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# 12 Medium of instruction issues in trilingual Hong Kong primary schools

Lixun Wang and Andy Kirkpatrick

## Abstract

As a multilingual society, three major languages co-exist in Hong Kong: Cantonese, English, and Putonghua. After the political transition to Chinese rule in 1997, the Hong Kong government adopted the Biliterate and Trilingual policy, which aims to make citizens of Hong Kong trilingual in Cantonese, English, and Putonghua and biliterate in Chinese and English. However, there are no clear government guidelines on which language should be used as the medium of instruction (MoI) for which subject in primary schools. In order to gain a clear picture of how trilingual education is being implemented in Hong Kong primary schools, a survey was carried out across 155 primary schools and detailed case studies were conducted in three of the surveyed schools to find out the extent to which the MoI policies instituted in each school facilitated students' trilingual learning. The findings suggest that the principals', teachers', students', and parents' views towards the use of different MoIs vary, as do the ways trilingual education is implemented. It is hoped that this chapter will help readers to gain a better understanding of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools, and of which methods of trilingual education best serve the interests of the students.

Keywords: biliterate and trilingual policy, Hong Kong, medium of instruction (MoI), primary schools, trilingual education

## Introduction

Three major languages co-exist in Hong Kong: Cantonese, English, and Putonghua. According to the 2016 Population by-census (Table 12.1), the percentage of the population aged 5 and over who reported speaking Cantonese has been slightly decreasing from 90.8 % in 2006 to 88.9% in 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). However, Cantonese still remains the predominant language – the socially preferred and most commonly used language in Hong Kong. As shown in Table 12.1, 88.9% of the population aged 5 and over reported that they spoke Cantonese as their usual spoken language in 2016, while another 5.7% claimed that they could speak Cantonese as another language. In other words, 94.6% of the population aged 5 and over reported being able to speak Cantonese (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p. 31). Meanwhile, 4.3% of population aged 5 and over reported that they spoke English, while

only 1.9% reported speaking Putonghua as their usual spoken language, but nearly 50% of the population reported being able to speak it (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). In addition to these three languages, small percentages of census respondents reported speaking a number of other languages. Table 12.1 below provides the details and illustrates how the use of specific languages has developed or altered between 2006 and 2016.

**Table 12.1** Proportion of population aged 5 and over able to speak selected languages/ dialects, 2006, 2011, and 2016.

Language/ Dialect	Proportion of population aged 5 and over (%)								
	As the usual spoken language			As another spoken language/ dialect			Total		
	2006	2011	2016	2006	2011	2016	2006	2011	2016
Cantonese	90.8	89.5	88.9	5.7	6.3	5.7	96.5	95.8	94.6
English	2.8	3.5	4.3	41.9	42.6	48.9	44.7	46.1	53.2
Putonghua	0.9	1.4	1.9	39.2	46.5	46.7	40.2	47.8	48.6
Hakka	1.1	0.9	0.6	3.6	3.8	3.5	4.7	4.7	4.2
Fukien	1.2	1.1	1.0	2.1	2.3	2.6	3.4	3.5	3.6
Chiu Chau	0.8	0.7	0.5	3.2	3.1	2.9	3.9	3.8	3.4
Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia)	0.1	0.3	0.3	1.5	2.2	2.4	1.7	2.4	2.7
Filipino (Tagalog)	0.1	0.2	0.4	1.3	1.4	2.3	1.4	1.7	2.7
Japanese	0.2	0.2	0.1	1.1	1.4	1.7	1.2	1.5	1.8
Shanghainese	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.2	1.1	1.1

Note: Figures exclude mute persons.

Geographically, Hong Kong is located on the south coast of China, bordering the mainland city of Shenzhen in Guangdong province to its north. Historically, Hong Kong was a British colony for 155 years until its ‘handover’ back to the Chinese government in 1997. During the colonial period, English was the sole official language in the realms of legislature, administration, the judiciary, education, and formal registers (Luke & Richards, 1982; So, 1989, 1996; Poon, 2000, 2010) until 1974 when Chinese became co-official language after massive public pressure from the Chinese Language Movement during 1968 and 1971 (So, 1996; Poon, 2000). English has been maintained as a co-official language alongside Chinese after the change of sovereignty in June 1997. Article 9 of The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China states that ‘In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’ (The Constitutional

and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 2017, p. 3). Putonghua, the national language of Mainland China, was not as significant as it is today before the handover of sovereignty in 1997. Since 1997, however, Putonghua has been promoted through the new Biliterate and Trilingual (兩文三語政策) language policy (Poon, 2004).

It is worth noting that the term Chinese can be ambiguous. In the context of Hong Kong, where the great majority of the population are first language speakers of Cantonese, Chinese is recognized as *written* Modern Standard Chinese (MSC) and *spoken* Cantonese. But, of course, there are many Chinese languages, one of which is Putonghua, the national language in Mainland China. Putonghua is the spoken form of MSC. Putonghua and Cantonese are significantly different in lexis, syntax, pronunciation, phonology, and grammar (Bauer, 1988; Zhan, 2002; Sze, 2005; Poon, 2010).

Hong Kong schools are divided into two main streams: the EMI schools, which use English as the medium of instruction, and the CMI schools, which use Cantonese as the medium of instruction. Cantonese has been used as the MoI in most primary schools, except for a few historical missionary schools which use English as the MoI. However, under the Biliterate and Trilingual policy and with the promotion of Putonghua after 1997, Putonghua has become a subject to be taught and has also been adopted by some schools as the medium of instruction in teaching the Chinese language. As a result, the situation concerning the implementation of the Biliterate and Trilingual language policy has become complex as there are no clear guidelines on how trilingual education should be implemented effectively in primary schools (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2013).

In this chapter, we will report the major findings of research into the implementation of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools. Our study was carried out in two stages which will be explained below. The aim of our study was to gain a better understanding of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools, to identify what worked and what did not. In this, we hope the study will contribute to multilingual education in general.

## Methodology

The first stage of our study comprised a wide-ranging survey on trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools in order to answer the following questions:

1. What are the approaches to trilingual education in HK primary schools?
2. Which approaches are more effective in fostering trilingualism?

A survey questionnaire was sent to the principals of all the 474 primary schools in Hong Kong in late February 2014. These included all the 34 government schools, all the 420 aided schools and all the 20 Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools. Government schools are operated directly by the Government. Aided schools are generally run by religious or charitable organizations, but are fully subsidized by the Government. Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools can charge

school fees, and receive government subsidy based on enrolment (Information Services Department, 2018).

155 Hong Kong primary school principals (a return rate of 32.7%) returned the questionnaire survey. The findings suggest that the implementation of trilingual education varies significantly from school to school, as does the effectiveness of trilingual education. Not surprisingly, given that there are no official guidelines for the implementation of trilingual education, primary schools have adopted their own medium of instruction (MoI) policies. They use different languages to teach different subjects in different ways. In order to gain a clearer picture of how the trilingual education model is implemented in specific schools, the second stage of our study involved follow-up case studies in three of the previously surveyed 155 schools. The second stage of the study took place in the school year 2014–2015. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were adopted including a bilingual questionnaire survey of 405 P4–P6 students in the three schools, interviews with 3 school principals, 30 subject teachers and/or subject panels, and 31 parents, 3 focus group interviews with 27 students, 30 class observations, classroom discourse analysis of 30 recorded lessons, and analysis of 30 teachers' reflection forms.

The three schools are all quite different in character. School A is a co-educational school founded in 1967 and located on Hong Kong Island. It was originally a CMI school in which all subjects, apart from English, were taught in Cantonese. From 2008 onwards, however, Putonghua has been used as the MoI for teaching the Chinese Language subject. The school is unusual in that it has a large number of international students from many parts of the world. As a way of helping these students become biliterate and trilingual the school introduced its own Internationalized Curriculum (I.C.) in the academic year 2011-2012.

School B is also a co-educational school but is the first 'through-train' mode whole day primary school in Tung Chung, the New Territories. So called 'through train' schools are primary schools that have linked with secondary schools to which their students go. At its establishment in 2000, Putonghua was used as the MoI for teaching the Chinese Language subject. In 2008, however, after realizing the ineffectiveness of using Putonghua in the teaching of the Chinese Language subject, the school decided use Cantonese as the MoI for the Chinese Language subject.

School C is a single-sex boys' school and has been in operation since 1930. The language policy in the school has changed several times over the years. Currently, Putonghua is the MoI for the Chinese Language subject for the first four years of primary school (P1–P4), and Cantonese is used for the final two years (P5–P6).

## **Major findings and discussion of the questionnaire survey in the first stage**

## *Code switching in Hong Kong primary schools*

As noted earlier, Hong Kong is a predominately Cantonese-speaking society. Before the return to Chinese jurisdiction in 1997, while the primary schools were mostly CMI, the great majority of the secondary schools were EMI. This is explained by the fact that, with the exception of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, universities in Hong Kong were all EMI. Parents therefore wanted their children to attend EMI secondary schools. However, many of these so-called EMI schools actually used mixed code, teaching in Cantonese and English (Pan, 2000; Lai & Byram, 2003; Poon, 2010; Poon, Lau, & Chu, 2013). This mixed language use by most Hong Kong school teachers has been termed a bilingual instructional genre (Lin, 1990; Pennington, 1995a, 1995b): the content of lessons is introduced in English and then illustrated through examples, definitions, and further elaboration in Cantonese, followed by a reaffirmation, conclusion, or transition to a new topic given in English (Pennington, 1998). The use of mixed code was frowned upon by the education authorities and The Education Commission Report Number Four (ECR 4, 1990) criticized the increasing use of mixed code in secondary schools.

In our large-scale survey of primary schools the Chinese Language subject teachers in 23 schools (14.84%) reported that they switched between Cantonese and Putonghua in teaching the subject. For the English Language subject, teachers in 53 schools (34.19%) indicated that they might use Cantonese in teaching English, depending on teaching and learning needs. Teachers teaching the Putonghua subject in 7 schools (4.52%) said that they used both Putonghua and Cantonese, but only in junior grades. Among the three language subjects, a majority of the schools (87.74%) said that they used almost 100% Putonghua in teaching the Putonghua subject, while about 50%-60% used almost 100% Cantonese in teaching the Chinese Language subject, and almost 100% English in teaching the English Language subject. We are aware that the survey data may not fully reflect the reality about the use of mixed code in primary schools, given that the official policy is to avoid the use of mixed code. We therefore wanted to investigate this further in the three case study schools, as well as stakeholders' perceptions of using mixed code in teaching and learning when deemed necessary, and report these findings later.

## *The origin of students and the medium of instruction*

In the study, in four of the 155 schools (one in Kowloon and three in the New Territories), students from Mainland China (and thus likely to be speakers of Putonghua) comprise more than 70% of the total (most of them are new immigrants from Mainland China), however, only two schools used Putonghua as the MoI in teaching the Chinese Language subject and then only in some grades. Putonghua was not used as the MoI for other subjects. The school with the highest percentage of Mainlanders (90%) actually used only Cantonese as the MoI in teaching the Chinese Language subject and other subjects. Putonghua, the national language of the Mainlanders, is not adopted as the MoI in teaching other subjects in these schools either. A school on Hong Kong Island which comprises 37% of students from other areas of the world

used Cantonese mainly supplemented by English or vice versa in teaching other subjects. One school in Kowloon and another in the New Territories have the highest percentage of students coming from South Asia, comprising 98% and 60% respectively. They are non-Chinese speaking students and it is impossible to adopt their mother tongues as the MoI, as Cantonese, English, and Putonghua are the three languages used as MoIs in Hong Kong. In these schools, Cantonese is the MoI for all subjects except for the English Language subject and the Putonghua subject. We can say that there is no apparent relationship between the origins of students and the MoIs chosen by the surveyed schools.

### *The Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools*

Hong Kong primary schools have traditionally used Cantonese as the medium of instruction and the survey confirms this situation as the majority of the surveyed schools (about 90%) are CMI schools. The majority reported that they used almost 100% Cantonese in teaching Mathematics, General Studies, Visual Arts, Music, Physical Education, and Computer/Information Technology. A minority, however, including 6 DSS schools and 3 aided schools, said that they used almost 100% English in teaching all the subjects, except the Chinese Language and the Putonghua subjects. The DSS schools have more freedom in that they can choose their own students and set up their own admission examinations (Yung, 2006, p. 107). They are also allowed to charge fees. The fact that they can choose their students probably explains why all these schools reported that their students' Cantonese and English language proficiency was above average, although only 16.7% reported that their students' Putonghua was above average. These DSS schools also enjoy more flexibility in the choice of medium of instruction, as 'they can adopt English-medium instruction on a class-by-class basis' (Chan & Tan, 2008, p. 476). In great contrast to the government schools which reported that their students' low level of English represented their greatest challenge, the DSS schools reported no difficulty there. They also reported no difficulty in their students' level of Putonghua, their students' motivation in trilingual learning or their teachers' motivation in trilingual teaching. They listed class scheduling as their greatest problem.

The findings of this survey have provided a rough picture of the present situation of trilingual education implementation in Hong Kong primary schools. Some patterns can be identified: the majority of the schools use Cantonese as the major MoI in most subjects except the English subject and Putonghua subject; the DSS schools use more EMI; while official policy frowns upon mixed-code teaching, it reportedly occurs, but mainly in junior grades. When asked about difficulties encountered in the implementation of trilingual education, the surveyed schools reported that they found that recruiting qualified and suitable teaching staff was the biggest challenge. Around half of the schools also found that students' low level of English has hindered the implementation of trilingual education.

In the next section we report on the second stage of the survey, the case studies, and seek to answer the following questions:

1. What is the rationale behind adopting different MoIs in teaching different subjects?
2. What is the real picture of code-switching between different languages in authentic classrooms?
3. What are teachers', students', and parents' views towards trilingual education?

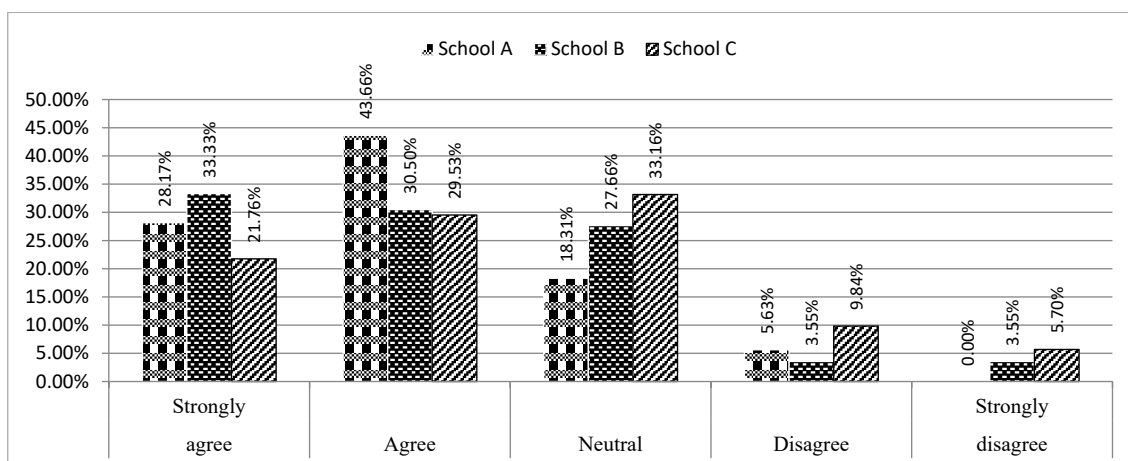
## **Comparisons across the three case study schools regarding trilingual education**

Here we compare stakeholder views in the three case study schools regarding trilingual education. The stakeholders are the school principals, teachers, students, and parents.

### ***Students' acceptance of the trilingual education model***

Generally speaking, students in the case-study schools reported positively on how trilingual education was being implemented (see Figure 12.1 below), but there were differences across the schools. Students from School A reported enjoying trilingual education the most as they gave this item the highest mean score of 3.99 (the average mean score across the 3 schools being 3.73). The non-Chinese speaking students of School A showed their willingness to learn more languages, especially Cantonese, as they wanted to communicate with local people. A P6 student from Africa said, 'I like learning the three languages because it will be more convenient for me to order food in a restaurant either in Cantonese or in Putonghua'. A P4 Filipino said, 'If I learn Cantonese, I can help my mom to translate when buying things in the market'. Another Filipino student remarked, 'In the past, I could not understand even one word in Cantonese, but now I am happy that I can understand more and more words in Cantonese'. Students from School B were also positive about the trilingual education model implemented in the school even though only one lesson per week was assigned to the Putonghua subject and the Chinese Language subject was taught solely in Cantonese. However, the students still enjoyed the current model as they gave item 3 a mean score of 3.89, which is above the average mean score of 3.73. One student said, 'We enjoy as we have foreigners and Mainlanders in school, when communicating we will teach them how to speak in Cantonese and Putonghua or vice versa. So we are used to learning the three languages in this way'.





**Figure 12.1** Students' acceptance of the trilingual education model in the researched schools.

In contrast, the P5–P6 interviewees of School C gave item 3 a mean score of only 3.52, which is below the average mean score of 3.73. This is perhaps not surprising as all these students are locals whose first language was Cantonese. As one student noted, 'I preferred using Cantonese in the study of the Chinese Language subject. If Putonghua was used, some classmates would find the lesson boring and became inattentive or fell asleep. Some even failed to answer the teacher's questions, affecting their academic results and thus their learning attitude became worse. This year the situation is improved as Cantonese is used'. In summary, students in School A (a mixture of many nationalities) were the most positive about the trilingual education model adopted in their school. Students in School C (100% local Hongkongers) were the least positive about the trilingual education model adopted in their school. Students in School B (67% local Hongkongers, the rest from other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds) hold a view in-between.

### *Parents' attitudes towards the trilingual education model*

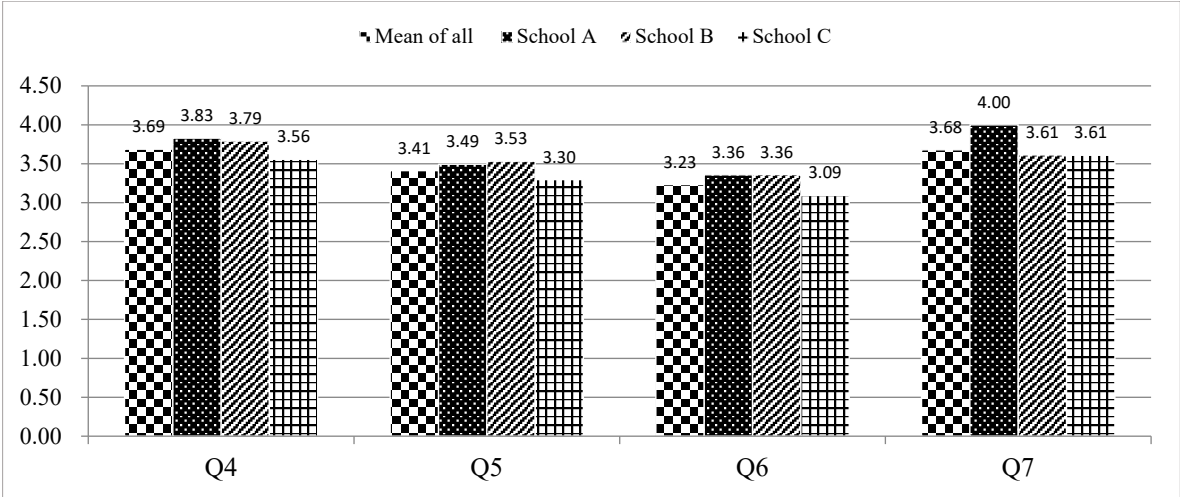
The trilingual education model implemented in the three schools was seldom the most salient factor in persuading parents which school to choose for their children, as only seven (22.6%) said that they took the trilingual education model in school into their consideration. In fact, parents gave priority to the closeness of the school, the school motto, the school ethos, etc. Parents from the Mainland were supportive of their children studying in Cantonese as they realized Cantonese is the mother tongue of local people in Hong Kong. This endorses Bacon-Shone and Bolton's (2008, p. 27) suggestion that immigrants and their children from the different dialect areas of Guangdong and Fujian provinces quickly adapted their speech to meet the norms of urban metropolitan Cantonese in Hong Kong. None of the parents disapproved of the teaching of Putonghua as a subject, but nine (29.03%) disapproved of using PMI in teaching the Chinese Language subject.

When considering if English should be used in teaching other subjects in the school, 27 parents (87.1%) suggested that Computing, Mathematics, and the science topics in General Studies could be taught in English so that their children could adapt well to EMI secondary schools that they all wanted to send their children to. These parents are thus no different from the majority of parents in Hong Kong who favour EMI schools (Kan, Lai, Kirkpatrick, & Law, 2011). As noted above, a major reason for this desire for an EMI secondary school is that six of the eight government-funded universities are all English medium, as are all of the private universities (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Parents from School A and School B were confident that their children's English language proficiency would be acceptable when they graduate as the schools provided students with an English language environment, partly to cater for the needs of non-Chinese speaking students in the schools. Parents' views differ on whether children should learn other languages together with their mother tongue in the early years in schooling. The great majority, 79.97%, agreed that children should learn the three languages at the same time in the early years in schooling. They believed that small children can learn languages easily, especially able students. Those who did not agree worried that learning three languages at the same time would cause chaos and they believed that children learn better in mother tongue and this should be taught first.

### *Students' views on code-switching/code-mixing*

Figure 12.2 below shows students' feedback on code-mixing in learning in the student questionnaire survey. Students from School A were found to be more tolerant of switching from one language to another when studying different subjects. However, during the focus group interview, four students said that they did not accept mixed code in Chinese Language and Putonghua learning even though they liked to use mixed code between English and Cantonese/Putonghua when communicating with the Hongkongers. One said, 'I don't like my teacher to teach me in mixed code. My teacher encourages me to listen to her and she will speak every word in Cantonese/Putonghua so that I will understand and then I will just understand people when they speak in Cantonese/Putonghua'. A further four non-Chinese students accepted mixed code and one of them noted 'I can learn and understand more Chinese words if the teachers express the words in English and I can remember them better'. Regarding the English subject, only one student, a Taiwanese, did not object to her English Language subject teacher using mixed code in teaching as she said, 'I have lost confidence in my English proficiency as my English Language subject teacher uses 100% English in teaching and I cannot understand her well'. The opinions of Students from School B varied on this issue. Three out of eight interviewed students accepted mixed code in learning. As one of them explained, 'We can easily understand what the teacher says if Cantonese is used to explain the English vocabularies'. For others, mixed code was not acceptable because they did not want to be too dependent on the teacher's translation and they wanted to take the initiative to learn. In School C, six out of eight interviewees accepted mixed code. One of the students who disapproved the use of mixed code pointed out, 'Using 100% English can benefit us when we

are going for an interview in the future’. While another student who supported the use of mixed code stated, ‘I accept mixed code. It is because if teachers use 100% English in teaching the English Language subject, I may not understand some of the difficult words and in this case I prefer teachers explain in Cantonese’.



Q4	I find it acceptable switching from one language to another when studying different subjects in the school.
Q5	I find myself code-switching/code-mixing between English and Cantonese regularly during the study of the English subject.
Q6	I find myself code-switching/code-mixing between Cantonese and Putonghua regularly during the study of the Putonghua subject.
Q7	I find code-switching/code-mixing in different subjects useful for my language development in general.

Figure 12.2 Students' feedback on code-mixing in learning

### Teachers' views on code-switching/code-mixing

From class observations, teachers' reflections, and teacher interviews, two significant points can be acknowledged in relation to their perceptions of the role of code-mixing. First, regarding language teaching, the English Language subject teachers in the three schools (two from each school) were consistent regarding their beliefs and classroom practices in that they all felt it was important to provide students with a rich English language environment. In practice, they all used 100% English in their teaching, and insisted their students raise and answer questions in English so that they could practise the language as much as possible. Only one of the teachers, a P1 English teacher in School C, stated that she would only use Cantonese if her students could not understand her instructions. The Chinese Language subject teachers who used Putonghua as the MoI (School A and School C) varied in their perceptions. Those

who taught the Chinese Language subject in senior grades insisted on using 100% Putonghua, while those teaching the junior grades were more flexible and tolerant, explaining the content with some Cantonese and allowing their students to raise and answer questions in Cantonese. In regard to teaching the Putonghua subject (School B & School C), the teachers said that they used 100% Putonghua in class and believed this would help their students enhance their Putonghua proficiency. The students also agreed that the language teachers strictly followed the MoI policies in language teaching. In general, the practice of code-mixing is relatively rare in language teaching classrooms in the case-study schools. In contrast, the teachers of non-language subjects were more flexible and tolerant towards code-mixing, especially when the MoI of the subjects was English, for a number of reasons: first, unlike teaching languages, the focus is on teaching students content not language; second, teachers believe students learn and understand more in their mother tongue, so the teachers would occasionally switch to the students' mother tongue facilitate their understanding of the subject knowledge.

### ***Principals views on code-switching/code-mixing***

The principals all expressed disapproval of code-mixing, as the schools had to follow the language policies laid down by the Education Bureau. Moreover, they seemed to believe that students could best learn a language effectively without switching or mixing with other languages. However, the principal in School B did condone a special case of code-mixing to accommodate changes in his school. Recently, the school had changed the MoI of Mathematics from Cantonese to English, starting with P1 and gradually moving up the grades. However, mathematical concepts are usually abstract and are not easy for less able children to understand. The mathematics teachers thus had to resort to using both Cantonese and English and the principal condoned this use of code-switching.

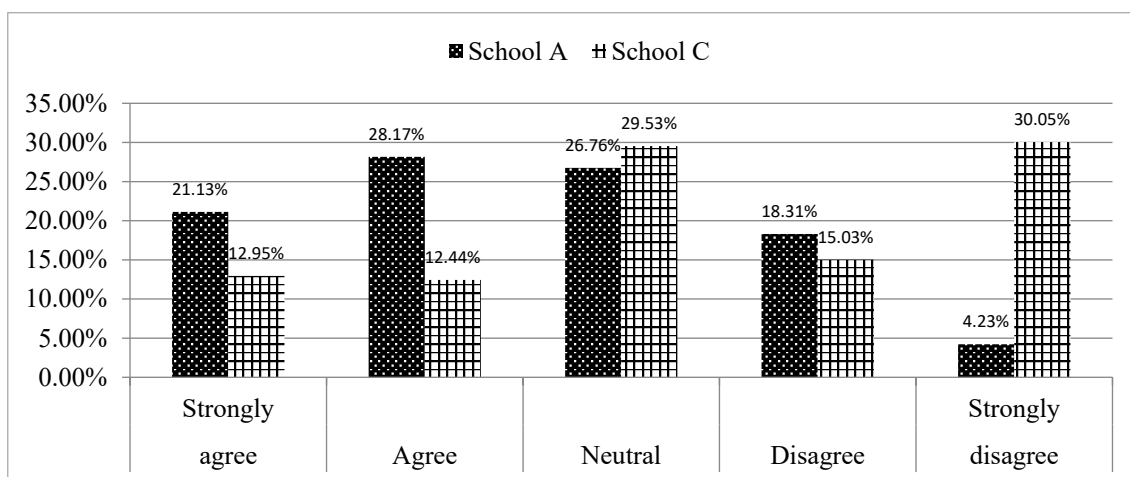
### **The use of Putonghua to teach the Chinese language**

Presently, primary and secondary schools may choose to use either Cantonese and/or Putonghua as the MoI for teaching the Chinese Language subject in consideration of their own circumstances, such as the proficiency and expertise of their teachers, the levels of their students, and the availability of learning and teaching resources/support (Legislative Council, 2016). Among a total of about 1,000 primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, 160 schools implemented PMIC (using Putonghua as the medium of instruction for teaching the Chinese Language subject) on a pilot basis under the Support Scheme from the 2008–2009 to 2013–2014 school years. They made this decision based on parental preference and the government's policy of supplying financial support in employing more Putonghua subject teachers (Legislative Council, 2016, p. 2). There has been much public debate about the effectiveness of using Putonghua versus Cantonese as the medium of instruction in Chinese Language lessons (Tse, 2009, p. 245). Is PMIC indeed beneficial for students' learning of the Chinese Language

subject? Some think that PMIC can boost students' Chinese Language enhancement; while others object to the implementation of PMIC as they are worried that too much emphasis would be placed on Putonghua proficiency, at the expense of the learning of Chinese language and literature, the two most important aspects in learning the Chinese Language subject. Chinese language teachers focus on literacy and literature. Putonghua teachers focus on pronunciation, using the Romanized *pinyin* script to aid students. Some teachers are also concerned that students' Cantonese proficiency would be undermined (Legislative Council, 2016). This is why it is important to study the students' attitudes towards using Putonghua as the MoI in the study of the Chinese Language subject.

### ***Students attitudes to Putonghua***

In School A, Putonghua has been the MoI for the Chinese Language subject since September 2008. School B first used Putonghua as the MoI in teaching the Chinese Language subject when it opened in 2000. In September 2009, however, Cantonese replaced Putonghua when the present Principal in School B found that using PMI in teaching the Chinese Language subject was ineffective, as many students were unmotivated in class, being unable to follow PMI. School B now only uses Cantonese in teaching the Chinese Language subject. School C used Putonghua as the MoI for the Chinese Language subject in September 2008, starting at P2 and gradually including the later levels until all Chinese Language subject classes from P2 to P6 were PMI. Cantonese remained the MoI for P1. From September 2014, however, School C changed this system by adopting Putonghua as the MoI for the Chinese Language subject only from P1 to P4 but using Cantonese as the MoI for P5–P6. Students from School C were more negative towards using Putonghua in studying the Chinese Language subject. They gave a mean score of 2.63 to item 1 (I find it appropriate to use Putonghua to study the Chinese Language subject.) while students of School A gave this a mean score of 3.44. Moreover, Figure 12.3 shows that 30% of students from School C chose 'strongly disagree' regarding this item compared to only 4% of the students in School A. As School B only uses Cantonese in teaching the Chinese Language subject, it is not included in Figure 12.3.



**Figure 12.3** Students' feedback on the appropriateness of using Putonghua in studying the Chinese Language subject.

In School A, as there were many non-Chinese speaking students, some teachers allowed the students to use English to raise questions in the Chinese Language lessons. The teachers would then show the students how to ask the questions in Cantonese or Putonghua and then require them to repeat the questions in Cantonese or Putonghua. A Canadian student in P4 stated, 'When we ask questions in English, the teachers will show us how to say it in Cantonese/Putonghua and we are encouraged to repeat it in Cantonese/Putonghua'. The P5-P6 student interviewees from School C said that they preferred Cantonese as the MoI for the Chinese Language subject and this might explain why students of this school reported enjoying trilingual education the least (these students are all local L1 speakers of Cantonese). A P6 student (who had been using Putonghua to study the Chinese Language subject in the past five years) said, 'I think it's better to use Cantonese to study the subject. It is because some students could not understand the teacher well when Putonghua is used'. A P5 student (who had been using Putonghua to study the subject in the past four years) said, 'I prefer using Cantonese. My Dictation performance would be affected if the words are pronounced in Putonghua as there are always misunderstandings when hearing the pronunciations'. As Putonghua grammar matches the standard written Chinese grammar, there is a slogan for promoting the use of Putonghua: 我手寫我口 'My hand writes down what I say'. However, students who could not understand Putonghua well did not prefer PMI. As a result, they were inattentive and noisy in class as they found the Chinese Language lessons boring. There were fewer interactions between teachers and students and fewer students were willing to answer the teachers' questions when using Putonghua. For example, a student from School C said, 'I also prefer using Cantonese because some of the words in Putonghua are retroflex and when we do not pronounce them properly, they will become other words with different meanings, making classmates laugh. Since we learnt Cantonese when we were very young, it is easier to understand the teachers when Cantonese is used'.

The above findings show that students' attitudes towards PMIC differed, depending on their linguistic background. When designing ways of implementing trilingual education, schools need to take into consideration factors such as contexts and the needs and abilities of the students, coupled with the expertise and proficiency of the teachers. As we shall suggest later, the actual model for the implementation of trilingual education needs to be decided at the school level when the local context and situation can be factored in to the decision making.

### ***Parents attitudes to Putonghua***

13 of the 31 parent interviewees in the three schools explicitly supported the schools' policies of using Putonghua as the MoI in the teaching of the Chinese Language subject. They believed that Putonghua is a global language that students need to learn as soon as possible, and they thought using PMI could enhance students' writing skills in Chinese. Those who were not in favour of this policy believed that students could learn the Chinese Language subject better in their mother tongue (Cantonese). Since some of the parents did not speak Putonghua themselves, they pointed out that they could not help their children and would need to pay extra tuition fees for after-school Putonghua classes and tutors.

### ***Teachers attitudes to Putonghua***

The majority of the Chinese Language subject teachers of the three schools had doubts about using Putonghua as the MoI in teaching the Chinese Language subject. They did not believe that using PMI could enhance the students' writing skills. In reality, they queried the effectiveness of using PMI. They found students were not motivated in class activities when using PMI, resulting in less interaction between teachers and students and between students and students.

### ***Principals attitudes to Putonghua***

Only the principal of School A was supportive of using Putonghua as the MoI in teaching the Chinese Language subject. The principal of School B was not in favour of using PMI in teaching the Chinese Language subject. He strongly believed that using mother tongue was the most effective way of enhancing students' language proficiency in Chinese. Therefore, he changed the school policy from using PMI to using CMI in teaching the Chinese Language subject. The principal of School C faced parents who objected to the use of PMI for teaching the Chinese Language subject, as students got poor TSA (Territory-wide System Assessment) results in the Chinese language subject in P6, because only Cantonese is used in the oral examination of the TSA. He thus decided to compromise, using PMI to teach the Chinese Language subject from P1 to P4 and then Cantonese to teach the subject for the final two years of primary school.

## **Language policies and language education**

The application of the Internationalized Curriculum in School A and the increasing number of non-Chinese speaking students have paved the way for changing the MoI in this school for subjects including Mathematics, General Studies, Visual Arts, Music, Physical Education, and Computer Science. The school has gradually changed the MoI of these subjects into 100% English from junior grades to senior grades. In addition, Putonghua is used as the MoI in the teaching of the Chinese Language subject from P1 to P6. Cantonese will play an increasingly minor role as a language of education in the school in future. The non-Chinese speaking students at School A are more likely to develop better proficiency in Putonghua and English than in Cantonese. School B is also facing an increase of non-Chinese speaking students and the school has adopted English as the MoI in teaching Mathematics and Science topics, firstly in junior grades while gradually moving up to senior grades. In the future, English is likely to play a more important role in the school as English is likely to be adopted as the MoI for subjects such as Visual Arts, Music, Physical Education, and Computer Science. Cantonese will still be used as one of the major MoIs in subjects such as the Chinese Language subject. Putonghua is used as a MoI only in the Putonghua subject. One would therefore anticipate students from School B to be more proficient in Cantonese and English than in Putonghua upon graduation. Cantonese is more emphasized in School C when compared with the other two schools. English is used as the MoI only for the teaching of English Language subject and Putonghua is used only as the MoI for teaching the Putonghua subject and the Chinese Language subject from P1 to P4. Cantonese continues to be the MoI for all other subjects. One would envisage graduates from this school to be highly proficient in Cantonese, but less so in both Putonghua and English.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned above, without government guidelines and guidance, individual primary schools have adopted their own policies regarding the use of medium of instruction in teaching different subjects, even across the same type of schools. What the three case studies have shown is how individual schools have adopted trilingual education in ways that are custom-made to the needs of the school and the linguistic background and needs of the students. All three schools will be able to produce graduates who are functionally trilingual and biliterate, but with different levels of proficiency in each of the three languages. We would maintain that ways of implementing trilingual education in Hong Kong is indeed best left to the schools to decide for themselves, rather than having a model of trilingual education imposed upon them. Each school is different and no one knows the school and its students as well as the Principal and the teachers. Therefore, we propose that the Principal and teachers should be allowed to decide the model of trilingual education they would like their school to adopt. A school-based bottom-up approach to developing a policy for trilingual education in



Hong Kong is far more likely to be successful than a top-down policy devised by 'experts' in the Education Department. Our project has tried to provide a better understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions of the trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools through a pilot study, a survey of 155 primary schools and three in-depth case studies. Despite the relatively large size of the survey and the rich data we collected from the three case studies, we are aware of the risks of overgeneralization of the findings. Nevertheless, we recommend the following points for policy makers and school administrators to consider when preparing language policies in education:

1. The three languages should be used as media of instruction, but the ratio of each should be modified as students progress through primary education, with an emphasis on Cantonese in the early years.
4. Either Putonghua or Cantonese could be used as the MoI for the Chinese Language subject from P1. Students should be allowed to choose the MoI they prefer. More opportunities should be provided for students to practice Putonghua in the school if it is not used as the MoI in the Chinese Language subject.
5. Special classes in Cantonese should be provided for P1 students whose mother tongue is not Cantonese.
6. English should be used as the MoI for English. Mathematics, General Studies, Music, IT, Visual Arts, and PE should normally be taught in Cantonese, but the other languages can be introduced whenever appropriate.
7. All teachers sharing the same MoI should work together more closely and develop cross-curriculum activities which require the use of that particular language.
8. A multilingual pedagogy (i.e. code-switching) can be adopted where appropriate, with the aim of enhancing students' trilingual development.

Hong Kong is said to be China's gateway to the outside world; the biliterate and trilingual language policy plays a major role in shaping Hong Kong into a multilingual and multicultural world city. We hope our study will help schools in Hong Kong find their own ways to effectively implementing biliterate and trilingual education for their students and the future citizens of Hong Kong.

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