

A Review of Research in English Language Education in Hong Kong in the Past 25 Years: Reflections and the Way Forward

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This is a review of research in English language education in Hong Kong in the past 25 years. A total of 108 studies under five themes have been reviewed: (1) English language teaching; (2) English language curriculum, assessment and reform; (3) Students' perspectives: motivation and attitudes, learning experience and strategies; (4) Teachers' perspectives: attitudes and values, language awareness, teacher training and qualifications; (5) Learning outcome: language use, English standards and the impact on teaching and learning. Five ongoing debates/controversial issues emerging from these studies have been identified and discussed. There are critiques and recommendations on the current situation and future development of research.

Key words: research in English language education, research in English language teaching, Hong Kong

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Introduction

My conception of “English language education” is a broad one. It starts with the field of English language teaching (ELT), which encompasses ELT methodology and the teaching of various skill areas. It crosses the border of education and touches on the domains of curriculum and assessment. English language education also involves the immediate stake-holders of teachers and students. Finally, the outcome of teaching and learning of English should be looked into — language use, English standards and the impact on teaching and learning.

The criteria for selecting studies for this review are threefold: (1) the topics must fall within the above five areas; therefore, research on language or linguistics per se will be excluded; (2) there must be at least some empirical component or some data for analyses in the studies; therefore, descriptive articles or articles containing merely arguments or discussions will be excluded; (3) only those relevant studies published locally and internationally in the past 25 years will be included.

The studies examined in this review are located through the following sources: the search engine “Google”, the databases “ERIC” and “LLAB”, some international and local language journals not included in the two databases, some books, edited volumes, research report series and conference proceedings published locally. Although much effort has been expended on locating the relevant literature, the list is not meant to be exhaustive.

Major Research Ideas and Concerns

The major research ideas and concerns gleaned from the studies centre around the following themes: (1) English language teaching; (2) English language curriculum, assessment and reform; (3) Students’ perspectives: motivation and attitudes, learning experience and strategies; (4) Teachers’ perspectives: attitudes and values, language awareness, teacher training and qualifications; (5) Learning outcome: English standards, language use and the impact of medium of instruction policy on teaching and learning.

English Language Teaching

Of the 33 studies on ELT located, they cover the topics pertaining to ELT methods (Carless, 2004, 2007; Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Klassen & Milton,

1999; Ng, 2005; Poon, 1992, 2004a), the teaching of listening (Coniam, 1998; Poon, 1992; Young, 1997), the teaching of reading (Foo, 1989; Pierson, 1987; Tinker Sachs & Mahon, 1997), the teaching of writing (Braine, 2003; Bunton, 1992; Ho, 2006; Keh, 1988; Lo & Hyland, 2007; Lo, 1996; Ma, 1988; Mak & Coniam, 2008; Pennington & Cheung, 1995; Poon, 2004a; Shi, 1998; Tsang, Wong, & Yuen, 2000), the teaching of vocabulary (McNeill, 1991, 1994), error correction (Lee, 1997, 2003; Lu, 2005) and the NET (Native English Teachers) scheme (Carless & Walker, 2006; Luk, 2001; Walker, 2001).

Hong Kong has always been following the footsteps of the west, though with a time gap of about 10 years, with regard to ELT methodology. The English teaching field in Hong Kong has experienced several paradigm shifts in methodology, at least on paper if not in practice, since the 1950s, from the grammar-translation method in the 1950s, to the Direct Method in the 1960s, to the oral-structural approach (or the audio-lingual method) in the 1970s, to the communicative approach in the 1980s and the 1990s, and to the task-based approach since 1999 (Littlewood, 2004; Poon, 2008c). Research in the above approaches is scant. There are only three studies involving the two most recent approaches, i.e., the task-based approach and the communicative approach. Carless conducted two studies in task-based approach, one investigating how this approach was implemented in three primary schools (Carless, 2004), and the other in 11 secondary schools (Carless, 2007). His overarching finding was that the task-based approach could be problematic if applied directly without adaptation to the local context. He proposed a weak version of task-based teaching. Poon (2004a) explored a new method of teaching writing in primary school, which she coined as the Integrative-Narrative Method. The theoretical underpinning of this method is communicative approach, and it advocates the use of children's literature and the integrated skill approach to the teaching of writing. In addition to the level of approach, there are a few studies exploring some innovative methods of teaching English language at the procedural level, for example, using films (Chapple & Curtis, 2000) and multimedia (Klassen & Milton, 1999) to enhance English skills, and authentic materials like TV news to improve listening proficiency (Poon, 1992). These studies generated positive results in terms of students' attitudes and language skills.

The research methods adopted in the above studies in methodology range from tests (Klassen & Milton, 1999), surveys and interviews (Carless,

2007; Chapple & Curtis, 2000) to case studies (Carless, 2004), action research and experiments (Klassen & Milton, 1999; Poon, 1992).

As for the studies in different areas of ELT, the teaching of writing is the most popular (14 studies) whereas the teaching of speaking and the teaching of grammar are the least popular (0 study). The teaching of listening, the teaching of reading and error correction have attracted 3 studies each, and the teaching of vocabulary 2. For writing, Lo and Hyland's (2007) action research implemented a writing programme designed to enhance primary students' motivation in writing through encouraging young learners to write about topics of interest to them. The result showed that underachieving students benefited the most from it. Five studies (Ho, 2006; Keh, 1988; Li, 1994; Lo, S. M. R., 1996; Pennington & Cheung, 1995) explored an alternative method of teaching writing — process writing, which is student-centred and underpinned by communicative language teaching. Poon (2004a) also tried out a new method of teaching writing — the Integrative-Narrative Method using children's stories and the integrated-skill approach. Students' interest in writing was enhanced and the content was enriched. An alternative way of teaching writing — using CALL — was investigated and found effective. Ma (1988) tried out "Outline Planner", and Mak & Coniam (2008) tried out "wikis". Concerning the content of students' writing, Bunton (1992) found that "poor grammar and spelling may be difficult to ignore in a real-world communicative situation where the comprehensibility of the content is vital" (p. 383). That is why the teacher's feedback on students' writing is important. Three studies explored different ways of giving feedback to students: teachers providing feedback on both grammar and content (Tsang, Wong, & Yuen, 2000), teachers using written comments and holding face-to-face writing conferences with students (Shi, 1998), and students giving each other peer feedback through the use of Local Area Networks (LANS) (Braine, 2003) were found useful.

Because of the nature of the topic, the above studies on writing adopted the research method of content analysis, except three using the survey and/or interviews and tests (Ho, 2006; Ma, 1988; Pennington & Cheung, 1995).

The three reading studies looked at the reading text and the processes of reading. A content analysis of the textbooks in Hong Kong concluded that the reading material is "of questionable intellectual, psychological, and cultural relevance for intelligent 14-year-olds" (Pierson, 1987, p. 353). In her study Foo (1989) tested the effects of the rhetorical structure of

expository texts on reading comprehension by asking students to read the same text with two versions written in different rhetorical structures. It was confirmed that the reading recall of L2 readers was affected by the rhetorical structure of the text. In addition to the text, the reading processes of students were also examined. Tinker Sachs & Mahon (1997) investigated primary students' strategies used in oral reading, e.g., sounding out, phonic substitution. The results showed that the students over-relied on memory for word recognition rather than applied phonic rules.

The research methods used in the above three studies in reading include tests (Foo, 1989; Tinker Sachs & Mahon, 1997) and content analysis (Pierson, 1987).

The three listening studies investigate students' listening strategies, the use of authentic materials and applying Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to listening. Eighteen university students were asked to apply the think-aloud procedures while listening to a text (Young, 1997). Some common strategies identified were inferencing and elaboration. Apart from listening strategies, material plays an important part in the teaching of listening. An experiment was conducted to compare the effectiveness of using standard listening comprehension materials and TV news to improve listening proficiency (Poon, 1992). The results indicated that TV news had a positive influence on students' motivation and listening skills. Besides TV news, a computer software called the Text Dictation was tried out to teach listening comprehension (Coniam, 1998). The findings of this study suggested that the Text Dictation procedure discriminated well between the students of different abilities.

The research methods used in the above studies in listening encompass tests (Coniam, 1998; Poon, 1992; Young, 1997), interviews (Young, 1997), and action research and experiment (Poon, 1992).

There are three studies on error correction — how the students corrected errors (Lee, 1997), how the teachers corrected errors (Lee, 2003), and the effect of explicit corrective feedback on learners (Lu, 2005). Lee's studies showed that the students had difficulty in detecting errors because of limited understanding of grammar terms, and that the teachers marked errors comprehensively but their feedback strategies were limited. Lu found that the effect of explicit feedback was more obvious on those learners who learnt English in a poor English environment.

The research methods used in the above studies in error correction include tests (Lee, 1997; Lu, 2005), tasks (Lee, 2003), surveys and experiment (Lu, 2005).

McNeill's two studies (1991, 1994) examined the teaching of vocabulary. The former used tests to find out how the students understood the format and meaning of the lexical content of their reading materials. The latter used a comparative method to find out whether the teachers and students had the same perception of vocabulary difficulty. The findings suggested that the teachers' "perceptions of vocabulary difficulty are not necessarily shared by their students", and that "many non-native speaker teachers of English lack a principled approach to dealing with pre-taught vocabulary in connection with reading texts" (McNeill, 1991, p. 159).

Finally, evaluation surveys of the NET (Native English Teachers) scheme indicated that there had been changes in both NET and local English teachers' perceptions of the role of NETs. NETs were perceived as holding "missionising" role perceptions in the sense that NETs' duty was to raise the quality of ELT in Hong Kong, thus causing resentment among local teachers (Tang & Johnson, 1993). It was found that the resentment has now subsided because of some improvements in NET sensitivities and educators' consensus on NET roles (Walker, 2001). Carless and Walker (2006) used the case study method to investigate collaboration between NETs and LETs (local English teachers) in Hong Kong secondary schools. Their finding showed that "NET/LET collaborative teaching can be a valuable way of enhancing second language acquisition" (Carless & Walker, 2006, p. 475). Likewise, Luk's (2001) survey on students also indicated a highly positive attitude towards the NETs.

English Language Curriculum, Assessment and Reform

Only five studies have been identified on the topics of curriculum, assessment and reform. Both Chan (2002) and Carless (1998) examined different aspects of the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) — a new initiative in curriculum development in the 1990s in Hong Kong schools (Morris, Adamson, et al., 1996). The former looked at the cognitive element of curriculum change and the teachers' attitudes towards it whereas the latter analysed the perceptions and actions of a primary English teacher in implementing the TOC. The findings of these two studies were contradictory, i.e., general teacher skepticism about TOC (Chan, 2002) as opposed to the positive attitude of a teacher towards TOC (Carless, 1998). The studies of Lewkowicz, Chan, & Tong (1991) and Chan, Drave, & Wong (1992) are about assessment. The former is a longitudinal study comparing university students' performance in the internal English tests

with that in the HKALE (Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination) whereas the latter attempted to define minimum English language requirements for the certification of teachers. Lee (2006) reported the effectiveness of web-based teaching in the English classroom. It was found that Web-based teaching “demands learners adopt a different approach to explore and manage learning” (Lee, 2006, p. 156).

The research methods used in the above studies comprise surveys (Carless, 1998; Chan, 2002; Chan, Drave, & Wong, 1992; Lee, 2006), lesson observations, interviews and case study (Carless, 1998; Lee, 2006), and tests (Lee, 2006; Lewkowicz, Chan, & Tong, 1991).

Students’ Perspectives: Motivation and Attitudes, Learning Experience and Strategies

Of the 21 studies located, 14 pertain to students’ motivation and attitudes (Axler, Yang, & Stevens, 1998; Humphreys & Spratt, 2008; Hyland, 1997; Lai, E. F. K., 1996, 1999; Lin & Detaramani, 1998; Lin, Detaramani, Yeung & Wong, 1991; Lu, Li, & Huang, 2004; Peacock, 1998; Pennington & Yue, 1993, 1994; Poon, W., 1988; Richards, 1994; Yang & Lau, 2003) whereas 7 are about students’ learning experience and strategies (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Hepburn, 1991; Lai, 2001; Lee, L., 1999; Lewkowicz & Cooley, 1998; Luk, 1998; Tang & Yang, 2000).

Motivation is a key factor contributing to second language acquisition (Giles & Byrne, 1982; Schumann, 1978). All the seven studies (Hyland, 1997; Lin & Detaramani, 1998; Lin et al., 1991; Lu, Li, & Huang, 2004; Peacock, 1998; Poon, W., 1988; Yang & Lau, 2003) examining tertiary students’ motivation and attitudes employed the same research method — survey — to collect data, and an additional research method of tests was used (Lu, Li, & Huang, 2004). One common finding was that the tertiary students were positive about English learning. The antagonistic feeling about English being a colonial language as reported in an earlier study (Pierson, Fu, & Lee, 1980) has subsided. Hyland’s (1997) survey aimed to discover students’ perspectives on language and cultural identity during the political transition. His study also contradicted the assertion of an earlier study that English use indicated a separation from the Chinese community and its traditional culture (Cheung, 1985). The subjects in his study reported a desire to acquire English for instrumental purposes, echoing an earlier finding about the utility value of English as perceived by Hong Kong tertiary students (Poon, W., 1988). Based on this instrumental/integrative

dichotomy of viewing motivation in second language learning proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972), two studies proposed another intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy to look at Hong Kong tertiary students' motivation (Lin & Detaramani, 1998; Lin et al., 1991) through the use of surveys and tests. The finding was that intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation was positively related to a high level of English attainment. The amount of motivation also proved to be significant in deciding students' level of English attainment. For example, a mainland group who had higher motivation proved to be better and more effective learners than the Hong Kong group (Lu, Li, & Huang, 2004). A related factor — i.e., learners' beliefs about foreign language learning — was investigated in another study employing the research methods of surveys, tests and interviews (Peacock, 1998). One finding was that the gaps between teacher and learner beliefs would probably result in negative language learning outcomes.

Seven pieces of work contribute to the study of school students' motivation and attitudes (Axler, Yang, & Stevens, 1998; Lai, E. F. K., 1996, 1999; Luk, 1998; Pennington & Yue, 1993, 1994; Richards, 1994). All of them adopted the research methods of surveys to collect data. Similar to the findings of the above studies with tertiary students, Richards' study (1994) suggested that intrinsically oriented students had less language anxiety. Secondary students' attitudes towards English language learning during the political transition period were surveyed. It was found that the students did not associate the use of English with implicit threats to their Chinese identity (Axler, Yang, & Stevens, 1998; Pennington & Yue, 1993, 1994), and that English in Hong Kong was likely to take on the features of a foreign rather than a second language both in education and in everyday life after the handover (Lai, E. F. K., 1996, 1999). In addition, one study reported secondary students' attitudes towards the British accent through surveys, and the subjects overwhelmingly preferred the British accent to the Hong Kong accent (Luk, 1998).

There are six studies in students' English learning experience and strategies. Half of them looked at different aspects of English learning experience of tertiary students — speaking (Lewkowicz & Cooley, 1998), listening (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992), and negotiation of meaning (Lai, 2001). A number of factors contributing to their learning were identified: the background of students, the context, the lecturing style, the task design. The other three studies examined learner strategies. It was found that high proficiency students employed more strategies than low proficiency

students (Hepburn, 1991; Lee, L., 1999), and that even young second language learners were capable of developing learner autonomy strategies (Tang & Yang, 2001). The research methods employed in these six studies comprise surveys and/or interviews.

Teachers' Perspectives: Attitudes and Values, Language Awareness, Teacher Training and Qualifications

Of the 25 studies from the perspectives of the teachers, the topics include teachers' values and attitudes towards English language teaching (Carless & Walker, 2006; Ho, Tang, & Tam, 1993; Lai, 1994; Luk, 2001; Man, 2000; Poon, 2008a; Richards, Tung, & Ng, 1991; Tsui, 2003; Walker, 2001), teachers' language awareness (Andrews, 1999, 2006; Berry, 2001; Tsui & Bunton, 2000), and teacher training and qualifications (Cheng, Wong, Kong, So, & Chow, 1998; Coniam, 2001; Coniam & Falvey, 2002; Lee, 1996, 2004, 2007; Lo, 1996; Lu, 2007; Pennington & Urmston, 1998; Poon, 2003; Urmston, 2003).

As values and attitudes are the key attributes of a teacher, a number of studies are devoted to this area of research. Lai's (1994) survey investigated teachers' attitudes towards the English curriculum. One finding was that English teachers preferred a more flexible curriculum. Lee's survey (1996) showed that primary English teachers in Hong Kong believed that having a very good command of English was important, but interestingly not many of them thought they possessed this quality. Richards, Tung, and Ng's (1991) survey of 249 teachers went deeper into teachers' beliefs and judgments about ELT and classroom practices in Hong Kong secondary schools. It was found that teachers' goals, values and beliefs were related to their teaching experience, training and approach to language teaching. Beyond their differences, the teachers were found to share a common ground, i.e., professionalism. Interviews and/or classroom observations are other research methods used to collect data pertaining to the problems and challenges facing English teachers especially novice teachers (Ho, Tang, & Tam, 1993; Tsui, 2003). The finding showed that the initial years of teaching were painful for those non-English-major or not professionally trained English teachers. It was found that if the teachers could upgrade their knowledge in subject matter content and pedagogical skills, it was likely that they would develop expertise in teaching after a period of self-doubt. Poon's (2008a) study employing multiple research methods (i.e., pre- and post-interviews, class observations by the researcher, pre- and post-

lesson observation conferences between the researcher and the teachers, and teacher journals) provides an alternative option for professional development of English teachers — namely teachers undertaking action research in their own classrooms with a view to improving teaching and learning. The spirit espoused in this kind of action research is exactly what is advocated in the recent education reform being implemented throughout the world — i.e., new professionalism. Man's (2000) study surveying and interviewing some in-service English teachers showed that there was a wide gap between the policy of new professionalism and the old practices in the English classroom. On the one hand, the teachers found it hard to respond to the government's unending calls for change as very little support was provided, and on the other hand, the government found that the teachers' belief systems and values would need changing. One finding of Lee's (1996) survey added a new light to teachers' self-perceptions as professionals: Primary English teachers seemed to have lower self-esteem than their secondary counterparts.

Language awareness is another attribute that a language teacher should possess. Several studies looked at different aspects of language awareness of Hong Kong English teachers — i.e., methodology (Poon, 2008a), grammar knowledge (Andrews, 1999, 2006; Berry, 2001), varieties of English (Tsui & Bunton, 2000), and relationship between language and culture (Lee, 1996). These studies in exception to Lee and Berry's drew on the data collected within a long period of time, from more than two years to eight years, through interviews and observations, and/or conferences, tests, teacher narratives, e-messages, action research. It was found that English teachers albeit not English-trained, if given sufficient support (for example, expert advice through action research), were capable of developing their awareness in English language teaching methodology (Poon, 2008a). On the contrary, English teachers who had not taken any further courses in grammar after receiving professional training showed very little progress in their grammar knowledge (Andrews, 1999, 2006). But interestingly, the use of grammatical terminology was found to be predominant in class although there was "an awareness of a certain incompatibility between the use of terminology and the prescribed syllabus/methodology" among the English teachers (Berry, 2001, p. 116). Tsui & Bunton (2000) pointed out that Hong Kong teachers tended to rely on exonormative norms in English use, and were not aware of the existence of "Hong Kong English". One finding of Lee's (1996) survey indicated that the majority of primary English teachers were not aware of the importance of culture in ELT.

Six studies are devoted to initial teacher training for pre-service teachers. Two studies employed interviews and/or surveys, journals to investigate the value of Cooperating Teacher Scheme (i.e., school mentor scheme) (Cheng et al., 1998) and internship (Lo, 1996) whereas two other studies analysed teacher journals (Lee, 2007) and email dialogue journals (Lee, 2004) to find out their effectiveness in pre-service teacher training. Positive findings were generated from the above four studies. However, two studies surveying the students of a BATESL (Bachelor of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language) programme found that the students were rather negative about the programme because of the huge gap between the theories learnt in the lectures and the practical constraints in the local classroom (Pennington & Urmston, 1998; Urmston, 2003).

The English Benchmark Test is an instrument that the Hong Kong government employs to assess teachers' English standards. Two studies used tests and surveys to compare the test-takers' attitudes towards the pilot Benchmark Test (Coniam & Falvey, 2002), and compare the effectiveness of audio and video versions of listening comprehension (Coniam, 2001). It was found that in the first study both the willing volunteers and unwilling volunteers scored comparably on the different test types although the former viewed the test types more favourably than the latter, whereas the second study suggested the audio mode of listening comprehension test was more viable than the video mode. Lu's (2007) study surveyed the participants of a writing course designed for teachers to prepare them for the English language Benchmark Test. The results showed that the teachers had shaky foundations in the linguistic knowledge of English; therefore, it is suggested to strengthen teachers' linguistic knowledge through in-service professional training, and to review Hong Kong's teacher education and professional training. Prompted by the poor results of the first English Benchmark Test released in June 2001, an earlier study reviewed the syllabuses of the English subject taught in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education programmes offered by three universities in Hong Kong with a view to assessing whether this subject provided adequate and sufficient training for English teachers in Hong Kong (Poon, 2003). The findings showed that the training of English teachers was not adequate and sufficient because of the changing profiles of the English teachers and the greater demands of the times on language teachers.

Learning Outcome: English Standards, Language Use, and the Impact of Medium of Instruction (MOI) Policy on Teaching and Learning

Twenty-four studies pertaining to learning outcome are located: 4 on English standards, 9 on language use, and 11 on the impact of MOI policy on teaching and learning. In Evans, Jones, Rusmin, and Cheung's (1998) survey and interviews, students, teachers, parents and businesspeople rated their own abilities in English slightly below average. It is interesting to see that these four groups of participants blamed each other for declining English standards. At a more micro level Hung's (2000) study employed an interlanguage analysis of grammatical errors based on a corpus of undergraduate students' writing. The study revealed that one key factor causing grammatical errors was the influence of the internalized grammar of students' first language on their second language; therefore, the English teachers were recommended to probe beneath the surface and guide the students in developing their internalized "grammars" of the second language. Apart from grammar, the university students in Hong Kong were found to have insufficient word knowledge skills drawing from the data of ACER Word Knowledge Test (Stone, 1994). As the Test provides a valid indicator of verbal skills and verbal reasoning ability, "the results of this study are consistent with general anecdotal and research evidence suggesting that the English proficiency of Hong Kong undergraduates is low" (Stone, 1994, p. 97). Hence the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was adopted as the exit test to assess the English levels of university graduating students in Hong Kong. Qian's (2007) study compared the results of a sample of students having taken both the IELTS and a locally developed test, GSLPA (Graduating Students' Language Proficiency Assessment). The finding indicated that the two tests differed considerably in terms of their design — i.e., the former to measure candidates' readiness for academic studies whereas the latter to measure candidates' suitability for professional employment. It was recommended to add the GSLPA as a concurrent exit test in order to meet the main objective of the exit test.

Nine studies looked into language use in secondary schools and universities. A variety of research methods were adopted: surveys (Evans, 2000; Low & Lu, 2006; Pennington, 1997; Pennington & Balla, 1998), interviews (Low & Lu, 2006; Poon, 2000b), classroom observation (Poon, 2000b), discourse analysis (Kwan, 2000; Lin, 1991), and video study and

tests (Johnson & Lee, 1987). The studies about language use in secondary school classrooms were conducted in different periods during which different MOI policies were in force in Hong Kong, namely the *laissez-faire* medium of instruction policy before 1994 (Johnson & Lee, 1987; Lin, 1991), the streaming policy during 1994–1998 (Evans, 2000; Kwan, 2000; Poon, 2000b), and the compulsory Chinese MOI policy (Low & Lu, 2006). Interestingly a common finding of these studies showed that code-mixing and code-switching were often used as the MOI in the classroom, not only in content subjects, but also in English lessons. It was found that teachers' code switches were not random, and they used bilingual teaching strategies for more or less the same reasons (Johnson & Lee, 1987; Lin, 1991). The bilingual mode of teaching was popular among secondary students, who found it a more effective means of achieving high marks in the English-medium examinations (Johnson & Lee, 1987). As for language use of university students, research indicated that English was used mainly in talking with lecturers, in discussions during tutorials, and in reading and writing whereas Cantonese mixed with English was used outside the lecture/tutorial rooms (Pennington, 1997; Pennington & Balla, 1998). Pennington et al.'s study, which was a replicate of Gibbon's (1983) study suggested "a move away from both the pure Cantonese and especially the pure English extremes and towards a blend of the two languages in a unique form of Cantonese with English-based lexis" over a period of 15 years (Pennington, Balla, Detaramani, Poon, & Tam, 1992, p. 64). Low and Lu (2006) also found that code-mixing and code-switching were extended to the domain of home and leisure activities, so they had become a reality in Hong Kong society.

Eleven studies contributed to the debate of MOI policy in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government forsook its *laissez-faire* policy and adopted a more rigorous MOI policy — the streaming policy — in September 1994. Three empirical studies investigated the streaming policy. Evans et al. (1998) and Tung, Lam, & Tsang (1997) employed surveys to find out students, parents and/or teachers and businesspeople's attitudes towards the streaming policy. The former's finding showed that most respondents disagreed with the streaming policy because it deprived them of a free choice of MOI, and they preferred multi-medium education (i.e., using English, Chinese and Putonghua as the MOI). The latter focused only on English as an MOI within the streaming policy framework, and it found that "students and their parents consistently value English over Chinese ... although they agree ... that instruction in Chinese is educationally more

effective” (Tung et al., 1997, p. 441). Poon’s study (2000a) investigated the streaming policy at both the levels of policy and implementation. In addition to interviewing government education policy makers and academics, four schools were used as case studies to examine how the streaming policy was implemented at the school level through classroom observations and interviews with principals, teachers and students. It was found that a number of factors hindered the implementation of the policy. On the other hand, three studies employing the research methods of surveys and interviews looked at the actual MOI used at universities, which were presumably English-medium (Evans & Green, 2007; Flowerdew, Li, & Miller, 1998; Walters & Balla, 1998). The findings revealed that the students’ English skills were inadequate, and the instruction was basically in Chinese in real practice. The Hong Kong government shifted its MOI policy to compulsory Chinese medium after the handover in 1998. Three studies explored the impact of the compulsory Chinese-medium teaching policy on teaching and learning. Tse, Shum, Ki, and Wong’s (2001) survey showed that while the teachers generally adopted a positive attitude towards the compulsory Chinese-medium teaching policy, they experienced some difficulties in the switch from English-medium teaching to Chinese-medium teaching. However, in another survey by the same authors (2007) it was found that many teachers were worried about the switch of MOI, and it was hoped that a more flexible framework would be developed. Poon (2008b) had surveyed some schools that were forced to change the MOI from English to Chinese in 1998 with a view to finding out the impact of Chinese-medium teaching on learning. The findings indicated the participants’ mixed feelings towards Chinese medium instruction. In addition to the above more macro studies, there are some studies investigating specific aspects of MOI at schools (Ng, 2007; Whelpton, 1999).

Ongoing Debates/Controversial Issues

Five ongoing debates/controversial issues have emerged from the above 108 studies. They are: the English standards of Hong Kong students, the use of code-mixing and code-switching in the classroom, the Hong Kong government’s MOI policy, students’ motivation and attitudes towards English learning, and the quality of English teachers in Hong Kong.

English Standards of Hong Kong Students

Are the English standards of Hong Kong students declining? This debate started in the 1980s, and has persisted until today. There is a myriad of factors contributing to the lowering English standards, such as the implementation of 9-year compulsory education, inadequate English teaching approaches and methods, insufficient supply of competent English teachers, etc. Though important, this issue has not attracted the attention of many researchers. Only three empirical studies located directly address the issue of English standards in terms of students' insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Stone's concluding remark — i.e., "the results of this study are consistent with general anecdotal and research evidence suggesting that the English proficiency of Hong Kong undergraduates is low" (Stone, 1994, p. 97) — is revealing. The researchers' views pertaining to students' declining English standards corroborate with the teachers' views. In Poon's (2008b) study, the English teachers of 10 secondary schools who have taught in those schools for at least eight years have witnessed the falling English standards of the students in their own schools. Apart from the researchers and the teachers, prominent public figures in business, politics and the judiciary strongly criticize Hong Kong students' English standards from time to time. A most recent example is the severe criticism given by Stephen Bradley, the former British consul general, prior to his departing Hong Kong in March 2008: "It has significantly declined as a language in general use" (Wong, 2008). Bradley's comment was echoed by the hard data of the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA), a public assessment of approximately two hundred thousand Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students' English, Chinese and Mathematics, released by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority in November 2008. The scores of the English subject were the lowest among the three subjects, and more than thirty percent of Secondary 3 students failed to achieve basic competency in English. What was worse, 7.8% of the Secondary 3 students reached the basic competency level when they studied in Primary 6 but their English had deteriorated after three years ("Thirty Percent", 2008).

The most interesting point about this more-than-two-decade-long debate is that the Hong Kong government had refused to admit openly the bare fact of dipping English standards until last year.¹ The official response to the query of English standards had remained the same in the past twenty years — i.e., "the Working Group concluded that English standards appeared to have been generally maintained but the fast increasing demand

for competent users had led to a misperception that standards were falling” (Education Commission, 1990, p. 93), and this stand was reiterated in later government documents (e.g., SCOLAR [Standing Committee on Language Education and Research], 2003). However, ironically the Hong Kong government has invested billions of dollars and “made strenuous efforts since the early 1980s to combat the declining language standards” (for details, see Poon, 2004b).

Use of Code-mixing and Code-switching in the Classroom

Should the use of code-mixing and code-switching in the classroom be allowed? Traditionally English-medium schools are required to teach all subjects except Chinese and Chinese History in English; likewise, Chinese-medium schools are required to teach all subjects except English in Chinese. The distinction had been clear before the early 1980s, but it became “blurred with the expansion of universal junior secondary education² and both languages are, in fact, being used in varying degrees in different types of schools” (Education Commission, 1984, p. 40). The “blurred” or “mixed” language use in the classroom as reported in the *Education Commission Report No. 1* (1984) was echoed in the nine pieces of research reported in Section 2.5, which were published between 1987 and 2006. Teaching in code switches has been spreading from junior secondary to senior secondary classes, and then to university tutorials and lectures in the past 25 years. The main reason for using code-mixing in some English-medium schools is that the English standards of students have not reached the threshold level. As English-medium schools are generally perceived as higher banding schools, they are more popular among parents, and therefore most schools opt for English-medium in order to attract more students.

There are two opposing views regarding the use of mixed-code in the classroom. On the one hand, the Hong Kong government’s official stand has been very clear-cut since the publication of the *Education Commission Report No. 4* — “the use of mixed-code in schools should be reduced” (Education Commission, 1990, p. 99). This standpoint has been reiterated by the policy-makers, such as the former Governor, Chris Patten (“Teaching Medium”, 1994), the former Director of Education, Helen Yu (“14 Schools”, 1998) and the former Secretary for Education and Manpower, Joseph Wong (“Warning”, 1998). On the other hand, some scholars consider it “a fallacy to say that using Cantonese as the MOI will necessarily lead to poor English” (Li, 1998, p. 162), and argue that Cantonese can be used in

English-medium schools “as a temporary means of enabling higher-order thinking process to be brought to bear on learning” (Lin, 2000, p. 183). An assumption behind Lin’s argument is that code-mixing/code-switching can be used strategically to assist students in learning content subjects with a view to gradually moving towards English-medium learning within the framework of bilingual education. However, neither the Hong Kong government nor the schools and teachers have any concept about bilingual education, and the teachers use code-mixing/code-switching not as a temporary means, but as a permanent practical tool to make the teaching of content subjects efficient. Therefore, “I argue that use of mixed code in teaching is not harmful in terms of communication and effectiveness in classroom teaching. Nevertheless, it is harmful in terms of students’ language development. Through constant use of mixed code in learning, students will be deprived of the chance to express themselves in either English only, or Chinese only. Besides, mixed code, though popular in verbal communication in Hong Kong society, is not acceptable in written form” (Poon, 1998, p. 96).

Hong Kong Government’s Medium of Instruction Policy

Which is a more viable MOI for Hong Kong secondary schools — English-medium or Chinese-medium? Historically being a British colony, Hong Kong provided English-medium education alongside Chinese-medium education. It was argued that the mother tongue should be the best medium of learning (Cheng, 1979). A number of empirical studies conducted in the 1970s reported some harmful effects of English-medium teaching (Cheng, Shek, Tse, & Wong, 1973/1979; Cheung, 1979; Poon, S. K., 1979). In the elite education era (i.e., prior to 1978, the year in which 9-year compulsory education was in force) using English as an MOI did not cause too many problems, but in the mass education era many students are not able to cope with learning through the English medium because of declining English standards. The report of the International Panel invited to review Hong Kong’s education in 1982 rightly summed up the dilemma facing Hong Kong then and even 27 years later now: “In Hong Kong where proficiency in English is necessary for economic and political reasons, there is a classic public policy dilemma: Whether to jeopardize the educational progress of the majority (and perhaps endanger the culture itself) in order to guarantee a sufficient number of competent English speakers; or to value the whole group (and in so doing conserve the culture) but accept the loss in capacity

to deal with the international environment and hence a possible decline in the economic prosperity” (Llewellyn, Hancock, Kirst, & Roeloffs, 1982, p. 30).

The thorny issue of MOI has been brought up time and again since the late 1960s without any resolution. The debate has gone through three stages: first, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s with a political orientation because of colonialism; second, from the early 1980s to 1997 with less political orientation because of subsided colonial feeling; and third, in the post-colonial period since 1997 with a strong political orientation again because of the handover of sovereignty (for details of the discussion, see Poon, 2008b). The Hong Kong government has so far adopted three different MOI policies, namely the *laissez-faire* MOI policy³ prior to September 1994, the streaming policy⁴ during September 1994 and August 1998, and the compulsory Chinese-medium teaching policy since September 1998. In January 2009 the Education Bureau of Hong Kong started another round of consultation on a new MOI policy entitled “The fine-tuning policy” to be implemented in September 2010.

The heated debate has been reflected to some extent in the 11 pieces of research in MOI. While most of the studies focus on the MOI used in the classroom and the attitudes of the teachers and students towards it only, Poon’s studies also investigate the issue of MOI from a more macro perspective — i.e., policy-making and implementation of the streaming policy (Poon, 2000a), and impact of the compulsory Chinese-medium teaching policy on teaching and learning (Poon, 2008b). One major finding is that “The flaw of the debate lies with the polarity of views posed by the two camps. Neither the supporters of CMI [Chinese-medium instruction] nor those of EMI [English-medium instruction] realize the importance of bilingual education” (Poon, 2008b, p. 219). Therefore, Poon proposes that “Hong Kong should get rid of its old paradigm of viewing English-medium teaching as a colonial liability, but rather as a legacy in harmony with Chinese-medium teaching” (Poon, 2008b, p. 221).

Hong Kong Students’ Motivation and Attitudes Towards English Language Learning

Are Hong Kong students motivated in English language learning? The 14 studies reviewed previously suggest that both tertiary and school students find English important to them and they are very positive about English language learning. The antagonistic attitudes towards English as reported in

some earlier studies — for example, students feeling uneasy or even hostile when hearing Chinese speakers using English in ordinary conversations with one another (Fu, 1975); “When using English, I do not feel that I am Chinese anymore” and “At times I fear that by using English I will become like a foreigner” (Pierson, Fu, & Lee, 1980) — have subsided. According to second language acquisition theories (Giles & Byrne, 1982; Schumann, 1978), Hong Kong students’ positive attitudes and good motivation for English language learning should bring about high standards in English. On the contrary, the English standards of students are declining as discussed previously. Apparently the research findings do not reflect the reality in the English classroom. As a matter of fact, the teachers of Hong Kong keep complaining about the low motivation of their students. Why is English considered so important and useful and yet fails to be learned? Research suggests that Hong Kong students’ motivation for English learning is extrinsic (e.g., for getting high grades in the examination) rather than intrinsic (Lin & Detaramani, 1998; Lin et al., 1991), and that students learn English for instrumental purposes rather than integrative ones (Hyland, 1997). Hence their English learning is not deep learning (Watkins, Biggs, & Regmi, 1991). I argue that there are other factors affecting students’ motivation for English learning, for instance, the teacher factor, the teaching materials, the teaching methods, the curriculum, the policy, the family background, the environment and the like.

Quality of English Teachers in Hong Kong

Is the quality of English teachers in Hong Kong good enough to teach English effectively? This is a controversial issue because it depends on the yardstick one uses. Compared with many places in the world, the English teachers in Hong Kong maintain a high standard, but compared with other regions, many English teachers in Hong Kong are still below the standard. Maybe we can first deal with the more objective side of the term “quality of English teachers” by looking at the qualifications and training of teachers. In 2001, the year in which the Education Reform formally started, the former Education Department of Hong Kong conducted a survey on the qualifications held by serving language teachers (i.e., teachers of both Chinese and English subjects). It was found that there were only 9% of primary English teachers and 36% secondary English holding relevant first degree plus relevant teacher training then (SCOLAR, 2003, Annex VIII).⁵ This phenomenon was mainly due to two factors: First, traditionally the

university graduates of English majors preferred joining the civil service, the financial sector and the multinational enterprise to joining the teaching profession; second, it was the Hong Kong government's policy of allowing graduates without prior formal teacher training to become teachers. Apart from qualifications and training, the quality of teachers should encompass some qualitative aspects, for instance, values and attitudes towards English language teaching, language awareness and professionalism, which are more difficult to assess.

The 25 studies reviewed previously show that the English teachers in Hong Kong demonstrate quite a high degree of professionalism. Their attitudes towards English language teaching are generally positive although some novice teachers find the initial years of teaching painful. In terms of their English language proficiency not many teachers think they have a good command of English. Research also indicates that their language awareness is not high. On the whole primary English teachers have lower self-esteem than secondary English teachers.

Reflections on the Current Situation and on Future Development

Research is meant for knowledge advancement in the field. Unlike research in science and humanities, educational research emphasizes not only theories, but also practices. That is why researchers in education need to keep a close eye on the educational trend as well as the wider environment that may have an impact on educational practices, such as the political, economic, social and cultural forces circumscribing the education sector. It is in this light that I view research in English language education. If “change” is the current catch-phrase, dramatic changes have indeed taken place in all respects in Hong Kong in the past 25–30 years — the local English language teaching field, the education sector, the profiles of students and teachers, language use and English standards, and finally the Hong Kong society at large. The early 1980s saw a paradigm shift in the approach to English language teaching in Hong Kong, at least in the official syllabuses, if not in real practice in the classroom. The Communicative Approach was introduced to Hong Kong one decade after it was advocated in the west in the 1970s. The year 2000 saw an unprecedented gigantic reform in education. Not only the academic system and student admission system were overhauled, but also the curriculum and assessment in all

subjects including English were drastically changed based on the principles of Education Reform. Subsequently the demands on students and teachers have increased. In fact, the breakthrough in Hong Kong's education — implementation of 9-year free and compulsory education in 1978 — changed the profiles of students and teachers, and brought about undesirable consequences such as dipping English standards and the use of code-mixing and code-switching in the classroom. The education sector can be seen as an epitome of the Hong Kong society, which has also gone through a metamorphosis in the past three decades, from a manufacturing hub to an international financial metropolis.

If we look at the research pertaining to English language education in Hong Kong reviewed above, we will easily discern two facts: The number of publications is small (108 pieces only) and they fail to reflect the full picture of English language educational practices in the past 25 years. Firstly, about the area of English language teaching, Communicative Approach is such an important approach in English language teaching advocated by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong for more than 25 years; however, there are only some articles explaining or commenting on the Communicative Approach, but no empirical studies have ever been conducted on the effectiveness of Communicative Approach or its strong version Task-based Language Teaching, which has been widely promoted in recent years, applied in Hong Kong. The same is true with certain aspects of English language teaching, for example, the effect of teaching of phonics and language arts promoted in recent years. In addition, there has not been any research reviewing the transplant of English language teaching methodology to the Hong Kong soil. Apparently the English professionals in Hong Kong are used to following the footsteps of the west, and this trend is likely to continue in the near future. Secondly, concerning the English curriculum and assessment, reforms have swept through the school sector since 2001, for example, the introduction of the new syllabuses and assessments, namely the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) for Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students implemented in 2004, School-based Assessment implemented in 2008, the Senior Secondary curriculum to be introduced in 2009, and the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE)⁶ to be implemented in 2012. However, to date no research has been published in these initiatives pertaining to curriculum and assessment reforms. Only two studies touch on the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC), which was initiated in the early 1990s and put aside after the handover in 1997. It seems that the researchers are really

lagging far behind. All the above-mentioned reforms will carry on and will be in full swing by 2012, the year in which the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum will have completed one cycle, and the new public examination — HKDSE — will be in place in 2012. Thirdly, the studies pertaining to students' motivation and attitudes merely look at the types of motivation that Hong Kong students have and relate them to extrinsic and instrumental purposes without digging deeper into the structural changes of the educational landscape in Hong Kong, for example, 9-year compulsory education, MOI policy, education reform, and curriculum and assessment reforms. Fourthly, the studies concerning teachers' values and attitudes focus more on the practical problems facing the English teachers, such as their English competency, their language awareness, how to develop subject-knowledge content and pedagogical skills in teaching. Only a few studies attempt to view teachers' attitudes and professional development in light of the structural changes and demands of the times on language teachers. Fifthly, the research in learning outcome examines merely the phenomena of declining English standards in certain aspects of language acquisition (e.g., grammar and vocabulary knowledge) and the use of code-mixing and code-switching in the classroom without relating to the deeper structural changes in Hong Kong's education. Only a couple of publications on MOI policy attempt to explore the social value that underpins schools' choices of MOI, and the impact of the government's policy on teaching and learning.

In addition to the issue of the link between research and educational practices, I will now turn to research *per se*. First of all, the scope of research in English language education in Hong Kong in the past 25 years is on the whole quite narrow. As discussed above, the research fails to reflect the full picture of English language educational practices in the local setting. There is an array of topics or areas that need investigating. Next, the research methodology is not vigorous enough. Surveys, tests and interviews are the major research methods for data collection in addition to a few studies adopting action research, experiments, classroom observation and discourse/content analysis. It is of course more convincing to present quantitative data to support certain claims in educational research. However, the empirical research must be carefully designed and well justified; otherwise, using surveys and tests casually merely for the sake of including some empirical component in a study will result in positivistic reductionism. This is a phenomenon in English language education research in Hong Kong. The sampling method further demonstrates the phenomenon of

positivistic reductionism. Most of the studies reviewed previously employ convenience sampling, i.e., the researchers using their own students as the subjects. The sample size of some quantitative studies using surveys is too small to generate results that can be generalized. Finally, the analysis and discussion of quite a large number of studies are not in-depth enough and they fail to dig out the core issues under investigation.

How the Quality and Standard of Research in this Area Can be Advanced in Future

Drawing on the above reflections on the current situation, I think it is high time to make more concerted efforts in research in English language education with a view to advancing the quality and standard of research in this area. To begin with, a research culture must be developed among the local English language education professionals including those teaching at universities as well as those teaching at schools. Traditionally English language educators, who do not have much knowledge and experience in research, confine themselves to teaching in the classroom at school. Language education research is the task reserved for the researchers and academics at universities, who may not have frontline or sufficient language teaching experience at school. This gap can be bridged through collaborative research between school teachers and teacher educators and researchers at universities. The current teacher education paradigm purports that teacher education is “a matter of facilitating the development of teachers’ capacities for situational understandings as a basis for wise judgment and intelligent decisions in complex, ambiguous and dynamic educational situations” (Elliot, 1993, pp. 18–19). Hence the shift of focus from “content” to “process” brings the concepts of action research and reflective teaching into teacher education, and this also echoes the spirit of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) espoused in the recent education reform (Poon, 2008a). It is in this light that collaborative research can be made meaningful and possible because school teachers are anyway required to pursue CPD by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong.⁷ Doing action research or reflective teaching can be a much more meaningful option for teacher development on the one hand, and on the other hand for promoting research culture in the field. Research output in terms of quantity can thus be boosted. The quality and standard of research can be enhanced only when there is a critical mass.

As mentioned previously, the English language education researchers need to pay heed to the scope, methodology and analysis of their research. The scope of research should be broadened and new areas or topics should be explored with a view to reflecting a fuller picture of English language educational practices in Hong Kong. Positivistic reductionism should be avoided regarding research methodology. More vigorous research methods should be adopted, for instance, action research, experiments, classroom observations, or even longitudinal studies. These methods are definitely more time consuming, but they are more likely to unveil the true picture of English language education in action during the process of research. As for the sampling method, purposive sampling (sometimes even having stratified sampling) is preferred to convenience sampling because the former is less biased than the latter and more valid findings can thus emerge. Finally, the analysis and discussion should dig deeper and adopt a more macro perspective in viewing English language education.

Conclusion

To recap, I have reviewed 108 empirical studies pertaining to English language education research in Hong Kong in the last 25 years. The themes selected for discussion are gleaned from the studies. They include: English language teaching; English language curriculum, assessment and reform; students' perspectives: motivation and attitudes, learning experience and strategies; teachers' perspectives: attitudes and values, language awareness, teacher training and qualifications; and learning outcome: language use, English standards and the impact on teaching and learning. I have identified some ongoing debates or controversial issues that have emerged from the studies. They are: English standards of Hong Kong students, use of code-mixing and code-switching in the classroom, Hong Kong government's MOI policy, Hong Kong students' motivation and attitudes towards English language teaching, and the quality of English teachers in Hong Kong. I have critiqued the current situation of English language education research in Hong Kong, and put forward some recommendations for improving the quality and standard of research in this area.

Notes

1. The Secretary for Education, Michael Suen, acknowledged at a symposium that “English-language proficiency in Hong Kong had declined substantially, and something needed to be done to reverse the trend” (“Back to Basics”, 2008).
2. 9-year free and compulsory education was introduced in 1978.
3. Schools were free to select their own MOI.
4. Schools were divided into three types: the English-medium schools, the Chinese-medium schools and the two-medium schools in which English-medium and Chinese-medium classes were offered.
5. The Hong Kong government has taken a series of measures since 2001 to improve the quality of English teachers, e.g., the Language Proficiency Attainment Test, English subject knowledge requirement, formal teacher training requirement, and relevant first degree requirement. Hence the percentage of relevantly trained primary and secondary English teachers has significantly increased to 54.0% and 70.4% respectively (Statistics of 2008 provided by the Education Bureau).
6. The present Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (equivalent to the O-Level of GCSE in Britain) and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (equivalent to the A-Level of GCSE in Britain) will be merged and replaced by HKDSE.
7. Of course the CPD requirement of the Education Bureau of Hong Kong is quantitative, i.e., teachers need to fulfill a minimum of 150 hours of training within five years in the forms of attending courses, seminars, etc.

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