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INTRODUCTION

In Hong Kong, English language teachers are urged to use English “in all English lessons and beyond: teachers should teach English through English and encourage learners to interact with one another in English” (Curriculum Development Council, 2004, p. 109).

So, it is not surprising that teachers of English in Hong Kong feel a sense of guilt every time they use Cantonese in their English classes. How many times have English teachers (particularly teachers-in-training) been warned that Cantonese must not be used in English classes? How many times have English teachers been told that every time Cantonese is used, an opportunity for students to learn English is lost? And how often do English teachers (guiltily) use Cantonese in spite of these warnings?

Our goal in writing this brief “guidebook” for the use of Cantonese (L1) when teaching English (L2) is to rid English teachers of their guilt! Students’ L1 is not an enemy to the development of high levels of English. Cantonese, used judiciously in the English classroom, can serve to scaffold English language learning.
The Underlying Assumption of This Handbook

The planned use of the L1 when teaching English supports and enhances the learning of English

Why is there a “monolingual” (use-only-English) policy?

- *Interference*: one argument given for the English-only policy is that the sounds, grammar, structures and meanings of Cantonese will transfer to English, and will interfere with L2 learning. Therefore, the two languages must be kept separate at all costs. However, even if Cantonese and English are kept separate in the classroom, it is unlikely that they will be kept distinct in the minds (or on the tongues) of the learners. The bilingual brain does not store the two languages in separate ‘boxes’ which are completely isolated from each other. Rather the two languages are in contact and ‘talk’ to each other. The drawings below help make this clear.
Maximum exposure: another argument for the L2-only policy is that, in this way, students will hear as much English as possible. This argument is based on the assumption that the more exposure to the L2, the higher L2 proficiency will be. However this argument has been shown to be incorrect; there is considerable research evidence to show that the L1 can be used to scaffold L2 learning. Put simply, if students do not understand what they are hearing (or reading) in English, they are unlikely to learn it. Furthermore, with the growth of the internet, You-Tube, blogs, and so forth, opportunities to hear and read English outside the classroom have expanded exponentially in recent years.

Arguments for modifying the “monolingual” policy:

Language is a cognitive tool: the best tool we have to think through problems, evaluate solutions, and understand difficult concepts is language. And the most powerful tool we possess to mediate thinking is our first language. Using our first language for this purpose also helps us to discover and express ideas in the L2. Other resources exist, of course, and we make use of them in English classes: art (paintings; photos; drawings), computers, dictionaries, etc.

Language is for communicating: There are many things we communicate using language. These include ideas, emotions, and identities. Bilingual and multilingual individuals regularly make use of their language repertoires to understand what and how each differs in the expression of ideas, emotions, and identities. Additionally, bilingual and multilingual people regularly make use of a mix of their languages, giving them subtle and complex ways of conveying their ideas, emotions and identities. In Hong Kong,
many teachers of English are bilingual or multilingual, and they should be recognized as providing *relevant* and *attainable* linguistic models for their students.

- **A multilingual model is more appropriate for today’s world:** The most important role that English now plays in today’s world is as a *lingua franca*. It is adopted as the common language of communication by bilingual and multilingual people for whom English is not a first language. The great majority of communication in English is between people who come from non-English backgrounds. There are many more L2 speakers of English than there are first language speakers and this has led to the development of varieties of English which, as in Hong Kong, may provide a more appropriate classroom model than an imported “Native Speaker” one.
GUIDELINES

The Aim of These Guidelines Is To Help Students Learn English by Teacher and Student Use of Cantonese in A Planned and Judicious Manner

English teachers in Hong Kong want to help their students learn English as quickly as possible. The argument we wish to make is that there are circumstances in which the use of Cantonese not only supports the learning of English, but makes the process more meaningful and more efficient.

1. MAKE CONTENT COMPREHENSIBLE.

   a) *Build from the known*

      One way of making content and language comprehensible is to use content that is familiar to the students. Familiarity is not the same thing as simplicity. Sadly, English teachers often feel that in order to provide material that the students can understand, they have to simplify and trivialize it. In the two examples given below, the initial use of Cantonese by the students serves to support the discovery and expression of ideas which will scaffold entry into English. As the activities (projects) continue, Cantonese will continue to be the backdrop against which they can check the meaning they are attempting to express in English.

      Example 1: make use of ideas and content taught in the Chinese class (or other content classes) to provide material for the English class. Doing so has the advantages of
using cognitively complex content already familiar to the students rather than using simple, trivial and boring content, and ii) using content that is of cultural significance.

**Example 2:** ask students to tell a personal story in Cantonese. This should be followed by writing the story in English, then telling it in English; or telling the story in English, then writing it in English. Carrying out this three-stage process (Cantonese/English/English) has the advantages of i) being able to express something of emotional and cognitive, identity-confirming, importance, and ii) providing motivation to make the effort to write as expressively, meaningfully and powerfully in English as students do with little effort in Cantonese. Bilingual dictionaries and English textbooks are obvious resources.

In the two examples above, the students will make use of Cantonese to sort out the content they wish to express and then work to say/write it in English. This is much more efficient and effective than trying to use English-only (See Behan, Turnbull and Spek (1997) below). There is little need for teachers to use Cantonese in these examples. Rather, using English to respond to questions that students might ask in Cantonese, provides an optimal opportunity: students are asking questions that are meaningful and important to them, and are eager to understand the response.
b) Provide translations for difficult grammar and vocabulary

Providing translations to clarify the meaning of words, phrases and grammatical structures is efficient and “allows students to progress more quickly to the more important stage of active use and internalization” (Littlewood, 2009, pg 8).

Example 1: use of Cantonese by teachers: translate conceptually difficult lexical items, or complex grammar explanations into Cantonese. This saves a great deal of instructional time, and permits the teacher to spend much more time continuing the pedagogical activity in English.
Example 2: use of Cantonese by students: students should feel free to ask their teacher “How do you say XXX in English?”, or “Does YYY mean ZZZ in Cantonese?”. Bilingual dictionaries and internet dictionaries are, of course, a wonderful resource, but a quick translation at the “moment of need” is optimal. Again, this saves a great deal of instructional time. However, there is a fine line between offering a translation when it is needed and offering a translation when, with a little “push”, the student would be able to retrieve the lexical item or phrase.

Ernesto Macaro (2009, pp. 44 - 47) provided some excellent examples of teacher translations into Chinese of lexical items and phrases initially provided in English. What is particularly interesting is that Macaro then played back the tape-recording of the episodes to
individual learners and asked each learner to talk about his/her response to the code-switch. In one episode, the teacher used the word “adolescence”, and then gave “teenager” and “adolescence” as Chinese translations. Feng Tao, one of the students watching the tape-recording of the episode, said: “When she mentioned ‘adolescence’…it was new to me…at the beginning I felt confused and guessed it was ‘puberty’ when I heard ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’…my guess was confirmed by her Chinese.” Here, we can see that the teacher’s switch to the L1 provided evidence that Feng Tao’s original guess was close, yet provided a better equivalent. Macaro concluded that teachers’ translations triggered a number of strategic reactions on the part of the students. In general, these strategic reactions served to support their learning of English vocabulary. Macaro concluded: “What emerges is an increasing possibility that banning the first language from the communicative second language classroom may in fact be reducing the cognitive and metacognitive opportunities to learners. We have some evidence that some items of vocabulary might be better learnt through a teacher providing first-language equivalents because this triggers deeper semantic processing than might occur by providing second-language definitions or paraphrases” (pg. 49).

c) Use cross-linguistic comparisons

Comparing the ways the different languages behave grammatically and express things can also be very useful.

Example 1: In many contexts, Chinese prefers to order information from ‘big’ to ‘small’, while English often prefers to go from ‘small’ to ‘big’. Comparing the ways envelopes are addressed in Chinese and English illustrate this well, as can be seen in the drawings below.
The RCLEAMS HKIEd
10 Lo Ping Road
Tai Po Hongkong

The English Version

Hongkong Tai Po
10 Lo Ping Road HKIEd
The RCLEAMS

The Chinese Version
Example 2: Chinese follows natural or ‘logical’ word order. This means things are usually described in the order that they happen. In the Chinese sentence below the order of events is therefore expressed chronologically. Note how the English translation is able to alter the order by placing the final action at the beginning of the sentence.

我吃完飯，你再打電話俾我。
ngo5 sik6 jyun4 faan6, nei5 zoi3 daa2 din6 waa2 bei2 ngo5（廣東話）

I eat-A food, you then phone give me
Call me after I have finished dinner (Tai 1985:50)

This preference for describing things in the order in which they happen also means Chinese usually places the reason before the effect. So for example, in the two sentences which follow, Sentence A is in the preferred Chinese order and Sentence B is in the preferred English order.

Sentence A (Preferred Chinese order)
Because it was raining, the match was cancelled

Sentence B (Preferred English order)
The match was cancelled, because it was raining.

Note that both languages can use both orders, but when Chinese uses the ‘English’ order it is for special effect. Similarly, when English uses the ‘Chinese’ order, it is for special effect.
Teachers who make comparisons and contrasts between the languages in this way can help students learn and increase their interest in languages and language learning.

2. **FOCUS ON STUDENT PROCESS AND PRODUCT IN TASK COMPLETION**

By process, we mean the “doing” of a task, activity or project. Language learning occurs during the process. By product, we mean the final, completed form. Often the product is the piece of work (oral or written) that is assigned a grade.

*During the process of doing a task, activity or project, using both Cantonese and English may be useful.* Students should be allowed, even encouraged, to use the L1 or code-mixing when developing with other students the meaning of what the teacher (or a text) has said. It is a waste of time to tell students not to use Cantonese when working through cognitively/emotionally complex ideas, as they will do so covertly if not allowed to do so overtly. By being able to use Cantonese initially, learners are able to know the full range of what they want to express in English.
YOU MUST USE ENGLISH ONLY

I LIKE ER ER CAT...

I LIKE ER ER TO SWIM

YOU CAN USE CHINESE IF YOU NEED TO.

ME TOO, THAT'S A GREAT PLACE

I LIKE TO SWIM IN THE SHATTY SWIMMING POOL BECAUSE THE SURROUNDINGS ARE SO PLEASANT.
The final product should use English to the extent possible. In early stages of English language learning, code-mixing should be permitted. As time passes, teachers should help students to find ways to express their meanings in English.

3. USE ENGLISH FOR CLASSROOM ROUTINES

Teachers should establish regularly used classroom routines in English. These routines include giving instructions for activities, opening, transitioning and closing lessons, and maintaining discipline. Carrying out these routines in English provide many genuinely authentic opportunities for using English in meaningful ways. Once routines are established, even the less routine disciplinary and task management issues can be dealt with in English.

DOING YOUR OWN ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is the term used when teachers have questions about their teaching, and go about searching for answers in their own classrooms. Even though published research may have dealt with similar questions to those that teachers have, the context of the research may be very different from the teachers, and seem of little relevance to them. It is for this reason that we suggest you try out mini-experiments in your class. Here is an example based on a small-scale study carried out by a group of teachers of French as a foreign language (FSL) (Behan, Turnbull and Spek, 1997).
Laurie, the FSL teacher, was quite concerned that the level of her students’ French was not up to the rather difficult and complex content she was expected to teach although she knew her students would have no difficulty carrying out the activities in English. Up until that point, Laurie had meticulously followed the classroom monolingual rule: “we only speak French in this class”. But she decided that for one activity, she would try something different.

Laurie’s students had been seeking out information about the lifestyle of First Nations people in Canada. In small groups, they were to work collaboratively to combine the information they had in order to understand the relationships between the climate, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, etc. As well as work out the relationships, they had to prepare for an oral presentation they would make the next day to the whole class on their discoveries. It was made clear to the students that, as always, they must use French in their groups.

Two groups were sent off to the cafeteria to do their work, and two groups stayed in the classroom. The groups in the classroom were closely monitored by Laurie who reminded the students to use French whenever they slipped into English. Both the talk of the students as they collaborated on this task, and their oral presentations the next day, were tape-recorded.

Not surprisingly, the groups of students in the cafeteria, who were not monitored for their use of French, used more English than the monitored groups.

Interestingly, and seemingly paradoxically, the oral presentations given the next day in French by the groups who spoke more English, were judged to be better than those who spoke more French during the preparation time. Why do you think this would be so?
Laurie and her two colleagues, Miles and Jane, argued that it was because the unmonitored students used their first language, English, to mediate their task understanding so that they could then work with the ideas in French. And, in fact, by examining the tape-recorded talk amongst the students, the teachers were able to hear that the unmonitored groups got busy right away figuring out what they had to do and talked about the ideas they had for their presentation in English. They then spent all the rest of the time figuring out how to say *what they now knew they wanted to say* in French. The monitored groups, however, barely got beyond figuring out what they were expected to do. The oral presentations of the groups who used some English in preparing for their presentation were more coherent, more complex in the expression of the relationships between climate and food and clothes worn, and their vocabulary was richer and more sophisticated (they had had time to use their dictionaries). Behan, Turnbull and Spek (1997) concluded that “L1 use can both support and enhance L2 development” (p. 41). It did so by helping the students to efficiently deal with task management. Additionally their L1 was an efficient and effective tool for mediating their understanding of cognitively demanding content.

What are some of the questions you have about the use of Cantonese in your English classes?

The more specific your question is, the more likely you are to obtain a useable answer. For example, you might ask: Do my students remember better those words I translated into Cantonese, or those words I defined in English?
SUMMARY

In this Handbook we have suggested ways in which English teachers can use Cantonese in the Hong Kong English classrooms. The key principle is to use Cantonese in ways that will help the students learn English. This means that there is room for both the teacher and the students to use Cantonese when they are learning English, as long as the teacher can justify this by saying the use of Cantonese will help ‘scaffold’ the learning of English.

We hope that you find the Handbook useful and it will help free you from any guilt you may have felt from using Cantonese in the English class. Bilingual and multilingual teachers should make use of their multilingual skills to help their students become bilingual and multilingual.
RESOURCES TO FURTHER YOUR UNDERSTANDING


