Chapter 8 1
Commentary on ‘Competencies’ 2

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Introduction 4

In reading the editors’ introduction and these interesting and informative accounts of how skills and competencies are learned and taught under the umbrella of the Singaporean quadrilingual language policy in which everyone is to learn English and their respective mother tongue, it is interesting to compare the Singaporean policy with the trilingual–biliterate language education policy of Hong Kong, where the government’s aim is to ensure its citizens are trilingual in Cantonese, *Putonghua* Mandarin and English and biliterate in Chinese and English. 5
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The first point of difference is the definition and treatment of mother tongues. In Hong Kong, Cantonese is promoted and is the major medium of instruction in most government primary schools. It is also the real mother tongue of the vast majority of the population, in that it is their first language. This contrasts sharply with the situation in Singapore, where mother tongue is determined, uniquely, I believe, by ethnicity, not language. Thus, ethnic Chinese are ascribed *Putonghua* (or *Huayu*, as it is termed in Singapore) as their mother tongue, no matter what (Chinese) language their mothers might actually speak. The second point of difference is that Chinese languages other than *Putonghua* are promoted in Hong Kong – hence the role of Cantonese as the medium of instruction in primary schools – while their use is discouraged, if not actually proscribed, in Singapore. 13
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To an outsider, the proscription of Chinese languages other than *Huayu* seems strange, especially given that the aim of insisting that Singaporeans learn their respective mother tongues is to keep them in touch with their Asian identities and cultural roots, with English as the language to ensure Singaporeans not only keep up with but actively participate in modernisation and globalisation. One might argue that keeping in touch with Asian identities and values might be more effectively achieved in the case of the ethnically Chinese by allowing them the use of their actual mother tongues. Forcing people away from the use of their real mother tongues could be predicted to undermine their sense of identity and to sever their cultural roots. As it happens, it may be that the development of a new variety of English – Singaporean English – is, in its colloquial, vernacular form, fulfilling the identity function. The figures reported in this volume indicate that an increasing number of Singaporean children are reporting that English is the main language of the home, although it must be stressed that the majority also indicate that English is not the sole language spoken in the home. Ironically, it may also be that *Huayu* will be more useful in modernisation and globalisation as China's influence on the region and world continues to increase. One might therefore argue that Hong Kong's trilingual policy might prove more effective, with Cantonese providing a sense of local identity, *Putonghua* providing national belonging along with access to the swiftly developing areas of Chinese influence and English allowing participation in globalisation.

A second point of difference is the language each country or territory has chosen to act as the main medium of instruction. In Singapore, English is the medium of instruction for all content subjects from Primary 1. The respective 'mother tongues' – *Huayu*, Malay and Tamil – are taught as subjects, for some 3 h per week. As the chapters in this book illustrate, this has led to concern, especially, but not exclusively, in connection with the teaching of *Huayu*, as children are finding it difficult to achieve high levels of proficiency in their respective mother tongues. As Zhang et al. (this volume, Chap. 7) point out, one problem arose from setting benchmarks and targets which were too ambitious. This, coupled with the teaching of Chinese as though it was a first language using pedagogical techniques such as memorisation and *moxie*, led to disappointing levels of achievement. As a consequence of this, a new Chinese syllabus was designed for those ethnic Chinese whose home language was either English or a combination of English and Chinese. Suggestions for changes in the pedagogy used for the teaching of Chinese are also made in the Sun and Curdt-Christiansen chapter, where they show how important training in morphological awareness is for promoting reading and comprehension skills. Their study offers strong evidence for the value of following the method adopted in the teaching of English and introducing morphological awareness training in the teaching of Chinese (see also Zhao and Shang, this volume, Chap. 16; Zhang and Li, this volume, Chap. 12).

Singapore's language policy is often held up to be a success in that English is spoken fluently by most Singaporeans. While this is undoubtedly the case, the study by Shegar and Ward (this volume, Chap. 5) reminds us how important socioeconomic status remains in educational success. The findings of their single-school

case study illustrate that the majority of the school's Chinese, Malay and Indian Singaporean students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and from homes where English is not the dominant language. As a result 'a fairly large cohort of students entering Primary 1 are not decoding and comprehending texts at age appropriate levels' (p. TBA). The authors recommend therefore that schools offer such students extended language support, extended in the sense that this support is offered throughout primary school, not simply while the students are in Primary 1. (See Vaish, this volume, Chap. 9, for one type of language support that is offered.)

Hong Kong's medium of instruction policy has been the cause of much controversy over many decades. Cantonese remains the medium of instruction in most government primary schools, although there is increasing pressure for *Putonghua* to become the medium for some subjects, including Chinese itself. A recent case study of a Hong Kong primary school (Wang Lixun and Kirkpatrick 2012) showed how one school is combining the three languages in complementary ways throughout primary school. The authors conclude with a proposal for trilingual education which basically calls for Cantonese at the early stages of primary, with *Putonghua* gradually becoming more used towards the later years of primary. English is taught as a subject and as the medium of instruction in selected subjects such as physical education.

Even though Hong Kong's schools are trilingual sites, the official policy is that only one language should be used at a time. This means that the only language used in English classes is ruled to be English. This includes content subjects which are taught in English in many – and in an increasing number of – secondary schools. The languages are to be kept separate. The reality is somewhat different as many teachers use Cantonese in the English classroom, but feel guilty for so doing, as well they might, as they can be disciplined for using Cantonese or *Putonghua* in English lessons. By the same token, only Chinese is to be used in Chinese lessons. The linguistic benchmarks set for achievement in English and *Putonghua* also treat the languages completely separately, in that they are based on the language of monolingual speakers of both languages. Thus, the English target for Hong Kong's school children is to sound like native speakers of English (using standard British English as a model) and the *Putonghua* target is an idealised monolingual speaker of the language. A similar problem is recorded in the study conducted by Zhang et al. where the bilingual benchmarks set for the children are reported as being too high. In both Hong Kong and Singapore, there seems to be official hesitation or doubt about applying multilingual benchmarks to multilingual children. But, as García has argued, a bilingual education should not use monolingual standards and that 'we must avoid the inequities of comparing bilingual children to a monolingual child in one of the languages' (2009, p. 386).

As the studies reported here illustrate, there is immense benefit to be gained from encouraging teachers and students to use the linguistic resources available to them in learning and teaching languages. Sun and Curdt-Christiansen's study (this volume, Chap. 6), in concluding that 'morphological awareness could be transferred across language in children who are learning to read in English and Chinese concurrently' (p. TBA), supports Cummins theory (2000) of a common underlying

proficiency through which academic language proficiency and cognitive ability can be transferred across languages.

Zhang et al. (this volume, Chap. 7) conclude that teaching bilingual writers to make use of their linguistic resources – for example, that when writing Chinese, they can be encouraged to ‘resort to English for equivalent lexis’ (p. TBA) – is useful and effective. They also point out that involving both the Chinese and the English teachers is important and that the ties between these two groups of teachers need to be fostered.

The importance of a multilingual pedagogy and the need for Chinese and English teachers to confer are important lessons from these chapters. In the Hong Kong context, it is not unusual to observe a Chinese class where the children are studying Tang poetry and then move to an English class where the topic is ‘Giving Directions to Foreigners’. Apart from being stultifyingly dull and offering little cognitive challenge, these English classes ignore the potential advantages of using the content taught in Chinese class to teach English. If, for example, the English teacher could bring the content of the Chinese classroom into the English classroom, not only would the children have some familiarity with the content but also have an inherent interest in it. In the case of Tang poetry, for example, children could be asked to complete a number of tasks including translating the poem into English and identifying culturally specific concepts and how these might be explained in English. Teaching children to become bilingual is facilitated by teaching bilingually (e.g. Littlewood and Yu 2009; Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain 2009). By the same token, thought could be given to the introduction of English content class subject matter to the Chinese language classrooms in Singapore. This does not mean that Chinese should be taught entirely through the medium of English or that English should be taught through the medium of Chinese. In the case of teaching Chinese, however, there is no reason why English cannot be used, as long as the use of English is designed to help the students learn Chinese (Wang and Kirkpatrick 2013). Guidelines for the use of Cantonese in the Hong Kong English classroom show how the L1 can be used for a number of reasons including making content and input more comprehensible, providing translations for complex concepts and grammar, making cross-linguistic comparisons and languaging (Swain 2013), whereby, for example, students may use the L1 while working in groups on a project to be delivered, either orally or in written form, in the L2 (Swain et al. 2011).

In conclusion, these important studies provide further evidence of the importance of language teachers working in bilingual and multilingual environments to work together and to work with teachers of content subjects. Competencies associated with bilingualism are best gained in bilingual settings where the respective languages can be used to facilitate their mutual acquisition. In today’s Singapore, the current emphasis may be too heavily upon English at the expense of the mother tongues. Research of the type included in this volume gives us valuable guidance in understanding the ways in which languages can be combined in language education to create successful bilinguals and the potential dangers of separating them and treating each as a discrete subject.

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