

The Medium of Instruction in the Engineering Stream at Tertiary Level in Hong Kong

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This paper reports the findings of a study of the medium of instruction in the engineering stream at tertiary level in Hong Kong. The article begins with overview of developments in language in Hong Kong education in the post-war period, and then goes on to describe and discuss the small body of research into language use that has been carried out in the territory's universities in the 1990s. The focus of the paper is a study of the use of English, Chinese and Cantonese as media of instruction in an engineering degree course (offered in full-time and part-time modes) at a representative English-medium technical university in Hong Kong. It was found that English is the main language of written assignments, textbooks and course materials. The findings relating to oral communication are much less clear. English tends to be used by students and lecturers in more formal situations such as lectures, presentations and seminars, while in less formal situations such as tutorials and discussions, Cantonese seems to have an important role. The findings also indicate that both students and lecturers on the part-time course make greater use of English than their counterparts on the full-time course.

Introduction

The roles of the English and Chinese languages in Hong Kong's education system have been a source of controversy since the Morrison Education Society established the territory's first Western school in November 1842, several months after the cession of the "barren island" to Britain. In the first century of British colonial rule, education for the Chinese in Hong

Kong was organized into two systems that were differentiated by language, culture and social class: a small but prestigious English-medium stream, which offered a Western-style education to a relatively affluent urban elite, and numerically larger Chinese-medium stream, which offered an education similar to that in Mainland China (So, 1992). Although the use of English as the medium of instruction (MOI) in the colony's Western schools was hotly debated at various times during this period, the relatively low priority that the *laissez-faire*-inspired colonial government attached to education ensured that these debates tended to be confined to education circles. However, in the post-war period, and particularly since the introduction of universal secondary education in the late 1970s, the issue of the MOI in Hong Kong education has been a source of community-wide debate. This debate over educational language policy has been reinvigorated in the past two years by the post-colonial government's controversial decision to force the majority of the territory's English-medium secondary schools to adopt Chinese as the MOI for all academic subjects apart from English.

One of the main arguments put forward by those who advocate the use of English as the MOI has been that proficiency in the language is a prerequisite for further studies at English-medium universities in Hong Kong (and overseas). This argument is presumably founded on the assumption that the language of written and spoken communication in the territory's universities (unlike its nominally English-medium secondary schools) is indeed English. However, although a considerable amount of research has been conducted into language use at secondary level (Johnson, 1995), there are surprisingly few studies of the MOI in Hong Kong's expanding tertiary sector. The study reported in this paper, which examines the use of English, Cantonese and written Chinese in the engineering stream of a representative technical university, was designed to add to our limited knowledge and understanding of language use at tertiary level in Hong Kong.

Background to the Study

In order to appreciate the factors influencing the MOI at tertiary level it is necessary to understand the use of English and Chinese in Hong Kong's education system. This section provides background to the issue of the MOI by, first, examining developments in language in education in post-war Hong Kong, and, second, discussing the findings from the relatively

small body of research that has been conducted into language use in the territory's tertiary institutions.

Language in Education in Post-War Hong Kong

The post-war period has witnessed two fundamental changes in secondary-level education in Hong Kong. Firstly, there has been a remarkable increase in the numbers of young people receiving secondary education. At the end of the Pacific War, secondary enrolments stood at around 12,000 (Hong Kong Government, 1946); fifty years later, 465,658 students were receiving a secondary-school education (Hong Kong Government, 1996). The rapid expansion in numbers has primarily been driven by the dramatic increase in Hong Kong's population, from around 600,000 in 1945 to over six million today. Secondly, expansion in quantitative provision has been accompanied by a change in the language through which Hong Kong students have received their education. In the early 1950s, more than half of the territory's secondary students were attending Chinese-medium schools (Keswick, 1952); by the mid 1990s, over 90% of students were attending Anglo-Chinese secondary schools, whose policy (if not practice) was to teach most academic subjects (apart from Chinese and Chinese History) in English. The growth of the English-medium sector and the virtual eclipse of the once dominant Chinese-medium schools since the late 1950s was not the result of a colonialist conspiracy (So, 1992), but a phenomenon that was largely driven by parents, who perceived that access to further education in Hong Kong and overseas, and careers in government, business and the professions depended on high levels of proficiency in English, which could be guaranteed only by a successful English-medium secondary education.

The post-war transformation of the English-medium stream from a system designed for a privileged Chinese elite in a colonial society to one catering for the masses was understandably accompanied by concern among educators about the educational and psychological problems which many students experienced when studying academic subjects through the medium of English (e.g. Cheng, Shek, Tse, & Wong, 1973; Llewellyn, 1982). These problems resulted in a significant change in the nature of classroom language use in the majority of Hong Kong's Anglo-Chinese schools. Although English continued to be the principal language of board work, teaching materials, assignments and examinations, the usual mode of oral instruction and interaction in the classroom involved switching

between and mixing English and Cantonese (Johnson, 1983; Johnson & Lee, 1987). Studies of Hong Kong classrooms during the 1980s revealed a steady decline in the use of English in the teaching of content subjects, particularly in Mathematics and Science subjects, and an increase in the use of Cantonese and Cantonese-English mixed code (i.e., Cantonese with English terms inserted) (Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Shek & Law, 1991; Shek, Johnson & Law, 1991). Mixed-mode instruction has thus been a compromise between English-medium instruction, which a substantial percentage of Hong Kong students apparently cannot cope with, and Chinese-medium instruction, which, because of the limited opportunities it affords for socio-economic advancement, parents are perceived not to favour.

The expansion of the Anglo-Chinese schools, the decline of the Chinese Middle schools, and the widespread use of Cantonese and mixed code as the main media of classroom instruction in the English-medium stream did not reflect government language policy in education (Johnson, 1998). Indeed, from the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s, the colonial government consistently supported the use of Chinese as the MOI in Hong Kong education (e.g. Board of Education, 1973; Burney, 1935; Education Commission, 1963, 1984, 1986), but failed to formulate and implement a clear language policy, principally because of the marked parental preference for education through the medium of English (e.g. Hong Kong Government, 1965, 1974). It was not until the late 1980s that the colonial government began to abandon its politically expedient policy of *laissez-faire* on the issue of the MOI (Education Department, 1989).

In 1990, the Education Commission's 4th report acknowledged that the existing policy of "positive discrimination" in favor of schools using Chinese as the MOI was not working, and that a "coherent framework" would be required in order to ensure that schools make consistent use of English or Chinese in the classroom. The Education Commission (1990) therefore proposed that secondary school students be streamed according to their ability to learn effectively in English or Chinese. Since it was estimated that only about 30% of students in a particular year group could benefit from English-medium instruction (Brimer, 1985), the vast majority of students in any year would be forced to learn through the medium of Chinese. Although the streaming proposal was widely criticized for being elitist, divisive and discriminatory, the controversial policy was approved by the government in 1991, and finally implemented in the 1998-99 academic year (Education Department, 1997). While the policy to promote

Chinese-medium instruction was formulated primarily in response to the educational, cultural and psychological needs of the majority of secondary students, the decision to retain an elite group of English-medium schools resulted from pressure from the territory's English-medium tertiary institutions, who complained that secondary-school graduates, after seven years of mixed-mode instruction, were increasingly unable to satisfy the high linguistic demands of the local and international academic communities.

The Medium of Instruction at Tertiary Level in Hong Kong

For the greater part of the colonial period the only tertiary-level opportunities open to secondary school graduates were at the English-medium University of Hong Kong (HKU), which had been established in 1911 "to provide close to China, education for Chinese, similar to that given in the British universities" (Endacott, 1964, p. 283). Although very little research was conducted into language standards and language use at HKU until quite recently, there is evidence that levels of proficiency in English were not as high as might be expected given that only a very small percentage of Hong Kong students (drawn mainly from an elite group of English-medium secondary schools) were fortunate enough to gain admission. Harrison (1962) notes that students at HKU in the 1920s often experienced difficulties coping with their English-medium degree studies:

Even students from the local schools, as experience in this university's classrooms was showing, possessed at this time only a limited working knowledge of English. Undergraduates were finding the strain of following degree courses, especially in arts, almost impossibly heavy; many were failing in examinations in spite of the strenuous efforts of the teaching staff; all concerned felt discouraged and frustrated. (p. 48)

Evidence from the late 1960s to the early 1980s also indicates that unsatisfactory levels of English may have impeded the effective learning of academic subjects at HKU (Ho, 1979; Kwok & Chan, 1972; Kvan, 1969; Sun, Chan, & Kwok, 1970). Writing in the mid-1970s, Lord (1974), who at the time was Director of the Language Centre at HKU, claimed that:

For the majority of students entering the University of Hong Kong English is not a viable means of communication at all. About a fifth of them cannot make themselves understood in English, and their comprehension of spoken English

is poor in the extreme. Few students can write English which is not bizarre.
(p. 1)

In the two decades since this observation was written tertiary education in Hong Kong has expanded very rapidly. Today there are six government-funded universities in Hong Kong (together with a number of other post-secondary and tertiary institutes of various kinds). Apart from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where, notwithstanding its original objectives, considerable use is made of English (Chase, 1993), it is the policy (if not the practice) of these universities to use English as the MOI. Perhaps not surprisingly, the expansion of university education, particularly in the 1990s, has been accompanied by continuing concern about the ability of many students to study degree courses effectively through the medium of English.

While the limited body of research referred to above has suggested that many Hong Kong students have encountered problems in their English-medium university studies, very few studies have been conducted into the impact that these problems may have had on the nature of language use at tertiary level, particularly in the area of oral communication. Research into student language use outside the classroom has indicated that Hong Kong students generally use Cantonese and mixed code (Gibbons, 1987; Kwok & Chan, 1972; Pennington, Balla, Detaramani, Poon, & Tam, 1992). There is certainly little evidence that tertiary students in Hong Kong have ever had any great need to communicate in English other than for purely academic purposes. As long ago as the early 1950s, the Keswick report (1952) on higher education in the colony noted that "most of the students now at the university [HKU] speak Cantonese outside the lecture rooms" (p. 26). A decade ago, just before the policy to expand tertiary education was introduced, Harris (1989) in his inaugural lecture from the Chair of English Language at HKU entitled "The Worst English in the World?" painted a bleak picture of English-medium instruction at Hong Kong's oldest university: "It is an open secret that much teaching is done in Cantonese. And when there are public complaints that even English literature is being taught here in Cantonese the writing is on the wall for academic bilingualism" (p. 42).

The only large-scale published studies of the MOI at tertiary level in Hong Kong were carried out at the City University of Hong Kong (CityU) in the early 1990s. In 1992, Pennington and Balla (1996) conducted a questionnaire survey of 789 students studying a range of English-medium

Diploma and Higher Diploma courses at CityU's College of Higher Vocational Studies (see also Balla & Pennington, 1996). Pennington and Balla (1996) found that the language of written communication was predominantly English. However, the picture for spoken communication was much less clear: lectures tended to be mainly in English (although around a quarter of the subjects claimed that Chinese [presumably Cantonese] was the usual MOI), whereas discussions in tutorials and laboratory sessions were mainly in Chinese. Perhaps not surprisingly, Pennington and Balla (1996) found considerable variability in the use of English and Chinese in different subject areas, with some courses, such as Accountancy, reportedly having a high degree of English use, while others, such as Social Work, were apparently conducted mainly in Chinese. As far as the present study is concerned, the most relevant findings in Pennington and Balla's (1996) research are those relating to spoken communication in courses in the building field (Building and Construction, Building Services Engineering, Building Surveying), where it was found that the language of lectures was "mostly English" and tutorials "mostly Chinese." The widespread use of Cantonese in supposedly English-medium tertiary courses led Pennington and Balla (1996) to conclude:

A classroom reality of students and teachers who (a) cannot function 100% in English, (b) do not wish to function 100% in English, and (c) do not need to function 100% in English is a situation in which mandated English language instruction is bound to fail. When this happens, the policy directive will generally not be completely ignored, but rather selectively implemented, according to individual understandings and needs. (p. 195)

At around the same time that Pennington and Balla (1996) carried out their survey of sub-degree students, Walters and Balla (1992, 1998) used the same research instrument to investigate language use as perceived by 1,237 students on seven full-time degree courses at CityU. Like Pennington and Balla (1996), Walters and Balla (1992, 1998) found that written materials (textbooks, handouts, assignments, examination papers, manuals) were almost exclusively in English. Regarding spoken communication, the students surveyed by Walters and Balla (1992, 1998) reported that lectures were generally in English, whereas around two-thirds claimed that the language of discussions in tutorials and laboratory sessions tended to be mainly Cantonese. As might be expected, there was considerable variation between courses. Discussions in the Law course were apparently conducted exclusively in English, whereas the vast

majority of the students taking Applied Physics and Computer Science reported that Cantonese was the usual medium of discussions in tutorials and laboratory sessions. Of immediate relevance to the present study are the findings derived from students taking the degree courses in Building and Construction and Electronic Engineering. Students taking the Building course reported that lectures were mainly in English. However, as in other courses, the findings relating to discussions were less clear-cut, with 55% of the subjects reporting that tutorials and laboratory sessions were conducted mainly or always in English, while the remaining 45% claimed that Cantonese was the usual medium of interaction. Like their counterparts on the Building course, the majority of Engineering students reported that lectures were mainly in English. However, unlike the Building students, almost 80% of the subjects taking the Engineering course reported that Cantonese was the usual medium of tutorial discussions. On the basis of their study of language use at CityU, Walters and Balla (1998) concluded that:

“English-medium instruction” in Hong Kong is not the total immersion concept that the term suggests. At best, English is used when it needs to be, that is, in written materials and where lecturers are native English speakers. Otherwise, Cantonese, the mother tongue of the vast majority of students and the majority of the lecturers, is used as the medium of instruction. (p. 387)

Although the studies of Pennington and Balla (1996) and Walters and Balla (1992, 1998) offer valuable insights into the nature of language use at tertiary level in Hong Kong, they both have a number of limitations. Firstly, the research instrument that both studies employed (the Language and Study Questionnaire) has a limited number of items dealing with the MOI. For example, in the key area of oral communication, the subjects were asked to report only on language use in lectures, tutorials and laboratory discussions. The questionnaire also fails to distinguish clearly between the language use of students and lecturers in these contexts. Secondly, since the findings relating to oral communication in the studies conducted at CityU include the language use of both expatriate and Chinese lecturers, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which Chinese staff (the majority of whom are Cantonese speakers like their students) use English in contexts like lectures and tutorials. Thirdly, the CityU studies were carried out in the early 1990s, which was before the dramatic expansion of higher education began to have an impact on Hong Kong's tertiary institutions. It is possible that the influx of (presumably) less

academically able students into the tertiary sector in 1992–95 led to a greater use of Cantonese or mixed-mode teaching (as was the case in the expanding secondary sector in the 1970s and 1980s). If this were the case, it would be reasonable to argue that the increased use of the mother tongue would not have been fully apparent until the mid-1990s.

The Present Study

The present study is designed to build on the work carried out at CityU by providing an up-to-date and detailed description of the language use of Chinese staff and students in a representative department in the field of engineering at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), the territory's longest-established institute of tertiary-level technical education. The "main medium" of instruction at HKPU is English. The study has two main objectives: (1) to investigate the use of English, Cantonese and written Chinese in the degree course in Building Services Engineering (BSE), which is offered by HKPU's Department of BSE; (2) to compare language use on the full-time and part-time modes of study. The Department of BSE was chosen because all of the students and an overwhelming majority of the academic staff are Hong Kong Chinese who speak Cantonese as their mother tongue. There are two native English speakers on the staff, who occupy senior positions and are mainly engaged in administration and research. The questionnaire items relating to the language use of lecturers specified that the subjects should report only on Cantonese-speaking members of staff. It is therefore assumed that the data relating to oral communication are not influenced by the subjects' experience of native-English-speaking lecturers.

Research Method

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire survey of 175 (153 male, 22 female) full-time and part-time students studying in Years 1 to 3 of the BEng (Hons) course in BSE at HKPU in the 1996–97 academic year. Ninety subjects (30 from each year) were studying on the full-time course. The vast majority of the full-time students were aged between 19 and 22, and had enrolled on the course after completing their Advanced Level examinations at a local Anglo-Chinese secondary school. The subjects on the part-time degree program (85 in all, distributed almost equally between the three years) were all working full-time in the construction industry in

Hong Kong at the time the survey was carried out. Most of the part-time subjects were in their late 20s or early 30s, and had been working in the building field for between five and ten years. The majority of these students had entered the part-time course after completing Higher Certificate or Higher Diploma engineering programs at HKPU and other post-secondary institutes in Hong Kong.

The questionnaire was piloted on four groups of full-time and part-time students between October and December 1996. The revised version of the questionnaire was administered to 175 BSE students between February and April 1997. The students completed the questionnaire under the supervision of their English lecturer during one of their Communication Studies classes.

Findings and Discussion

The Language of Written Work

The findings relating to writing clearly indicate that English is the principal language of written communication in the BEng (Hons) in BSE (Table 1). Since the official language of instruction and assessment at HKPU is English, it is hardly surprising that all formal written work (i.e., work which is assessed) is in English. The subjects reported that examination papers (95%), laboratory reports (93%), research proposals (91%) and other reports (89%) are "always" written in English. Although (perhaps surprisingly) a small percentage of the subjects claimed that their written work was "usually" in English (4%–9%) or "sometimes English, sometimes Chinese" (1%–2%), there is no evidence that Chinese plays a very important role in formal or informal written communication in their degree studies. However, English is less likely to be "always" used for lecture notes (75%), summaries (75%), seminar/tutorial notes (69%), notes from books, articles, etc. (62%) than for more formal assessed work.

It is interesting that the items in Table 1 fall into two fairly distinct groups with the dividing line between reports and lecture notes. The first four text types are written for assessment purposes, while the last four items are generally concerned with the process rather than the product of learning. While the written medium for various types of notes and summaries is still mainly English, the fact that 18%–25% of the subjects claimed to use English "usually" while 6%–12% claimed to use a mix of English and Chinese, indicates that these students may annotate such texts

Table 1 The Language of Written Communication

Text Type	Always English	Usually English	Sometimes English, Sometimes Chinese	Usually Chinese	Always Chinese
Examination papers	95%	4%	1%	0%	0%
Laboratory reports	93%	6%	1%	0%	0%
Research proposals	91%	8%	1%	0%	0%
Reports	89%	9%	2%	0%	0%
Lecture notes	75%	19%	6%	0%	0%
Summaries	75%	18%	7%	0%	0%
Seminar/tutorial notes	69%	22%	8%	1%	0%
Notes from books, articles, etc.	62%	25%	12%	1%	0%

with Chinese terms when taking notes from written and oral sources. The use of Chinese words and phrases for texts which play an integral part in the process of learning presumably serves as an aid to understanding new ideas and information.

The Language of Reading Materials

The findings relating to reading, which are presented in Table 2, clearly indicate that the reading materials used in the BSE degree course are mainly in English. It would appear that examination papers, recommended textbooks and specially prepared reading materials such as lecture notes and course handouts are almost always in English. The medium of other reading materials such as reference books, journal articles, manuals, regulations, catalogues and magazines also tends to be mainly English, although it is possible that the subjects occasionally read Chinese or bilingual texts of this kind during the course of their studies. There is little evidence that students need to make extensive use of academic materials in Chinese in their degree studies.

Overall, the findings in Tables 1 and 2 clearly indicate that English is the main language of written communication in the BSE degree course. Indeed, it would seem that examinations, assessed written assignments, recommended books and course materials are exclusively in English, although there is some evidence that Chinese is occasionally used in note-taking and summary writing, and in reading materials of a professional rather than academic nature. These findings are largely consistent with the

Table 2 The Language of Reading Materials

Text Type	Always English	Usually English	Sometimes English, Sometimes Chinese	Usually Chinese	Always Chinese
Examination papers	96%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Lecture notes	86%	14%	0%	0%	0%
Textbooks	85%	14%	1%	0%	0%
Course handouts	81%	16%	3%	0%	0%
Reference books	70%	25%	5%	0%	0%
Journal articles	70%	22%	6%	2%	0%
Manuals	68%	23%	9%	0%	0%
Regulations	65%	23%	12%	0%	0%
Catalogues	56%	31%	13%	0%	0%
Magazines	43%	21%	28%	6%	2%

findings of the studies carried out at CityU by Pennington and Balla (1996) and Walters and Balla (1992, 1998).

The Language of Oral Communication

While the findings relating to the language of written communication are unsurprising given the role of English as the official MOI at HKPU and as the world's leading language of science and technology, the nature of language use in the area of oral communication is much less predictable. Although English is the recommended medium of instruction and interaction in lectures, seminars and tutorials, as we have seen, there is some research evidence and considerable anecdotal evidence that Cantonese is widely used in English-medium tertiary institutions in Hong Kong.

The final section of the questionnaire required the subjects to provide information about the nature of oral communication. The subjects were asked to indicate the language(s) that they (i.e. BSE degree students) and their BSE lecturers normally speak (and therefore listen to) in both formal and informal situations during the course of their university studies.

(a) The Language Use of Students

Table 3 summarizes the findings relating to student language use in oral

Table 3 The Language of Oral Communication: Students

Situation	Always English	Usually English	Sometimes English, Sometimes Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
At presentations	84%	15%	1%	0%	0%
In seminars	50%	34%	13%	3%	0%
In lectures	25%	45%	23%	6%	1%
In tutorials	14%	39%	39%	6%	2%
In meetings	17%	27%	39%	14%	3%
In informal discussions with lecturers	11%	22%	46%	18%	3%
Chatting to lecturers about non-academic matters	4%	8%	41%	37%	10%
Discussing work with classmates	1%	4%	13%	37%	45%
Chatting to classmates about non-academic matters	2%	3%	6%	27%	62%

communication. It is immediately apparent from the findings that the picture of language use in the area of speaking and listening is much less clear than that of written communication. The only situation in which BSE students appear to speak English exclusively is at oral presentations. The use of English at presentations — 84% of the subjects claimed that they “always” speak English — can largely be explained by the fact that most oral presentations in the BSE course are assessed. Indeed, in Year 3 of both the full-time and part-time courses students are required to present the findings of their research project before an audience of academics and peers, and their performance in these presentations contributes significantly to their overall grade for the Research Project module.

However, the use of English appears to be somewhat less consistent in other academic speaking/listening situations, particularly those at the informal end of the formal-informal continuum. It would appear that students’ contributions to seminars are mainly in English, although it is interesting that only 50% of the subjects claimed that they “always” use English. In the case of lectures, only a quarter of the subjects reported that they “always” speak English, while 45% claimed to do so “usually.” It is important to note that these findings do not indicate how often students speak at lectures. It would be reasonable to assume that lectures primarily involve the transmission of information and ideas, and that students adopt

a mainly passive role. Student contributions to lectures are presumably limited to the clarification of lecture content, and this may be the reason why Cantonese is apparently used to some extent.

In tutorials and meetings, where interaction rather than the formal transmission of knowledge is encouraged, it is noticeable that a relatively small percentage of students reported that they "always" speak English. While English still appears to be the usual medium of tutorials and meetings, the findings clearly indicate that Cantonese has an important role in these situations. As Table 3 reveals, 39% of the subjects reported that the language that they use in tutorials and meetings is "sometimes English, sometimes Cantonese." In the case of meetings, 17% of the subjects stated that they "usually" or "always" speak Cantonese. When asked to report on the language of informal, course-related discussions with Cantonese-speaking lecturers, only a third of the subjects claimed that they normally use English, while nearly a half stated that such encounters were "sometimes English, sometimes Cantonese." As might be expected, when the subjects chat to their lecturers about matters unrelated to their work, it would appear that they mainly use Cantonese. In student-student interactions, Cantonese is understandably the usual language (presumably interspersed with English technical terms), particularly when the topic of the discourse involves non-academic matters.

Overall, the findings relating to oral communication seem to indicate that the extent to which students use English is mainly dependent on the formality of the situation. In formal situations such as oral presentations, where the students' performance is assessed, English is apparently always used. When interacting with their Chinese lecturers, the more informal the situation, the more likely the subjects are to speak Cantonese. When interacting with their peers outside the classroom, the subjects mainly use Cantonese.

The information presented in Table 3 summarizes the findings derived from both full-time and part-time students. It is interesting to compare the responses of full-time and part-time students in relation to the use of English and Cantonese in oral communication (Table 4). It would appear from the findings in the "always English" and "usually English" columns in Table 4 that, apart from oral presentations (where, very surprisingly, only 74% of the part-time subjects reported that they "always" speak English), students on the part-time course tend to make more consistent use of English than their counterparts on the full-time course, particularly in tutorials and meetings. It would also appear that part-time students tend to

Table 4 A Comparison of the Language Use of Students on the Part-time and Full-time BSE Courses

Situation	Always English		Usually English		Sometimes English, Sometimes Cantonese		Usually Cantonese		Always Cantonese	
	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT
At presentations	93%	74%	7%	24%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%
In seminars	49%	51%	37%	31%	10%	16%	4%	1%	0%	1%
In lectures	17%	33%	46%	44%	24%	21%	11%	1%	2%	1%
In tutorials	8%	20%	28%	52%	52%	25%	10%	2%	2%	1%
In meetings	13%	22%	22%	31%	43%	35%	16%	12%	6%	0%
In informal discussions with lecturers	11%	11%	17%	27%	47%	45%	22%	14%	3%	2%
Chatting to lecturers about non-academic matters	6%	2%	4%	12%	36%	46%	40%	33%	14%	6%
Discussing work with classmates	1%	1%	2%	6%	12%	14%	38%	37%	47%	42%
Chatting to classmates about non-academic matters	1%	2%	2%	5%	4%	8%	23%	31%	70%	54%

FT = full-time, PT = part-time.

make greater use of English in informal interactions with lecturers and their peers than the students on the full-time course.

The apparently more consistent use of English on the part-time course is interesting, particularly in view of the fact that many of the part-time students enter the course after a considerable period outside formal education (very often ten years or more), whereas most of the full-time students enter the course after completing English-medium studies in the 6th Form (which includes a demanding Use of English course that focusses on English for academic purposes). One possible explanation for the part-time students' greater willingness to communicate orally in English is the confidence in the language which they derive from using English in workplace. Thus, while the level of English proficiency indicated by the formal academic qualifications of many part-time students may not be particularly high, since many of them are required to speak English fairly regularly at work, especially in formal situations such as meetings and interviews, their actual proficiency in the language may be a good deal better than suggested by their paper qualifications (which they would have received over a decade ago). Another factor that would encourage the use

of English in the part-time course is the fact that nearly all of the students have taken Higher Certificate and/or Higher Diploma courses in BSE-related subjects. The foundation that these courses have offered (where most of the written materials would presumably have been in English), together with the expertise and practical experience that they have gained from full-time employment in the building services industry, means that most of the part-time students have a clearer understanding of the key areas of BSE (both academic and professional) than their full-time counterparts. It is quite likely, therefore, that most part-time students are better able to cope with English-medium instruction (particularly in the early stages of the course) than the full-time students; hence, the apparently greater use of English for oral communication in the part-time course.

(b) The Language Use of Lecturers

The subjects were also asked to report on the language use of their Chinese lecturers in the area of oral communication (Table 5). It would appear from the findings that BSE lecturers generally use English in presentations, seminars and lectures, although it is worth noting that only around half of the subjects reported that their lecturers "always" use English in seminars and lectures. In less formal academic situations such as meetings and tutorials, where discussion and problem-solving are encouraged, Cantonese appears to be used by a number of lecturers. Although well over half of the subjects claimed that their lecturers "always" or "usually" use

Table 5 The Language of Oral Communication: Lecturers

Situation	Always English	Usually English	Sometimes English, Sometimes Cantonese	Usually Cantonese	Always Cantonese
At presentations	63%	28%	6%	2%	1%
In seminars	50%	36%	9%	4%	1%
In lectures	47%	40%	8%	4%	1%
In meetings	26%	31%	33%	8%	2%
In tutorials	22%	39%	33%	5%	1%
In informal discussions with students	12%	16%	39%	23%	10%
Chatting to students about non-academic matters	5%	14%	31%	31%	19%

English in meetings (57%) and tutorials (61%), a significant percentage reported that lecturers make equal use of English and Cantonese in these situations. In informal discussions with students, around a third of the subjects stated that lecturers “usually” or “always” speak Cantonese. Perhaps not surprisingly, informal communication between lecturers and students about non-academic matters is usually conducted in Cantonese.

It is interesting to compare the responses of the full-time and part-time students in relation to their lecturers’ use of English and Cantonese. As the findings in Table 6 reveal, it would seem that lecturers on the part-time program make greater use of English than their counterparts on the full-time course in all situations. Given the findings about student language use in Table 4, it is clear that English is used much more for oral communication in formal and informal situations by both students and lecturers on the part-time course than on the full-time course. In the case of the full-time course, it is interesting that a very significant percentage of the subjects reported that Cantonese is the usual medium of informal interaction between lecturers and students (see the last two items in Table 6), while in slightly more formal situations such as meetings and tutorials Cantonese also seems to have an important role. It is only in presentations, seminars and lectures that English is the usual MOI on the full-time course.

Overall, the picture that emerges from the findings relating to oral communication (Tables 3–6) is that English tends to be mainly used by

Table 6 A Comparison of the Language Use of Lecturers on the Part-Time and Full-Time BSE Courses

Situation	Always English		Usually English		Sometimes English, Sometimes Cantonese		Usually Cantonese		Always Cantonese	
	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT
	At presentations	58%	69%	30%	25%	7%	5%	4%	1%	1%
In seminars	39%	62%	40%	32%	15%	4%	5%	2%	1%	0%
In lectures	36%	58%	47%	32%	9%	7%	6%	3%	2%	0%
In tutorials	15%	29%	31%	48%	44%	22%	8%	1%	2%	0%
In meetings	21%	32%	23%	39%	40%	25%	12%	4%	4%	0%
In informal discussions with students	8%	17%	11%	21%	39%	39%	30%	17%	12%	6%
Chatting to students about non-academic matters	3%	7%	9%	18%	27%	36%	36%	25%	25%	14%

FT = full-time, PT = part-time.

students and Cantonese-speaking lecturers in more formal academic situations such as presentations, seminars and lectures (which emphasize the transmission of information and ideas), while in less formal situations such as meetings, tutorials and discussions (which focus on interaction between the participants), both students and lecturers appear to make greater use of Cantonese, though English still seems to play an important role.

Conclusion

This study of the MOI at HKPU has found that English is the principal medium of written communication on the full-time and part-time BSE degree programs. Examinations, assessed written assignments, recommended books and course handouts are always in English. There is no evidence that written Chinese plays a very significant role in the subjects' studies. However, the picture of language use in the area of oral communication is much less clear. It would appear that English is the usual medium of oral communication in more formal academic situations such as presentations, seminars and lectures, while in less formal situations such as meetings, tutorials and discussions both students and lecturers appear to make greater use of Cantonese, though by no means to the exclusion of English. In informal interactions about non-academic matters students and lecturers generally use Cantonese. The findings also indicate that students and lecturers on the part-time course make greater use of English in both formal and informal situations than their counterparts on the full-time course.

These findings need to be viewed with some caution. In the first place, unlike the studies carried out at CityU in the early 1990s, which surveyed large numbers of students from a range of academic departments, the study reported in this paper focusses on language use in just one department. Although the study provides a reasonably accurate picture of language use in the department of BSE, it would of course be dangerous to suggest that the findings are representative of the MOI at HKPU or any other university in Hong Kong.

Another problem concerns the interpretation of certain questionnaire items relating to oral communication, in particular the "Sometimes English, Sometimes Cantonese" item. This item could be interpreted in a number of ways: (1) in some classes they use English, in others Cantonese; (2) in some classes they use roughly equal amounts of English and Cantonese; (3) they regard Cantonese-English mixed code (i.e. Cantonese

with English terms) as an equal mix of the two languages. It is also worth pointing out that the mid-point in a list of five is an appealing option for those who wish to avoid extremes.

The third reason for caution about the findings stems from question marks over the suitability of questionnaires as a means of collecting data about classroom language use. Although questionnaires can provide useful information about classroom discourse, since the data are based on the subjects' reflections rather than actual classroom recordings, such surveys cannot accurately gauge the nature and function of language use in academic contexts, particularly the extent and complexity of code-mixing and code-switching which, on the evidence of classroom-based research at secondary level, are characteristic of Hong Kong classrooms.

The findings of this study, while providing a useful addition to the relatively small body of research on the MoI at tertiary level in Hong Kong, thus point to the need for classroom-based studies of language use in lectures, seminars, tutorials, and other academic contexts where ideas and information are presented and discussed. The expansion of secondary education in Hong Kong in the 1970s produced a plethora of studies of this nature in the following decade; it will be interesting to see whether the development of tertiary education in the 1990s produces a similar body of research in the coming years.

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