Education Reform and Language Selection in Hong Kong: Brief Remarks by a Linguist on the "Medium of Instruction" and "Mix" Issues

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Linguistic theories distinguish between human faculty for language, for any language, and the realization of that capacity through the use of particular language in particular situations. There exists a fundamental contradiction between the linguist's endorsement of the human faculty for language that inevitably emerges equally in all of us and the popular belief of the different worth of varying ways of speaking. Regrettably, this latter belief is as unfortunate as it is real. While linguists have to contend with the political realities of labeling speech as languages and dialects, as standard languages or jargons, as mixed or not, there is no room in their theory for degrees of adequacy for the human language faculty. It is a matter of dogma in linguistics that human beings have the same potentials for expression and that capacity for language matures fully in each individual (with the exception of individuals who have been raised in inhumane conditions) and it finds its realization – its expression -- in an individuals' proficiency of use of some variety of language. There is no contradiction between this dogma, with its implication that varieties of language are adequate for the purposes of expression to which they have been put, and the obvious fact that individuals a) conform to social norms that also embrace language expression and b) strive for better expression to suit particular purposes of expression. What then should these norms be and what is better expression?

In this note, I will attempt some partial answers. My main point will be that individuals will accomplish adequate communication quite happily through participation in communicative interaction that is meaningful to them. I base this point on my fundamental belief that learners as any other communicating individuals manage their speaking so as to note and adjust inadequacies, relative to the interactive situation they find themselves in.

FUNDAMENTAL PREMISE
The premise

Linguistic-grammatical theory today rests on the axiom that "…normal human intelligence is capable of acquiring knowledge [of language] through its own internal resources, making use of the data of experience but moving on to construct a cognitive system in terms of concepts and principles that are developed on independent grounds… languages are held to "grow" by virtue of common human resources" (MacSwan 1999:8-9).

This being so, it is a logical necessity for linguists to endorse in principle as fundamental the premise that all languages are equally worthy, equally suited to be the conduit for an individual's expressive purport. In the context of language selection as medium of instruction, this fundamental premise was, for example, expressed in a UNESCO declaration of 1953. The child's mother tongue is the right selection. In today's formulation, the school should be so organized as to allow the child to use its own language and the developing child's own language should be celebrated by all participants in the educational process.

Modulations

In practice, what is the child's own language may not be that easy to determine. Children from a "traditional" village that has been incorporated into an urban educational district and other children from the uptake area whose families have moved into the district will of course have had different speaking experiences. Especially in areas that are fast developing, accommodations have to be made by all parties to these differential communicative backgrounds. (I will return to "linguistic diversity" below.)

Schools that use the children's vernacular as the medium on which expressive, cognitive and emotional growth of the child is based follow best practice. In countries with a very well established system of a continuum of varieties from national standard thru regional speech to contemporary dialect, individual differences may well be bridged by teachers' accommodations of speaking according to linguistic-behavioral norms at intermediate points on this cline.

Additional languages have a role to play. Great care has to be taken if other languages are introduced. Bilingual education is one possible accommodation to realities of differential communication practices in a community and to future communication goals:

"Ideological, idealistic and research-based doctrines of educational provision […] plead for the foundations of education being laid in the primary language while the second language is gradually built up in the development of bilingual skills […] when local cultural, political and religious factors have to be taken into account, as is the case everywhere, then language policy in education has to co-ordinate what is feasible with what is desirable." (Baetens Beardsmore 1999:509-510).

Should an educational system take a bilingual turn, it must be organized in such a way that no child's speech is marginalized.

To implement a curriculum which will include goals to implement particular language norms, it is of paramount importance that adequate noting, evaluation and adjustment of all deviations in the children's speech from that of the norm takes place. This management process however must be present in the children's own speech. It is initiated in the teaching situation and the child has to be the one to apply it. How this can be brought about is a pedagogical problem which interfaces with but cannot be solved by linguistics alone. Good teachers know to initiate in children this process of child-managed acquisition. Also, pedagogy along the lines of what is currently proposed under the label of "language awareness" may point in the right direction; and interactive, negotiating pedagogies that stimulate active exploration of speech practices may be compatible with what linguistics mandates.

What is also absolutely important is that no secondary inadequacies (personal communication, J. V. Neustupný) occur. By that I mean, among other matters, that not a single child's speech and educational chances must be devalued because of a teacher's higher expectations for children whose speech reflect the characteristics of an elite.

APPLICATION
Diversity among pupils

When a child who speaks a different variety from that (those?) already used in school joins school, the society and the educational system should make every effort to give that child an education in the child's variety. When I say diversity and different variety, I refer to "language" as well as to the non-grammatical "discourse" differences and other behavioral competences that enable successful participation in school events. Children's differing ways of speaking must be respected and schooling must accommodate to the child's language and discourse behaviors.

Placing the child's language behavior at the center can organize schools and the educational process in different ways. This again is not a problem for which linguistics alone can predict successful solutions. A few suggestions may however not be misplaced here. First, small classes would seem imperative because otherwise how can the child be engaged in speaking such that the child's own language management is stimulated? Second, a child could be placed with others like him/her which would broaden the inclusiveness of the teacher's speaking in the children's language variety and which would of course support mutuality of interaction between all children and the teacher. Another way could be that teachers use several language varieties and discourses in a linguistically diverse class – which of course requires that the teachers are competent and willing and trained to do so, small classes, a conducive physical environment, and so on.

If a child's variety of language cannot remain the medium throughout the years of learning, education in it must be made available for as long as it takes to enable the child to make a transition into the majority's language environment without harm to the child's affective, cognitive, expressive and otherwise behavioral development and school performance in whatever regards.

A disturbing fact of educational language practice is the apparent belief that one language and only one language can be a medium at any one stage of education. This monolingual ideal does not reflect realities of language practices outside of school in most communities around the world. If the recognition of "foreign languages" is taken into account, then I cannot think of a single community that is not multilingual. As a matter of fact (personal communication, J. V. Neustupný), multilingual (multivarietal) classrooms have always been there. Even today, strictly speaking by linguists' criteria, probably all classrooms are multilingual (multivarietal). What this paper advocates, in harmony with professional beliefs among linguists, is the necessity to manage these situations.

Classroom discourse can and in my opinion should reflect community practices. Teachers should be trained in interaction and language management and be willing to interact in multiple ways of speaking (of languages and discourses) in their classrooms, to appropriately connect education with children's family and community experiences and practices of communication.

Multilingual state policies

States (and the equivalent, e.g., SAR's, territories, and so on – wherever in governance the responsibility for education lies; another term could be "political community") are major stakeholders in language management with regard to their young citizens. Besides realities of their respective language situations, states have overt policies to help organize future communication in support of related state goals. Hong Kong is an example of a political community with an explicit

trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) and biliterate   (Chinese and English) policy that supports its unique position as a SAR and its domestic social and economic goals.

Such policies in no way contradict the principle that language selection in education depends on the choice of the child's own variety.   Multilingual policies merely challenge the educational process to organize education for best results.

Progression

There is nothing mysterious about teaching languages. There is an abundance of good practice to learn from. For example, only a few weeks ago, the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong co-organized an international conference on plurilingualism (Plurilingual Hubs in the New Millennium; http://www.cbs.polyu.edu.hk/hubs/) and many of the papers addressed directly and very helpfully precisely the issues of the timing of introducing new languages, the amount of curricular time to give to them, methods of enabling acquisition including content teaching and if so what content to cover at what levels of education and in what progression, of assessment (which should be specifically tailored to the methods and desired outcomes) and so on. Teacher training and teachers' communication and pedagogical practices are obviously especially crucial determinants of outcome.

Perhaps the single most important action we in Hong Kong can take is to tap best practices from elsewhere with a view to thoroughly understanding their particular situations and then to draw lessons for ourselves in view of Hong Kong's peculiar educational and linguistic circumstances (and taking into account social and economic goals).   I feel it is worthwhile to selectively indicate one here.

Acquisition of English is on top of many Hong Kong parents' and the Hong Kong government's educational agenda. One pedagogical choice to enable English acquisition by pupils is some kind or other of bilingual education. Baetens-Beardsmore who co-organized the Plurilingual Hubs conference reviews operational variables for teaching English through the bilingual technique of teaching a combination of languages and other subject content. He comments on Brunei and Singapore. His comments are of value to Hong Kong. The operational variables are "the most difficult ones to manipulate in applying any language in education policy" (516). Among his operational variables are:

"Teacher competence"

*H*e observes how even when teachers do their best to implement a policy, they "fail to understand the process of an integrated content and language-learning syllabus. This leads to a pedagogic strategy which produces reactive language but not active language usage, thereby at times defeating the major objective of a bilingual programme using content-matter to help the language learning process" (518).

As a linguist, I agree wholeheartedly with the necessity of integrated teaching and active language management to enable language learning.

"Language strategies in classroom teaching practice"

He observes how "teacher-fronted activities … tend to hinder active language usage by children… also tend to lead to pseudo-questions and display questions to reveal knowledge already known by the teacher" (520).

As a linguist, I agree wholeheartedly with the necessity of active and interactive language management in enabling language acquisition.

"Whole-school policies"

He observes how the "mistake is to concentrate on the language side alone, where what is needed in bilingual education is an integrated approach that takes into account a whole set of parameters" (521).

As a linguist, I agree wholeheartedly with whole-system approaches to accomplish educational outcomes, including language acquisition.

Lessons for Hong Kong are that, among many other operational variables, unless teacher competence assures success, language strategies in classroom teaching enhance interaction and enable learning, and the approach is integrated, Hong Kong should not implement bilingual methods.

Furthermore, Hong Kong's language and education situations are radically different from many that inform current literature and practice however. Experience internal to Europe relies on distances between languages in all regards: grammatical and socio-linguistic and other behavioral-contextual distances are minor indeed compared to the gulfs that separate Cantonese (and even more so Chinese-Putonghua) from English language practices. Educational resources and traditions may well be just as far apart. In such light, the following questions expressed by the Chief Inspector of the Luxembourg Ministry of Education where three languages are successively introduced and used in the school system should give cause for serious concern in Hong Kong (quoted by Baetens-Beardsmore, 513):

- To what extent does the passage from one language to another hamper intellectual development, not only in language studies but in all the subjects on the curriculum?
- To what extent does the simultaneous use of two languages prevent children from comfortably expressing their thoughts and feelings?
- To what extent is bilingual education responsible for a certain mutism in pupils, a tense attitude, a lack of self-assurance and personality, an inability to produce personal and creative work?

These questions warn that bilingual education solutions differ significantly in their outcomes and that success depends on particular circumstances in the particular community as well as on the proper implementation of education and language management theories.

'Mix'?

Closely related to the medium of instruction and bilingual education discussions in Hong Kong is the issue of 'mix'. Languages are in ever increasing contact in contemporary society. That names for things (lexical items) move across languages is hardly a novel phenomenon and an entirely healthy phenomenon. People who already know English may readily recognize some loan words in Cantonese (or in my case in Swedish) that have been borrowed from English. "A borrowed word is one which has moved from one lexicon into another [language's lexicon] where it is coded with language-particular morphology and mapped to PF [phonetic form] with language-particular phonological rules" (MacSwan 235). Children acquire and all people use borrowed words and they behave like any word that constitutes a language.

It is, further, a tenet of linguistics that people adapt languages to appropriate use each in its particular context.

This is an unremarkable claim. It merely says that behavior is differentiated and mostly for good reasons. One doesn't cut cheese with an axe. And just as a majority of the world's population is multilingual, that majority as easily and naturally code-switches. What's appropriate in one moment in a particular contextual configuration of thought and action is not in the next; one way of speaking is appropriate to the one context, another way of speaking to the next one.

It is a fact that children's language faculties mature so that they become competent members of the communicative community and command a multiplicity of the expected varieties that are used in that community. When the family or significant others with whom they interact use several languages and varieties of languages, the children develop competence in these and use them appropriately, i.e., "keep them apart" as systems and apply them according to communicative context . These facts need not be challenged. I repeat, these facts are proven and not open to challenge.

To these facts we add the observation that much before the end of schooling, early in fact, students are completely fluent in Cantonese (thus, their linguistic individual growth is essentially complete). During that schooling, they begin acquiring also English. However little English they may know, what could possibly be wrong with trying some of it out in an utterance? Since they know their Cantonese, does generating and uttering an additional piece of language to that to which most people are accustomed in any way subtract from their Cantonese competence or harm the hearer?

Presumably the utterance was meaningfully directed at and exchanged with some other person, and was deemed fully adequate by that interlocutor.   It would seem a praiseworthy behavior and an act of linguistic innovativeness. Praiseworthy at least in that the student is trying out his/her English – the acquisition of which is one of Hong Kong's most pressing educational goals. Code-switchers/-'mixers' do not have limited linguistic competence in comparison with others. They actually know more of languages, because they can draw also on the English lexicon in such a way as to adequately integrate a piece of that different language into an otherwise Cantonese utterance.

Incidentally (as J. V. Neustupný reminded me), for those among you who are familiar with language acquisition theories, this agrees with the belief common in applied linguistics that interlanguage errors testify to the learner's advance of acquisition of the target language, subject of course to making sure that the target norm does not disappear from the acquisition process.

Integrating languages meaningfully in discourse – isn't that a much nicer expression than the so maligned expression 'mix' -- is no mean achievement which presupposes considerable linguistic skill. I might add that the more they learn of English, they better they will become at code-mixing!

Code-switching (-mixing) "enhances rather than limits the expressive capacity of an individual" (MacSwan 250). He demonstrates how "putting the recursive grammars of two languages together generates infinitely many strings that are not in either infinite language taken separately" (251). In simpler terms, an individual who draws on the resources of more than one language (however little that individual knows of the second language) can generate many more utterances than if he/she were to speak only the one language. I praise expressive inventiveness in these terms but I am not suggesting that education should give up on enabling students to progress in their acquisition of others' language norms. Of course they should be so enabled. There is no contradiction between the praise of code-switching behavior and the goal of progression as long as pedagogy assures that students remain active learners and language managers moving in the direction of the teaching norm.

And if a student knows to name a concept in only one language, say, in English, does that do any harm to the

student or to anyone else? The answer is obvious as the question is silly. Of course it does not do any harm. But it does provide an opportunity for the person to learn the equivalent name in the other (or another) language.

It is not the fault of code-switching-mixing that society differentiates the use of varieties according to contexts. It is however a matter of educational policy to determine whether some content will become associated with English rather than Cantonese by virtue of being so taught. This is a matter that has nothing to do with code-switching/-mixing and it requires separate discussion. My own value in this regard is clear: a democratic society should strive to give all people the opportunity of equal access to information and to participation in political processes. Educational language selection policy and practice should reflect that value.   Citizens today face ever more complex issues of environment and governance and a language shared by all facilitates informed decisions and understanding of their consequences.

CONCLUSION

I am the first one to admit that I assume in this note that learners want to learn, including wanting to acquire languages and discourses. If they do not, I have nothing to say. Other than my fundamental belief in a pedagogy that respects the children's own languages and discourses, I advocate a language management approach to language development in learners.

Linguists who work with language management theory (*for example, see* Neustupný 1987, 1989) are by no means alone in advocating such an approach. Ball and Lardner (1999) discuss the secondary English classroom in the public school in the United States and argue the importance of a pedagogy according to which "[T]eachers and students become monitors of their own and each other's grammar and discourse patterns". This can be accomplished by "focusing on participation patterns in interactive discourse in order to raise the awareness of teachers of the links between their own styles of communication and their students' responsiveness in classroom exchange"; and such "intentions and expectations need to be evident in observable or, we might say, audible behaviors in the classroom."

Individuals will accomplish adequate communication quite happily through participation in communicative interaction that is meaningful to them. I base this point on my fundamental belief that learners as any other communicating individuals manage their speaking so as to note and adjust inadequacies, relative to the interactive situation. School is but another interactive, communicative situation.

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