Attitudes Towards English and Cantonese Among Hong Kong Chinese University Lecturers

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This article describes a study that used primarily in-depth interviews to investigate the attitudes of 20 lecturers towards the English medium of instruction policy at a Hong Kong university at the moment of the former British colony’s transition to Chinese sovereignty. The results of the study document the overall attitudes of the lecturers towards the policy, their reasons for supporting it, their problems in applying it, and their reported use of Cantonese to overcome their problems in applying it. The rather ambivalent attitude towards English that the study reveals is seen as indicative of the sociolinguistic tensions within the society at large. The article concludes with a discussion of ways to tackle the perceived problems.

In accordance with the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, since July 1, 1997, the former British colony of Hong Kong has been a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, with guarantees of a high degree of autonomy in the running of its affairs and the maintenance of its capitalist way of life and personal freedoms. According to unofficial estimates, the L1 of over 98% of Hong Kong people is Cantonese, a spoken variety of Chinese that differs from the official spoken standard used on the mainland, Putonghua (although Hong Kong and the mainland share the same character-based writing system, Modern Standard Chinese). In spite of the fact that the great majority of its population speaks Cantonese, Hong Kong promotes itself as a bilingual society. English is widely used in business, government, and education and is the language of upward and outward mobility (So,

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1 In Hong Kong the traditional character system (with some characters adapted to reflect certain specific features of Cantonese) has been retained whereas the mainland has introduced a system of simplified characters.

2 The official policy is in fact to promote trilingualism (in spoken Cantonese, English, and Putonghua) and biliteracy (in written Chinese and English).
whereas Cantonese is used in the home and informal social encounters and is the language of ethnic solidarity. With the transition of sovereignty from Britain to China and the inevitable replacement of English in some official functions (e.g., some areas of the law and public administration) by written Chinese and spoken Cantonese and Putonghua, concern is regularly expressed in society about the future of the former colonial language. English is considered to be important to Hong Kong, which sees itself as an international city and point of contact between the burgeoning Chinese economy of which it is now a part and Western and other Asian countries that want to do business with China.

In spite of Hong Kong’s status as a British colony, until the advent of mass compulsory secondary education in the 1970s and the introduction of mass university education in the late 1980s and 1990s, only a small educated elite of Hong Kong Chinese spoke English. The demand for English speakers increased exponentially during the 1980s and 1990s as Hong Kong’s prosperity rapidly increased and the former colony was transformed from a low-value-added manufacturing centre to a knowledge- and communication-based service economy. Mass education dramatically increased the number of Hong Kong people speaking English and helped partly to fulfil this demand. But although the number of people with at least some proficiency in English increased, the average level of proficiency declined (Johnson, 1995). As a result, a perception developed that Hong Kong was undergoing a crisis in English standards and lacked people competent enough in the language to service the economy. To a considerable extent, Hong Kong secondary schools have taken the blame for this situation, their de facto use of a considerable amount of Cantonese in a de jure English-medium system being seen as a major reason for a purported decline in English standards (Boyle, 1997; Li, 1996). More recently, the primarily officially English-medium universities have also come under fire from employers, the government, and the media for not producing graduates with requisite English skills, and the public has begun to note the use of Cantonese also at the tertiary level.

A number of studies have investigated the use of Cantonese in de jure English-medium secondary schools—so-called mixed-mode teaching (see Johnson, 1995, for a review)—and the attitudes towards this phenomenon on the part of teachers, pupils, and parents. By contrast, this article examines attitudes towards English as the medium of instruction and towards the use of the mother tongue at the university level among lecturers in one of Hong Kong’s English-medium universities. Using in-

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3 That is to say, career progression and emigration and study overseas.

4 We use the term lecturer throughout this article as a generic term to refer to the participants.
depth interviews, the study provides a picture of the tensions created by the policy of using English as the medium of instruction and of the place of English in the society at large.

ENGLISH IN HONG KONG

Colonial Period

In contrast to other former British colonies in Asia, English has never penetrated society at large in Hong Kong and has only ever been widely used in the formal contexts of government, education, law, and written business communication. Cantonese has always been the language of spoken general communication (except where expatriates are involved), and there is no indigenous creative literature in English to speak of.

There are a number of reasons for English being reserved for its formal uses in Hong Kong. First and foremost, Hong Kong is a linguistically homogeneous territory, with 98% of the population speaking Cantonese. There was never any need for English as a lingua franca between different ethnic and linguistic groups, as there was in countries like India, Malaysia, or Singapore, for example, except at the highest levels of business and government.

Second, English was always culturally distant from the ethnic Chinese during the colonial period. The colonialist expatriates and the local Chinese historically only mixed socially at the highest levels of society. The British never encouraged social integration and, in any case, were always so few in number relative to the total population that the average Hong Kong person was unlikely to have more than a passing acquaintance with a Westerner (Welsh, 1994). At the same time, the Chinese traditionally viewed Hong Kong as only a temporary refuge, either from disturbances on the mainland or as a prelude to emigration further afield (Flowerdew, 1998). This sojourner mentality, coupled with the traditional family orientation of the ethnic Chinese (Lau & Kuan, 1988), made it unlikely that a Hong Kong Chinese would want to have close social relations with the expatriate British or other foreigners.

Third, Hong Kong people (perhaps because of what local sociologists Lau & Kuan, 1988, have referred to as their utilitarian familism or egotistical individualism, which can be traced back to the experience of many of them as refugees from mainland China) value English for its pragmatic function and for what it can help them achieve in material terms for themselves and their families rather than as a vehicle for exploration of a cultural or social world.

If English was viewed as the language of the colonial rulers for most of the colonial period, a language needed for success in the civil service,
law, education, and business with expatriates, by the 1980s and 1990s it had come to be viewed as the international language, essential for success throughout Hong Kong’s economy, which now acted as a business hub linking East and West and depended upon international investment, trade, and communication (Johnson, 1995). In terms of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), although by 1997 the “imperialists,” the British-led administration, had left, vested interests, especially international capitalists who depended on an English-speaking workforce, remained influential in promoting the use of the English language (Lin, 1997).

English and Decolonization

Many postcolonial situations in the 1950s and 1960s saw a switch away from the colonial language in favour of the vernacular language or languages. In certain formal contexts there are already signs of this happening in Hong Kong. Spoken Cantonese and written Chinese are increasingly being used in government, law, and secondary education. However, there is no question of a wholesale rejection of English in Hong Kong. Unlike most other postcolonial situations, Hong Kong is fortunate in being immensely wealthy, and its wealth is built primarily on international trade, investment, and information, all of which are inextricably linked to the English language. Hong Kong’s value to China, which has a fast-growing, increasingly market-oriented economy, is as a conduit for trade and investment. It is therefore in China’s interest also to maintain the use of English, the international language of business, in Hong Kong. During the period before the change of sovereignty, the Chinese government collaborated with Hong Kong’s business tycoons and ensured that, as during the colonial period, international business interests dominated the post-handover Hong Kong government. These interests again favour the continued use of English (Flowerdew, 1998).

The Medium of Instruction

During the early years of this century, colonial educational policy in Hong Kong concentrated on providing English-medium education up to

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5 The literary and cultural critic Said (1994) refers to this phenomenon as “an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language” (p. 273). The phenomenon is evident in the newly independent Eastern bloc states’ rejection of Russian.

6 A caveat: During the final 5 years of the transitional period the British government shifted its allegiance away from the business interests, which traditionally had supported it, in favour of the liberal prodemocracy movement. However, this group too was dominated by an English-speaking, elite middle class (Flowerdew, 1998).
the university level for a small elite from the more affluent sector of the Chinese community, the aim being to ensure a supply of go-betweens who were fluent in English and Chinese and were able to act as mediators in dealings between the expatriate elite and the local Chinese population. During the period of the Chinese Nationalist government on the mainland, from 1928 to 1949, private Chinese-medium schools, supported by institutions in China, came to outnumber their English-medium counterparts (although the only university, the University of Hong Kong, founded in 1911, was English medium). Following the demise of the Nationalist government and the establishment in 1949 of the People’s Republic of China, which was isolated from the rest of the world, however, the popularity of and support for Chinese-medium schools declined, so that by the 1980s, 90% of secondary institutions in Hong Kong were English medium (So, 1987). The driving force behind the move to English-medium instruction was primarily parents, who perceived that the future career success of their children depended on proficiency in English (So, 1987).

With the introduction of mass English-medium education in the 1970s, it became apparent that many if not most children, who had little or no exposure to English outside the classroom, experienced considerable difficulty in following an English-medium academic curriculum. In addition, most teachers were themselves untrained in English (Hong Kong Education Commission, 1995). Faced with these difficulties, teachers responded by adopting what is called a mixed mode of teaching, that is, they used Cantonese with English terminology for oral exposition and English as the medium of textbooks, written assignments, and examinations.\(^7\)

During the 1980s the government issued a number of reports noting official disapproval of mixed mode and encouraging schools to switch to mother-tongue teaching (Cantonese with written Chinese) if they felt their pupils were unable to benefit from English-medium instruction (e.g., Hong Kong Education Commission, 1984, 1986; Working Group, 1989). The government’s view was that instruction should be 100% in either English or Chinese but not in a mixture of the two.

Faced with parental pressure, however, school principals were unwilling to make the change to Chinese medium, even if they themselves felt that mother tongue education was more suitable for their pupils. A switch to Chinese medium could mean the loss of a school’s most able

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\(^7\)So-called mixed-mode teaching—referred to elsewhere as classroom code switching or code mixing—is a discursive practice that has been found to prevail in bilingual classrooms in many locations throughout the world. Limited space precludes any sort of detailed treatment here (although see Martin-Jones & Monica Heller, 1996, for an overview). We simply note that the lecturers’ use of mixed code is by no means unique to Hong Kong.
pupils, who might be withdrawn by their parents and sent to schools that remained English medium. At the same time teachers felt that mixed-mode teaching was an acceptable and reasonably effective procedure and did not want to change their teaching style (Hirvela & Law, 1991; Shek, Johnson, & Law, 1991). The schools therefore largely ignored the government’s recommendations. Only in the dying months of the colonial regime did the government become more interventionist and inform schools that they would have to meet specific criteria if they wanted to continue to be considered English medium and that, if they did not meet these criteria, they would be expected to teach in the mother tongue.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a rapid expansion of the university sector in response to the increasing demands of the economy for skilled professionals paralleled the introduction of mass secondary education of the 1970s. From the early 1970s to the mid-1990s the percentage of secondary school graduates going on to university expanded from approximately 2% to 18%. Of the six universities, four are officially English medium and two allow instruction in either English or Chinese (although even when lectures and tutorials are in Chinese, the textbooks are invariably in English). With such a rapid expansion have come signs that at the university level, too, many students are unable to cope with English-medium instruction, although this situation has only recently started to come into focus.

Attitudes Towards English

Parents’ desire for their children to be educated in English-medium schools in order to maximise their career prospects, referred to earlier, suggests strong instrumental attitudes towards English in Hong Kong. A range of surveys conducted with secondary school pupils (Pennington & Yue, 1994), university students (Hyland, 1996; Lin, Detaramani, Yeung, & Wong, 1991), and teachers (Richards, Tung, & Ng, 1992) provide empirical evidence of a strong positive instrumental orientation to English. In the most recent of these surveys (Hyland, 1996), for example, conducted among 926 students at the university that was the research site for the present study, 5 of the 6 (of a total of 25) attitude statements subjects most strongly agreed with were as follows (most strongly agreed with listed first):

- I wish that I could speak fluent and accurate English.
- I believe I will continue to need good English skills after I graduate.
- The ability to communicate in English is very important for success in my subject at university.
• It is a good thing to have English as one of the official languages of Hong Kong.
• The use of English is one of the most important factors in Hong Kong’s prosperity and development today.

On the other hand, 6 of the 10 statements subjects most strongly disagreed with were as follows (most strongly disagreed with listed last):
• English will be less important in Hong Kong after 1997.
• After 1997 all government and legal business should be carried out in Putonghua.
• English should not be a medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools.
• My subject textbooks should be either written in Chinese or translated into Chinese.
• Cantonese should be the only official language in Hong Kong.
• It should not be necessary to study subjects in English at university.

Similar findings are reported in the other surveys cited.

Positive instrumental attitudes towards English in Hong Kong are fostered by the mass media. The local newspapers and television regularly publicize items addressing the question of English standards and quoting statements made by academics, the government, and business leaders about the need for Hong Kong to improve its English. As Lin (1997) points out, the argument made in support of the need for high standards of English is invariably an economic one (see also T’ sou, 1994; Tung, Tsung, & Lam, 1997); Hong Kong can maintain its position as a centre for international trade, finance, and information, and international companies will want to invest in Hong Kong, this argument runs, only if the territory has a work force with high-level English skills. The hegemonic nature of this positive, instrumental portrayal of English is likely to be influential in shaping attitudes towards the language.

With such a monumental social change as the reversion of sovereignty, attitudes towards English will quite possibly alter. Even before the official handover, China’s growing prosperity had already made careers on the mainland a possibility, as they were during the Nationalist period in the early part of the century. Now, political integration is likely to expand economic cooperation even further. In addition, the new political regime reflects the mainland’s point of view in Hong Kong and promotes patriotism and positive attitudes towards China, whereas in the past the colonial regime tried to discourage such feelings. All of these developments are in turn quite likely to create more positive attitudes towards Putonghua and the Chinese language. Nevertheless, given the overriding capitalist orientation of the Hong Kong elites and public at large and
the Beijing government’s support for this orientation, measures to encourage positive attitudes towards English as an instrumental language will most likely continue.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

We now turn to our study of how Hong Kong Chinese lecturers in an English-medium university perceive their position in the context of the situation of English in Hong Kong during the transitional period. The study reported here was conducted at City University (CityU), one of the new universities in Hong Kong. Minimum entry levels to Hong Kong universities require a pass in the Hong Kong Examinations Authority Use of English examination, which is equivalent to a score of 515 on the internationally recognised Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Most North American universities require a TOEFL score of 550 for direct entry to an academic programme, which is equivalent to a grade of C on the Use of English examination. However, few students manage to achieve a C on entering CityU or, indeed, other Hong Kong universities, most having only a grade D or E and some being accepted without a pass at all in order to fill the quotas.

Because of the mismatch between the expectation that instruction is to be in English and the inadequate proficiency level of many of the students, one of the problems for lecturers is how to make lecture content comprehensible to such students. CityU’s policy statement regarding English-medium instruction, as set out in Academic Regulation 1 (City University of Hong Kong, 1995), seems to indirectly acknowledge this problem and offer a possible way out for lecturers. The regulation states, “The normal medium of instruction and assessment at the University is English. However, individual staff members may use Chinese at their discretion to explain or clarify particular points” (p. 73).

One of the interesting findings of the present investigation is the different ways lecturers interpret this possibility of using Chinese in their lecturing.8 A quantitative survey by Walters and Balla (1992), which asked students at CityU to report on which language was used in their classes, showed that most of the tutorials and many of the lectures were conducted primarily in Cantonese. In contrast, our study addressed the language of instruction question at CityU primarily from the lecturers’ point of view and adopted a qualitative approach, exploring the reason-

8 The term Chinese is ambiguous in the context of spoken language in Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong people speak Cantonese, not Putonghua, the word Chinese can be interpreted as either Cantonese or Putonghua. Most would interpret the word Chinese in the CityU regulations as Cantonese, although that could change as more lecturers are hired from the mainland.
ing behind lecturers’ attitudes concerning the language of instruction. The result of this enquiry is a picture of a considerable tension around the role of English as the official medium of instruction that reflects the concerns of Hong Kong society in general.

METHOD

The data analysed in the study were collected by means of preliminary questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and follow-up contacts with lecturers during the period leading up to the change of sovereignty in 1997, starting in November 1993 with a pilot study. The main interviews were conducted from February to June 1994, and follow-up contacts continued until mid-1996.

The pilot study, which involved three lecturers and used the instruments listed below, provided ideas on what the significant issues might be and how to structure the questionnaire and interviews so as to cover fruitful ground without unduly influencing the subjects’ responses.

Participants

Following the pilot study, we randomly selected 34 Chinese lecturers at CityU from the university telephone directory and asked them to take part in the study. Of the 27 who agreed to participate, we subsequently selected as our database 20 lecturers who formed a representative cross-section of Cantonese-L1 lecturers in the institution in terms of rank, age, gender, and discipline.

The academic staff at CityU is made up of approximately 75% local Cantonese speakers with English as their L2 and 25% English-speaking expatriates. Table 1 provides background information on the 20 Cantonese-speaking lecturers reported on in this article.

The participants included 14 male and 6 female humanities and science lecturers with teaching experience ranging from 1 to 30 years. One was a full professor, 10 were associate professors, and 9 were assistant professors. Although many had gained their lecturing experience solely in Hong Kong teaching Cantonese-speaking students, nearly half had had some experience in lecturing to non-Hong Kong Chinese students in the United Kingdom, the U.S., and Canada. Most of the lecturers had pursued their postgraduate study outside Hong Kong.

On average, the lecturers involved in the study lectured to groups of 40–90 students; the average group size was 70. The smallest student group size was 24 (in a postgraduate course in the Department of
TABLE 1
Background Information on the Lecturers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code (sex)</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Lecturing experience (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In Hong Kong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA (f)</td>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>2 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB (f)</td>
<td>Building &amp; construction</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC (m)</td>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD (f)</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>1 2 (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LE (m)</td>
<td>Economics &amp; finance</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>1 2 (Canada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LF (f)</td>
<td>Information science</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>3 4 (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LG* (m)</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LH* (m)</td>
<td>Chinese translation</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>9 21 (China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LI* (m)</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>4 1 (U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LJ* (m)</td>
<td>Electronic engineering</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LK* (m)</td>
<td>Accountancy</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL* (m)</td>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LM* (f)</td>
<td>Accountancy</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LN* (m)</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>6 4 (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LO* (m)</td>
<td>Applied statistics</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>9 2 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LP* (m)</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LQ* (f)</td>
<td>Applied statistics</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LR* (m)</td>
<td>Manufacturing engineering</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS* (m)</td>
<td>Electronic engineering</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>2 (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT* (m)</td>
<td>Information systems</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Lecturer was interviewed in Cantonese.

Building and Construction), and the largest group consisted of 120 students, in an undergraduate course in the Department of Business and Management.

Instruments

General Questionnaire

After the lecturers agreed to take part in the study, they completed a general questionnaire designed to provide standardized (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) factual data on the lecturers and their basic attitudes towards lecturing at CityU. The data from this questionnaire helped in setting the framework for the subsequent in-depth, open-ended interviews and allowed the subjects to spend time on the more attitudinal dimensions of the issues at hand during those interviews. The questionnaire was designed so that it did not bias the lecturers’ responses in the interviews.
In-Depth Interview

We agree with Goetz and Lecompte (1984, as cited in Leki and Carson, 1997) that the interview medium is uniquely suited to eliciting data that “represent the world view of the participants being investigated” (p. 57). Our aim in this study was to develop an insider’s view of the phenomenon under investigation, in our case how the lecturers experienced lecturing in a L2.

A number of studies have shown that subjects in cross-linguistic/cultural research may tend, on the one hand, to accommodate their statements to bring them closer into line with the perceived values of the investigators and, on the other hand, to emphasise in their statements what differentiates them from the perceived values of the researchers (see Bond, 1986, for a review). Bond refers to these processes as *ethnic accommodation* and *ethnic affirmation*, respectively, and they are referred to as the *Hawthorn effect* in the more general educational research literature (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1985). As two members of the research team were Westerners and the research subjects were all ethnic Chinese, the Cantonese-speaking, ethnic Chinese member of the research team conducted all of the interviews in order to avoid the potential problem of cultural convergence or divergence. To further forestall any cross-linguistic/cultural bias, interviewees were offered a choice of being interviewed in Cantonese or English, research having again shown that choice of language can affect the quality of responses in cross-linguistic/cultural research (Bond, 1986). Of the 20 lecturers interviewed, 6 chose English and 14 opted for Cantonese.

The interview followed a semistructured format similar to that used in previous studies conducted by Flowerdew and Miller (1995, 1996) with expatriate, native-English-speaking lecturers at CityU. That is, three broad main topic areas—perceptions, problems, and strategies in lecturing—were determined beforehand, based on student interviews conducted in an earlier study by Flowerdew and Miller (1992). In deciding what questions to ask and in subsequent analysis, we benefited from being lecturers ourselves at CityU. The interviews were reflexive (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983); that is, the interviewer started not with a specific set of questions but with a set of areas to cover that evolved as more interviews took place. The interviewer’s aim was to minimize his influence on what the interviewees said while providing some structure in terms of what was relevant and eliciting clarification in instances of ambiguity (Spradley, 1979).

Of course, the interview format has its defects; subjects may be unable to verbalize their perceptions, they may prefer to give responses they think the interviewer is expecting or would like, and they may have difficulty in recalling actual described events or situations (although this
last problem is alleviated when the data are locally grounded, as they were in our case; that is, the subjects were involved in the issues on a day-to-day basis; Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, given that we were interested in obtaining the lecturers’ point of view and not some objective description, we believe that the advantages of our methodology outweighed any drawbacks.

Other Sources of Data

As analysis of the data progressed, we took opportunities to have further face-to-face and telephone conversations with lecturers in order to test out developing hypotheses.

As part of a broader ethnographic study, we collected other data, most notably from students of the lecturers concerned in the study, by means of questionnaires, open-ended report formats, and direct observation of their classes. However, because the focus of this article is lecturers’ attitudes, we make only occasional reference to these additional data. For example, when lecturers talked about their use of Cantonese, the results of our own observations and those of the survey conducted by Walters and Balla (1992) were useful in confirming that lecturers at CityU indeed used Cantonese frequently. Again, however, we emphasise that we were primarily concerned with attitudes in this study and not with establishing whether reported facts were true or not (in which case, of course, triangulation and multiple perspectives would be important).

Analytical Procedure

Supervised by the Cantonese-speaking researcher, a research assistant transcribed the interviews and translated those conducted in Cantonese into English. Afterward, the three researchers analysed the data, first independently and then together. Our analysis was guided by similar research done by two of the researchers at CityU with expatriate lecturers and students (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995, 1996). We met to discuss the ongoing analysis and decided how to code the data into categories that were felt to be potentially significant. Guided by the emic principle of analysis (Pike, 1964; Watson-Gegeo, 1988), according to which theory develops out of the data intrinsic to the given situation, the categories were not preestablished but developed out of our interpretative analysis of the data.

The interviews were edited and loaded onto the QSR NUD*IST word-processing program (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty., 1994), which allowed us to efficiently organise the large amount of interview data and helped develop the analysis further. From this analysis, we
identified significant comments made by the lecturers and cross-referenced them with comments from other interviews so that a picture of the key perceptions, problems, and strategies of the lecturers vis-à-vis the lecture event at CityU emerged. As hypotheses regarding the data were developed, the interviewer elicited further views from the lecturers in order to test those hypotheses. NUD*IST was then used to further structure the data.

The lecturers’ attitudes regarding English as the language of instruction and their use of Cantonese constituted one of the most interesting issues that emerged from the data. Accordingly, our analysis of the data involves four main categories and five subcategories in relation to this issue (see Figure 1). They were selected from 47 categories concerning the lecturing experience overall (see Flowerdew, Li, & Miller, 1996, for a description of the complete data).

RESULTS

The lecturers’ attitudes towards the medium of instruction issue, as expressed in the study, are summarised in Tables 2–5. As well as pointing out the key issues identified by the lecturers, the data give some indication of the pervasiveness of the various attitudes. Because the data were not intended to be quantitative, however, readers should treat the data in Column 3 of the tables with caution. The fact that some lecturers did not express an attitude does not necessarily mean that they did not share it, although it indicates that the attitude was probably not of the utmost significance for those lecturers.

FIGURE 1
Categories and Subcategories for Lecturers’ Comments on the Medium of Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes towards the English-medium policy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for supporting the English-medium policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems in applying the English-medium policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students’ weaknesses in English</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Students’ unwillingness to participate and ask questions in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pressure from students to use Cantonese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards the use of Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Degree of reported use of Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reasons for using Cantonese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attitudes Towards the English-Medium Policy

Attitudes towards the English-medium policy are summarised in Table 2. All of the lecturers interviewed expressed their awareness of the official CityU policy that English is the medium of instruction. Although the great majority stated that they agreed with this policy, they also felt that it should be applied flexibly:

1. LA: I think we can have a policy but the policy should be implemented flexibly, in a way that deals with problems, and rather than just having the policy.

2. LD: If it is a rule, and it is a formal rule supported by a flexible practice, that’s okay.

Many lecturers believed that lectures should be delivered in English, but Cantonese was more appropriate for tutorials, a view that is consistent with Walters and Balla’s (1992) finding that Cantonese was the predominant language of tutorials. Tutorials are considered less formal and are seen as an opportunity for explaining individual students’ problems.

One lecturer, LJ, felt that lecturers should be able to decide for themselves which language to use, whereas other lecturers thought that the medium of instruction should depend on the course or module being taught, some lectures being more appropriately taught in Chinese (Cantonese):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Lecturers expressing attitude</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is aware of the official English-medium policy</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports the policy in general</td>
<td>A B C D E F I K L M N O Q R S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wants flexibility in the way the policy is applied</td>
<td>A D F G H I J L M N O P R S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducts support tutorials in Cantonese</td>
<td>A B E F G J L N O P S T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks language choice should depend on the discipline</td>
<td>E H K N O P N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks university should consider Chinese as the medium of instruction</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See Table 1.
3. *LO:* Since there are many different modules in the City University, we should not adopt a policy of using either Chinese or English. Instead, it should depend on what a lecturer teaches. Take for example in social sciences. When a lecturer gives lectures on social problems in China, I think that it is more appropriate for the lecturer to deliver his lectures in Chinese, instead of restricting him to using English.

4. *LP:* To me, subject matters predetermine [which language should be used] . . . subject matter carries much influence on the kind of medium used. Let me cite an example. Science subjects like physics, chemistry, biology, or mathematics may be clearer and freer from much influence of the medium of instruction if they are taught in English. But talking about subjects in the humanities and social sciences which discuss real-life examples, such as issues on political reforms, pension scheme, and equality of men and women, and so on, from a purely teaching point of view, students would only generate enthusiasm and become more interested if the mother tongue were used for discussion.

Only one lecturer (LN) went so far as to say that consideration should be given to making Chinese the medium of instruction, arguing that students may not be happy if they know their lecturer is a Cantonese speaker and that he is using English merely because it is official policy. This lecturer also mentioned that students had on occasion asked him to switch to Cantonese, an issue we return to below.

Reasons for Supporting the English-Medium Policy

Lecturers justified their support for English as the medium of instruction in a variety of ways (Table 3). At a basic level, according to the lecturers, using English in lectures helped students with course work and examinations, which also had to be done in English:

5. LF: The most important thing is to make the students understand the motive of why I’m speaking English. It’s not to show our superiority to them; it’s actually to try and help them, because in the situation where they have to do the exam in English, write in English, and course work and everything. If they can express themselves in English, whether in study or at work, it would be much better.

9 Those lecturers choosing to be interviewed in Cantonese are indicated by an asterisk (*) in the text.
English was also considered to be important because it is the language of the disciplines and of textbooks:

6. *LO: All the textbooks available are in English. We handle our discipline in English as well. It doesn’t seem to be very appropriate if we use Cantonese instead. . . . I think that for our discipline we should teach in English.

Other arguments in favor of using English centered on its importance in maintaining Hong Kong’s economy and international competitiveness. First, the lecturers pointed out that students would need to be able to communicate in English in their professional careers after they graduated (see also Excerpt 5):

7. LE: Hong Kong is a kind of international financial centre, and the students would in their work interact with English, so English is very useful . . . it is essential for the Hong Kong tertiary student.

More globally, English was seen as important for Hong Kong’s international standing:

8. LC: I think we have to have this [policy of English as the medium of instruction], if not we will lose our competitiveness, if our students are not speaking English. This would be very bad for Hong Kong.

9. *LG: I think it would be disastrous for Hong Kong generally [if English became less important]. They [the people of Hong Kong] perceive the need to be able to speak in English because of practical needs. They need to be international.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Lecturers expressing attitude</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English helps students with their course work and examinations</td>
<td>D E F M N O P Q R</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English is the language of the disciplines and textbooks</td>
<td>A D E F I O R</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students need English in their careers after they graduate</td>
<td>A B C E F M N Q R</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English is important for maintaining Hong Kong’s international status</td>
<td>B C E H I K L S</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See Table 1.
Problems in Applying the English-Medium Policy

Although lecturers generally supported an English-medium policy, they noted the difficulties of applying it rigidly in practice (Table 4).

Students’ Weaknesses in English

The majority of the lecturers (16) commented on their students’ poor levels of English as the most significant obstacle to their lecturing effectively in English.


11. LB: If you do it [lecture] in English, I see it as a kind of barrier that the students will face. If you could lift this kind of barrier for them, then they understand the subject much easier, faster.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ weaknesses in English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ poor English affects lecturers’ ability to apply the English-medium policy</td>
<td>A B C D F G I K L</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak English results from an increase in number of tertiary level students</td>
<td>N O P Q R S T</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ ability to use Cantonese is also weak</td>
<td>B I K S</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have difficulty using English</td>
<td>A B C D E F G I K L</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding of concepts prevents formulation of questions</td>
<td>E G H I L M</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students do not want to be embarrassed</td>
<td>N P Q R S T</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese helps in promoting interaction and covering the material</td>
<td>B C D F G H I J K L P R S</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students ask lecturer to use Cantonese</td>
<td>D E J M N S T</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Cantonese by some lecturers puts pressure on those who wish to use more English</td>
<td>I M P</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students put up a mental barrier against English</td>
<td>B C E I N O P S</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More mature students put less pressure on lecturer to use Cantonese</td>
<td>F L M N</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See Table 1.
Weak English was believed to result from the rapid increase in the number of students at university level in Hong Kong in recent years and the consequent decline in average levels of competency:

12. *LL: It [the standard of English] becomes worse and worse year by year. It varies a lot and depends very much on which secondary schools they [students] come from . . . . But there is a phenomenon of a decline in the standard of English. As compared to the days when I first joined this institution 4 years ago, the English standard for even BM [business management] students has all along been on the decline.

Interestingly, four lecturers believed that students’ Chinese language ability was also declining. This state of affairs is not surprising, as students in Hong Kong are educated at secondary school through the medium of English and therefore have not acquired the requisite command of the technical register in spoken Cantonese, their mother tongue.

13. *LK: [Students are weak] not only in English but also in Chinese. For the past 2 years, I have been teaching Chinese Accounting in Chinese, and it is also required by the syllabus to use Chinese as the medium of instruction. I am now teaching International Accounting, which is taught in English, and I find that students from both groups, with one using Chinese and the other English as the medium of instruction, do have problems in both languages.

Students’ Unwillingness to Participate and Ask Questions in English

Closely related to students’ weaknesses in English is the extent to which students participate in lectures, especially by asking questions. Most lecturers stated that their students did not ask as many questions as they would like and attributed this lack of participation to inadequate English. First, students had problems using English in general:

14. *LL: . . . it’s chiefly because they don’t understand the content of lessons that they can’t actively participate in lessons. . . . They don’t know how to ask questions. . . . Their confidence would be greater if their English standard was better.

In addition, some lecturers pointed out that students could not formulate questions because they did not understand the concepts:

15. *LS: Because they aren’t able to absorb what I’ve taught, that’s why they don’t know how to ask questions.

According to some lecturers, the desire not to be embarrassed in front of their peers or lecturers also kept students from participating:
16. *LM: I have the impression that they may feel embarrassed using English to ask questions, especially in front of the whole class, for they may not be confident enough or even be a bit scared of using English.

17. *LP: Students who are of an average English standard feel shy about using English. They are not ready to speak up even if they encounter problems since they believe that in the eye of their lecturer, their English proficiency is poor.

As a result of these language-related problems, the lecturers were sometimes frustrated at the low level of student participation and interaction. For one lecturer, however, even using Cantonese as the medium of instruction would not solve the problem of poor participation:

18. *LS: Even if they [the students] answer [questions] in Cantonese, their organisational ability is not strong enough. For they are ambiguous and use lots of terms which are beyond my understanding. I believe they are terms currently used in films and so on, that one or two words stand for a paragraph or so. But in fact, that one or two words do not mean anything.

LS echoed the comment in Excerpt 13: Whatever their level of English, because of their background in English-medium (or mixed-mode) education, students had not acquired the academic register in Cantonese. Nevertheless, many lecturers stated that their own use of Cantonese increased the amount of interaction and coverage of the material in their classes (see also Excerpts 23 and 42).

Pressure From Students to Use Cantonese

Another problem in using English as the medium of instruction, according to the lecturers, was that students put pressure on them to use Cantonese:


20. *LN: Their [students’] biggest response [in lecturer evaluation questionnaires] is that they hope that I will deliver lectures in Chinese.

The fact that other lecturers used Cantonese may have compounded the problem for those who wanted to maximise the use of English:

21. *LM: As other lecturers may use Chinese as the medium of instruction, resistance [to English as the medium of instruction] from students is greater, especially if you are Chinese and know Cantonese but still you don’t teach in Cantonese.
A considerable number of lecturers (eight) felt that some students put up what they referred to as a mental barrier against listening to English.

22. *LS: I find that when I lecture in English, students have no response at all. The reason is not that they don’t know what I am teaching. I am not of the opinion that students today are not able to understand English at all. Their mentality is since you are a Cantonese, why don’t you lecture in Cantonese? Under such circumstances, they will not attempt to listen to your English.

Another lecturer tried several different ways to encourage her students to take part in lectures in English but ended up with a mode of communication she did not want:

23. LB: When I do it [ask a question] in English and I demand an answer back in English, I have to first, most likely, repeat the question three times before they know what you are trying to get at, and then it takes quite a bit of time to structure their answer. And then you still have to probe now and again to find out what they are trying to tell you. So to me, it’s like a total waste of time. Now I use the word waste; I think I’ll use the word waste with inverted commas, okay. Now if I do the question in Cantonese and say, “You must give me the answer in English.” Okay, you save the time in the sense that you don’t have to repeat yourself three times, but they still have to structure the answer and that’s time consuming on their part. And then if you say, “You are also,” you say, “you are allowed to give the answer in Cantonese,” and they liven up straightaway, although it might be the wrong kind of answer, but the interaction is much faster and they participate more willingly. . . . I must say, after trying all three, I am forced to stick to the third one. Now I must say I am forced because it is not really the kind of mode that I want.

In spite of the students’ difficulties in participating in lectures in English and the pressure on lecturers to use Cantonese, for some lecturers the problem lessened as the students matured and became more aware of the value of English in their academic and professional careers:

24. LF: When I taught them in the first year, they really quite resent the fact that I would speak as a Cantonese-speaker in English. When they come to the final year, they realise that they have to write in English, what they write in the exam is English. Even when they get to work they realise that they have to use English a lot, and good English helps their career. So even during off periods, even when they come and have a chat with me, sometimes they speak in English. . . . With postgraduates, it’s strange and funny. The postgraduates are not so worried about speaking English or Chinese. They’re quite happy to respond in the same way.
Attitudes Towards the Use of Cantonese

Table 5 summarises the lecturers’ attitudes towards the use of Cantonese, which was probably the most significant strategy lecturers reported using to compensate for students’ weak English. Like many lecturers, LA saw the ability to use the mother tongue as an important advantage of Cantonese-speaking lecturers over their expatriate colleagues:

25. LA: I think we have advantages over them [non–Cantonese speakers]. When it comes to the worst, then we shall speak some Cantonese to them [the students] to make sure that they understand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Cantonese</th>
<th>Lecturers expressing attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a way to overcome problems with students’ English</td>
<td>B H M P Q R S T 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an advantage for Cantonese-speaking lecturers over expatriate colleagues</td>
<td>A B H M O S T 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported use of Cantonese</th>
<th>Lecturers expressing attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believes use is often greater than the academic regulations suggest</td>
<td>B H I N T 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes all lecturers use some Cantonese</td>
<td>A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids it if at all possible</td>
<td>A K 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes that insisting on English can be an extra burden on students</td>
<td>A K R T 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explains points in Cantonese in private or in tutorials</td>
<td>A D F M N P S T 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Cantonese sparingly in lectures to ensure comprehension</td>
<td>A B L M P Q R S T 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses exclusively Cantonese when lecturing on a difficult topic</td>
<td>B 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Cantonese all the time in accordance with a special arrangement</td>
<td>I 1</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for using Cantonese</th>
<th>Lecturers expressing attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ low English proficiency</td>
<td>A B D G H M N O P Q R S T 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfairness of use of English for students strong in the discipline but weak in English</td>
<td>H I K L O P R T 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalness of using Cantonese</td>
<td>A I J K L P R S T 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic solidarity</td>
<td>A G L M N O P R S T 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification of important points</td>
<td>A B G M R Q T 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement of more questions</td>
<td>B C D F G H I J K L O P R S T 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation of local examples</td>
<td>B C M 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation of key vocabulary</td>
<td>B C G P T 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* See Table 1.
Reported Use of Cantonese

Several lecturers used the mother tongue far more than permitted by the academic regulations on the medium of instruction, which state that Chinese may be used to explain or clarify points. The lecturers’ comments on this point are supported by Walters and Balla (1992) and by our own recordings and observations of lectures. In fact, one only needs to walk down any classroom corridor and listen to realise that a lot of Cantonese is used at CityU.

Although a great deal of evidence points to the extensive use of Cantonese in lectures, individual lecturers nevertheless varied considerably in the degree to which they reported using the mother tongue. All of the lecturers interviewed said that they used at least some Cantonese, although two said that they tried to avoid it if at all possible. The rationale of these lecturers was as follows:

26. *LK: To me, the advantage is having the opportunity to use English in learning the discipline, which is of value to them in the future.

27. LA: It is good for the students to make an effort to express in English so that they can be trained. I keep on sometimes mentioning to them, if they work in a small organisation it is OK [to rely on Cantonese]. But if they really want to work in multinational firms, I think that English is important.

In contrast, however, another lecturer saw no need to be concerned with the students’ English:

28. *LT: I would very often switch to Cantonese. I think there’s no need for me to impose an extra burden on the students. I don’t think it is my job to teach them English. What I have to do is make them understand the modules that I teach . . . . If they need to learn English, they should learn it from foreigners or others who are better qualified.

This lecturer was unusual in separating language from content. As noted, the majority view in Hong Kong is that instruction in English will lead to improved proficiency in the language.

Some lecturers, hinting at the clandestine nature of using Cantonese, said that they would restrict Cantonese to explaining difficult lecture points to their students in follow-up tutorials or in private if approached to do so:

29. LD: I will explain in Cantonese in private.
30. LF: In terms of help, if they come to me and want me to explain in Cantonese, I will, privately, I will. In the tutorial or privately I will explain in Cantonese.

Other lecturers reported making fairly sparing use of Cantonese during lectures to ensure comprehension:

31. LA: We can revert a little bit in Cantonese... Once in a while, the medium is switched back to Cantonese to ensure that they understand.

32. *LQ: If the students actually find a topic too difficult to understand. In that case, I would use Cantonese when I explain for a second time.

Making a more radical use of Cantonese, one lecturer reported using exclusively Cantonese in lectures that dealt with complicated topics:

33. LB: I tried to deliver it [a construction contracts module] in English. Once I move onto the sort of more difficult aspects, I am forced to do it in Cantonese.

And one social studies lecturer, echoing comments in Excerpts 3 and 4 that some subjects in the humanities and social sciences are more appropriately taught in the mother tongue, reported that (in accordance with a special departmental policy approved by the university) he used Cantonese exclusively in his lecturing.

Reasons for Using Cantonese

The lecturers gave a range of reasons for using Cantonese. One of the most important was students’ low level of English proficiency. When asked whether CityU could apply the policy in force at another Hong Kong university—to use English at all times except in one-to-one consultations—one lecturer responded as follows:

34. *LO: I don’t think that such a policy is suitable here because the students’ language proficiency could not meet this standard.

One lecturer pointed out that an English-only policy might discriminate unfairly against students who are weak in English but strong in the discipline:

35. *LL: Those who have a sound foundation of the discipline may not demonstrate a very high standard of English.
Another reason for using Cantonese, put forward by the lecturer who lectures wholly in the mother tongue, was that it was the natural thing to do:

36. Interviewer: You mentioned that you taught in Cantonese. Can you tell us why?

*LI: I haven’t particularly thought about choosing Chinese or English for my teaching. It’s natural. Being my first language, it just came naturally.

In all, nine lecturers mentioned that lecturing in Cantonese was more natural. However, when asked about this point, none of the lecturers said that they felt uncomfortable lecturing in English. For nine of the lecturers, lecturing in English was indeed more natural because their own experience of the discipline had been in English. Nevertheless, many lecturers (nine) stated that Cantonese somehow made them closer to the audience—the ethnic solidarity argument alluded to earlier.10

37. *LP: A strong sense of friendliness is produced [if I use Cantonese].

38. *LS: We [Cantonese-speaking lecturers] can establish a closer relationship with students, for instance, we can crack jokes in colloquial Cantonese with students and we can convey messages to them through the use of the local language.

39. *LJ: I won’t feel uncomfortable [using English] as we all know English, but it is more direct if Cantonese is used. The class atmosphere will unavoidably become a little bit dull [if English is used exclusively]. . . . I will unconsciously lecture in Cantonese when it comes to an interesting point and I find that students pay more attention when I do so.

40. *LO: I use Cantonese [for socialising with students], even in making announcements.

Another important reason expressed for using Cantonese was that it helped to clarify important or difficult points:

10 Hong Kong Chinese lecturers’ choice of code can be interpreted in terms of accommodation theory (Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973), which claims that speakers adjust their speech to approximate the speech of their addressees in order to win approval. Accordingly, lecturers in the present study would be drawn towards using Cantonese, the language of their audience. However, in any communication a third party, or referee, might also influence the choice of code (Bell, 1984, as cited in Yau, 1997). In the present study, the referee is the university authorities and the wider community, who would influence lecturers to choose English.
41. LA: [We can use Cantonese with the students] to make sure that they understand, or when they feel really stuck in the discussion, they can’t really think of the right word, or I really want them to understand certain points, because they thought they really cannot catch what is the fact and what is said.

By using Cantonese, lecturers could encourage students to ask more questions:

42. *LO: If the students’ standard of English is poor, they may not be able to express themselves well. They may be afraid of asking questions.

Interviewer: While they can ask us in Cantonese?

LO: Yes.

Cantonese was also judged useful, if not essential, in presenting local examples:

43. LC: Because of the nature of marketing communications, we talk about some of the topics like advertising, public relations and so forth. Now, a lot of creative ideas in the Hong Kong markets is Cantonese; the play of words and these incidents are lingual, and so forth.

A further function of Cantonese was translation of key vocabulary:

44. LC: To explain to them [students] this term, what does that mean in Cantonese.

Nevertheless, not all the lecturers felt that the use of Cantonese would help students comprehend ideas:

45. *LL: If there are such occasions [when it is difficult to get ideas across to students], I find explaining those theories to them in Cantonese to be an even more difficult task for me. Not only for me, I also don’t believe that this will in any way facilitate their understanding of those theories.

And for some terms and expressions, the lecturers had no choice but to use English:

46. LH: Technical terms and noun phrases and so on will certainly be in English because I don’t know how to translate them into Cantonese.
DISCUSSION

The most striking point about the results of this study is that the lecturers’ comments regarding English as the medium of instruction reflect to a great extent the general instrumental view of English in Hong Kong society. With only one exception (LN), the lecturers argued that English provided access to greater knowledge, was the language of the disciplines, and was important for professional careers and for maintaining Hong Kong’s international status, and as such should be retained as the official medium of instruction.

On the other hand, the lecturers’ perspective on the importance of English sometimes contradicted their attitudes as regards their own teaching. In their lectures, they faced the practical difficulties of executing an English-medium policy with students who had what they considered to be inadequate levels of English competence, they encountered a certain amount of resistance to English on the part of students, and ethnic solidarity led them to want to use Cantonese. As a result, although some lecturers said that they would feel quite comfortable lecturing exclusively in English, all of them reported making at least some use of the mother tongue in order to make their teaching more effective in terms of conveying the subject matter, encouraging more questions and interaction, and maintaining ethnic solidarity.

We emphasise that our results reflect attitudes and reported behaviour, not behaviour itself. The lecturers may have had a vested interest in expressing their opinions as they did. Regarding their attitude towards the English-medium policy, the lecturers themselves had all been trained in English, most of them overseas in English-speaking countries, and many had spent part of their careers in English-speaking countries. In the period of uncertainty created by Hong Kong’s change of sovereignty, English provides the lecturers with job mobility if things go wrong in the Special Administrative Region. In addition, retaining English as the medium of instruction acts as an important barrier to mainland academics who are not able to teach in English and who might otherwise pose a threat to the lecturers’ positions in the postcolonial period. At the same time, in spite of our assurances about the preservation of their anonymity, the lecturers may have felt obliged to express their support for English as the medium of instruction, as it is the official policy. Similarly, they may have underreported their actual use of Cantonese, as such use is against official policy. However, the fact that they all admitted using it to some extent, together with our other sources of data on this issue, makes us confident that a considerable amount of Cantonese was being used.
CONCLUSION: THE UNIVERSITY AND THE ENGLISH-MEDIUM POLICY

As reported earlier, the official policy in Hong Kong is to discourage mixed-mode teaching in the secondary schools in favor of teaching in either Cantonese or English. However, like their secondary school counterparts (Hirvela & Law, 1991; Shek et al., 1991), the lecturers involved in this study do not view mixed-mode teaching as detrimental to the overall teaching process. Indeed, for some of them, lecturing effectively totally in English would be exceedingly difficult; in some cases they would be trying to communicate with students who demonstrably did not understand.

Where does this situation leave the university as regards its language policy? Academic Regulation Number 1 (i.e., “The normal medium of instruction and assessment at the University is English. However, individual staff members may use Chinese at their discretion to explain or clarify particular points”) is clearly being interpreted much more broadly than intended.

Enforcing the Policy

In our view, any attempt to enforce an English-only policy by subjecting lecturers to some sort of policing, as at least one department has suggested, in order to solve the English problem would be counterproductive. As the study reported here suggests, Cantonese can be an invaluable resource for solving communication and learning problems with students of lower English proficiency, and it carries important social meanings.

One obvious way of making things easier for lecturers would be to require students to achieve a minimum level of proficiency in English before they embark on their content-area studies and to offer them intensive English courses until they were up to the required level. In our view, such a system will ultimately be introduced. During the transitional period from elite to mass education and from British to Chinese sovereignty, using such a system would be politically difficult. Students entering university have been through the secondary school system, which is English medium, in principle at any rate. Accepting that these students need further English tuition before they are ready for university education is still a difficult pill for government, university authorities,

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11 One department has considered adding a question on the end of course evaluation questionnaires to check that English was used.
and the public to swallow, especially as it would imply that the universities need more time and financial resources for language training. Nevertheless, bilingual education, done properly, offers benefits over and above what mother tongue education offers alone. It is thus reasonable to expect effective bilingual education work to require at least some additional resources (So, 1987).

Reassessing the Policy

Some time after the data for this study were collected, the university appointed a new president. One of his first decisions was to review the question of English standards, which he considered to be in crisis. As a result, a reengineering committee was set up to reassess English policy within the university. Sensitive probably to the political and resourcing implications, the group did not make any recommendations along the lines suggested in the previous paragraph. Among the suggestions put forward, however, one in particular merits particular attention: The university would designate some courses in which students could expect an English-only policy and, where necessary, the university’s English language staff would provide support for these courses. The percentage of English-only courses would increase over the 3 years of the curriculum, as students’ confidence and ability developed. At the same time, the implication is that mixed-mode courses would be tolerated but with the understanding that the overall aim was to increase the use of English. Courses that are more appropriately taught in Cantonese, in the humanities, for example, would officially be designated as Cantonese medium.

This policy seems realistic. It would mean that lecturers who used Cantonese would no longer feel they were subverting the official policy and could retain the university’s commitment to English-medium teaching when appropriate and possible.

Another measure put forward by the reengineering group also has our support: training for content teachers in how to lecture to students who have limited proficiency in English. At present, lecturers in all disciplines are expected to be able to present their subject matter effectively without having received training in teaching students for whom English is an L2. This expectation is unrealistic and needs to be addressed.

Whatever measures the university introduces, and even if the student body’s competency in English increases radically, Hong Kong’s English-

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12 Interestingly, this person is highly proficient in English, Putonghua, and Cantonese, having been born on the mainland and having pursued an academic career in the U.S. before coming to Hong Kong.
medium universities will probably always evidence some code switching, and the sooner that this becomes officially accepted, the better. Unless classrooms are to become sterile places, devoid of social interaction and reserved solely for the transfer of information, Cantonese will always play a role. Nowhere else in Hong Kong society is English used in social interaction between Cantonese speakers, and to expect it to be used for such purposes in the university classroom is unrealistic.

Eliminating the Policy

The discussion and suggestions above assume that Hong Kong universities will remain English medium. Although this is the intention at present, it may not be the case in the long run. Although ethnic Chinese replaced expatriates in the higher levels of university administration and policy making some time ago, these people have usually spent at least a part of their academic careers in English-speaking Western countries. They have an interest in maintaining international mobility, and retaining English as the medium of instruction is one way of doing so. As Hong Kong switches its orientation towards China and mainland scholars come to teach in Hong Kong, however, academics may begin to see their future on the mainland, which would make more emphasis on Chinese—Putonghua rather than Cantonese—appropriate.

We believe that at some time in the future there may be an official switch to a bilingual policy, but with the emphasis remaining on English and Cantonese in practice and with Putonghua accepted to enable mainland lecturers to lecture in the national language. In the longer run, some observers are predicting that China’s rapid development means that Chinese may challenge the place of English as the world’s undisputed lingua franca. But that possibility is still a very long way off. In the meantime, as the findings of the present study illustrate, CityU will no doubt continue to reflect the sociolinguistic tensions within Hong Kong society at large.

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