

Language policy for learning quality and social justice

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In Hong Kong, the Medium of Instruction (MoI) policy in secondary schools has been a hotly debated issue for decades. Hong Kong is geopolitically unique with its British colonial past and closeness – geographically and culturally – to the Chinese mainland. It is a multilingual community facing a globalizing world where the English language has gained dominance.

At different times, the MoI in most secondary schools has been Chinese (Cantonese), English, and sometimes both. Before 1998, over 90 percent of secondary schools were Anglo-Chinese in name. They used English textbooks and examinations, and the amount of spoken English used in these schools varied on the basis of the capabilities of students and teachers. Their popularity was due to the perceived advantage after graduation, though English medium instruction was a major hurdle for many students, often acting as an obstacle to learning across the curriculum.

In 1998, the Education Bureau initiated a policy that limited the English medium education to 114 secondary schools, about one quarter of all secondary schools. The rest became Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools. A controversy ensued among parents who felt their children were being disadvantaged by curtailed access to English — the main language in all of Hong Kong’s universities. English language retains its cultural currency in Hong Kong as a perceived ticket to the world of business, higher education and social mobility.

Last year, the government announced a “fine-tuning” of its MoI policy by giving schools more autonomy in the choice of MoI. There is a great need for policy research because the results of the new MoI policy will be far reaching for the quality of education in Hong Kong.

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Angel Lin has received a major grant from the Research Grants Council to undertake research on the impact of the government’s fine-tuning of the MoI policy. The policy is interesting because of the new space for manoeuvre and how it is used by individual schools, formerly classified as EMI or CMI. The fine-tuning is intended to allow for bottom-up initiatives on the part of individual schools, teachers, parents. The research will focus on precisely how they strategize and position themselves within the parameters set by the policy to maximise their advantage.

The implications of this research go beyond education and include issues of access, equity, learning quality and social justice. Such research is also becoming relevant to educational institutions in Southeast Asia where multiple languages often enter into the learning of students at all levels of schooling, and economic globalization increases the cultural capital of English speakers.