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THE USE OF ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN POST-COLONIAL HONG KONG – PERCEIVED REALITIES AND ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

In post-colonial Hong Kong, despite the Chinese government's effort to promote the national language, English is still held to be the most marketable language, particularly in this age of globalization. Most tertiary institutions in Hong Kong therefore continue to adhere to the English-medium instruction (EMI) policy. However, with the changing socio-political environment, the Chinese language has assumed more importance; meanwhile, the general English language proficiency of university students has declined as a result of the democratization of tertiary education. This raises the question of the practicality of the adoption of the EMI policy across the higher education sector, particularly at the self-financing tertiary institutions, where students normally are less academically accomplished. In order to understand how the EMI policy is practised in these institutions, teachers and students from different academic programmes of five self-financing tertiary institutions in Hong Kong were interviewed to explore their perceived realities in EMI classrooms, coping strategies and language preferences. Findings reveal persistent support for the EMI policy, though its actual implementation involves various adaptations which may be harmful to students' English learning. It is argued that efforts be made to address the issues involved so that the EMI policy can be more than an aspiration.

Key Words: medium of instruction, ESL, higher education, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of internationalization and commodification of higher education fuelled by the accelerating trend of globalization, English has increasingly been adopted as the medium of instruction in higher education across the globe in countries where English is not the native tongue of the general population. The use of English in teaching

and learning among students who are essentially learners of the language as a second or foreign language has aroused concerns about the effects of EMI on teaching and learning effectiveness and issues around the perceptions and implementation of the policy. Studies into these issues have been conducted across the globe in recent years (e.g. Botha, 2013; Byun et al, 2011; Collins, 2010; Evans & Morrison, 2012; Kim, 2011), with conclusions drawn and recommendations made in each. However, as the formulation of the MOI policy has always been motivated by political agendas and has to be understood in the broader social and political context (Tsui, 2004), more research into the actual practice of EMI in different contexts and from different perspectives is required to foster a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon and inform future practices.

Among all the places that adopt EMI, Hong Kong presents one of the more interesting cases that illustrate the interplay among the social and political forces underpinning the implementation of the policy and the stakeholders' views and adaptations to it. As the last British colony in Asia, Hong Kong only returned to her ancestral sovereign China around two decades ago in the year 1997; the recent experience of the city's colonial history gives the English language the status of more than just a commodity, as the language is commonly viewed in many other societies. Meanwhile, the influence of the Chinese national language, Putonghua, has been rising in education and in society at large. Under the "bi-literate and trilingual" language policy introduced by the government, Putonghua was added as the third official language alongside English and Cantonese, the native tongue of nearly 90% of the population. However, in terms of actual circulation, Putonghua is still largely confined to business and professional communication (Evans, 2010), even though the government has launched various initiatives to promote it, including the use of Putonghua as the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools (Evans, 2013).

There has long existed a dilemma over the choice between Chinese and English as the MOI. Although it may appeal to some nationalists to promote Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI) in primary and secondary schools, various stakeholder groups have blamed the CMI policy for the decline in students' English standards, thus affecting their competitiveness (Li, 2009). This is not an unfounded concern as evidenced by research showing the adverse effects the change in the MOI may have on language learning (e.g. Poon, 2004; Lin & Morrison, 2010).

In higher education, as English is commonly considered to be the language of internationalization (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Phillipson, 2006), the majority of the universities and tertiary institutions in Hong Kong continue to adopt English as the MOI. As an example, even the Chinese University of Hong Kong, whose principal language has been Chinese since its establishment in 1964, has become increasingly bilingual by offering more courses in English since 2004 (Li, 2013).

Even though the "bi-literate and trilingual" language does not seem to have challenged the long-standing EMI policy among universities and tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, the perceptions and actual use of the languages in education may be undergoing undercurrents of change given the change of the socio-political environment. Such changes may be intensified by the reality that many university students nowadays do not have an adequate level of English proficiency to learn effectively in an EMI environment, largely as a result of the shift from elitist to mass education. The problem of a mismatch between policy (EMI) and actual practice (mixed-code of English and Cantonese) has long existed since before the turn the century (Li, Leung & Kember, 2001), particularly in science faculties (e.g. Flowerdew, Li & Miller, 1998; Walters & Ralia, 1998). While university education was accessible to only around 2% of the student population in the 1980s, the percentage rose to 18% in the mid-1990s (Howlett, 1998; University Grants Committee, HKSAR, 2018) and continued to climb to around 27.5% in 2017/2018 (University Grants Committee, HKSAR, 2018). With the government policy to increase the participation rate in post-secondary education from 30 percent to 60 percent of the relevant age group (Education and Manpower Bureau 2006), there has also been a rapid increase in the number of sub-degree and degree programmes offered by self-financing tertiary institutions since the turn of the century. For many of the tertiary students, therefore, the adoption of EMI may present obstacles rather than a competitive edge.

In view of all the changes described above, there may be a need to adjust the MOI policy in higher education, and such a need should be most conspicuous among the self-financing tertiary institutions. It is a known fact that in general, students admitted to these self-financing programmes have poorer results in the public examinations than those admitted to the government-funded institutions (Yuen, 2015). It is doubtful whether these students are able or willing to pursue their studies using English; the exploration of the need to review the MOI should therefore begin among these students and their teachers. The views of these teachers and students

may provide grounds for the exploration of other language approaches, such as the use of mother tongue, which is the most powerful medium for thinking (Vygotsky, Rieber, & Carton, 1987), and the use of translanguaging, an approach used to capitalize on the linguistic repertoire of students in a multilingual classroom, which has been advocated by applied linguists in recent years (Garcia & Wei, 2013; Wong, Mazak & Carroll, 2018). The latter may be a feasible solution as public support for the use of both Cantonese and English in education, rather than either of the two languages alone, has been found in previous research (Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 2008).

The approach adopted by policy-makers thus far has been top-down in nature, which might have disregarded public opinion and the interests of the indigenous (Helot & Laoire, 2011, p. xv); the shift of focus away from the authoritative top-down processes advocated in recent frameworks of language policy (e.g. Corson, 1999; Ricento, 2006) may point to some new direction which may bring us closer to the resolution of the problem. In order to explore whether or how changes would be required, this study tapped into the experiences and opinions of educators and students from the self-financing tertiary institutions in Hong Kong about the implementation of the EMI policy. The questions addressed in this study were:

(1) To what extent is English used as the medium of instruction in teaching and learning in the self-financing tertiary institutions, from the teachers' and students' perspectives?
(2) Do teachers and students have difficulties in using English as the MOI? And if so, how do they cope with the difficulties?
(3) Which language(s) among English, Cantonese and Putonghua do the teachers and students of the self-financing tertiary institutions prefer as the MOI?

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants

Teachers and students from a variety of undergraduate programmes from five of the self-financing tertiary institutions in Hong Kong were invited to participate in the study. At the time of the study, there were fewer than ten degree-offering self-financing tertiary institutions in the

city. The five participating in the study were the more established ones with stable student intakes. The sample was therefore considered to be representative enough to reflect the more prevailing views among this group of stakeholders.

Three teachers from each of the four broad disciplines of science, social science, business, and arts and humanities from the five institutions accepted the invitation to participate in the study, making a total of twelve teacher participants (seven male and five female). These teachers were openly recruited and individually approached by the researchers, so they had not been acquainted with the researchers and were impartial to the project. All of them were holders of doctoral degrees and were functionally bilingual in Cantonese and English, with Cantonese being their native tongue. Most teachers interviewed had been teaching at tertiary level in Hong Kong for more than 10 years, and more than half of them had been in the profession for over 20 years. Four of them had been overseas educated, and three of them had overseas teaching experience. Four of them had also had experience teaching in local government-funded universities before joining the self-financing tertiary sector.

Twelve groups of students, mostly those who had been or were being taught by the teacher participants in this study agreed to participate in the focus group interviews. Each group consisted of six to eight student participants, making a total of 79 participants. Participants in each group were invited from programmes in the same discipline of the same institution to ensure homogeneity, which would facilitate sincerer discussion among them (Dawson, Manderson, & Tallo, 1993; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). There were both males and females in each group, and the participants were all native Cantonese speakers aged between 19 and 21 in different years of their studies. Of these twelve groups, two groups were from science degree programmes, three from business degree programmes, four from social science degree programmes and three from arts and humanities degree programmes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were collected via focus group interviews with the twelve groups of students and via in-depth individual interviews with the twelve teachers. As this study set out to elicit the stake-holders' beliefs, perceptions and subjective experiences on the issue of MOI, which may be considered by some to be a sensitive topic, interviewing was the main

instrument of data collection in this study. Interviewing was considered an appropriate method for this study as it is highly suitable for obtaining information based on personal emotions, feelings, experiences and insights, or about sensitive issues (Wisker, 2007). In particular, the focus group was considered to be an appropriate research instrument for the student participants as they were all young adults who may be prone to mutual influence in real life. A focus group setting encourages dynamics among the participants that may resemble their interactions in a natural environment (Casey and Krueger, 2000) and is thus more effective for eliciting their genuine opinions.

The in-depth individual interviews with the teachers aimed to find out about the teachers' practices and views about the use of Cantonese, English and Putonghua in their teaching, to what extent they followed the language policy of their institutions, if any, and how they coped with the difficulties they might encounter in the process. Similarly, the focus group interviews with the students centred around the participants' experiences in learning in the three languages, how they overcame the difficulties they might have had in learning using English, and their concerns and preferences about the choice of MOI (Refer to Appendix A for the interview questions used).

All the participants were clearly briefed on the purpose and procedures of the study and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. They then signed the informed consent form and completed the demographic information form before the interview began.

To allow the participants to fully express themselves, the interviews were conducted in their native tongue Cantonese. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic content analysis. Statements or expressions providing information or reflecting views in relation to the research questions were identified and coded in each interview and then categorised with similar units from across the interviews. Main ideas emerging from the categorisation and re-categorization process were compared and contrasted where appropriate, and interpreted in accordance with the research questions concerned.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Ambiguity of the MOI Policy

The message of English being the medium of instruction was communicated subtly rather than overtly in these institutions, and yet both the teachers and students somehow knew or assumed that English was supposed to be used in teaching and learning. For the teachers, most of them failed to identify any official document that stipulates their institutional language policy. Except for two of them who gained this knowledge directly as programme administrators or from some senior members of the department, the teachers learnt that the official language to use was English mainly through their direct observations of the college's emphasis on the English language, and the mention of EMI in some course documents and teaching evaluation forms. However, those who had been in the field for more than 20 years could clearly tell that the medium of instruction in higher education had been and should be English, possibly because of their prior experience, particularly those with prior teaching experience at government-funded (also commonly called "UGC-funded" locally meaning "funded by the University Grants Committee") universities. Recalling from his twenty-odd years' teaching at UGC-funded universities, one teacher (02-BM) remarked, *"Even for those courses about China, if they were to be taught in Chinese, approval from the university was required. You got no choice, you have to, because it's EMI."*

Compared with the teacher participants, the student participants were generally much less aware of the existence of language policies at their institutions. They assumed that if such a policy existed, it should be EMI. However, none of them could report any formal channel in which they received information about the language policy of their institutions. This can be illustrated with a group of student participants' (02-MS) responses to the question of whether there existed a language policy in their institution:

> S (02-MS-6): It should depend on the teachers. Teachers probably would use English of their own accord.
> *I: You assume the teachers would think that (they should use English)?
> S (02-MS-6): (They) should feel that we are (a) tertiary (institution), so (they) normally would use the international language, English in teaching, so they would seldom cover everything all in Cantonese.
> I: Okay, so this is your perception. Does that mean you guys do not

know if there is such a policy (EMI)?
Students (All in the 02-MS group): No, we don't.
(*I = Interviewer)

A similar reason mentioned by a few other student participants was that since other local universities and tertiary institutions followed the EMI policy, so should theirs. In other words, their "perception" of the policy could be to a certain extent affected by their own expectations.

The teachers' and students' accounts reflect that these self-financing tertiary institutions tend not to promote or assert the EMI policy, but the policy is vaguely in place and is generally still perceived or presumed to be in practice. Two of the teachers who had taught at UGC-funded universities noted the relatively less stringent enforcement of the EMI policy at the self-financing tertiary institutions they were currently teaching at. One teacher (05-SS) remarked, "As you know it is not easy (to get approval for the exceptional use of Chinese as the MOI) at UGC-funded universities, but self-financing institutions actually have much greater flexibility…" The same teacher (05-SS) viewed the flexibility as an advantage that had not been fully appreciated. "The problem is, as I can observe, many self-financing institutions tied themselves down (to the EMI policy)." For better or for worse, the self-financing institutions tend to have more leeway in the adoption of MOI. This may explain their rather ambivalent stance and the vagueness of the EMI policy, which affects its actual implementation as discussed below.

The Actual Use of English in Class

The different percentages of use in lectures and tutorials

Although the majority of the participants knew or believed that EMI was the language policy that they were supposed to follow, their implementation of the policy was rather arbitrary. Most of the teacher participants as well as student participants reported that English was used as the MOI most of the time, although what they meant was mainly the lectures and the materials used in class. Similar to findings from previous studies of language use in Hong Kong higher education (Li, Leung, & Kember, 2001; Walters and Balla, 1998; Evans & Morrison, 2011), this study found that English was more prevalently used in lectures than in small-group settings. Most of the teachers claimed that their own use of English was nearly 100 percent in lectures, which was validated by the

students' observations. From the students' perspective, English was also the main MOI in most lectures, with a few of the groups claiming that English was used up to 90% to 100% of the time.

However, both the teachers and the students were more tolerant of the use of Cantonese in tutorials. While most of the teachers estimated that their use of English was nearly 100 percent in lectures, their estimates of their use of English in tutorials generally fell to around 80 percent. Similarly, from the students' perspective, few teachers used English only in tutorials. Code-mixing was prevalent, and there appeared to be a common pattern of the use of English and Cantonese across these institutions. In the most common cases, English was the dominant language used with Cantonese as the auxiliary one. In fewer cases, English and Cantonese, and occasionally Putonghua in the presence of mainland students, were equally used. There were however only a few mentions of the use of Cantonese outweighing that of English.

When all the accounts are put together, it is evident that the disparity between policy and practice documented in various studies (e.g. Flower, Li, & Miller, 1998; Li, Leung & Kember, 2001), though noticeably narrowed in recent years in some UGC-funded universities (Evans & Morrison, 2011), still commonly exists among these self-financing institutions. The common use of Cantonese is noted by one teacher (01-BM), "You can hear that many teachers are speaking Cantonese when passing by their classrooms."

The commonplace discretionary use of Cantonese

The majority of the teachers indicated that English was their major medium of instruction in class and a small amount of Chinese, mainly Cantonese, was used in their teaching. Generally, these teachers would adjust their use of the three languages in consideration of the audience and the context. Below are a few of the major considerations mentioned:

(1) *Students' comprehension.* The majority of the teachers noted that they would use Cantonese to facilitate students' understanding, for example in explaining difficult or abstract concepts and technical terms and in giving examples of local subjects.

(2) *Students' composition.* The teachers would make a greater effort to use English if there were non-Cantonese speaking students in class. A few teachers claimed that they would adhere to English if there were

exchange students in class in order to be fair to these students. In one case, at the request of a few foreign exchange students, the teacher used English to teach Chinese Medicine even though the majority of students in the class preferred Chinese to be the medium of instruction.

(3) *Students' year of study*. A few of the teachers noted that students' English ability generally would increase by the year. One teacher pointed out that she would speak more Cantonese to first-year students but little or no Cantonese to senior-year students as the latter should be more used to English-medium instruction.

The students generally understood why the teachers used Cantonese. Reflecting what their teachers said, most students noted that the teachers used Cantonese primarily to explain more difficult terms and concepts and to give examples, and when students failed to understand the explanation in English. They could also see other reasons behind the use of Cantonese. For example, they could appreciate that the teachers may occasionally also go off topic speaking Cantonese so as to amuse students or attract students' attention. Another reason they could see was that the teachers could teach at a faster pace in Cantonese so that they would not lag behind their teaching schedules. Such shared understanding between the teachers and students provides further evidence that the use of Cantonese is an established practice and a common occurrence in these institutions.

Lenient interpretation and implementation of the EMI policy

The reality as portrayed by these teachers and students reflects a rather lenient approach to the interpretation and implementation of the policy. Although the teachers and students believed that the MOI was English and they themselves were largely practising it, there were exceptions from the policy that were commonly considered by the teachers and the students to be normal if not permissible.

An important justification for the judicious use of Cantonese is the subject being taught. Some of the teachers admitted using more Cantonese in dealing with subjects or topics related to Chinese or local contexts. This practice was corroborated by most of the student interviewees. The English-Cantonese ratio in instruction also varied depending on the nature of the course and the discipline. The students made clear distinctions between core and general education subjects, and between science and non-science subjects. By the students' accounts, while English accounted

for 70 to 90 percentage of class time in core subjects, Cantonese was used more in general education subjects, in some cases up to 50 to 60 percentage of the time. While a few arts and humanities courses were reportedly conducted mostly in Cantonese, there were no reports of science subjects being delivered mainly in Cantonese. It seems that when the teachers and students gave the high overall estimated percentages of use of English in class, they were ignoring certain general education and arts and humanity courses.

Apart from the subject matter, the students also seemed to consider the policy to be less applicable to them than to the teachers. Their understanding of the policy seemed to focus on the word "instruction" rather than "English". As discussed above, the majority of the students only vaguely perceived that their institutions adopted EMI, and such obscurity may have contributed to their non-committal stance to and lenient interpretation of such as policy. According to the teachers' observation, the students tended to use Cantonese or mixed-code to ask questions and to discuss among themselves in class, and students' choice of language after class was unanimously Cantonese. The majority of these students also admitted that they would not use English among themselves during class discussion unless the teacher insisted they speak English; it was far less likely they would use English with their tutors outside of the classroom unless they are requested to. Of all the students interviewed, only one student reported that he would speak English voluntarily. Therefore, the EMI policy, as far as the students were concerned, was mainly confined to the teachers' use of English in their instruction.

Perceived Difficulties and Coping Strategies

From the teachers' perspective

Not surprisingly, all of the teachers observed that their students in general had difficulties coping with EMI, pointing out that some students could not understand lectures delivered in English and that their assignments were generally not satisfactorily written in English. Most of these teachers were not blind to the issue, and a common view among them was that there had been a year-by-year decline in the English standard among first-year students, especially since the replacement of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level (HKAL) examination with the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKSDE) examination in 2009. Even

though they were not language teachers, they were able to identify some of the causes of the students' generally low English language proficiency, such as the massification of higher education which allows more students who are weak in English to go to college, the government's inconsistent language policies and the lack of an English-speaking environment in Hong Kong.

The students' limited proficiency inevitably posed difficulties for the teachers. When asked what they did to facilitate students' learning despite the language barrier, the teachers reported a variety of measures:

- Giving explanations and examples in Chinese when students failed to understand in English;
- Allowing students to ask questions in Chinese;
- Providing English subtitles for videos;
- Providing written Chinese translations on the board;
- Giving feedback on assignments;
- Forcing students to read English articles and then give presentations in class.

Among these measures, none except perhaps the last one aimed to facilitate students' acquisition of both content knowledge and language. These teachers generally associated EMI with forced English practice and thus improvement in English, but ironically they did not have much hesitation in giving up using English as soon as difficulties arose. Some clearly stated that content teaching should be their priority.

> "It is difficult to achieve both goals (content and language learning) at the same time, especially in these institutions where students' academic and linguistic performances are relatively low." (04-BM)

Difficulties aside, it is the teachers' perceived role in students' language learning that affected their practice. As content teachers, most of them tended not to consider improving students' English a part of their responsibility.

> "Sometimes I think, I'm not an English teacher, and my responsibility is (teaching) in this field. For example, if I teach engineering, it would be fine as long as my students know the calculations, right?... It would be good if they have good English, but should this be an objective of

the course? I don't think so." (02-MS)

They stated that students should have met the language requirement before entering university and it would be too late for "rescue" in college. Some thought that students who are weak in English should take the initiative to improve their English rather than expecting teachers to compromise and use Cantonese to accommodate their needs.

Teachers' emphasis on knowledge acquisition over proficiency in the English language is in alignment with their casual attitude towards the accuracy of language use in their students' work. Except for a few of them who cited some deliberate efforts to facilitate students' learning in English by highlighting their grammatical mistakes in assignments, most teachers would attach little importance to students' language use as long as they could understand what their students were trying to articulate. Some teachers pointed out that language use could affect students' grades as poor English may affect idea expression, though language use is generally not covered in their marking criteria.

The difficulties arising from the required use of English are perhaps not only experienced by the students. As L2 users of English themselves, some teachers may not be proficient enough to teach in English as effortlessly as they would in Chinese. As admitted by one teacher (T) (05-SS):

> T: To us, and I believe not only a few of us, when we speak English rather than Chinese, a lot is deducted, in the ability to express ideas on the one hand, and in the material (being delivered) on the other. When it comes to concrete descriptive content, it is much more complicated to use English, which means when I want to give examples, I would use simpler ones.
> *I: So, would that mean "shallower"?
> T: Yes, shallow. It's easier for us, but more boring for the students.
> (*I = Interviewer)

She said she would have no choice but to drop some details if it was too difficult for her to explain them or translate them into English. The problem of "loss in translation" described above may well have been experienced by some teachers. Although none of the teachers interviewed attributed their use of Cantonese to their own inadequacy, some teachers certainly have difficulty expressing themselves clearly in English, as

noted by a few of the students interviewed. For example, one student referred to one of his previous teachers, commenting, '*If the teacher's English is poor, I'd rather he or she use Cantonese and not push it.*' Overall, therefore, many of the teachers' ways to cope with the difficulties they had using EMI involved compromises in their standards, both for their students' work and for their own teaching.

From the students' perspective

Although the teachers all agreed that their students had difficulty learning in English, the students themselves tended to downplay the difficulties they had. As discussed above, from these students' perspective, the EMI policy was more the teachers' concern, and even so, they generally accepted the teachers' occasional use of Cantonese. As one student stated, "*The lecturers should use English throughout and as far as possible, but when we are stuck, they should stop and explain in Cantonese.*"

The flexible adaptation of EMI policy may be one of the strategies for both the teachers and the students who are weaker in English to cope with the policy. Although these students were considered by their teachers to be rather weak in English, these students had their own way to help them meet the course requirements, such as using Internet resources, translation tools and seeking help from peers, or simply setting lower standards for themselves (Yeung & Lu, 2018). Besides, it was mainly students from Chinese-medium secondary schools who experienced more serious difficulties, but most of them got used to English-medium instruction in their second year of study, similar to their counterparts in some other universities (Evans, & Morrison, 2016). Simply put, the EMI policy may not be perceived as such a challenge to them despite their average to low proficiency in the English language.

Strong Preference for English as the MOI

Despite the difficulties the teachers and students may have using English in teaching and learning, the majority view was to keep English as the MOI. Although some students stated their preference for greater flexibility in the choice of MOI, the majority of the students asserted without much hesitation that English should be adopted as the MOI when asked how the three languages should be used at tertiary level (Yeung & Lu, 2018). Similarly, the majority of the teachers preferred for English to

remain as the major medium of instruction at college, with a certain amount of flexibility, which concurs with findings from previous research (Flowerdew, Miller, & Li, 2000).

Both the teachers and the students were fully aware of the status of English as a lingua franca for global communication and academic research and its importance for the students' future studies and careers. The common underlying assumption of the benefits of EMI on English learning as highlighted in various studies across the world (Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018) is shared by most participants in this study. They believed that an EMI environment would force the students to use English and thus improve their English proficiency.

> "If you compare a graduating student with a first-year student, you can tell that the graduating student's English ability is higher. Having been getting around in the (EMI) system for four years, his English can't possibly be worse, can it?" (02-AH)

As for Cantonese, the majority view among the teachers and the students was to acknowledge its use as an auxiliary language in the classroom. Only one teacher suggested a bilingual policy by which English and Cantonese would be addressed equally and used flexibly. However, as two of the teachers pointed out, under a bilingual approach Cantonese would become the dominant language. They were skeptical about the use of mixed-code, claiming that it would not help improve either students' English or their Chinese. There was also the concern that if Cantonese were the MOI, students would have little or no English environment and their English would become worse, which would negatively affect their future job and study opportunities.

From a more practical point of view, some teachers pointed out that it would be very difficult to find textbooks and references written in Chinese. A few others brought up the consideration of student recruitment. As the public are prone to associate the medium of instruction with the quality of the college, the adoption of CMI would have a negative impact on student recruitment and affect the college's status.

As for Putonghua, although the teachers all acknowledged its importance, no teachers tended to agree to use Putonghua as the MOI. Only one teacher mentioned that Putonghua along with English and Cantonese should receive equal importance if the college aims to become an internationalized institution. The language could be taught as a subject

or used in some elective courses, as some suggested, but the general view was that the social and educational environment is not ready for Putonghua as the MOI. This is in line with findings from previous research (Tam, 2012). Some teachers expressed concern over teachers' Putonghua proficiency, and one teacher mentioned that he would not mind teaching in Putonghua if his Putonghua were good enough. Besides, English is still more valued than Putonghua as reflected by some of their responses to the question whether Putonghua should be used as the MOI:

> "I don't think so in the foreseeable future. In fact, even in Mainland China English is becoming more and more important, and they (students) also want to learn more English…There is no reason why we, Hong Kong should go in reverse. More time for Putonghua would mean less time for English. This is not quite possible; I don't think so." (01-BM)

> "Mainland students come to Hong Kong simply because Hong Kong speaks English (uses English in teaching)." (02-MS)

The majority of the student interviewees also decided that Putonghua as the MOI would not be a plausible idea. Apart from the practical considerations similar to those highlighted by the teachers, some of the students rejected the idea in defiance of the "supremacy" of the language. They pointed out that the speakers of Putonghua, like speakers of other languages, should be subject to the EMI policy. They also expressed fear of losing their Hong Kong identity as a result of the adoption of Putonghua as the MOI. Their assertiveness of their local identity may signify their resistance to the growing dominance of mainland ideology (Chen, 2018; Choi, 2017).

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above illustrate the extent to which English is used as the medium of instruction in teaching and learning from the teachers' and students' perspectives in the self-financing tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, thus providing an answer to the first research question. It can be claimed that the EMI policy is vaguely in place in these institutions but not actively promoted or asserted at the institutional level. Possibly as a result of this, the interpretation and implementation of the

policy are rather lax, with English being used in instruction to a large extent only in lectures and to a lesser extent in tutorials, and minimally beyond the classroom. Cantonese is commonly used at the teachers' discretion, often affected by the nature of topics and subjects. The teachers' effort to use English is quite often not reciprocated by their students, who tend not to view themselves as bound by the policy and therefore only use English when explicitly required by the teachers.

The findings also shed some light on how the teachers and students address the difficulties in teaching and learning using EMI. Although there are teachers who attempt to address the fundamental language problems that students may have, the ways the teachers and students cope with the required use of English are mainly characterized by compromises. The discretionary use of Cantonese may be considered to be one such compromise; ignoring English use problems or settling for lower standards may be another. These practices and attitudes may explain why the students' difficulties are generally not perceived to be insurmountable obstacles by the teachers and the students themselves.

As for the research question about the teachers' and students' language preferences, the findings of the study provide quite a clear answer. Despite the language difficulties that these students generally have, and the changing socio-political environment that gives more importance to the Chinese language, the support of the teachers and the students for the EMI policy remains strong. This is understandable given the growing importance of English as a global language and all the benefits that an English-medium education promises.

When put together, these findings present a clear picture of the reality of the self-financing tertiary institution in Hong Kong, which consists of aspirations and adaptations, sometimes to the extent of self-deception. The majority of findings concur with those of a recent large-scale study by Galloway, Kriukow, and Numajiri (2017), which investigated the implementation of EMI in universities in China and Japan. Despite certain differences across contexts, teachers and students in these other Asian universities also embrace the EMI policy, practise it in different forms (to varying degrees but never fully), face language-related challenges and take the policy for granted. While teachers generally believe that the mother tongue is a useful pedagogical tool, many students prefer for their teachers to use all English. These are similar to the discretionary use of Cantonese practised by the teachers and the interpretation of EMI as mainly applicable to the teachers from the students' perspective as

revealed in this study.

However, participants of the present study appear to be rather relaxed about the exceptional use of Cantonese and occasionally Putonghua in the supposedly EMI classroom, particularly in general education courses. Also, the ways the teachers and students adapt to EMI call into question the genuineness of the policy practised in these institutions. It may be argued that there are different forms of EMI; what is worrying, however, is not whether the practice should be defined as EMI, but rather what effects it may have on students' learning in the long run. Therefore, some of the issues raised in this study may need to be addressed to provide the condition necessary for the policy's success.

The first issue is the compromises that both the teachers and students make in order to carry on teaching and learning in English, particularly the low accuracy standards they set for English use. Such a norm may not be conducive to the acquisition of proper English and may foster undesirable habits of English learning. As there are established views that second language learners need to be aware of and learn from their errors in order to develop their proficiency (James, 2013), and that unnoticed and uncorrected errors may be fossilized (Swain, 1985), the ignorance of students' problems in English use may bring more harm than good for their language development. While further research yet needs to be conducted to find out whether or how the practice of EMI may affect the development of students' English proficiency and/or content knowledge (Macaro et al, 2018), the way many content teachers and their students treat language use in the current practice may need to be given due consideration.

The compromise in the quality of the use of the English language in EMI contexts and the possible negative influence on students' acquisition of the language may be attributed to the pressure, both official and social, to teach and learn in English when learners or even teachers are not ready. To alleviate such pressure, learners' bilingual or multilingual ability needs to be valued as an asset; students' other languages may be given an official role and capitalized upon in the instructional process. This necessitates an ideological and pedagogical transformation in education towards translanguaging in higher education, where English assumes an ever more important role as the MOI in the increasingly globalized world. The potential benefits of translanguaging practices in higher education on developing learners' fluidity in language use have been more widely recognized in recent years (Mazak & Carroll, 2016), and such a paradigm

shift may help develop learners' English in addition to, rather than at the expense of, their native tongues.

Another issue revealed by the study is the neglected role of content teachers in the successful implementation of EMI. Although some of the teachers may make some mild efforts to help students improve their English for their disciplinary studies, most of them do not take this as their responsibility. However, viewed as a form of the bilingual educational approach of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), EMI is meant to foster English learning through learning and teaching of non-English subjects through the medium of English. Most teachers agree with this premise, but ironically they do not see themselves as having a part to play in students' English learning. It is important for teachers of disciplinary content to realize what roles language plays in CLIL and how disciplinary content is constructed through language and literacy (Llinares, Morton, & Whittaker, 2012; Love, 2009). As the kind of language proficiency that students need consists of not just general proficiency but also academic literacy and professional communication skills, content area teachers can collaborate with English teachers and even take the lead to impart to students the academic literacy skills their students need (Murray, 2016). It is necessary to provide training for content teachers in teaching students with limited proficiency in English, which has been discussed (e.g. Flowerdew, Li, & Miller, 1998) and yet little seems to have been done in this regard.

Ultimately, institutional support is required for the EMI policy to be consistently and effectively conducted. While in the UGC-funded universities, the policy is clearly established and teachers and students may have been gradually catching up with it (Evans & Morrison, 2011), the self-financing tertiary institutions are far from reaching that stage. Institutional commitment is necessary in providing the support required for successful implementation of the EMI policy. Such support measures, as suggested by Galloway, Kriukow, and Numajiri (2017), may include the collaboration between content teachers and EAP teachers and the provision of training for content teachers in EMI teaching. The purposes of adopting EMI also need to be clearly identified and communicated to the teachers and students.

This study shows the policymakers that even though there has long been advocation of alternative MOI policies, and even though the changing political landscape in Hong Kong naturally favours the acceptance of a bilingual policy, the aspirations for adherence to the EMI

tradition remains strong amidst the waves of globalization. The imposition of other languages as the MOI regardless of the key implementers' beliefs is rather unlikely to succeed, as shown by the experiences of other post-colonial countries such as Malaysia and India (Lin & Man, 2009; Tam, 2012). With this understanding of the actual situation and trend, the question for the government and these institutions is not whether the EMI policy should be replaced, but how to implement it properly and effectively, especially among students who apparently have limited English proficiency. However, as Cantonese has long played an unofficial role in the EMI system in Hong Kong, policymakers could acknowledge its role and help promote an environment for translanguaging practices even though English remains the main MOI.

CONCLUSION

This case illustrates how the ideal of English-medium education could be held rather dearly even though it may be hard to attain; it also presents some problems that may arise in the pursuit of EMI when students are eager and yet not linguistically ready and the teachers are not pedagogically prepared for it. In addition to providing an updated reference for local policymakers and practitioners regarding the implementation of the EMI policy in the self-financing tertiary education sector in Hong Kong, this study contributes to the literature on English-medium higher education by illuminating the reality in the EMI classrooms with mostly ESL learners of rather low proficiency in an Outer Circle region. It is believed that the challenges these teachers and students face are shared by many of their counterparts in other allegedly EMI classrooms in Asia.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Focus group interview questions (for student participants)

1. Did you go to a CMI or EMI school?
2. How did it feel like being taught in CMI / EMI?
3. Concerning your college life, which language(s) do your teachers normally use as the medium of instruction? What are the percentages of their use?
4. How and why do you think such language(s) are used?
5. What language(s) do you use in the classroom? On campus? What are their percentages?
6. Do you know the medium of instruction policy of your college? How explicit do you perceive the language policy of your institution to be?
7. As students, do you face any difficulties in following the language policy? If so, how do you cope with the difficulties?
8. Which language(s) do you think should be used as the medium of instruction, and how and why such language(s) should be used?
9. Do you have any opinions and concerns about learning in Cantonese, English and Putonghua?
10. Overall, what do you think the language policy of tertiary institutions should be like?

Appendix B. In-depth interview guiding questions (for individual teacher participants)

1. How long have you been teaching at tertiary level? Have you taught at other levels (e.g. primary/ secondary/ adult education)?
2. Have you been teaching at EMI or CMI institutions, or both?
3. Which language(s) do you normally use as the medium of instruction? What are the percentages of their use?
4. How and why do you use such language(s)?
5. What language(s) do the students use in the classroom? On campus? What are their percentages?
6. Do you know the medium of instruction policy of your college? How explicit do you perceive the language policy of your institution to be?
7. As teachers, do you face any difficulties in following the language policy? If so, how do you cope with the difficulties?
8. Do you sense that the students have difficulties following the language policy? How do you think they cope?
9. It is generally said that the English standard of Hong Kong students is decreasing. What is your view on this issue?
10. Which language(s) do you think should be used as the medium of instruction, and how and why such language(s) should be used?
11. Do you have any opinions and concerns about learning in Cantonese, English and Putonghua?
12. Overall, what do you think the language policy of tertiary institutions should be like?