



**母語教學的崎嶇路**  
中學生與家長的態度研究  
**Teaching with Mother Language**  
A Study into Parents' and Students' Attitudes

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## **Youth Study No. 13**

### **Teaching with mother language A Study into Parents' and Students' Views**

#### **SUMMARY REPORT**

## **1. Introduction**

The road to mother tongue teaching in Hong Kong has been zigzagged for a long time. The Education Department has recently decided to implement mother tongue teaching starting in 1998 school year. This has stirred up much debate. Will the standard of English be lowered by mother tongue teaching so that educational opportunities and job competitiveness of the young people will be jeopardized? Are there any solutions which can address the worries of parents and students? Can schools maintain their quality of teaching after the change? How can resources be coordinated to produce qualified teachers within the time frame? In this youth study, we hope to improve our understanding of different people's views through an opinion survey of parents and students as well as various focus group discussions. We also hope to attract further exchange and sharing on this topic among educators, youth workers, research experts, parents as well as policy makers. Our efforts hopefully will lead to more suitable services and measures in the implementation of mother tongue teaching.

## **2. Methodology**

Telephone surveys were employed for this study. Two questionnaires, one for parents and one for students, were set. Standard Public Opinion Program sampling procedures developed by the Social Sciences Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong were adopted. Telephone numbers were first randomly selected from the telephone directories as seed numbers. Subsequently, by employing the plus/minus single drift method, additional numbers were generated from seed numbers to capture possible unlisted numbers. All numbers were then mixed at random to give the final telephone sample. The students survey was conducted from 1 to 4 August 1997. A total of 509 students, who are studying from Form 1 to Form 7, were successfully interviewed. The response rate was 28.4 per cent, whereas the standard error was less than 2.2 per cent. The parents survey was conducted from 4 to 7 and 8 to 11 August 1997. A total of 517 parents, who were parents of children studying From 1 to Form 7, were interviewed. The response rate was 27.3 per cent whereas the standard error was less than 2.1 per cent.

In addition, in-depth focus group interviews were conducted for parents and students. Altogether 9 focus groups were interviewed between the period of 15 August to 3 September 1997. Three groups of parents, three groups of junior secondary students, and three groups of senior secondary students were

interviewed. These groups were selected from different districts which may have parents and students coming from different socio-economic background. The length of each focus group discussion was around an hour and was recorded. Guided discussion was conducted by the researcher according to a pre-set discussion guidelines (refer to appendix 3). Throughout the interviews, respondents were encouraged to express their opinions and feelings freely.

The analysis contains a synthesis of the quantitative data from the two telephone surveys and the qualitative data from the nine focus group interviews.

### **3. Highlights of Major Findings**

- 3.1 Over half for both of the parent respondents (56.5%) and student respondents (55.1%) were in favor of the implementation of teaching in mother tongue. Around a quarter (23.6%) of the parents and 30.4% of the student respondents held the opposite view.
- 3.2 The majority of both parent respondents (87.6%) and student respondents (85.8%) accepted the use of mixed language of English and Cantonese in classroom teaching. Only a small portion of respondents (parents: 4.6%; students: 9.5%) thought it was unacceptable
- 3.3 About two-third (66.5%) of the parent respondents and 71.8% of student respondents agreed that learning would be effective if teaching was conducted in mother language. Less than one-tenth (9.9%) of parent respondents and 15.5% of the student respondents thought the opposite.
- 3.4 Over half (56.5%) of parent respondents and a majority (80.4%) of student respondents believed that students were motivated to learn if mother tongue teaching was conducted. Around one-tenth for both parents (12.2%) and students (10.2%) held the opposite view.
- 3.5 61.5% of parents and 73.6% of student respondents thought the students' standard of English would be lowered if taught in mother language. Only less than one-tenth for both parents (8.1%) and students (8.3%) thought the opposite.
- 3.6 43.1% of parents and over half (50.1%) of student respondents also believed that their competitiveness would be eroded if mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction in classrooms. However, about one-fifth (19.3%) of parents and one-third (32.6%) of student respondents thought the opposite.
- 3.7 When asked if they would accept their schools switch to teach in mother language, about two-third (67.9%) of the parent respondents and 63.2% of student respondents would accept the move. However, around one-quarter (25.1%) of parent respondents and 30.5% student respondents would not accept.

- 3.8 For those parent and student respondents who accepted the change, claimed the following as the top three reasons: mother tongue teaching would facilitate effective learning (parents: 48.1%; students: 61.9%), students had no choice (parents: 14.2%; students: 20.0%) and it would be the trend of the society (parents: 14.5%; students: 2.7%).
- 3.9 Those who did not accept schools to change mentioned the following top three reasons: did not want to adjust again (parents: 17.1%; students: 56.0%), worry to lower the English standard (parents: 56.6%; students: 29.5%) and worry to be less competitive in future (parents: 19.4%; students: 9.6%).
- 3.10 Less than half student respondents (49.2%) claimed that they were more suited to learn in Chinese. Another 39.1% said they were more suited to learn in English. Only around one-tenth (10.9%) claimed it would be suitable for them to learn in both languages.
- 3.11 About one-third (34.7%) of the student respondents were confident to speak fluent English. Around two-third (67.8%) of them were confident to express themselves in writing. A majority of students (83.2%) were confident that they were, in general, able to understand spoken English. 40.3% of the student respondents were confident to use internet for learning.
- 3.12 Parent respondents believed that the top three effective methods to improve English were: attending tutorial classes (42.9%), reading more (23.8%) and watching television or listening to radio. Students respondents, (17.4%), chose the top three effective methods to be reading more (51.6%), watching television or listening to radio (43.8%) and reading magazines or newspaper (23.7%). However, over one-fifth (21.1%) of parent respondents said they were unable to assist their children to improve English standard.
- 3.13 A majority of student respondents (79.4%) would not consider studying in mainland China, whereas about two-third (64.2%) of the parent respondents held the same view. 16.2% of students said they would consider studying in the mainland, whereas only 9.5% parent respondents would do so.
- 3.14 Over half (52.8%) of student respondents agreed that implementation of teaching in mother tongue to be extended up to Form 3. More than one-third (38.2%) of parents held the same view. Less than one-fifth for both parents (19.0%) and students (16.2%) said they did not support teaching in mother tongue.
- 3.15 Above one-third (35.2%) of student respondents worried that using Chinese textbooks in secondary schools might not match English textbooks used in post-secondary level in language.
- 3.16 A vast majority of parent respondents (92.8%) wish schools to teach Mandarin, whereas two-third (65.5%) of student respondents thought the same.

- 3.17 Both English and Mandarin would be the languages students wished to learn in future. 48.4% parent and 59.0% of student respondents thought it would be important to learn English. For Mandarin, the percentage for parent respondents was 38.3% and for students was 36.5%.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Language Medium of Instruction in Classroom Teaching is in a Confused Situation.

Despite a consultant report dated back to 1982 that proposed the government should implement mother tongue teaching in all the schools, today there are still much controversies on the issue which are far from being settled.

The dilemma is reflected in the findings of this study which indicates there are many variations on the language medium in classroom teaching. Although most of the schools reports to the Education Department that they are "teaching in English", the reality is different. The spectrum of variation include "teaching different subjects in mixed languages", "teaching different classes in different languages", "teaching with mixed languages in different sessions", "teaching in English with Chinese textbooks", "teaching in mixed languages with English textbooks", "teaching in Chinese with English textbooks" and so forth.

The survey results also show that over half (56.5%) of the parent respondents agree that teaching should be in mother language. A majority (87.6%) of them indicate that they accept a mixed language in classroom teaching. 66.5% of the parent respondents believed that students can learn more by using Cantonese as the instruction medium and 71.8% of the student respondents have a similar view. Over half of the parents (56.5%) and a majority (80.4%) of the students agreed that mother tongue teaching will motivate students to learn.

Nevertheless, in actual practice, it is a very confused situation. Perpetuation of this phenomenon might be due to the fact that there is a practical necessity for learning English in Hong Kong society. In consideration of the strong expectations from parents, schools are often torn between the ideal of teaching in mother tongue for effective learning or teaching students in English for better career and educational opportunities. For a long time, therefore, teaching in mixed languages of Cantonese and English has become a mainstream.

## **4.2 Parents and Students are Worried about Possible Consequence of Mother tongue teaching.**

### **(a) Lowering of English standard:**

The survey results show that 61.5% of the parent respondents and near three-quarters (73.6%) of the student respondents are very much concerned that mother tongue teaching will lower their English standard. Most of them stress that English language skill has become an indispensable asset for survival in today's society. The standard of English for students must be maintained.

### **(b) Reducing the chance for further studies or employment:**

The importance of English language for further studies or seeking employment in Hong Kong are understandable in views of the characteristics of our present economy and job structure. Despite the fact that both parents and students understand that teaching in Cantonese is a more effective learning methods, they still prefer to look for schools with higher English standard so that the chance for further studies or employment will not be lowered.

### **(c) Reducing the competitiveness of students:**

Another worry of parents and students are the possibility that mother tongue teaching may reduce the competitiveness of students among others. In view of the fact that future occupations of Hong Kong will probably centre around finance, insurance, stocks and foreign exchange, and tourism, one can see that both English and Chinese language abilities are required. It will be undesirable for students to be unable to maintain their competitiveness in the society.

## **4.3 There are much Confusion and Misunderstanding on "Instruction Medium" and "Language Ability"..**

### **(a) Confusion on the conceptual difference between "medium of instruction" and "language ability":**

The confused situation of using language medium in classroom is closely related to the confusion on the concepts between "medium of instruction" and "language ability". Medium of instruction, refers to the language medium used for teaching in classrooms. Teaching in English means using English as the medium of instruction for students, whereas mother tongue teaching means using Cantonese to teach in classrooms. This clearly shows that the medium of instruction plays a vital role in effective learning. One of the problems in using English as the medium of instruction is that students may not understand the medium rather than the subject matter. As a

result, students learn ineffectively in physics, mathematics or chemistry, not because they lack a scientific mind but because of the barrier created by the language used in instruction.

Thus, having a good language ability in English will be beneficial in learning, but the vice versa is not necessarily true. For those who may be good in English, mother tongue teaching will be a good solution for the problem.

**(b) Misunderstanding that "English language ability" will improve if using "English as the medium of instruction":**

Another misunderstanding is that students and parents believe that student's English language ability will be improved if using English as the medium of instruction. This is based on the speculation that the more exposure to an English speaking environment, the better the English language ability will be.

The survey results show that it is a spurious relationship. Despite the fact that 83.2% of the student respondents claimed that in general they understand English in listening and 67.8% mentioned they are able to express themselves in writing, only around 34.7% feel confident to speak English fluently. At the same time, nearly half (44.0%) of the student respondents are taught in English with English textbook. Only less than one-fifth (19.9%) of the student respondents are using Chinese textbooks and are taught in mother language, i.e. Cantonese. The findings further state that "English language ability" will improve if using "English as the medium of instruction" is not the case.

**(c) Misunderstanding that "English language ability" will be eroded if using "Mother Language as the medium of instruction":**

Quite often, students and parents also have another misunderstanding. They believe that students' "English language ability" will be eroded if using "mother language as the medium of instruction". This is of course another deceptive belief which worries many parents and students. In fact, the survey findings reveal that nearly half (49.2%) of the student respondents regarded themselves suitable to learn in mother language. However, the phenomenon that most students and parents choose to ignore is that learning English needs special effort. They instead blame using mother language as the medium of instruction and argue that it will erode students' English language ability. This attitude is in fact quite thought-provoking.

#### **4.4 A Number of Issues are Related to Mother Tongue Teaching: Support Disadvantaged Families, Learning Mandarin or Using Simplified Chinese Characters.**

**(a) Supports to students from disadvantaged families:**

Findings of the research indicate that a vast majority of the parent respondents (92.5%) express that they are unable to assist or supervise their children in doing homework. This is particularly true for those parents who are workers in the manufacturing sector, are homemakers or have only primary or less education. Besides, another one-fifth (21.1%) of parent respondents testify that they lack the ability to teach English to their children. This is especially true for parents with poor education or low income.

It will be important for the government to consider how to allocate extra resources to assist and support students coming from the disadvantaged families so as to eliminate these structural hindrances for effective learning.

**(b) Most parents wish students to learn Mandarin, but there are no visible signs for the request of using Mandarin as medium of instruction.**

The vast majority (92.8%) of parent respondents wish there were Mandarin classes in their children's schools. About two-third (65.5%) of student respondents have similar views. In fact, the survey results also indicate that just less than half (44.7%) of student respondents are currently studying or planning to learn Mandarin. This reflects an undisputed importance of Mandarin in today's society. However, regarding using Mandarin as the medium of instruction, the request from both parents or students are far from visible.

**(c) There is also no urgency to consider using simplified Chinese characters in textbooks:**

Although there has been discussion on using simplified characters in textbooks on the controversy of mother tongue teaching, the demand from both parents and student respondents are not obvious. At present, simplified Chinese characters are still far from popular in many areas of the society, such as newspapers, magazines, books, advertisement, lyrics and so forth. There is no urgency to consider this issue when discussing mother tongue teaching.



## 5. Recommendations

In view of the above discussion and analysis, the Federation recommends:

### 5.1 The Government Should Consider a Comprehensive and Strategic Plan on Language Teaching Policy.

In response to the worries of parents and students, the government should consider a comprehensive and forward-looking plan on the issue of language teaching. The plan should be able to enhance effective learning among the younger generations, to accommodate the socio-economic development of the society and the manpower demand in the changing economic development. It should also be taking into consideration the effective learning and international competitiveness of our young people in the coming century.

### 5.2 In Implementing the Strategy for Mother Tongue Teaching, the Direction Should be Based on "Chinese as Foundation, English for Application":

It is quite clear that majority of the population in Hong Kong are Chinese. It is also obvious that proficiency in both English and Chinese languages will be of great value for the young to be competitive in the highly internationalized economy. As a result, in order to achieve the objective that our next generation be well equipped with proficiency in both languages, it would be important to follow the direction that our language policy be based on "Chinese as foundation, English for application". This follows that we should maintain students with a good standard of English in the process when we proceed to teach in mother tongue. Worries of parents and students be resolved only if the government is able to put emphasis on both .

### 5.3 Extra and Enough Resources Should be Allocated to Facilitate the Implementation of Related Policies. These include:

#### (a) Strengthening the training of language teachers as well as increasing the ratio of language teachers to students:

In order to achieve the objective of teaching in the mother language, the government should allocate extra and enough resources in response to the planned changes. It will be important to strengthen the training of language

teachers on one hand, and to increase the ratio of language teachers to students on the other. This enables language teachers to be released from the burden of overwork and return to concentrating on their primary duty --- language teaching.

**(b) Additional educational equipment for language teaching:**

The importance of educational equipment in language teaching, such as teaching equipment, language laboratory, wireless headsets and so forth is very obvious and understandable. It is significant to allocate extra as well as enough resources for schools to upgrade or add to their educational equipment for language teaching. This will provide a better interactive learning environment for language teaching.

**5.4 The Government should Implement Mother Tongue Teaching in Primary and Junior Secondary.**

To follow the principle of mother tongue teaching, it is recommended that the government should implement teaching in Cantonese in classrooms for primary and junior secondary. This also includes the use of Chinese textbooks. For continuity of language in further studies, if schools are allowed to exercise autonomy to choose teaching in English for upper forms, the requirements for these schools should be clearly laid down. The guidelines should at least include: the right conditions for teaching English, such as the number of language teachers who are qualified to teach in English and availability of teaching facilities; and the level of English standard for the students. This guideline should be developed in consultation with educational experts. It should be set with a clear and objective standard so that schools and teachers can follow.

**5.5 It is Recommended to Review Related Policies to Facilitate the Implementation of Mother Tongue Teaching:**

**(a) To consider using Chinese textbooks:**

As the medium of instruction will change to solely Chinese, i.e. Cantonese, it will be quite natural to use Chinese textbook to match the classroom teaching. It is recommended that the Education Authority to consider using Chinese textbooks.

**(b) To consider the unification of the English syllabus A and B in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination:**

Historically, there was a close relation between the English syllabus A and the entrance examination of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. A large number of students choose to study the syllabus A as one of the requirements for further studies. However, with the implementation of Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS), the function of English syllabus A has gradually disappeared. It is about time to review the relationship of the two syllabuses. It is recommended that The Examination Authority to consider the unification of the English syllabus A and B in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

**(c) To set the standard of English and Chinese languages requirements for further studies:**

The requirement on proficiency in English language is a universal criterion to be satisfied if a student wishes to further his studies. It will be important to review these standards and to clarify them so that students would be fully aware of them. A reference may be made to the operation of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for the setting up of English standard for university entrance. A similar mechanism should also be set up for Chinese language as the university entrance requirement.

**(d) To review the requirements for English and Chinese for the recruitment and appraisal of civil servants and government subvented bodies:**

A parallel mechanism should also be developed in the public sector as well as those of subvented non-governmental organizations. Requirements on English and Chinese language abilities for recruitment or appraisal should also be clearly set up. The recent change of government policy on the assessment of academic qualifications from using the commonwealth as the backbone to using Hong Kong as the basis for recognition is a positive move for the Hong Kong graduates.