remained skewed in favour of EMI students. It also meant that students from both EMI and CMI schools would be restricted in their development of high-level academic literacy and intellectual skills in their first language (Lin 1997: 28).

Subsequent official documents which partly or wholly addressed the MOI issue followed the general direction of language streaming, and the selection of the best students for teaching in English. A passage from School Education in Hong Kong: a statement of aims (Education Commission 1993) regarding MOI, quoted in the Report of the Working Group on Language Proficiency (Education Commission 1994), as well as the Education Commission Report No. 6 (Education Commission 1995), captured this language elitism very well:

>Schools] are also expected to make clear and consistent use in each class of either Chinese or English, rather than a mixing of both languages . . . All children should be helped to develop a good level of competence in at least one language (Chinese, for most children), and some competence in a second language (usually English). Some children are capable of being fully bilingual.

Apart from the general direction of streaming and selection, two developments are noticeable in the various policy papers addressing MOI from 1989 onwards. These are, namely, the settling on a mechanism of selection for English teaching, and the increased visibility of business interests in the formulation of language policy. Together they contributed to the utilitarian discourse of teaching in English for the select few. Let me first turn to the development of the mechanism of selection, where, as we shall see, commissioned academic research played a prominent part.
The weight of research

In the various documents defining the language selection policy, one finds constant references to research, both foreign and local. Research conducted officially (by the Educational Research Establishment under the Education Department), sometimes jointly with academics, has played an important part in policy formulation and legitimation. In particular, research findings were invoked to support selection for monolingual English teaching for a minority, in contravention to the obvious advantage of education in the first language.

One important argument legitimizing the whole edifice of language selection is that EMI teaching is not only harmless, but even beneficial for a select few. As stated by the Education Department (1989: para. 2.0.2), ‘for a small proportion of students, offering bilingual education through using EMI is beneficial to their cognitive development; so, if educationally feasible, and on condition that it will not impede students’ cognitive development, we encourage schools to use EMI’.

This major argument for language selection, when it first appeared in the ED Report, rests on the findings of two research projects. The first, ‘An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Various Language Modes of Presentation, Spoken and Written, in Form III in Hong Kong Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools’ by Johnson et al. (1985), was conducted jointly by the Educational Research Establishment of the Education Department, and the Department of Education, the University of Hong Kong (HKU). The second, ‘Effects of the Medium of Instruction on the Achievement of Form 2 Students in Hong Kong Secondary Schools’ by Brimer et al. (1985), was also an academic-cum-official project, by the Faculty of Education, HKU, and the Education Department.

In Johnson et al. (1985), 1296 Form 3 (aged around 14) students of 10 secondary schools were selected for a study of the effectiveness of English versus Chinese modes of video and printed presentation and evaluation. One of their observations was that, when tested in English, students of the high English proficiency group ‘approach[es] that of genuine bilingualism’. This, presumably, meant that these students could be educated in English without any loss in subject learning.

However, a closer look at the findings reveals that, for the video study, students with high English proficiency scored best when the mode of presentation was either Cantonese or bilingual (Johnson et al. 1985: 26, Table 7A). This was when the mode of questioning was in English. When the mode of questioning was in Chinese, the best mean scores, gained for the Cantonese and bilingual modes of presentation, were even higher for students with high Chinese proficiency. Given the fact that students of high proficiency in both languages overlapped considerably, this means that they did lose out when taught in English, even when the mode of questioning was in English. For the printed study, a similar pattern emerged. For English questioning, the best results for the high English proficiency group were obtained when the lesson was presented in Chinese with an English glossary, and not in English (Johnson et al. 1985: 52, Table 16A). For Chinese questioning, again, results for the high Chinese proficiency group were considerably better, particularly for those who had been given a Chinese presentation. The efficacy of education and mode of questioning in the first language is very obvious. To be educated in English, even for the best students, clearly involves some sacrifice in learning.
The simple truth was not lost on the students. Notwithstanding the researchers’ conclusion that ‘those students whose English proficiency is high welcome the opportunity to work through the medium of English’ (Johnson et al. 1985: 74), evidence from their own study said otherwise. In the printed study, for example, only ‘a bare 3% of all subjects chose English as the preferred mode [of presentation]’, and ‘it is interesting that these groups did not consist as might have been expected of subjects with outstanding English language ability’. The researchers realized, therefore, that ‘subjects who chose English, and many of those who preferred the bilingual mode to Cantonese, must have done so, not because they found it easy, but because they recognize the need for English in order to achieve their career objectives’ (Johnson et al. 1985: 40). In fact, the researchers themselves stated that ‘if there were no requirement for response [to test questions] through English, then not surprisingly Chinese could be regarded as the appropriate mode; but in that case it would not have been necessary to carry out this research’ (Johnson et al. 1985: 73). To enhance the learning of English via using it as a medium for subject teaching, therefore, is a goal that looms large in the local scene. Research is done only to find out how much better some students could deal with it than others.

Another study by Brimer et al. (1985) was much more forthcoming about the overarching goal of enhancing the learning of English, over and above education for its own sake. Their report stated bluntly that:

There is no point in determining whether children in Hong Kong would learn more effectively through English or Chinese. We already know that they would learn more effectively through Chinese . . . Our problems arise because their learning of English will be more effectively achieved by using it as a medium of instruction. So long as this is a dominant aim of the education system then the questions that remain relate to how it can be used with least disturbance of learning within the curriculum and for how many it can be used without serious and irrevocable disruption of learning (Brimer et al. 1985: 4).

Following from this, therefore, Brimer et al. (1985: 40) defined their research objectives thus:

If it is to be a continuing feature of the policy for Hong Kong secondary education that it should seek to make English accessible to as many as possible to as high a level as possible, then research elsewhere would argue that English should be a medium of instruction for as long as possible to as many as do not suffer from it. The current study seeks, indirectly, answers to such questions as, ‘Can such suffering be avoided or reduced to acceptable levels?’ and, ‘For how large, and for which, proportion of the population is it possible?’

This low-key tone of compromise contrasts greatly with the very forthright one used in policy statements, which said that a select group of students had been proved to be able to benefit from English teaching.

Perhaps those who drafted these forthright policy statements were not to bear the entire blame for their over-optimistic tone. Just as in Johnson et al. (1985), the Brimer et al. (1985) report also stretched its results too far in order to prove that learning in English benefits the select group of students with high language proficiency. In this research, which involved the teaching of students of 15 schools using English, Chinese and bilingual texts (i.e. English with a Chinese glossary, or vice versa) respectively in history and science for 6 weeks, researchers came up with the finding that ‘a policy which allowed somewhere around the top 30% in English proficiency to pursue their studies through English would succeed in making those students effective in both English and their curriculum studies’ (Brimer et al. 1985: 40). A careful look at the data reveals that this only applied to history, and when students were tested in English. When they were tested in Chinese, the highest mean score achieved was significantly higher than that obtained in English testing.
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(31.30 v. 23.92). Not surprisingly, this was obtained by students taught with Chinese texts, in Chinese middle schools. In the case of science, those of the top 30% who did best, even in the English test, were, in fact, those taught with Chinese texts. Effective learning in English, therefore, only meant the ability of retaining information in English for the purpose of English testing, and for a language-dependent subject, i.e. history.

Another crucial component of the English selection policy is the definition of the size of the select group for EMI, and the mechanism for selection. The ED Report (Education Department 1989) proclaimed, for the first time, that only 30% of students had the English language capacity to use EMI at secondary school entrance, and that this had been established by research. This ratio was reiterated in subsequent official documents, and is now being institutionalized in the present policy, whereby only 114 schools, out of about 400, were permitted to use EMI.

A careful review of relevant research, however, shows that nowhere has this 30% been established as a result of careful study and, if it did appear, it was only as a research artefact, namely, as a convenient way of dividing up the sample. For example, in Johnson et al.’s (1985) study, students were divided into low, middle and high language proficiency groups (30%, 40% and 30% respectively), given different modes of presentation, and then given either Chinese or English modes of questioning. As for the actual proportion of students who would benefit from (or do not lose out too much) with EMI teaching, the report stated clearly that ‘this research does not permit conclusions to be drawn regarding a prerequisite minimum threshold level of English language proficiency’ (Johnson et al. 1985: 74).

Brimer et al.’s (1985) study adopted similar cut-off points for the sake of comparison of the effectiveness of Chinese and English teaching modes, i.e. 30%, 40% and 30%. The result was, among other things, that students at the top 30% of language proficiency were way ahead of the rest when the testing was conducted in English (but not so in Chinese). The researchers, however, were quick to add a disclaimer: ‘it is important to recognise that the choice of 30%, 40% and 30% bands of language proficiency was based upon judgement and the cut off at the 70th percentile should only be taken to indicate that the enabling level of proficiency lies in that region, not precisely at that point’ (Brimer et al. 1985: 40). Furthermore, it acknowledged that one of the limitations of the study was ‘the somewhat arbitrary choice of cut-off points for levels of language proficiency’ (Brimer et al. 1985: 83).

This 30% ratio, arbitrary as it was, had now been firmly set up in the present selection policy. Viewing the results of another study carried out by the Educational Research Establishment (Ip-Tsang and Chan 1985), one could see that this 30% is, in fact, a gross overestimate. In this study, an objective of which was to establish the proportion of students for whom teaching could be done ‘exclusively or predominantly in English’, the researchers found that only 10% of students at the beginning of Form 1, 21% at the beginning of Form 2, and 28% at the beginning of Form 3 were taught completely in English. Since teachers’ use of language mode was closely related to the English proficiency levels of students, the 10% of Form 1 students taught in English was a much more accurate and practical estimate than the 30% carried in the official policy.

Yet another important component of the language policy is the mechanism whereby this 30% of students is selected for EMI teaching. In the ED Report (Education Department 1989), an ambitious proposal was made for a compre-
hensive set of learning targets and related assessments for English and Chinese for Primary 3, Primary 6, Form 3 and Form 5 respectively. This would supply teachers with well-specified targets to guide their language teaching and, most important of all, results of the proposed criterion-referenced assessment administered at Primary 6 would help select the minority for EMI teaching in secondary schools. This programme, known as the Target and Target-Related Assessment (TTRA) scheme, was endorsed by the Education Commission Report No. 4 (Education Commission 1990) (math was added), and the Education Department announced its impending implementation in May 1992. The programme would be first implemented in Primary 4 as from the spring of 1993, instead of from the beginning of formal schooling in Primary 1, so as to enable language selection by December 1994. This batch of primary school leavers would then be notified of their language proficiency and, by 1998–1989, TTRA tests for Primary 6 students would have been carried out for the second time. By then, according to the plan outlined in the Education Commission Report No. 4, the Education Department would be able to issue ‘firm guidelines’ to secondary schools to use one ‘pure’, ‘right’ language, i.e. the one catered to the language proficiency levels of their student intake (Choi 1992: 259).

By 1994, however, the TTRA tests were not forthcoming (see Chi Chung Lam’s paper in this issue), and so in the Report of the Working Group on Language Proficiency issued that year (Education Commission 1994), another assessment exercise was to be put in place as from September 1994 onwards. This was the Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment (MIGA), which was basically the assigning of fixed proportions of students to three groups, based on their internal school assessments and scaled by the Academic Aptitude Test. The top group (designated Group I) was said ‘to be able to learn through either English or Chinese’, meaning that they were the ones who could enter schools using EMI. This select group would comprise of students who were in the top 40% in both the ‘Chinese subject group’ and in English. There was also Group III, which comprised of students in the top 40% in one subject group, and the top 50% (but not top 40%) in the other, and which was regarded ‘to be better able to learn through Chinese, but could probably cope with English medium education’. In effect, Groups I and III students would be permitted to learn through English (Education Commission 1994: para. 2.4.7).

The Education Commission (1994) made it clear that such a proportionate designation of students to English or Chinese teaching was unsatisfactory. It stipulated that ‘firm guidance which the government will exert on schools in due course will need to be based on more objective criteria of academic and linguistic ability’ (Education Commission 1994: para. 3.62). And, it looked to the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) scheme to provide this objective classification. However, since the TOC scheme soon ran out of steam, when the Education Department (1997) issued its Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools, the MIGA was still used. It was still in place at the time of writing.

It is interesting to note the role of research in official policy in the case under study. Academics from the University of Hong Kong were involved in joint research with the relevant government department, and their results were used in policy documents to justify the selection of 30% of students for English education, confirming this decision as pedagogically sound and scientifically established. If schools and parents acted according to policy prescriptions, then students would be
taught with the ‘right’ and ‘pure’ language, and the problem would be resolved. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the conclusions that the researchers made have not been well supported by evidence. Furthermore, when research results were used to support policy, the basic premise, namely, that the teaching of English instead of effective education was of paramount importance, remained unstated in the documents. This leaves the public unable to judge the extent of the trade-offs involved.

From what we have seen above, academics who were commissioned into officially sponsored research had not gone beyond the dominant discourses invoked in policy papers. For example, they did not question the seemingly ‘natural’ divisions of linguistically ‘able’ and ‘less able’ students, and have therefore failed to relate language ability to social class inequality (Brimer et al. 1985: 3). Likewise, they attributed the prevalence of EMI schools to ‘parents’ choice’ (Brimer et al. 1985), as various government documents on language issues did (Education Department 1989: para. 1.2.13, Education Commission 1990: para. 6.4.14). In this way, they dodged the difficult but important issue of social and political domination behind the hegemony of English, and which frames parental choice. This lack of reflection is hardly surprising, given the fact that, outside the official discourse, there is no dearth of academic support for this ‘naturalized’, utilitarian view of English as merely a neutral, international communication tool (Li 2000).

The commissioned research was also severely circumscribed in its scope and methodology of study. By merely utilizing test results as indicators of learning effect, the researchers could not assess the quality of classroom interaction and the depth of learning, which are precisely areas where the greatest contribution made by first-language education lies.

The language selection policy rests on one major premise, i.e. that ‘mixed code’ is harmful to students’ learning, and that language use in the classrooms should be ‘pure’ (i.e. either Chinese or English, but not both). This is often repeated in official discourses on language in education, and is framed as if it has been proven by research and/or sound educational maxims, and that it is the root cause of students’ learning difficulties. But, as Lin (2000) argues, this belief has, in fact, never been examined nor verified in empirical research, and is therefore nothing but a language ideology used to justify an inequitable streaming policy. Lin (2000) also shows, through careful analysis of actual classroom exchanges, that such a reductionist, monolingual ideology, far from being a useful guiding principle in designing language policy, actually impedes teaching and learning by limiting the range of useful classroom communicative resources that teachers can draw on.

Another major premise of the language selection policy is that fluency in English is crucial for the maintenance of Hong Kong’s position in international commerce. This utilitarian perspective that privileges English learning above all else is actively promoted by businesses, which played a major role in constructing the relevant discourse and shaping the policy itself. This is what I shall turn to in the next section.


Rhetoric concerning the importance of English for the economy of Hong Kong as an ‘international city’ is present in virtually every official document on the language
issue since the *Llewellyn Report* (Llewellyn et al. 1982). Meanwhile, the role of businesses in shaping language policy grew to such an extent that they actually found their way into official documents. In the *Report of the Working Group on Language Proficiency* (Education Commission 1994: para. 2.26), the Language Campaign, which had been launched in 1988 by several businesses, most notably, British-related enterprises, was specifically commended for having promoted ‘improved standards of English in order to maintain Hong Kong’s international position’. In particular, the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (hereafter referred to as the Hongkong Bank), initiator and leader of the Language Campaign, was mentioned for having donated HK$20 million to a Language Development Fund, which supported a ‘coherent programme of language-related research and development projects’ (Education Commission 1994: para. 2.102). Then, in the Education Commission’s Report issued the following year (1995: para. 2.64), such efforts were applauded yet again:

We know that some commercial institutes have put in efforts to raise language capacity. Some examples are: the Hong Kong Language Campaign, The Hongkong Bank Language Development Fund, Hong Kong Telecom English Teachers’ Centre, etc. We are very grateful for the efforts on the part of private enterprises, and we hope that more support would come from the public.

Acknowledgement of the contribution of major businesses in official education documents is a rare but distinctive indicator of the weight of their influence in education policy. Indeed, this influence came about in the form of an aggressive campaign, named the Language Campaign, launched in 1988 by businesses, particularly those with British-linked interests. The Campaign was led by the Hongkong Bank, which provided three successive chairpersons until it disbanded in 1995, and which made the biggest donations. Its members included: Hongkong Bank, Hongkong Telecom, Hutchison Whampoa, the Swire Group, Shell Hong Kong, *South China Morning Post*, China International Trust and Investment Corporation, Yaohan, and Time/Warner Inc, which joined in 1992 (Language Campaign Bulletin [LCB]1: 1, LCB 2: 1, LCB3: 1, LCB7: 2, LCB9: 2).

**Promotion of English teaching**

One major activity of the Language Campaign was to influence and promote English language teaching in schools and tertiary institutions, and this was achieved mainly through donations. For example, a Centre for Professional and Business English, housed in the former Hong Kong Polytechnic (now the Hong Kong Polytechnic University), opened in May 1989, to which the Language Campaign donated 2.2 million (LCB1: 1). Similarly, a Language Resource Centre, situated in the Institute of Language in Education (ILE, under the Education Department, and later incorporated into the Institute of Education for training schoolteachers), opened in May 1991. This was supported by a $5 million donation made by the Hongkong Bank, Hutchison Whampoa, the Swire Group, and Yaohan (LCB3: 1). Then, Hongkong Telecom provided initial support for the setting up of the TELEC (Teachers of English Language Education Centre) in the University of Hong Kong, which essentially linked up schools and teachers via a computer network for the enhancement of English teaching (later funded also by the Hong Kong Jockey Club and the Language Fund) (LCB7: 6–7).
Influence on policy-making

While the existence of such centres helped to promote the cause of English language teaching, the Language Campaign went a step further to actually influence policy-making. The Hongkong Bank, leader of the Campaign, donated $20 million to the Education Department to create the Hongkong Bank Language Development Fund, which was set up in 1990. This funded a 5-year programme of research and development projects to be conducted through and coordinated by the Institute of Language in Education, an official establishment under the Education Department, overseen by a Management Team, to which the donor group sent its representative. There were eight projects altogether, and among these were ones related to the Target-Oriented Curriculum, which was initially related to language streaming, as well as the MIGA project (LCB7: 8). Both of these were directly related to, or have been incorporated into the present language selection policy, as we have seen above.

The ‘English for business’ rhetoric

The shaping of education policy was, of course, an important achievement of the Language Campaign. Yet another major undertaking was the strengthening of the English rhetoric through high-profile propaganda activities. In 1992, advertisements about Hong Kong’s need to have ‘plenty of good English speakers . . . if it is to maintain its international competitiveness’ were put out by the Language Campaign (LCB5: 1–2). These were carried by the South China Morning Post, the Asian Wall Street Journal and Time magazine, all of which offered space free of charge for an extended period of time. And, throughout the existence of the Language Campaign, efforts were made by their members or invited guests to hammer similar messages into the public mind through writings, speeches and interviews.

Taken together, these messages constructed a kind of discourse that conveyed the unquestionable, almost ‘natural’, importance of English (Li 2000). First of all, it assumed the existence of an all-important world of ‘international’ business and finance that was overwhelmingly populated by English speakers. In order for Hong Kong to compete for, or retain its membership, in this world therefore, its inhabitants had to speak fluent English, and this seemed to be the most important, if not the only, way. A typical remark is this one made by Brian Renwick, Senior Manager Personnel of the Hongkong Bank, who also became the second chairperson of the Language Campaign: ‘English is the international language of business’ and ‘we need more competent English speakers if we are to keep up the Hong Kong success story’ (LCB2: 1).

A supplementary argument was that Hong Kong relied on an expanding service industry sector, and it was important that employees ‘speak the language of customer service’, which, presumably, was English. Not only were most, if not all, customers imagined to be English speakers, but these customers demanded much more than correct grammar or extensive vocabulary. ‘Equally important [for business], if not more so, are nuance, a smile, an offer to help’, it was said (LCB1: 2).

This emphasis on spoken English, near-native fluency and even ‘nuance’ is interesting, as it set up a hierarchy of English capacity, whereby the ‘native (English) speaker’ naturally stood on top, and others were placed on descending rungs
accordingly. Because this hierarchy was taken to be universal, this view had an unmistakably imperialist slant to it. Supplementing the oft-repeated rhetoric that English was the international language of business (LCB2: 1–2, LCB3: 2, LCB5: 1–2), therefore, were declarations that ‘the use of the English language should be viewed as a matter of convenience, practicality and universality’ (LCB8: 2). Furthermore, English was assigned an intrinsic, absolute value. Speaking at a Language Campaign symposium, Roy Harris, Chair of English Language, University of Hong Kong, stated bluntly: ‘Cheap English doesn’t go with quality goods, services or operations of any kind’. Commenting on the standards of English locally, he said: ‘If Hong Kong English were up for auction on the international market, there isn’t a self-respecting country in the world that would even put in a bid for it’ (Harris 1989: 1). The imperialist and the absolutist stance of the English superiority discourse came across very strongly in this terse remark.

This kind of discourse entails closure on at least two fronts, and, as it impacts on education, leads to very undesirable consequences. Firstly, since English is taken to be the ‘universal’ language, there is no need to learn other ‘less important’ or ‘less universal’ languages. Indeed, Yaohan, the Japanese retail chain store which had joined the Language Campaign early on, was prepared to train its staff in language skills (meaning English) in order to strengthen internal communications. In this establishment, it was said: ‘English is the medium between Japanese management and Chinese staff’ (LCB4: 2).

The second closure arises from the overriding instrumentality behind the learning of English, which not only displaces the cultural element involved in language learning, but, worse still, reduces the goal of education to merely the acquisition of a ‘language of customer service’ (LCB1: 2) or an ‘international language of business’ (LCB3: 2). On the rare occasion when Language Campaign members acknowledged the educational value of learning in one’s first language, this realization was nevertheless set aside rapidly, and the importance of learning English was stressed again. The fear of ‘how much your business might be losing through employees’ poor English?’ was strong enough to take one’s mind away from educational considerations.9

Take the best students and teach them English

Lin (1996: 58) had pointed out that foreign business interests and certain academic discourses supported the government’s English-dominated policies (most notably, recruitment policies) by furnishing rhetoric that legitimized the subordination of all educational goals to the dominant goal of mastering a foreign language. Indeed, that was what members of the Language Campaign, which included also local businesses, had been striving at, rather successfully. Through this, they were able to shift staff-training costs onto public education expenses, while maintaining and asserting a racial-cum-linguistic superiority and ideology well beyond 1997.

As in the colonial days, the present language selection policy is strongly elitist. I have shown, in the above section, how the selection mechanism guarantees that the academically best students would learn in the English medium, thereby making them near-native English speakers (so-called ‘truly bilingual’, in official terms). These people would then function as brokers between the powerful English-speaking investors (the ‘international’ business interests) and the local Chinese. Tsim
(1989: para. 1.11), in his commissioned report on English proficiency in Hong Kong submitted to the Hong Kong Language Campaign, stated the status and function of this group very clearly:

The Hong Kong Chinese who can act as a bridge between East and West, between the expatriates who speak no Cantonese and the locals who speak little English, belong to perhaps the top ten to twenty per cent of the class in our Anglo–Chinese schools. Every effort should be made to ensure that they will be able to learn English, to learn in English if they want to, and use English in their adult life without fear of social ostracism.

With the institutionalization of the supremacy of English-medium education now in place, this English-oriented elite need not have any fear, of course. Even with the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, English supremacy would not be undermined, as long as the total subordination of the education system to instrumental needs is maintained. Peter Sutch, Chairperson of John Swire & Sons (HK) Ltd, was sure of this, as he spoke in the third Symposium of the Language Campaign in 1993:

Hong Kong’s continued success as an international business centre is to a substantial extent dependent on the use of English as its lingua franca, a fact recognized by the Chinese government which is opposed to a reduction in the emphasis on English in Hong Kong schools in favour of Chinese (LCB7: 5).

An important question that is never asked, however, is to what extent, and for how much longer, Hong Kong has to sacrifice the development of young minds so as to ensure the production of the best linguistic brokers, instead of better citizens. Peter Sutch might not care about the value of education for Hong Kong students in their own language, but education researchers such as Brimer et al. (1985: 8) did point out, as mentioned above, the unquestionable advantage of learning through Chinese for Chinese students in Hong Kong. Other researchers have also reported the unsurprising observation that classroom participation and student–teacher interaction were much better in classrooms using Chinese as the teaching medium. While EMI schools obtain the best students, therefore, they do not provide the best education because they are handicapped by the foreign medium of teaching. On the other hand, CMI schools which adopt the most effective medium of teaching are labelled as ‘second class’ as a result of the selection policy, and they are therefore subject to a certain degree of demoralization. Under the present policy, too, extra resources are committed to improving English skills (for their own students), or to running bridging courses (for EMI schools), rather than to the long-neglected work in building the groundwork for first-language education, such as preparing appropriate textbooks, Chinese word-processing equipment and training, and so on. The privileging of the training of ‘linguistic brokers’ in education policy will clearly have long-term deleterious effects on education and society as a whole.

**Beyond utilitarianism: medium of instruction, education and sociocultural values**

Since policy ‘cannot be divorced from interests, from conflict, from domination or from justice’ (Ball 1990: 3), contest is to be expected, even if this might only take place at a local level. Weak and invisible as contesting and alternative values might often be, a brief description of them nevertheless sets the context in which one could view officially sanctioned ones in a better light. This is necessary because
officially sanctioned values, through successful engineering of a dominant discourse, often appear to be ‘natural’ and universal whereas they are not.

In order to tap such alternative values, I interviewed seven school principals and one education administrator of a local religious institution. Most of my informants were in charge of traditional Chinese middle schools, except for two of them, who headed Anglo-Chinese schools which had experimented with gradual change to full CMI teaching before the language selection policy was implemented. From their interviews, one gets a glimpse of an interesting spectrum of alternative educational values which have been displaced or marginalized by official policy.

*Cultural transmission and identity-formation v. instrumental goals*

My informants, in particular the principals of traditional Chinese middle schools, saw their work as cultural transmission and identity-formation. Indeed, that was one of the major reasons why their schools had persisted in using Chinese as their medium of instruction. Mr A was deputy principal of a Chinese middle school that had been established in Hong Kong in the 1930s as a refugee school from Guangzhou, China. His school, which was also his Alma Mater, was built in the late 19th century by Chinese Christians, so, according to him, it was ‘a school run by Chinese people all along’. Naturally, therefore,

... it has a strong sense of Chineseness, of national character, and a great emphasis on transmitting a Chinese consciousness... In terms of history and culture, we identify with China. We don't identify with things British... Politically, we don't resist the British, but in terms of national allegiance, we think of ourselves as Chinese.

Principal B, a retired principal who had played an active role in the Association of Hong Kong Chinese Middle Schools (founded in 1983), was even more forthcoming about the cultural mission of Chinese schools, as contrasted with the predominant instrumentality in which the issue of MOI was deliberated. He once told his colleagues of the Association that:

Chinese middle schools are Chinese middle schools. We promote mother-tongue education, which is very appropriate in terms of [education] theory, and which is universally applicable. But mother-tongue education and Chinese secondary schooling are two different things. What we offer in Chinese middle schools is much more than mother-tongue education: teaching in Cantonese, or teaching in Mandarin, whatever. Not at all! Rather, it is our organization, our spirit, our nation, thoughts, national thought, Chinese culture, things Chinese. Chinese customs, ideals, their roots, a lot of legacies... If you think in terms of British, or colonial concepts, you'd never bring out these things. Nobody wants to, or is able to. Everybody think about qualifications, [university] entrance, doing business. Who cares about your China?

In the same interview, Principal B tried to make a case for the revival of the Chinese middle school system in Hong Kong, as a means of re-strengthening Chinese culture. In his opinion, Chinese culture had suffered a serious setback on the mainland in the past decades. Now that Marxism was beginning to wane and efforts were being made to revitalize Chinese traditions on the mainland, and with Hong Kong reunified with China, Hong Kong should play its part by returning to Chinese education. This should comprise ‘Chinese moral values, history and culture’, idioms that were prevalent in the classics, the time-worn stories embedded in these idioms, and even the traditional pedagogical practice of recitation, and writing with the ink-brush. All these, he believed, would take the student much
further than just becoming a ‘clerk or a secretary’. A lone voice in the commercial wilderness indeed, yet what he said brings out the extent to which a humanist discourse of education as cultural transmission has been subordinated to a narrowly utilitarian view of education as training for employable skills.

Indeed, the Chinese medium in traditional Chinese schools was taken as central to their national and cultural allegiance. Principal C, who headed a Catholic school set up in Hong Kong in the 1920s, recounted the reasons behind the decision, made in the early 1970s, by the sponsoring institution to remain Chinese. One of them was the Chinese education background of the founding Catholic sisters back in the pre-war days on the mainland, and their devotion to ’run[ning] a Chinese school for Hong Kong Chinese students’. As her colleague, Principal B, explained:

We feel that when we teach in Chinese, we are in fact . . . affirming our Chinese tradition and values. We are very insistent on this. For example, when you deliver a moral lecture, when you try to mould their character, . . . you speak in English, and you’d use examples from the English language. You speak in Chinese, and you’d quote from things Chinese. This is actually about the selection of values.

Cultural transmission is related to moral education, where the use of the first language is seen to play an important role. Commenting on the present MOI policy whereby English schools get the top students, for example, Principal A said: ‘They [the EMI schools] get all the Band One [top 25%] students. But when we teach, we don’t only aim at teaching Band One students . . . We also cultivate civic values. We feel that we are going the right direction’. Moral and civic education, which involves cultivation of young minds at a much deeper level, is therefore set up against the narrow goal of academic achievement.

The school principals’ insistence on cultural transmission and identity-formation via the use of the first language comes across very clearly in their words, and their agency in this respect is well appreciated. However, the schooling system, with English-medium higher education looming above, as well as the employment structure that privileges English-medium learning, has, for the past few decades, constructed Chinese-medium education as only second class. This, unfortunately, is something that students of Chinese-medium schools have to live with. Either this, or they have to develop counter-discourses to contest it. Judging from the present situation, however, it seems that such counter-discourses are extremely weak and isolated.

Egalitarian ideals and pedagogical soundness

The Chinese medium of education is also related to a commitment to an egalitarian ideal of education. Another of my informants, Principal D, was the principal of a Christian school which was built in Guangzhou in the late 19th century and moved to Hong Kong in the early 1950s. Having herself had an English-medium education all along, and having taught in English-medium schools for almost two decades before she took up the present position, Principal D nevertheless was committed to Chinese-medium education because she thought this was most suitable for her students. She observed that content teaching in a second language could only benefit the privileged minority, who therefore became the prized targets of recruitment of schools eager to boost their reputation. As an educator, she felt that she should have the courage ‘to wade against the tide’, because:
I always think that there are far more poor people than rich ones. Ordinary people and poor people make up the majority. . . . Everybody say [sic] they want the best students. Now these only constitute about ten percent. What about the other ninety percent? Who is going to teach them? I think the issue is as simple as that. And we say we are a Christian school. If you’ve read what I’ve written before, you’d know that I don’t refrain from criticizing our own Christian schools. . . . I don’t object to some Christian schools training very good students. What I object to is the attitude that one has to hold on to the best students [and disregard the others].

To emphasize the true value of Christian education, she later added: ‘Why should we turn [the weaker students] away? We always say we Christian schools educate in love and so on. How can you [select the best] and say this [at the same time]?’

To Principal D, English-medium education was unsatisfactory except for the privileged few, because it was pedagogically unsound to make children learn through a language that they could not use to express themselves well. ‘One’s thoughts are expressed through language. If one is blocked by [an unfamiliar] language, how can one express oneself? Naturally they’d stop expressing [their thoughts]. . . . We always describe education in Hong Kong as “force-feeding”. Ultimately this has to do with language’.

The use of Chinese as a medium of teaching should, according to Principal D, act as a catalyst for better teaching: more interactive teaching and class discussion, a better chance to develop deep-level analysis, and a move away from traditional, didactic modes of education. This was what she had been encouraging her teachers to do in her school. Such teaching at a deeper level, according to Principal D, was particularly relevant in the local context, where universal, compulsory education meant that the system had to take in children of poorer families who were less endowed for content learning through a second language.

Principal D’s views were echoed by Principal E, who headed a school that had spearheaded a reform programme, designed for Catholic diocese schools, which involved a gradual transition to Chinese-medium education for a majority of subjects over a period of a few years. The implementation of the official language selection policy in 1998 had, unfortunately, thwarted such a local reform initiative. The Catholic diocese schools which were involved in the reform were thereafter split up into those which ‘qualified’ for English-medium teaching, and those which were relegated to the more inferior majority of Chinese medium schools. Nevertheless, over the few years of relatively free, uninterrupted experimentation, Principal E had tried to impress on his staff the importance of a concomitant change in pedagogy while shifting to Chinese-medium teaching. Briefly speaking, students should be given more chance to express their opinions and feelings, and develop their skills in independent research, now that their native tongue was adopted in the classrooms. Teachers naturally had to work harder, because now they were no longer propped up by the authority that had come with their exclusive mastery of English, a foreign language. This change involved a serious rethinking of educational goals and ideals, which had been delayed for a long time by the use of EMI in his school, as in many other local schools.

To school principals and teachers who are seriously committed to pedagogical soundness and the egalitarian ideal, this kind of rethinking is of course timely and necessary. One consideration hinging on this rethinking is, however, a dilemma: namely, how to maintain pedagogical soundness while ensuring students’ access to English, the dominant symbolic capital for social mobility in Hong Kong. In this regard, the elitist official policy of language streaming and enforced monolingual mode of learning, based on the ideology of language ‘purism’, has to be abandoned,
or undermined. Various bilingual modes of teaching as well as classroom communication should be explored so that the first language could be used constructively both for content learning and for supporting the development of the second language, for the majority of the students (Lin 2000, So 2000).

Conclusion: whose interests are to be served?

Immediately after 1997, a high-profile education reform was undertaken by a newly appointed Education Commission. Starting from a widely publicized consultation document which called for a complete overhaul of the schooling system in January 1999 (see Education Commission 1999), the Commission finally issued a set of reform proposals in September 2000 (see Education Commission 2000). A thorough analysis of the implications of the reform proposals, on both the institutional and the wider societal level, would necessitate the writing of at least a few academic papers. Obviously this is outside the scope of this paper. Related to the central discussion of this paper, however, is the significant omission of the language issue in the official documents. This is in great contrast to the review done almost 2 decades earlier, i.e. the Llewellyn Report (Llewellyn et al. 1982), in which it was given pride of place by the overseas visiting panel. Given the many misgivings about the language selection policy implemented in 1998, it is clear that such omission has not come about because a satisfactory solution to the problem is already in place.

In previous sections, we have seen that the language selection policy was both framed and legitimated by the narrowly utilitarian and labour market-driven goal of education in Hong Kong, with a highly elitist character that remains hidden in official discourses, whereby the socially endowed are selected for learning through a foreign language. On the classroom level, both researchers and front-line educators have noted the pedagogical shortcomings of the use of a foreign medium in the classroom. More specifically, they pointed out that deep-level learning, citizenship and Chinese cultural education was well-nigh impossible, and a didactic, rote-learning mode had to be retained if the MOI is English. Despite its high-sounding rhetoric of developing students’ ‘capability for independent thinking, critical analysis and problem-solving and team-work’ (Education Commission 2000: para. 2.21), the recent reform document remains conspicuously silent on this issue. In particular, it had nothing to say about the present language selection policy as a cost-effective way of training linguistic brokers serving investors in the global economy. Any changes the education reformers promised to undertake would therefore not touch the heart of the matter, i.e. the major goal of education, and whose interests are to be served.

Notwithstanding the silence on this matter in the reform documents, the leading members of the Education Commission did comment on the language issue in an informal context. In April 2000, it was reported that the three leading members of the Commission lashed out at the ‘mother-tongue education policy’, implemented since 1998. Their line of thinking was quite clear: that Hong Kong schools should not teach in the mother tongue, because English was the most useful language worldwide. Among them, Anthony Leung, chairperson of the Education Commission, pointed out that education should bow to market forces. If teaching in English was what most parents preferred, then schools should teach in that
language. Not the slightest concern was shown about educational efficacy, as well as social, cultural and political implications of MOI both on a local and global level. From the late 1980s, when the present language selection policy first took shape, to the year 2000, the dominant discourse of education for training in English skills has not changed a bit. In contrast, the *Llewellyn Report* of 1982 had highlighted the dilemma of Chinese students being taught in English, a language ‘synonymous with power and prestige’ (Llewellyn *et al.* 1982: 27). Looking back to this highly sensitive remark, the position of the Commission’s leaders today clearly represents a major closure in education discussion.

Is there hope for a counteractive discourse against this dominant one of narrow utilitarianism? Judging from the existence of contesting values held by front-line school personnel, I think there is no other way but to look to actual educational practice on a local level. However, such a counter-discourse based on educational efficacy would have to confront the popularly held myth, vigorously promoted by businesses for their own interests, and also supported by certain academic discourses, that Hong Kong’s economic survival depends on the availability of English language skills. Nothing short of a thorough critique of the human capital theory, particularly its vulgarized version whereby education is invariably taken as an easy scapegoat at times of crises, would suffice. On another level, the ideology of linguistic ‘purism’, which affirms the undesirability of ‘mixed code’, must also be exploded, in order to open the way to meaningful and effective bilingual practices in classroom communication so that English would not be available only to the socially endowed.

**Notes**

1. This general commitment to ‘encourage’ mother-tongue education was, in turn, a response to the *Llewellyn Report* of 1982, which, among other things, criticized the widespread counter-productive practice of making children learn in an alien tongue, English.

2. One of my informants, Principal D, an experienced teacher of English, estimated that only about 30 of those 114 schools were able to maintain monolingual teaching in English without great difficulty.

3. The official explanation for this move was that, as from the fall of 2001 onwards, allocation to secondary schools would be based on three ‘bands’ instead of five, and so there would be a much greater range of ability among those admitted to the ‘best’ schools. Hence the need for supplementary teaching in Chinese in these schools.

4. It was reported that in an Education Department survey, about 200 CMI schools decided to switch to EMI teaching when their first batch of CMI students proceeded to Forms 4 and 5, for all or some subjects. This amounts to about two-thirds of the total number of CMI schools. See *Apple Daily* (2001).

5. This was a reversal of earlier policy. Following the *Education Commission Report No. 1*, schools were asked to adopt Chinese as medium of instruction. In April 1986, an Education Department circular was issued to schools, recommending them to arrange different groupings of language medium by levels, by subjects and by streams (see Education Department 1994: 1).


7. The role of research in policy is often clearly spelt out in research texts. For example, ‘In 1981, the government accepted a multi-million dollar package aimed at improving the standard of English and Chinese in schools. One part of this package was the establishment of a research programme to examine problems relating to the medium of instruction and to provide a basis for the formulation of future policy directions’ (Johnson *et al.* 1985: 1).

8. ‘The end result of the endeavours both of the staff at the ILE and the teachers who use the Centre’s facilities’, according to David Gledhill, Chairman of the Swire Group in Hong Kong, who opened the Centre, ‘should be a workforce which is better able to converse and work in the international language of business – English’ (*LCB*3: 2).
9. ‘Hong Kong – International City’, a speech given by Brian H. Renwick, Chairperson of the Hong Kong Language Campaign, to the American Chamber of Commerce, 8 October 1993, reported in LCB7: 2–3.

10. The Education Department commissioned a study to compare the teaching of eight Chinese-medium schools with eight English-medium ones. It revealed that teaching in experimental schools [Chinese-medium schools] was more dynamic and active. Teachers adopted more interactive approach and students actively participated in their learning process. . . . Also observed through videotaping of classroom teaching, teachers adopted more lively presentation style in their teaching. Because there was no language barrier in the teaching and learning process, more topics were covered and the subject matter was discussed in detail and in depth’ (see Education Department 1994: 55–59).

11. Presentation of ongoing research on CMI schools by Amy B. M. Tsui in the Annual Education Seminar, Professional Teachers’ Union of Hong Kong, 12 June 1999.

12. Traditional Chinese middle schools were typically set up in the pre-war years, adopting Chinese as the medium of instruction, and following the American 6–3–3 system (6 years of primary schooling, followed by 3 years of junior and then 3 years of senior secondary schooling) adopted on the mainland. In 1961, the 3 years of senior secondary schooling were truncated, as the junior and senior secondary stages were combined into 5 years plus 1 matriculation year by government decree. This was to bring them in line with the Anglo-Chinese system, which was marked by the use of English as the medium of instruction except for the subjects Chinese and Chinese history, and 5 years of secondary instruction followed by 2 years of matriculation before university entry. Despite the growing unpopularity of CMI education, some such Chinese middle schools still maintained their CMI instruction. After 1997, they were joined by many other Anglo-Chinese schools forced to switch to CMI teaching.

13. ‘Mother tongue teaching a dead-end road: three big heads of the EC lashed out at present policy’, Apple Daily (2000). The ‘three big heads’ referred to are Anthony K. C. Leung, banker appointed Chairperson of the Education Commission, Cheng Kai-ming, professor of education at the University of Hong Kong, and Tai Hay-lap, headmaster of a local secondary school. All three had sustained a high media exposure throughout the education reforms.

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