The Cultural Implications of English Medium Education in Secondary Schools in Hong Kong: A Case for Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to account for the role that English medium of instruction (EMI) schools have played in forming the characteristics of the Hong Kong elite and their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. It also explores the shift from diglossia to bilingualism both in Hong Kong society and secondary schools as the result of globalisation of the world economy as well as a demand for equality of opportunity. The recent policy on the medium of instruction in schools continues to promote monolingual education in an attempt to elevate the status and role of mother tongue education, yet has in effect consolidated the position of the minority elite EMI monolingual schools. By maintaining and making EMI schools even more exclusive, the present policy is perpetuating a distinctive local elite, who, while functioning in the context of a Special Administrative Region of China, have developed a distinctive bilingual identity with ready access to the increasingly globalised world of commerce and finance. To counter the negative impact of elitist education, the paper concludes by proposing that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a necessary objective in curriculum planning. Moreover, the students of EMI schools are being groomed, as were their forebears, for the role of cultural brokers in and beyond an increasingly multicultural city that in turn plays a key role in the greater international community. Intercultural competence is seen as necessary both within and across regional boundaries, as EMI students move from the diglossic situation in schools to a bilingual situation in the work place.
Introduction - A historical perspective

The Chinese elite

From the outset, the urban Hong Kong Chinese population has been marked by distinct characteristics that set them apart. A factor that brought about this distinctiveness is the ‘self-select’ nature of the Hong Kong population. Lau & Kuan (1988) point out that Hong Kong immigrants have tended to be more urbanised and modernised than their fellow countrymen in China. The fact that they were able or willing to uproot themselves meant, “they might be more adventurous, ‘individualistic’, self-reliant and less encumbered by traditional inhibitions” (p. 34) than their compatriots. In 1985, 59.5% of the Chinese population of Hong Kong preferred to refer to themselves as ‘Hongkongese’ rather than Chinese. This Hong Kong identity, they observe, is not an implicit rejection of China or the Chinese people. It takes China and the Chinese people as the reference group and marks out the Hong Kong Chinese as a distinctive group within it. Group identity is not a natural fact but a cultural perception and individuals assume several collective identities in different times and circumstances (Kramsch, 1998).

In Hong Kong, a distinct elite emerged in the absence of the influence of the agrarian-landlord and gentry-scholar-official classes. This absence has resulted in a weakening in the transmission of classical learning and Confucian morality and values in education. The colonial nature of Hong Kong has meant this custodial class has lacked the ability to influence education. However, slowly an indigenous elite emerged. Smith (1985) identifies the Chinese elite of the nineteenth century as being members of interpenetrating advisory, financial and professional groups who played a part in bridging the social and cultural gaps between the Chinese and the British in colonial society. In China the route to social mobility was through the Chinese civil service exams. In Hong Kong, however, it was through education in an English medium school, followed by a position in government service then as compradore, the middlemen in the Europe-China trade, and finally through appointment to the Legislative Council of the colonial administration. Thus, from the outset, entry to the Hong Kong Chinese elite was through the portals of English medium education where a degree of intercultural communicative competence and proficiency in English were acquired.

The Hong Kong Chinese elite class has been mainly open and non-exclusive, allowing entry to people of humble origins. Its members are
generally not characterised by any traditional cultural accomplishments, political achievements or moral excellence. The hallmark of this class has been economic success. Thus the Hong Kong elite had little sense of cultural or moral mission or little sense of being custodians of traditional Chinese or Confucian values. It would not be unfair to say that the abiding values of much of this group are materialistic and opportunistic, and that these were hardly tempered by the missionary Christian schools that they attended, though many have been outstanding philanthropists (Lau & Kuan, 1988).

The nature and composition of this elite was such that it was hardly likely to foster an ethos conducive to the transmission of traditional Chinese educational and moral values within Hong Kong itself. Moreover, a series of historic accidents seriously hampered the transmission of this ethos through Chinese middle schools, i.e. the collapse of the Nanjing regime and the ascendancy of the anti-intellectual, totalitarian regime in Peking, followed by the Cultural Revolution (So, 1992). These developments caused the urbanised Hong Kong population to distance themselves from the mainland and reject the command economy of a largely agrarian socialist China (Lau & Kuan, 1988). While the socialist state in China utilised mass-mobilisation and ideological inculcation and warded off alien cultural influences through measures of social control, the Hong Kong government followed a policy of economic liberalism, cultural and commercial openness and relatively less social intervention.

One of the more obvious indicators of the divergence of Hong Kong from the Chinese Mainland is seen in differences which have arisen in both the written and spoken forms of Chinese and their relative status, especially as used in the high domains. Cantonese is the main spoken language in Hong Kong. Elsewhere in China, Putonghua, or Mandarin, is the language used in all high domains. As the language spoken in the Peking area, Putonghua is closely related to the written form of Modern Standard Chinese. This Chinese national common language was established in The Conference on Standardising Modern Chinese in 1955 based on the phonological features and the grammatical structures of the northern Chinese dialect. In Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and many other overseas areas, Putonghua is always learnt in association with written Chinese. This was also the case in Hong Kong Middle Schools until the collapse of the Nanjing Government in 1949 (So, 1992). From that point in Hong Kong there has been little focus on Putonghua teaching.
Bilingualism and diglossia

The English medium schools and the University of Hong Kong formed an elite sympathetic to the colonial administration. This meant that Secondary education in Hong Kong was from the outset characterised by a language-based bifurcation (So, 1992). The language policy of the Hong Kong Government aimed to achieve a high level of bilingualism from a relatively small group of Cantonese speaking bilinguals who acted as intermediaries between the governing class and the rest of the population. To this group of bilinguals was added the considerable number of students who received their education overseas. In fact in 1982, Luke and Richards described Hong Kong as a case of ‘diglossia without bilingualism’. That is English was used exclusively for the higher language functions, largely by monolingual Europeans, and, except for this very small minority, the more general domains were dominated by monolingual Cantonese speakers. European expatriates, administrators and businessmen alike tended to learn neither written Chinese nor spoken Cantonese, the language of 98% of the local population, and the majority of Chinese did not know English. The higher functions of language - those associated with government, the law and higher education, were conducted in a foreign language, English. Chinese, whether as Putonghua or Cantonese, was excluded from high domains and the Chinese Middle Schools, a possible conduit for Putonghua, tended to languish as isolated from the turbulent Chinese mainland (So, 1992).

Fifteen years after Hong Kong was described as diglossic but without bilingualism, Johnson (1997, p. 173) writes of a ‘remarkable shift within the local population throughout the community towards Chinese/English bilingualism over the past decade and a half’. He reports that ‘whereas 40% of the population considered themselves bilingual in 1983, 70% did so ten years later’.

Bilingualism is not only a feature of the elite but is becoming a feature of the emerging Hong Kong identity of a wide section of the community. The younger middle-class section of the Chinese population is prepared to use a mixed code of Cantonese and English in their speech and acquire a certain trendy modernity which demonstrates linguistic autonomy from the spoken Cantonese of Canton, on which the spoken Cantonese of Hong Kong is based (Johnson, 1997). As Kramsch (1998) remarks, 'by crossing languages, speakers perform cultural acts of identity'.
Further fragmentation of the diglossic pattern has been shown by Afendras (1998) who explores the mix of English in the domestic domain in Cantonese speaking homes. This is largely confined to the growing group of Hong Kong returnees whose children go to international schools. This use of English is also evident in other homes where the employment of Filipina maids is seen by some parents as means of acquiring English proficiency for the children in whose charge they are left. This is an added source of English proficiency and usage which notably is not connected with the culture or population of the 'inner circle' (Kachru, 1992) or core English users in Britain, the United States of America, Australia or New Zealand. In addition, there is a sizeable group of Indians and other non-Chinese Asians who use English as a lingua franca as well as a wide variety of other languages. There is, therefore, abundant evidence that among the middle-class Hong Kong residents, the diglossic functional complementarity of language is rapidly breaking up (Pennington, 1998) as English is used in a wider range of domains and both written Chinese and Cantonese penetrate the higher domains of discourse.

During the colonial period, English had established itself as the main medium of communication in the civil service, the upper levels of business and professional sectors, as well as in higher education. However, since the reversion to Chinese sovereignty, the government has formulated a language policy for the civil service whereby the objective is to have a civil service that is bi-literate in Chinese and English and tri-lingual in Cantonese, Putonghua and English. The development and the teaching of Modern Standardised Chinese i.e. the teaching of Putonghua in association with written Chinese, only began after the departure of the British Administration. The official status of Putonghua and Cantonese has been guaranteed after the transfer of sovereignty by Article 9 of the Basic Law. This, perhaps uniquely in Chinese political communities, effectively gives spoken Cantonese, a dialect, the status of an official language. Recently, Cantonese has penetrated the higher functions of languages in politics and law. This unique use of a 'high' form of a spoken Chinese dialect is evidence of Hong Kong’s growing sense of identity. This is manifest also in the proliferation of code switching involving a continuum of language use from ‘high’ (English or ‘high’ Cantonese) to ‘low’ (‘low’ Cantonese with code-switching) depending on domain, participants and setting.

Taking a wide view of culture, Beardsmore (1998) shows how bilingual speakers may potentially range across three sets of cultural norms - two of these being the wider cultures associated with the two languages and the
third being the emerging new bilingual culture. This is the situation for the non-Chinese ethnic groups in, for example, Singapore. However, the situation for the Chinese in Hong Kong is more complex. To have full access to political power within China, members of Hong Kong’s merging trilingual culture must also have access to Putonghua as well as Cantonese and English. Moreover, proficiency in English gives access to two further clusters of cultures; the multifaceted culture of the core English speaking countries, as well as the emerging global cultures associated with International English.

However, despite this bilingual and cultural complexity, in the domain of the young, English remains a foreign language, with very few young people having a need to resort to English outside school. Cultural issues are conspicuously absent from language policy statements and do not figure prominently in language policy debates. The bilingualism of the Hong Kong middle-class is increasingly independent of the culture of the core English speaking countries. Despite increased bilingualism in the adult domain, Western features have not penetrated many areas of youth culture. Within popular music, TV and other aspects of the mass media the indigenous forms enjoy greater popularity (Sze, 1995). Local TV accounts for 90% of the whole volume on Chinese channels. An important source of lyrics and melodies of popular songs since the 1980’s has been Japanese. Further evidence of this new cultural orientation is the rapid spread of a Cantonese based popular culture, as ‘Canto Pop’ spreads to include the development of a vernacular writing system discussed and described in Li (1996). The Chinese written language in Hong Kong has been widely influenced by syntactic features of Cantonese, though the education system has generally opposed this development.

Scollon (1998), taking the Hong Kong news-stand as an ‘ethnographic exemplar’ (p. 123) of a site of cross-cultural engagement, shows how with Chinese newspapers, public discourse is presented in ways which ratify a pre-existing role or relationship, i.e. they are positioned in a way that suggests familiarity and closeness. With the English newspapers, however, the encounter is formally treated as one between acquaintances or strangers. In Kachru’s (1992) terms, the cultural ‘range’ of English-knowing bilingualism does not extend beyond educational and some commercial contexts, and its social ‘depth’, though expanding, is limited to the middle-classes and is not accessible to most young people. This is in contrast to Singapore where Pakir (1991) shows that English has a much wider range and depth among English-knowing bilinguals, where young people may
move fluidly from standard to non-standard English even while discussing formal topics.

It is increasingly important that EMI schools help equip trilingual students with the necessary intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for the cultural complexity both within Hong Kong - including the social divisions resulting from a school system divided on linguistic grounds - as well as with external cultures that impinge on an international city. This is not to say such competence is not required in other areas of Hong Kong education. The particular position of EMI schools, with their cross-cultural and bilingual stance, places them as an important starting point.

**Education policy**

*Laissez faire – but monolingual*

At present there is no attempt to explore a curriculum for ICC. The Education Department has not responded to the increasing demand for and acceptance of bilingual education among teachers who see mother tongue as a valuable and necessary part of instruction, especially in terms of cultural identity. Two surveys of English majors (Pennington & Balla, 1998), one of undergraduate pre-service BA student teachers and the other of postgraduate in-service teachers, have shown that tertiary students favour bilingual code teaching between Cantonese and English, and that this preference is a direct function of age. The younger generation of teachers views the mixing of codes as a useful maximisation of linguistic resources in the classroom.

However, monolingual education, whether in English or Chinese, with all that it implies about the development of a sense of cultural identity and pride, is still promoted by policy makers. Until recently, Hong Kong secondary schools, though closely controlled and monitored at the level of resources by the Education Department, were given a free hand to implement their own language policies within the constraints of being monolingual, i.e. exclusively using either English or Cantonese with written Chinese. Many schools followed the prestigious Anglo-Chinese schools and offered English medium education, though the majority of these schools could not deliver it adequately and the students were not capable of learning through a foreign language. Also many teachers felt they did not have adequate skills to meet this demand. Thus an effective and appropriate bilingual teaching methodology has not developed; instead an unregulated
and haphazard use of Cantonese and English proliferated surreptitiously behind a facade of English medium education. Thus the Education Department’s promotion of monolingual models for secondary education and its fear of mixing Cantonese, written Chinese and English in the classroom resulted in a huge gap between practice and policy. Teachers have not been prepared for effective bilingual teaching and insufficient research has been done in Hong Kong on its effectiveness, despite the fact that events still indicate that its use is inevitable.

Positive discrimination in favour of mother-tongue education

Rather than develop a rational and effective form of bilingual education, the Education Department attempted to halt the unregulated mass flow of school students into English medium secondary schools. The Education Commission (1990) called for the scaling down of English medium education. The new policy aimed at strengthening the credibility and viability of Chinese medium schools as well as improving the credentials of English-medium ones. The policy was almost totally ignored. A total of 272 schools did not follow the Education Department’s advice on the medium of instruction most appropriate for their pupils (Education Research Section, 1998). Fear of losing their best students and the policy of promoting monolingual schools led many school principals to claim that their schools were English medium when in fact the language of interaction in the classroom continued to be mainly Cantonese, with English as the language of assessment.

Throughout the late 1980’s, the influential parents of pupils in EMI schools showed a considerable determination in opposing any spread of mother-tongue education into the more prestigious schools. No school principal could ignore the fate of Carmel Secondary school between 1988 and 1990. This highly regarded Anglo-Chinese school, under the direction of a principal committed to mother-tongue education and supported by the Education Department, pioneered the introduction of Chinese (Cantonese) medium education in September 1987. This was followed by immediate protests from the parents and the withdrawal of many pupils from the school. The standard of subsequent intakes plummeted and the policy was abandoned in 1990 when English medium instruction was reinstated and the principal resigned.
Mandatory language policy

Phillipson (1992) claims that in many post-colonial societies English is seen as a threat. This is related to the promulgation of global ideologies through the worldwide expansion of one language. He refers to this phenomenon as *linguicism* and defined it as ‘ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language’. Pennycook (1998) sees evidence of this role for English in the fact that accounts of English as an international language written by native speakers are often marked by a celebratory tone.

Perhaps reflecting these concerns, within two months of the reversion to Chinese sovereignty, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) attempted to impose mother-tongue education in local secondary schools up to Secondary 3. Certain provisions were made to allow 114 schools to opt out and use English medium in a phased manner. This figure appears to reflect the recommendation of the Education Commission Report No. 4 (1990) which stated, ‘only around 30% of students may be able to learn effectively through English’ (p. 102).

A huge number of parents vigorously protested against this move, interestingly, in the year Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty, a fact which may be seen as challenging Phillipson’s view. In fact the continued central role of English, especially in education and commerce has hardly been seriously challenged in Hong Kong. This may be surprising in view of its association with Hong Kong’s colonial past and as its status could be seen as a threat to the dignity of Chinese. As we have seen, the Hong Kong middle-classes have been isolated from the traditional cultural content of Chinese education, have rejected the socio-political culture of modern China and have aligned themselves with the international culture of global capitalism, modern communications systems and technology. English is thus enthusiastically embraced in culturally important areas like the medium of instruction. For the Hong Kong middle-class, the importance of English is that it aligns the user with the more dominant of those unequal groups referred to above.

That English is not widely perceived as a threat to identity can be partly accounted for because the Chinese tend to identify themselves as Chinese through ethnicity and the writing system. This, we have seen, transcends the
differences between the many different spoken Chinese languages. As a people the Chinese speak many dialects or languages that are mutually unintelligible but maintain a sense of shared identity (Kramsch, 1998). This identity is restated consistently though family bonds, medicine, the arts and eating habits. Hong Kong people are well known for their pragmatism and English is seen as useful.

The main consequence, though perhaps not the aim, of the policy is to allow the Hong Kong middle-class to preserve its distinct cultural identity through the continued existence of a smaller number of even more exclusive EMI schools. In this way Hong Kong’s elite have continued access to the increasingly global culture of education and commerce and at the same time maintain a cultural distance from the Chinese mainland by perpetuating themselves as a political and social elite educated in a distinctive Hong Kong educational system. Though the policy purports to elevate the position of mother tongue education, the government’s insistence on monolingual Chinese instruction, which still effectively means Cantonese, in these schools effectively relegates them to second class schools and seriously undermines the principle of equality of opportunity as well as institutionalising social divisions.

The culture of teaching and learning

Though proficiency in English is highly sought after, the same enthusiasm does not apply to the study of traditional cultural aspects of the language. Byram (1988, p. 15) sees foreign language learning as, ‘an emancipation from the confines of the learner’s native habitat and culture, with the development of new perceptions and insights into foreign and native cultures alike’. He contrasts this to ‘contemporary interpretations of communication as an aggregation of neutral, culture-free skills that lead to an impoverished version of language teaching’ - an approach to cultural studies he refers to as ‘agnostic or minimalist’. However, there is evidence that this culture-free, ‘impoverished’ version is precisely the version desired by most Hong Kong people, at least in so far as an education system free from traditional Western or British cultural connotations is aspired to. The target language of EMI schools may be English, but the target culture is neither British nor Western in orientation.
Divesting EMI schools of the culture of the core English speaking countries

The term Anglo-Chinese school has fallen into disuse in recent years and has been replaced by the term ‘English medium schools’. This is not an accidental occurrence. English medium education is sought as the gateway to the international community but the culture associated with this community is no longer exclusive to the core English speaking countries. As Halliday (1998) has pointed out, ‘the bond between language and culture is not a rigid one’. Many communities have taken a different language and maintained their culture.

This is apparent in Hong Kong schools where English language textbooks and the assessment materials produced by the Hong Kong Examination Authority go to great lengths to present English in a Hong Kong setting. Cortazzi & Jin (1999) have identified three patterns in English textbooks reflecting cultures: those that reflect the learners’ own culture – the source culture; those that reflect the target culture and those that reflect international target cultures. As such, most English textbooks in Hong Kong reflect the source culture. This is done through the device of introducing non-local interlocutors like tourists or overseas Chinese visitors. Often this simply relies on the pretence that Hong Kong people talk to each other in English. There is little attempt to present the culture associated with the core English speaking countries. When local participants are used to present English language items for conversational practice, the setting often appears to be inauthentic and artificial as English is largely a foreign language in the domains of childhood and adolescence. It appears Hong Kong teachers and student teachers prefer these to materials based on the source culture on the grounds of cultural ‘relevance’, indicating that for them topic and setting define the local culture more closely than language.

Byram (1988), referring to the same tendency but in a different context, characterises this use of English in the English medium classroom as involving not ‘much more than a codification of their existing knowledge in a foreign language, as if that language were no more than a codification of their existing experience in a foreign language’. English is presented as no more than ‘an epiphenomenon of their own language’ (p. 17). This appears to be the case in English medium secondary schools where the immediate purpose of studying English is to complete studies through English. Byram’s exhortation that students learn a foreign language as access to ‘another culture, another way of life, another rationality’ is not part of the overt or hidden curriculum of secondary education in Hong Kong.
Elsewhere (Byram, 1989) looks at the need for young people to come to terms with ‘otherness’ in their own society. Such could apply in Hong Kong where students experience English as a foreign language in the world of school but encounter it as an international language in the world of adult employment. This encounter with a second language within one’s own national boundaries requires an adjustment of national identity. The culture embedded in an international language of instruction is clearly quite narrow and so far ill defined. However, it is the global culture to which it provides access that gives it value. This has implications for Hong Kong, yet there is little evidence that this has been explored in policy discussion, where the main issue is language proficiency. Byram (1988), citing Kerl (1979), points out this ‘flight to pragmatism’ is an attempt to avoid ideological issues but is nonetheless a political position, as it indicates the cultural position many Hong Kong people take vis-à-vis Chinese education and international trade and finance.

English as an international language is sometimes seen as being culturally neutral. This is not the case. As the English language meshes with other cultures it is resemanticised by non-traditional users of English. These new users have taken the English language and made it their own, mixing it with their own languages, divesting it of many of its traditional cultural connotations and enriching it with new ones (Halliday, 1998). This is seen in Singapore (Pakir, 1991) and in many parts of India. Bilingualism in Hong Kong is perceived as largely additive rather than substitutive both in terms of language skills and acculturation, thus English as a language is not feared. Furthermore, it marks the user as part of the elite who can interact with the global forces of education and commerce. Thus it is considered empowering. Within Hong Kong, English does not threaten ethnic cultural identity because it does not impinge much on it. This, within the multilingual context of China, as we have seen, is established largely by ethnicity along with a range of culture-specific practices. The widespread use of English by Hong Kong people is not seen as making them any less Chinese, but it does involve a realignment of identity vis-à-vis the mainland Chinese and gives wider access to the socio-political culture of global capitalism.

The maintenance of a Chinese culture of teaching and learning in EMI schools

A highly selective and eclectic relationship exists between language, traditional cultural traditions and the modern forces of globalisation in the
culture that pervades Hong Kong education. There are however some enduring features of Chinese culture in many English medium classrooms in Hong Kong secondary schools. Western educators, as Cortazzi & Jin (1996) point out, frequently interpret Chinese students’ ability and learning styles according to current Western notions. They report that Western teachers perceive Chinese mainland students to be mainly concerned with language form. These students are seen to rely heavily on memorisation, avoid interactive situations and questions and concentrate almost exclusively on reading and writing skills, placing great emphasis on grades and exams. Western educators perceive learning systems that place great emphasis on memorisation as best suited to traditional societies where there is a large, slowly evolving body of knowledge. Learning systems relying on memorisation are perceived as less suited to fast changing societies where outside influences must be absorbed rapidly. Yet it is precisely in countries whose writing systems demand memory-reliant learning systems that have shown the greatest adaptability to change in the later half of the twentieth century.

The tendency to interpret the Chinese culture of learning in terms of deficit may be more illuminating about Western attitudes than Chinese. Implicit in it is the construction of the deficient Other, a well-documented and characteristic feature of the discourse of English. As such, according to Pennycook (1998), it reflects unconscious notions of cultural superiority and imperialism. He sees this as a cultural construct of colonialism which ‘is permeated back into the discourse of colonialism’ (1998). Though English as a world language is largely resemanticised as post-colonial societies assimilate it and use it for their own purposes, there is evidence that within the culture of the core English language users certain meanings become attached to language. He gives examples of how contemporary educational debate echoes the Burney Report on education in Hong Kong published in 1935. There the education system is criticised for being too exam-orientated and of failing to give students who enter university sufficient language skills. It comments on how the demand for English comes from parents and is largely ‘utilitarian and vocational’ in motivation and how it is educationalists, both English and Chinese who demand more education and proficiency in Chinese. These all remain contemporary perceptions.

More sinister and more significant is the persistence of the view of the inadequacy of the Chinese learner. Sweeting (1990) quoted in Pennycook (1998) reports the Bishop of Victoria as stating in 1882, ‘You know the way
they learn; they memorate (sic), they hear the Chinese explanation, and this goes on from morning to night for years, and they get the classics into them ... When a Chinaman goes to school he is given a little book, and he just simply sits and pores over it, not understanding the meaning of a character, ... when he is in his teens, he begins to have some explanation given to him’. Though less cruelly put, similar observations are made of Hong Kong learners by Western orientated teachers who frequently characterise Chinese learners as passive, imitative memorisers whose learning would greatly benefit if challenged by the more creative styles of the West. However, as Cortazzi & Jin (1996) point out, Chinese students ‘are active, reflective, independent thinkers but, importantly, such qualities are differently aligned from ways in which Western teachers expect them to be expressed’ (p. 191). They are less manifest in the classroom than in private study.

Pennycook gives other examples taken from Sweeting and gives disturbing contemporary examples of similar sentiments, clearly showing the continuity of such constructs. In a similar vein, Samson (1984) criticised the Western disdain for memorisation, seeing it not as ‘an easy cop-out or release from thinking’ but ‘as the initial step in assimilating a lesson’. As Pennycook (1998) points out, ‘the central problem here is that different learning practices are not understood merely as different but are constructed in the larger framework of images of Other, from which position it is all too easy to see Chinese students as static and deficient’.

It is interesting that Chinese learning styles persist in English medium classrooms in Hong Kong, where there is a similar tendency to view learning as gradual mastery rather than discovery, place emphasis on imitation and memorisation and view students collectively rather than individually. The learning culture within Hong Kong has its own particular characteristics, reflecting its historic and cultural distinctiveness, and undoubtedly there are differences across the rest of China. According to my own observations as a teacher educator, the learning culture outlined by Cortazzi & Jin (1996) is found in English medium classrooms and in a system largely modelled by British administrators yet remains pre-eminently Chinese, though no doubt modified by the Hong Kong context. The teachers in EMI schools are local Chinese. They do not bring with them this colonial construct of ‘the other’, at least in regard to their Chinese students, which Western educators may do. The teaching and learning practices within the Chinese community remain essentially Chinese, even if conducted through the medium of English.
This culture persists despite, not because of, trends in teacher education where there are frequent complaints that teaching methodologies taught in both pre-service and in-service teacher education courses do not survive when student teachers enter the schools. This complaint is common also in Britain (Roberts, 1998) where there is much evidence that teachers are more influenced by the teaching styles they valued as students than methodologies acquired in teacher education which may clash with the institutional environment of the school. However, the divergence between teaching styles promoted in Hong Kong teacher education and those used in the classrooms is probably greater, as Western teaching methodologies and assumptions about learning dominate teacher education. These are seen in the almost exclusive use of Western course books and the widespread use of Western expatriate lecturers. Moreover, in the absence of much local research in these areas, there is a great reliance on research in education conducted in the core English speaking societies where the learning culture is undoubtedly different.

Recent developments in language teaching methodology have been greatly influenced by psycholinguistic theory of language acquisition and learning, with the emphasis on the primacy of oral language, the necessity for interaction and communicative motivation. However, in many classrooms, not exclusively in Hong Kong, the written word is more valued than the spoken; silent study considered more effective than interaction and the formal properties of language more assessable to study than shifting variables of pragmatics. More research is required into the impact on the language learning / teaching process by the imposition of methodologies that appear to violate cultural expectations of both teachers and learners though they may be based on methodological models derived from psycholinguistic theory.

Culture and the curriculum

Though Hong Kong has always sought people with intercultural communicative skills, nowhere is the acquisition of these skills made explicit in language policy. Students are left unaided to negotiate the complex cultural interactions of a language policy which aspires to produce trilingualism and biliteracy in a cosmopolitan urban community comprising ethnic Chinese formerly governed by Britain.
Van Ek & Trim (1990) make a case for ‘sociocultural competence’ as an objective of language policy. They describe this as ‘that aspect of communicative ability which involves those specific features of a society and its culture which are manifest in the communicative behaviour of the members of this society’. They characterise this competence as comprising ‘social conventions’ and ‘social rituals’. The degree of familiarity with these would depend on the circumstances in which intercultural communication take place, the implication being that a higher level of competence would be required for Hong Kong people who communicate with English native speakers, especially within the culture of the native speaker. Many students from Hong Kong study overseas and many businessmen conduct business with users of English from the core English using countries. Also many families have close associations with such societies, especially in Canada, the United States and Australia. However, for most in Hong Kong, these skills need to be applied also within Hong Kong, where English is used as an international language rather than with native speakers within their own culture. Van Ek & Trim (1990) outline a threshold level of such competence designed to suit all these contacts: the predictable situations where the contact is with native speakers and the less predictable one where English is the medium of international communication between non-native speakers. The approach emphasises awareness of and familiarity with types of intercultural experience, leaving open-ended what learners do with these experiences and how they affect their own attitudes and behaviour. Aspects of sociocultural competence for English at threshold level include universal experience and social conventions and rituals. The universal experiences allow the learners to gain some familiarity with features of everyday life, living conditions, interpersonal relations and major values and attitudes within the target culture. Social conventions and rituals include non-linguistic features like body language, visiting, eating and drinking rituals, as well as linguistic conventions of politeness.

Byram (1997) discusses three approaches to cultural studies in language education, which he sees as preparing students to come to terms with the ‘otherness’ of foreign cultures. The first is the ‘tourist-consumer’ account of foreign culture. This he sees as inadequate in that it tends to stereotype and is politically conservative. We can add that it locates the culture associated with English back in (an idealised) place and time and for these reasons would be inappropriate in Hong Kong. It could be argued that Byram (1997) appears to dichotomise the approaches unnecessarily. The ‘tourist-consumer’ account of foreign culture may be inadequate but it is a
useful approach to take in the initial stages of a cultural curriculum, especially at school level.

The second approach is the ‘ideological-understanding’ orientation that aims to give learners a critical understanding of the foreign people. Again, this, though more sophisticated, ignores the present reality of the genuinely bilingual nature of many societies like Hong Kong where the elite have taken English and naturalised it to their own purposes. Lastly, he discusses the ‘political-action orientation’. This latter approach involves the learners analysing the foreign culture and reflecting on their own and on the historical situation in which they find themselves.

These approaches locate the cultural nexus of English within the national boundaries of the traditional users of English and use a ‘native-foreign speaker’ dichotomy. This is no longer appropriate were English is used as an international language outside the traditional boundaries of the core-English users. However, Hong Kong people are extensive travellers. Perhaps it is time to reinstate the examination of the culture of the core English speaking communities in language textbooks, not as the target language and culture, but as one form of English and the cultures in which it is used. Textbook settings could include British, Canadian, American and Australia settings.

In his outline of the stages of planning a curriculum for ICC, Byram (1997) places emphasis on geo-political considerations related to individual learners foreseeable needs, the location of interaction and whether English is used as a lingua franca or with native speakers. He also considers the location of the teaching and learning; whether it will comprise fieldwork, independent learning or takes place within the classroom, as well as the use of mass media and other materials. These concerns can certainly inform the thinking of planners of a curriculum for ICC in Hong Kong. His analysis of linguistic features, however, goes beyond Van Ek & Trim’s (1990) which concentrates on politeness conventions by placing more emphasis on discourse competence. ICC Byram sees as the intertwining of savoirs, savoir comprendre - ethnographic skills of interpretation, savoir apprendre / faire, involving knowing how to learn or do, savoir s’engager, knowing how to engage or interact and savoir etre, knowing oneself in relation to a different culture.

A curriculum for ICC needs to develop an awareness of the emergent international culture of education, commerce and finance as it manifests
itself in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia and elsewhere. Consideration may need to be given to intercultural communication between Chinese people from the mainland, Taiwan and other Southeast Asian countries, as it takes place in Hong Kong in Putonghua or English. Explorations of identity vis à vis the mainland Chinese and other groups within Hong Kong could be carried out, particularly of those large ethnic groups which add to Hong Kong’s cultural diversity: the Indians and the Filipinos. Such a curriculum could challenge stereotyping processes, whether involving ethnicity or gender.

Bilingualism tends to consolidate elite groups, particularly in Hong Kong were the elite EMI schools have the most vigorous bilingual programmes. If cultural studies were included in the school curriculum, it would have to reflect the fact that this elite is actually being formed by the very education system from which it is being studied. As such the programme would have to be highly reflexive and aim for a sophisticated degree of self-awareness in the students. It would be cross curricular in nature, involving geography, history and economic and political affairs. It would also permeate language lessons, whether of Modern Standard Chinese or English. The largely neglected study of literature in schools could be revitalised by a study of writing in English by Chinese and other non-European writers who explore merging linguistic and cultural identities. South East Asia has a rich supply of literary material, much of it accessible to senior school students, exploring the cultural and linguistic identity of Asians in a post-colonial environment where English is increasingly used as an international language.

Since the compradores, cross-cultural competencies have been relevant to and valued in Hong Kong. Acquiring them, however, has never been given any formal recognition. In a time of globalisation of communications and trade, Hong Kong, the middleman, is redefining itself within the Middle Kingdom. The schools, especially the potentially divisive and culturally alienated EMI schools, need to develop a curriculum which fosters students who are self-aware and confident in demonstrating savoir etre - knowing oneself in relation to others, both within the Chinese community and within the larger global community, where English is for some a native and for others an international language.
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