

Context and constraints: Immersion in Hong Kong and Mainland China

Philip Hoare

The demand for bilingualism through education in Asia

AAA Catholic English College Parent-Teacher Association demands the Appeals Committee allow Our School to continue using English as the medium of instruction.

Advertisement placed in SCMP, 22nd Dec 1997

We, your College Council, deeply regret that in the next academic year, Chinese as the medium of instruction will be imposed on our college. [...] We acknowledge that you deserve a far better treatment for all your hard work and effort than the stress and uncertainties which have now befallen you.

Advertisement placed in SCMP, 15th Dec 1997

I don't think I need to further emphasise the importance of English to Hong Kong. Quality English education is our top education priority.

Michael Suen, Secretary for Education, Hong Kong, 2008

The initial proposal – to make English the medium of instruction for all subjects from elementary to high school by 2010 – provoked controversy and resistance immediately.

The Straits Times (Singapore) S. Korea Correspondent, 11th Feb 2008

Sources said that 5 percent to 10 percent of the university courses will be taught in English within 3 years.

Xinhua News Agency, October 24, 2001

Fifty local elementary schools will be approved to open pilot bilingual courses every year, bringing the city's bilingual schools to 500 by 2010, education officials said yesterday.

Shanghai Daily April 28, 2004

Parents had very positive response towards [immersion]. This was why there were 3000 students signing up for this, nearly blocking the road, while we only admitted 200. We called the police and the police station sent out officers to maintain order so that people can get through the road.

Principal, Xi'an Middle School, 2007

Outline

- The demand for bilingualism through education in Asia;
- Immersion in Hong Kong:
 - Features, outcomes, classrooms;
- 'Immersion' in Xi'an:
 - Features, outcomes, classrooms;
- Applying immersion.

Features of Immersion in Hong Kong

- Late immersion: 25% of the age group taught through English, Grades 7-13;
- Selection by academic ability;
- Prestigious schools + English is high status so few parents reject the opportunity;
- Whole school, few subjects excepted;
- Same curriculum as mainstream, Chinese language schools;
- Teachers are academically and professionally qualified but no differentiation between training for subject teaching through English or Chinese - i.e. no recognition that immersion is *different*;

Outcomes of Immersion in Hong Kong

- Over 3 years, English immersion gives students an advantage in English but a disadvantage in other subjects. *Yip, Tsang & Cheung, 2003*
- Over 7 years, English immersion gives students an advantage in English and no disadvantage in other subjects. *Tsang, 2008*
- Hong Kong students perform very well internationally in reading, mathematics & science. *OECD, 2008*
- General belief that standards are not as high as they need to be or should be:
 - (English in kindergarten) + (3-4 hours per week x grades 1-6) + (English (70%+ of the curriculum) x grades 7-13)

Immersion classrooms in Hong Kong

- Teacher-centred;
- Rich, complex content & correspondingly rich & complex teacher talk, often monologue;
- Little student talk, usually one word responses, teachers often accept Chinese;
- Academic writing is often copied or memorised extracts - this is accepted by teachers. *Kong, 2004*;
- Frequent, traditional, high-stakes assessment, curriculum dominated by public assessments at grades 11 & 13.

Transcript 1

- Sub-topic: How different lenses refract light;
- Easy to understand, with prior knowledge and diagrams;
- Good classroom atmosphere: friendly and purposeful, students pay attention;
- No extended spoken student contributions (they draw lens & light ray diagrams);
- No written follow-up work;
- Not challenged to express relationships between refraction and lens shape.

What factors might influence processes and outcomes?

- School status: Based on tradition and academic success, NOT (directly) success in developing bilingualism
 - Content teachers' success depends on students' *academic* success: Little pressure to support students' English growth;
 - Teachers may avoid the challenges of English use rather than face them: language switching is common;
- High % of the age-group in immersion
 - Not seen as demanding special skills from teachers or commitment from students;
- *Late* immersion
 - Greater pressure on academic subject content;
 - More teachers may be involved in immersion;
 - Coordination and management of immersion curriculum is more difficult;
- Attitudes towards English and Chinese *Lai, 2005*
 - Cantonese: high integrative motivation;
 - English: high instrumental motivation.

Features of 'Immersion' in Xi'an

- China-Canada-USA-English Immersion Project began as immersion in kindergartens and primary schools: *"For the English teaching reform, to deal with our problems of [the] inefficiency of traditional English teaching [and] because [for] the current policies and China's economic development they need more and more people to use English to work. [...] We want to educate children to be capable to use English to study, to live, to work in the future."* Prof Qiang Haiyan
- Originally no plans to continue at middle schools level but parental & school pressure persuaded them to try;
- In 3 *middle* schools:
 - Very few lessons per week;
 - Content is not from the standard curriculum but is school-selected academic content;
 - Taught by teachers of English.

Outcomes of immersion in Xi'an

- No evaluation of the project in terms of students' English language gains in middle schools;
- Principals and parents are delighted with students' progress;
- The project is seen as a major selling point for the schools involved *because it provides additional English*;
- Many students are very fluent but may lack the ability to express more complex meanings associated with the content they have been studying. Weaker students may acquire very little English.

Immersion classrooms in Xi'an

- Very large classes – 50-60 students;
- Very interactive lessons (i.e. a great many student turns and some long group discussions);
- Students are very highly motivated to try to use English;
- Content is simple but often factually loaded;
- No explicit language focus and often little new language except vocabulary. Tendency to practise language rather than learn new language.

Transcript 2

- No content of any depth;
- No complex teacher talk expressing new ideas;
- Students probably know the content already;
- A lot of student contributions;
- Highly motivated class;
- Language practice rather than new learning.

What factors might influence processes and outcomes?

- > Immersion is probably illegal in the PRC. *Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2001*;
- > Rationale for the project is to improve English;
- > Content teachers lack English proficiency;
- > English teachers are challenged by the content;
- > Teachers explanations lack depth and complexity so teacher language lacks complexity. No focus on language-content relationships. If the content is too demanding, teachers may omit it;
- > Students lack exposure to and use of increasingly rich language;
- > Students are assessed on the content but success for teachers is measured by how well the school believes the students are learning English.

Applying immersion

- > In all contexts, the immersion model assumes:
 - students have to engage with new curriculum content in the second language and, in doing so, have to use (and learn) new language;
 - the content cannot be ignored because it is part of the local curriculum;
 - teachers recognise responsibility for content and the second language;
 - the *quality* of language learning is matched by the *quantity*.
- > Language education programmes exist in their own contexts, with opportunities and constraints;
- > In Hong Kong & Xi'an, development of *academic* English is a major objective;
- > Hong Kong: If teachers can accept some responsibility for students' English development, students' English gains may begin to match content learning;
 - *A stronger and more successful Hong Kong version of immersion can evolve;*
- > Xi'an: Content can be treated as if it were part of the formal curriculum – students cannot escape the more complex academic language required to express meanings;
 - *In the foreseeable future, middle schools in Xi'an are unlikely to become immersion schools. CBI based on strong academic content provides a model for experiments with immersion in the future in Xi'an or elsewhere in China.*

Transcript 3

- > A grade 9 humanities lesson in Hong Kong;
- > Topic: Disadvantages of modern farming methods;
- > Teacher demands:
 - Longer, more elaborated responses from students. Students discuss geography issues together in groups;
 - Use of the English required to express content meaning: verbs & connectives expressing a cause-effect relationship (*leads to, results in, therefore*);
- > Teacher provides:
 - Supportive environment: encouragement, praise, very friendly atmosphere;
 - Language scaffolding: prompts, graphic;
 - Rehearsal time.

NB: This example is very untypical of Hong Kong classrooms.

Transcript 4

- > Grade 7 'Science in society' class in Xi'an;
- > Topic: Classification & classification of living things;
- > Teacher demands:
 - Correct content: the classification into vertebrates, invertebrates, etc. must be correct;
 - English use appropriate to the content: "*.... can be classified into two groups*", "*The first group is XXX and the second group is YYY*" "*P belongs to Q group*", etc.;
- > Teacher provides:
 - A rich content and appropriately complex language;
 - Cognitive challenge through the content;
 - Language and content scaffolding: Graphic, prompts, rehearsal time, etc.

	breathe	reproduce	on their bodies	body temperature
fish	gill	lay eggs	scales	changeable
amphibian	gill/lung	lay eggs	skin	changeable
reptile	lung	lay eggs	scales	changeable
bird	lung	lay eggs	feathers	constant
mammal	lung	give birth to live babies	hair/fur	constant



Conclusion

- Immersion has a great deal to offer to students and teachers in different parts of the world;
- Huge demand for language education in Asia. The potential of immersion is recognised but matching the model with the constraints of many different contexts presents a major challenge;
- Exchanges of ideas and experience across contexts can help educators develop language education programmes which match their own needs but which draw on the combined wisdom of many years and many places.