

Chapter 1

The Hong Kong Language Context

1.1 Introduction

On 1 July 1997, after being colonized by the British for over 150 years (1842–1997), Hong Kong was renationalized as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. According to the Basic Law, the SAR’s mini constitution, it is stated that:

In addition to the Chinese language, the English language may also be used by the executive authorities, legislative and judicial organs of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (Article 9, Hong Kong SAR Basic Law, March 2015)

While the status of English as a co-official language is spelled out unambiguously, given the linguistic diversity in China, it is not clear what exactly ‘the Chinese language’ refers to. Yau (1992) finds it regrettable that there is no mention of ‘Cantonese’, the vernacular of the vast majority of Hongkongers and a vibrant regional lingua franca in the Pearl River Delta. He surmises that such a glaring omission may be due to the central government’s wish to “keep the ambiguous element in the term ‘Chinese’, so that there would be more leeway for them in the interpretation and implementation of the language policy in post-1997 Hong Kong” (Yau 1992, p. 16) (Fig. 1.1).

Under the first Chief Executive, Mr. Tung Chee Hwa, the SAR’s language-in-education policy has been framed as ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’,¹ with the primary objective of graduating students with a high level of competence in spoken English and Putonghua in addition to Cantonese, and written Chinese and English. Conceived before the handover, the dual MoI streaming policy, officially known as the ‘mother tongue education’ policy, was implemented in September 1998 amidst plenty of social tension and controversies. Some 18 years down the road, the language learning outcomes of secondary school-leavers and university graduates alike leave much to be desired. That policy is largely conditioned by Hong Kong’s geopolitical

¹ 兩文三語 (*loeng²³ man²¹ saam⁵⁵ jy²³/liǎng wén sān yǔ*). Written Chinese in Hong Kong is largely Mandarin- or Putonghua-based but pronounced in Cantonese (see Chap. 3).

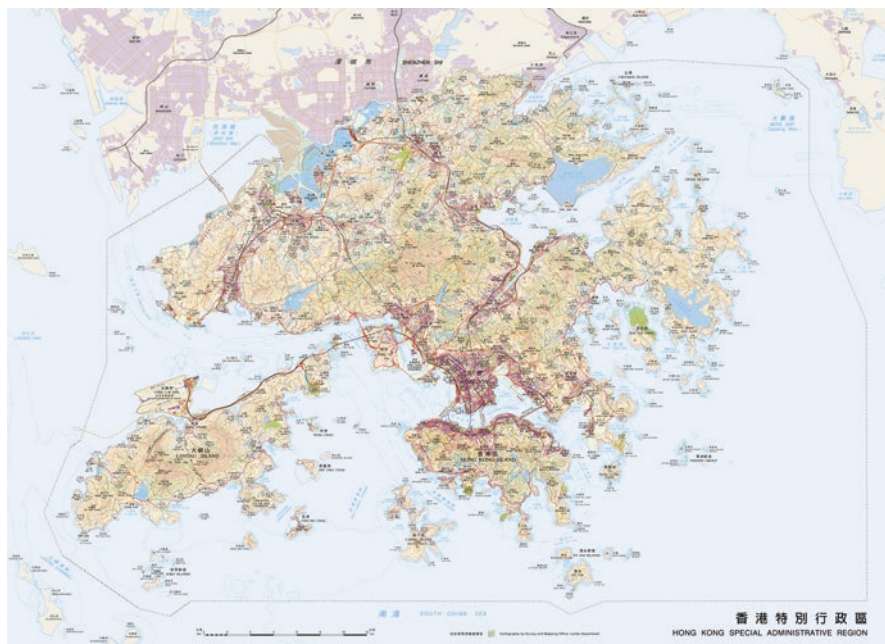


Fig. 1.1. Map of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (This map was downloaded and extracted from data made available by the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region at <https://DATA.GOV.HK/>. The provision of information copied or extracted from or a link to **DATA.GOV.HK** at this website or in relation to the product or service shall not constitute any form of co-operation or affiliation by the Government with any person in relation to this website, the product or the service or any contents herein.)

position, until the end of the twentieth century, as a window or principal gateway between mainland China and the rest of the world. In response to rising woman- and man-power needs as Hong Kong gradually evolved from a manufacturing-centered to a knowledge-based economy since the 1980s, trilingual and biliterate competencies became indispensable skill areas in the white-collar workplace, as shown in job adverts, big and small, for senior and middle-ranking management positions across a wide range of business sectors. In addition to English, the rise of ‘China trade’ has accentuated the need for capable personnel who can converse fluently with Putonghua-dominant clients in mainland China and visitors from across the border. Apart from the logical outcome of renationalization – that the national language of China, Putonghua, should be added to the local curriculum – for one work-related reason or another there is a practical need on the part of Cantonese-dominant Hongkongers to learn at least some Putonghua. More and more Hongkongers are learning Putonghua, a trend which is evidenced in self-reported census figures in the past 15 years (2001, 2006, 2011; see Table 1.1).

Controversial policy measures aside, it would be unfair to put the blame of lack-luster language learning outcomes from secondary to tertiary levels on the education

Table 1.1 Proportion of the population self-rating their ability to speak Cantonese, English and Putonghua: 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011 (Census and Statistics Department 2007, 2012; cf. Poon 2010, p. 7)

Language/Dialect	Proportion of population aged 5 and over (%)												
	As the usual language						As another language/dialect						Total
	1996	2001	2006	2011	1996	2001	2006	2011	1996	2001	2006	2011	
Cantonese	88.7	89.2	90.8	89.5	6.6	6.8	5.7	6.3	95.2	96.1	96.5	95.8	
English	3.1	3.2	2.8	3.5	34.9	39.8	41.9	42.6	38.1	43.0	44.7	46.1	
Putonghua	1.1	0.9	0.9	1.4	24.2	33.3	39.2	46.5	25.3	34.1	40.2	47.8	
Hakka	1.2	1.3	1.1	0.9	3.6	3.8	3.6	3.8	4.9	5.1	4.7	4.7	
Chiu Chow	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.7	3.9	3.8	3.2	3.1	5.0	4.8	3.9	3.8	
Fukien (including Taiwanese)	1.9	1.7	1.2	1.1	2.0	2.3	2.1	2.3	3.9	3.9	3.4	3.5	
Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia)	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.7	1.2	1.5	2.2	0.9	1.3	1.7	2.4	
Filipino (Tagalog)	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	1.6	1.7	1.3	1.4	1.8	1.9	1.4	1.7	
Japanese	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.0	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.5	
Shanghainese	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.3	1.1	1.1	0.9	0.9	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.1	

Source: Census and Statistics Department (2007, 2012)

Note: The figures exclude mute persons.

reform entirely. After all, no administration, pre- or post-handover, could afford to be blind to the market-driven demand for proficient speakers of English and Putonghua. What is remarkable is that, the language learning outcomes are grossly disproportional to successive Hong Kong governments' aggregate investment and annual funding support for language learning in the past two decades, which in dollar terms is huge by any national or regional standard. Back in 1998, a senior executive of a local bank lamented that:

In Hong Kong, the government accords high priority to education and to upgrading the quality of education. In 1996–97, approved public spending on this area represented 21 percent of the government's total current expenditure and 8 percent of capital expenditure. Unfortunately, the Hong Kong education system has failed to produce a sufficient number of the quality staff that employers are looking for. In the area of language proficiency, which is the single most important tool for effective business communication, I have observed a decline in standards. (Au 1998, p. 179)

Some 18 years later, Au's sentiments and viewpoint here are still widely shared by many in the local business sector. Why is it so? What are some of the major problems, what policy measures have been adopted to cope with them, and how effective are such measures? This book attempts to address these questions from multiple perspectives. First, *linguistically*, what is it that makes (Modern Standard) Chinese,² (spoken) Putonghua, and (spoken and written) English so difficult for Cantonese-L1 learners to master? Second, *sociolinguistically*, what are the patterns and conditions of language use in Hong Kong society, and to what extent are these languages related to Hongkongers' lifeworld? Third, *psycholinguistically*, how feasible is it to foster additive bilingualism through classroom instruction, including using the target languages as medium of instruction for teaching English and the Chinese Language subject, respectively? Fourth, *neuro-cognitively*, is there a stage of life, in terms of biological age, at which the learning of one or more languages is relatively more fruitful, over which the learning outcomes – the return of funding support for various language learning initiatives so to speak – are likely to be more productive or, to use the Chinese idiom, 事半功倍: 'yielding twice the result with half the effort'?³ Finally, *pedagogically*, is it possible to bring about greater synergy between teachers of English and EMI (English medium of instruction) content subjects, so that input obtained in English lessons can be more effectively extended to and applied in the learning of content subjects in English, and likewise for the teaching of Putonghua, as a separate subject or MoI, to facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language and Chinese literacy development? Without unequivocal answers to crucial questions such as these, the SAR government's biliteracy and trilingualism policy appears to ring hollow like an empty slogan, and borders on being a

²For the conceptual and terminological distinctions between 'Modern Chinese', 'Modern Standard Chinese', 'Standard Written Chinese', etc., see Chap. 3 (cf. Li 2006, pp. 152–153; Li 2015).

³*S*²² *bun*³³ *gung*⁵⁵ *pui*²³/*shì bàn gōng bèi*. This four-syllable idiom has an antithesis involving the same morpho-syllables but in a slightly different order: 事倍功半 (*shì*²² *pui*²³ *gung*⁵⁵ *bun*³³/*shì bèi gōng bàn*), 'getting half the result with twice the effort'.

utopian ideal, making one doubt whether precious resources are directed to the needy in an effective and timely manner.

Research in the past two decades on various aspects of the language situation in Hong Kong, published in English and Chinese, has enlightened us on various Cantonese-English contact phenomena (especially code-switching and code-mixing), the typical sociolinguistic profile of Cantonese-L1 Hongkongers, their attitudes toward English and Putonghua, and some of their salient non-standard features (errors) in the process of learning English and Putonghua. All of these empirical insights have good potential to provide informed answers to one or more of the above questions. What is lacking, to my knowledge, is systematic contrastive studies between Cantonese and English.⁴ While there has been some research on Cantonese-Putonghua contrastive phonology (e.g., Ho 1999, 2005), which has shed some light on optimal strategies for teaching Putonghua, this body of knowledge has yet to be trickled down to front-line teachers of Chinese/Putonghua in need, and to be reflected in the support measures for fostering additive bilingualism in Putonghua through classroom instruction. Insights from systematic contrastive studies are crucial for identifying students' learning difficulties in the target languages as the baseline or starting point for conceptualizing effective teaching strategies. In addition, with regard to biliteracy development in Chinese and English, while it is well-known that Cantonese, the preferred vernacular of the majority of Hongkongers, is generally not used for writing Chinese, we know relatively little about how big a challenge is faced by Cantonese-L1 speakers when learning to write in two of the most learner-unfriendly writing systems in the world: logographic, non-alphabetic written Chinese, and alphabetic written English which is deep in its orthography – deep because the ways in which English spelling relates to pronunciation are rather inconsistent.

To address the above questions and issues, this book provides a holistic account of the Hong Kong language situation by drawing on research insights in a number of areas: contrastive studies at different linguistic levels between Cantonese and English (phonological and lexico-grammatical), Cantonese and Putonghua (phonological), and Cantonese and Putonghua-based Standard Written Chinese (lexico-grammatical). Other research areas include the medium of instruction debates – teaching content subjects in English and teaching Chinese in Putonghua (TCP)⁵; Hongkongers' perceptions of their identities as gleaned through their attitudes toward Cantonese, English and Putonghua; and home-grown South(east) Asian students' needs for Cantonese and written Chinese. The main objective of this book is to try to come to grips with the following research questions:

⁴There are two exceptions to my knowledge: Chan and Li's (2000) contrastive study between Cantonese and English phonology (see Chap. 4), and Hung's (2005) use of Chinese-English contrastive grammar to help EFL learners understand salient non-standard, learner English features.

⁵普通話教中文 (*pou³⁵tung⁵⁵waa³⁵ gaau³³ zung⁵⁵man³⁵/pūtōnghuà jiào zhōngwén*), more commonly known as 普教中 (*pou³⁵ gaau³³ zung⁵⁵/pǔ jiào zhōng*).

- (a) What is it that makes biliteracy and trilingualism such a formidable task and lofty goal for Cantonese-L1 Hongkongers and ethnic minority students of South(east) Asian descent?
- (b) Given the linguistic and sociolinguistic constraints, plus what we know about the biologically determined critical (optimal time) period in terms of heightened sensitivity to speech sounds and lexico-grammatical structures in a (plurilingual) person's life stages, would it be more desirable to refocus the language-in-education policy by deploying language support resources differently, with a view to optimizing the effectiveness of students' learning outcomes towards becoming trilingual and biliterate?

The relevant critical issues will be dealt with progressively from Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. This will culminate, in the closing chapter (9), in a synthesis of the foregoing discussion and critical analysis before drawing implications and presenting a number of recommendations for strategic changes to the SAR's existing language-in-education policy measures. In the rest of this chapter, we will outline the macro-linguistic situation in Hong Kong along three dimensions: (a) individual plurilinguality and societal multilingualism, (b) biliteracy in Chinese and English, and (c) ethnolinguistic identities.

1.2 Plurilingual Hongkongers, Multilingual Hong Kong

Until the 1980s, Hong Kong was regarded as an essentially monolingual, Cantonese-speaking society (see, e.g., Luke and Richards 1982; So 1998, pp. 161–162; cf. So 1989). This was by and large true for Cantonese speakers who made up about 95% of the local population. Throughout the history of the former British colony until the end of June 1997, the English-speaking communities – colonizers and colonized together – rarely exceeded four percent (So 1998, p. 161). As the principal economic activities underwent a gradual shift towards those that are more characteristic of a knowledge-based economy, and following the implementation of the 9-year free compulsory education policy in 1978, the number of people with basic knowledge in English has increased considerably.⁶ One consequence is that more and more Hongkongers reported having English as ‘another language’ according to (by-)census figures from 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011 (Table 1.1, cf. Bacon-Shone and Bolton 1998; Bolton and Luke 1998).

As shown in Table 1.2, only 2.8% of the respondents indicated that their Cantonese was ‘not so good’ (1.2%) or they had ‘no knowledge’ of Cantonese (1.6%). This shows that Cantonese is widely used and understood in Hong Kong society. As for English, Table 1.1 shows that the percentage of people who claimed

⁶So (1998, p. 168) notes that in the 30 years between 1965 and 1994, as a result of steady expansion of educational opportunities, the number of people who gained access to one form of English-medium education or another increased by 700 percent.

Table 1.2 Self-rated competence in Cantonese, spoken English, Putonghua, written Chinese and written English (estimated number of people aged 6–65: 5,615,100 persons; 2011 Population Census)

	Very good 非常好 (%)	Good 良好 (%)	Average 一般 (%)	Not so good 較遜色 (%)	No knowledge 不懂 (%)	Total (%)
Speaking and writing						
Percentage of persons aged 6 to 65 by perceived language competence on using Cantonese	53.1	32.8	11.3	1.2	1.6	100
Percentage of persons aged 6 to 65 by perceived language competence on using spoken English	5.1	18.6	36.9	22	17.4	100
Percentage of persons aged 6 to 65 by perceived language competence on written English	5	19.2	37.5	21.5	16.8	100
Percentage of persons aged 6 to 65 by perceived language competence on using Putonghua	5.8	18.3	39.8	23.9	12.2	100
Percentage of persons aged 6 to 65 by perceived language competence on written Chinese	23.7	42.8	28.6	2.4	2.5	100

Source: Census and Statistics Department (2013, pp. 3–4)

to use English as ‘another language’ increased from 34.9% (1996) to 42.6% (2011). A marked increase was in evidence with regard to Putonghua as ‘another language’, from 24.2% (1996) to 46.5% (2011), surpassing that of English by nearly 4 percent. If the figures for using English (3.5%) and Putonghua (1.4%) as the ‘usual language’ are added, the total percentages of people who perceived a need to use English and Putonghua in their everyday lives amounted to 46.1% and 47.9%, respectively.

What is even more revealing from Table 1.2 is that the percentage of people who self-rated their spoken English and written English as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ amounted to (5.1 + 18.6) 23.7% and (5.0 + 19.2) 24.2%, respectively, while the self-ratings for Putonghua and written Chinese were (5.8 + 18.3) 24.1% and (23.7 + 42.8) 66.5%.

Also noteworthy is that over one-third of the respondents rated their spoken English (36.9%) and written English (37.5%) as ‘average’, while those who gave the same rating for Putonghua and written Chinese stood at 39.8% and 28.6% respectively. All this suggests that about 60.6% (5.1 + 18.6 + 36.9) of the local population were reportedly conversant in English, 63.9% (5.8 + 18.3 + 39.8) could interact with others in Putonghua, while 61.7% (5 + 19.2 + 37.5) were literate in English. These figures indicate that, by 2010, some 13 years after the return of

sovereignty to China, the SAR was developing towards a multilingual society, and the trend is clearly pointing upwards.

Increasing multilinguality notwithstanding, it is not uncommon to find situations that may be characterized as ‘mono-bilingual interaction’, in that one side would use only Cantonese, the other side would respond completely in Putonghua. Such a recurrent scenario may be found on television. For instance, on the i-CABLE Finance Info Channel,⁷ before Hong Kong Stock Exchange operation hours begin at 9 am on working days, the two or three Cantonese-speaking anchors would sometimes seek the views of mainland Chinese investment experts in Shanghai or Guangzhou, and their conversation would be broadcast live, with no evidence of either side’s input being scripted. Whereas the Hong Kong anchors’ questions are raised invariably in Cantonese, the non-Cantonese-speaking mainland expert would routinely respond in Putonghua. Their give-and-take, however, appears to be seamless, with no signs of disfluency, repair or misunderstanding, suggesting that both sides have (at least field-specific) receptive competence in the other’s preferred language. Such a mode of mono-bilingual interaction constitutes strong evidence that despite gaps in the interactants’ ‘truncated’ repertoires (Blommaert 2010), here Putonghua or Cantonese, effective, field-specific communication can still take place between Putonghua-dominant mainlanders and Cantonese-dominant Hongkongers.

1.3 Biliteracy in Chinese and English

Literacy is a matter of concern to the government of every polity, partly because the effectiveness of governance depends, among other factors, on a citizenry literate in the local language(s). Research worldwide shows that illiteracy correlates strongly with social problems such as poverty and poor hygiene. According to UNESCO (2014), illiterate people tend to be more vulnerable to poverty:

Whereas poverty can be directly observed, vulnerability cannot: it is essentially a measure of what might happen in the future. Measuring vulnerability to poverty is generally aimed at the likely sources of vulnerability and who is vulnerable. A study in Ethiopia, for example, examined the impact and potential interactions of health, education and consumption among the poor, finding that those with both chronic undernutrition and illiteracy are more vulnerable to poverty and more likely to stay longer in deep poverty. (UNESCO 2014, p. 28)

Hong Kong is fortunate in that illiteracy has not been a major concern. As shown in the self-reported percentages in census data over two decades until 2011 (Tables 1.1 and 1.2), the literacy rates for written Chinese and English in Hong Kong are by no means low. This is corroborated with other evidence, such as the number and variety of newspapers and magazines, in English and Chinese (among other

⁷ 有線電視財經資訊台 (*jau²³sin³³ din²²si²² coi²¹ging⁵⁵ zi⁵⁵seon³³ toi²¹/yǒuxiàn diànshì cáijīng zīxùn tái*).

languages) with community-wide circulation.⁸ What is obscured in these statistics is that the average Hongkonger must make a great deal of effort in order to become biliterate in *both* Chinese and English. A major source of learning difficulty lies in the fact that Chinese adopts a logographic, non-alphabetic writing system. The basic unit of writing is known as a ‘character’ (‘字’, *zì²²/zì*),⁹ or written graph. The logographic characters contain little or no clue as to how they are pronounced, for, unlike the English alphabet, no phonemic sound values could be deduced from the shape or written form of a character. It is not true, however, that Chinese characters contain no phonetic information (DeFrancis 1984) – thanks to the dominant ‘phonetic compound’ character formation principle.¹⁰ Within the inventory of 47,021 Chinese characters included in *Kāngxī Zìdiǎn* (康熙字典, ‘Kangxi Dictionary’), which was compiled and first published in the early eighteenth century, about 90 percent are phonetic compounds in which a semantic radical and a phonetic component are discernible (Lee 1989, p. 1). For example:

岡 (<i>gong⁵⁵/gāng</i> , ‘ridge’)
崗 (<i>gong⁵⁵/gǎng</i> , ‘mound’, semantic radical 山, <i>saan⁵⁵/sān</i> , ‘hill’)
鋼 (<i>gong³³/gāng</i> , ‘steel’, semantic radical 金, <i>gam⁵⁵/jīn</i> , ‘gold’)
門 (<i>mun²¹/mén</i> , ‘door’)
悶 (<i>mun²²/mèn</i> , ‘bored’, semantic radical 心, <i>sam⁵⁵/xīn</i> , ‘heart’)
聞 (<i>man²¹/wén</i> , ‘hear’, semantic radical 耳, <i>jī²³/ěr</i> , ‘ear’)
問 (<i>man²²/wèn</i> , ‘ask’, semantic radical 口, <i>hau³⁵/kǒu</i> , ‘mouth’)

As shown in these examples, the phonetic information may be direct (e.g., 岡 acting as a phonetic in 崗 and 鋼) or rather indirect. For instance, in Cantonese, the reference value of 門 [*mun²¹/mun²²*] as a phonetic applies to the onset consonant [*m*], but it may not apply to the rime [*man²¹/man²²*]; in Putonghua, it is the reverse – note the divergence in tone contours. In other words, any phonetic information in a Chinese character is opaque and only apparent to a literate or semi-literate person who has already learned the written forms and pronunciations of hundreds of characters (Erbaugh 2002). As a result, therefore, the pronunciation (音, *jam⁵⁵/yīn*) of a given character must be learned and memorized along with its written form (形, *jīng²¹/xíng*) and meaning (義, *jì²²/yì*). With regard to each of the thousands of Chinese characters needed in everyday life, these three sources of lexical informa-

⁸ As of May 2016, there are about a dozen paid Chinese newspapers and three paid English dailies with a community-wide circulation. In addition, there are half a dozen tabloid-like free newspapers – five in Chinese, one in English – published bi-modally (print and online), with the print version being delivered on working days (*Headline Daily* also on Saturday) at designated points of distribution. As for magazines, there is a multitude of types and topics, published weekly or monthly, mainly in Chinese, catering for the tastes and interests of a wide range of readers from different age groups.

⁹ 方塊字 (*fong⁵⁵/faai³³/zì²²/fāng kuài zì*).

¹⁰ 形聲字 (*jīng²¹/sīng⁵⁵/zì²²/xíng shēng zì*). For other character formation principles, see Hao (2001a) and Taylor and Taylor (2014).

tion are organically fused together (Dai 2001a, p. xv).¹¹ Such a characteristic of the Chinese writing system has inspired a multitude of literacy teaching models and methods in mainland China (e.g., pronunciation-focused, form-focused, and meaning-focused, or any combination of these; Dai 2001b) and Hong Kong (e.g., a phenomenographic method guided by an integrated perceptual approach, Tse 2001; Tse et al. 2007). One consequence of this indirect sound-graph relationship is that when a Chinese character has not been used for some time, it may become cognitively obscure, and the speaker/writer may have difficulty recalling its actual written form (Kwan-Terry and Luke 1997). All these literacy issues will be examined and discussed in greater detail in Chap. 3.

To master the 3000+ high-frequency Chinese characters needed for reading a Chinese newspaper with a reasonably good understanding, considerable class time and after-class practice are needed to familiarize pupils with their pronunciations and written forms. In general, teachers of Chinese across Greater China routinely advise their pupils to copy the characters repeatedly and, in the process, to commit their written forms and pronunciations to memory. Apart from encouraging pupils to learn Chinese characters in context, copying and rote learning have traditionally been the dominant methods through which productive competence of the target Chinese characters, including the proper sequence of strokes, is assured. Literacy training in Chinese is thus a laborious, time-consuming process. Towards the need and goal to speed up schoolchildren's cognitive and intellectual development through reading, Hao (2001b) describes the learning of Chinese characters as a major stumbling block,¹² which is an area where curricular reform, informed by rigorous empirical research, is urgently needed:

Chinese characters consist of so many strokes, which makes them difficult to recognize, write and remember. As soon as children have entered school, they must overcome the literacy hurdle. Teachers take pains to teach schoolchildren to write, requiring them to copy the characters repeatedly and mechanically. Teachers and schoolchildren alike spend most of their time and efforts struggling to get over the literacy gap, which is a major impediment, indeed a stumbling block [攔路虎] towards developing their overall language learning abilities. Such a predicament must be overcome by reforming the pedagogies in Chinese literacy teaching and learning. (Hao 2001b, pp. 107–108, my translation)¹³

To give a quick and rather extreme example, 鬱 is one of the kanji characters in Japanese which is also taught and learned in the Japanese curriculum. It is written in the same way as in traditional Chinese script in Hong Kong (*wat*⁵⁵) and Taiwan (*yū*) and has a very similar meaning. With its 29 strokes, it has been rated as among the most complex. Its compositional complexity has attracted a comment by a netizen as follows:

¹¹『漢字有「音形義」有機地結合在一起的三個信息源可以充分利用』(Dai 2001a, p. xv).

¹²攔路虎 (*laan*²¹*lou*²²*fu*³⁵/*lán lù hǔ*, literally 'road-blocking tiger').

¹³「漢字筆畫繁多，難認難寫又難記，兒童一邁進學校的大門，就要過識字關，教師要花大力氣教，兒童要反覆地機械地抄寫，師生的精力主要是耗費在識字上。識字成爲攔路虎，它是妨礙語文學習能力整體發展的主要矛盾，所以必須改革識字教學。」(Hao 2001b, pp. 107–108)

鬱 is a Japanese character famous for its high stroke count and complex composition of elements. It means ‘depression’, which seems appropriate... it’s depressing that you have to work this hard just to write a single character. (‘Crazy kanji: what’s the highest stroke count?’, <http://nihonshock.com/2009/10/crazy-kanji-highest-stroke-count/>)

No wonder it was targeted for simplification in mainland China (郁, *yū*). Since the 1950s, the PRC government has made great efforts to mitigate literacy acquisition problems, especially among rural populations. There was a lot of serious discussion about alphabetization as an alternative writing system, which in the end was abandoned in favor of simplifying the existing stock of Chinese characters. Under the ‘one country, two systems’ arrangement, however, Hong Kong, like the other SAR Macao, continues to use traditional Chinese characters, which consist of more strokes and therefore require more effort to learn and to write (compare, e.g., the character for ‘dragon’, *lung²¹/lóng*: 龍 vs. 龍).

Apart from acquisitional problems rooted in the logographic writing system itself, Cantonese-L1 speakers in Hong Kong have to baffle with another literacy problem. Being ‘dialect’ speakers of Cantonese, naturally they have a tendency to write the way they speak. Colloquial elements of their vernacular literacy, however, are not accepted in formal writing and, if they surface in students’ school work, are systematically banned and replaced with their normative SWC equivalents. For instance, as a verb meaning ‘to sleep’, 瞓 (*fan³³*) must be replaced with 睡 (*seoi²¹*). For historical and sociocultural reasons, however, ‘written Cantonese’ has been given social space to flourish, especially in informal, ‘soft’ sections of Chinese newspapers and magazines (Li 2000; Snow 2004). Such vernacular-based, non-school literacy elements are commonplace in social media like Facebook and Twitter, and other online communication platforms such as blogs, MSN, and discussion forums. From the educational point of view, written Cantonese elements are seen as ‘interference’ when students are engaged in producing literacy-focused school work.

A further problem is related to the status of written Chinese in Hong Kong. As Shi (2006) and Shi et al. (2006/2014) have observed, written Chinese in Hong Kong, being influenced heavily by Cantonese and English, have evolved its own norms, which may be characterized as Hong Kong Written Chinese (HKWC). Such a trend is especially clear in Hong Kong Chinese news discourse. From Hongkongers’ point of view, however, the dividing line between SWC and HKWC is often unclear; of those elements that are recognized as part of HKWC and distinct from SWC, few are incorporated into the local Chinese language curriculum.

What about English literacy? For Cantonese-L1 speakers, developing literacy skills in English is no simple task either. Most Chinese Hongkongers learn their ABC from kindergarten. While English is alphabetic and is written with Roman letters, its spelling-pronunciation relationships are not so consistent and, for that reason, not so learner-friendly as a second or foreign language. Other linguistic challenges include the fact that, unlike Cantonese which follows syllable-timed rhythm, English words are pronounced with stress-timed rhythm. For instance, in a polysyllabic English word like *elementary*, English-L1 speakers would pronounce all syllables in quick succession, with the stressed syllable in the middle pronounced

in higher pitch. This is a major area of learning difficulty for Cantonese-L1 learners who, following syllable-timed rhythm, have a tendency to apportion the same amount of time to every single syllable of a printed word (*e-le-men-ta-ry*), in effect making no distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables.

In EFL settings, the bulk of the learning of English takes place through reading. English is an alphabetic language; the phonetically based spelling system, while inconsistent, makes it sometimes possible for English speakers to pronounce a given English word regardless of its length, including vocabulary words that have never been encountered before. For instance, for upper intermediate EFL learners, the meaning of a long English word such as *anti-establishmentarianism* may be unfamiliar, but based on their knowledge of the recognizable embedded segment *establish* and English pronunciation rules, the average EFL learner with an intermediate level of competence has a fair chance of spelling and pronouncing it correctly. Of interest here is that knowledge of Chinese characters or literacy practices has little reference value when EFL learners are struggling to make sense of the complex sound-spelling relationships in English. Quite the contrary, in the absence of training and practice in phonics in English lessons, Chinese EFL learners tend to commit long English words to memory through rote learning, in the same way that they are trained to memorize the written forms of Chinese characters through extensive copying and practice. This was also my experience when I was in Primary (Grade) 5 or 6; I still remember reciting ‘*t-e-r-r-i-t-o-r-i-e-s, ter-ri-to-ries*’ on my way home after school, being anxious of the dictation of an English passage related to ‘New Territories’ (the northern part of Hong Kong) the following day. A lack of phonological awareness is thus one important reason why advocates of phonics teaching feel so strongly that it should be introduced as early as possible into the EFL curricula.

In his book-length treatise, *Writing and Society*, Coulmas (2013, p. 8) notes that in many cultures, literacy was historically associated with prestige and social status (e.g., in imperial China and pre-modern Korea before the twentieth century), which is why knowledge of writing has never been, and still is not distributed fairly in society. In this connection, Coulmas echoes Ferdinand de Saussure’s remark made about a century earlier, namely the ‘tyranny of writing’. With that note, the father of modern linguistics was alluding to writing as an obstacle to the scientific study of language which, in his view, should be guided by speech as the primary focus. Can we speak of ‘tyranny’ in the literacy practices in postcolonial Hong Kong? To the extent that under the biliteracy and trilingualism policy since 1998 every Hong Kong citizen regardless of ethnicity is expected to become biliterate in Chinese and English, plus the learner-unfriendliness of the two writing systems, I think there is a grain of truth in the tyranny of written Chinese and written English in the SAR.

1.4 Ethnolinguistic Identities

Plenty of research since Le Page and Tabouret-Keller’s (1985) seminal work has confirmed their original insight time and again how a plurilingual speaker’s language or stylistic choice (L1, L2, L3, heritage language, indigenized or localized

language, pidgin and creole, sociolect pertaining to a specific ethnolinguistic group, etc.) is closely bound up with multiple layers of speaker/writer identity, in accordance with the ‘orders of indexicality’ pertaining to the perceived status of the language varieties and speech styles as semiotic resources in situated and dynamic communicative acts (Blommaert 2010; cf. Blommaert 2005; Kirkpatrick 2007; Rampton 1995).

In Hong Kong, there is a body of language attitudes research showing a gradual shift in the Chinese community’s attitude towards English. Until the early 1980s, many Chinese student respondents indicated a concern for speaking English, suggesting that for them, English played a marginal role in their lifeworld at best. It would be unthinkable for them to use or interact with others in English unless when they had no choice, for example, in gate-keeping situations such as responding to questions at job interviews or attending oral and writing examinations (Fu 1975; Pierson et al. 1980). About half of the secondary school respondents felt uneasy when their classmates spoke to them in English outside the classroom (Fu 1975), while many agreed to such statements as the following:

When using English, I do not feel that I am Chinese any more.
 At times I fear that by using English I will become like a foreigner.
 If I use English, it means that I am not patriotic.
 Speaking English seemed to betray one’s national identity. (Fu 1975)

Part of the lack of motivation to use or even to learn English may be attributed to Hong Kong Chinese students’ national pride during the 1970s. In 1978, Margaret N.-Y. Ng, a politician, barrister, columnist and former Legislative Councilor (1995–2012) who regarded pro-CMI arguments based on national pride as “dangerous”, provided an instructive example in a newspaper feature as follows:

I think arguments from national pride [...] are dangerous [because they] often lead us to irrational decisions which will benefit nobody. I remember a friend of mine who, to his infinite regret, speaks English badly although he had an excellent English teacher in school. The reason he never learned any English from this teacher was that my friend, then a youngster filled with intense nationalistic pride, felt that such an undertaking would have been despicable. Logically, putting Chinese first and a second language second does not necessarily result in your under-achieving in the second language; but logic works least effectively where emotions dominate. What happens most often is that one falls between two stools, and ends up being proficient at neither language. (Ng 1978/1979, pp. 159–160)

Ng then drew implication by extrapolating the moral of the story thus: “it is easier to refuse to learn a despicable foreign language than to put work into learning the noble mother tongue really well” (Ng 1978/1979, p. 160).

From the 1980s onwards, however, such a concern for betraying one’s Chinese identity was gradually overtaken by an awareness of the instrumental value of ‘global English’, as more and more student respondents expressed being proud when speaking better English than their peers elsewhere in Asia, for example, in mainland China and Taiwan (e.g., Hyland 1997; Lin and Detaramani 1998). The greater readiness to use English and the increasingly positive attitude toward English are corroborated by self-reported census figures discussed above. More and more Hongkongers find it necessary to use English as ‘another language’.

Table 1.3 Social identity of Hong Kong young people in 1996 and 2006.

	1996	2006
Hong Kong people	33.9%	28.7%
Hong Kong people, and next option is Chinese	40.0%	39.4%
Chinese people, and next option is Hong Kong people	15.8%	22.3%
Chinese people	10.4%	9.6%

Sources: Lam et al. (2007), Executive Summary

Students' language attitudes toward Putonghua, on the other hand, were lukewarm at best. Far from embracing Putonghua as a natural sequel to the renationalization of Hong Kong as the most international metropolis in China, most of the student respondents considered their social or ethnic identity as Hongkongers or Hongkongers residing in China rather than Chinese or Chinese Hongkongers. In a more recent language attitudes study, Lai (2009) observes that:

it was surprising to find students expressing stronger integrative orientation towards English, the colonial language, than Putonghua, the national language of China. As in the instrumental domain (...) English was the most highly valued as a gatekeeper for upward and outward social mobility. Cantonese ranked second (...) Putonghua ranked last. (Lai 2009, p. 81)

The findings of the language attitudes studies cited above are consistent with another body of public opinion research, which points toward steady numbers of respondents who perceive themselves as 'Hongkongers', as opposed to 'Chinese'. The figures in Table 1.3, adapted from Lam et al. (2007), are indicative of this trend (cf. Poon 2010, p. 24).

The lukewarm emotional attachment to Putonghua, as shown in Lai's (2009) study, is also consistent with survey results of Hongkongers' social or ethnic identity collected biannually by the Public Opinion Programme based at the University of Hong Kong from August 1997 to December 2014. With few exceptions, the percentage of respondents who claimed to be 'Hongkongers' or 'Hongkongers in China' consistently exceeded those who regarded themselves as 'Chinese in Hong Kong' or 'Chinese' (HKU Pop Site 2015).

These perceptions have a direct impact on Hong Kong Chinese students' motivation to learn the two target languages: English (spoken and written) and Putonghua (spoken). Their types and levels of motivation in turn will determine to what extent they have ownership over the target languages, and how intellectually engaged they are in the process of 'investing' in language learning activities. As Norton (2013) has pointed out, language learning and literacy practices involve not just reading and writing, but also:

relationships between text and reader, student and teacher, classroom and community, in local, regional, and transnational sites. As such, when students invest in a set of literacy practices, they also invest in a range of possible and imagined identities. As language educators, we need to take seriously the findings that suggest that if learners have a sense of ownership over meaning making, they can engage actively in a wide range of literacy practices; however, if there is little ownership over meaning making, learning becomes meaningless and ritualized. (Norton 2013, pp. 116–117)

In short, language learning takes place not in a linguistic vacuum but in a real social world. To engage learners, language teachers would have a better chance of success if they understand how their learners' efforts are shaped and determined by actual social forces in the 'literacy ecology' of institutional practices in the home, school, and community. Is a target language seen as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) which is worth spending time to acquire, or is it perceived as the language of a group that learners hate to identify with? To optimize teaching and learning effectiveness, learners' identities and their attitudes toward the target languages must be tackled strategically, with a view to complementing the give-and-take in the actual classroom language teaching and learning process.

1.5 Synopsis of the Book

To address the research questions and delve into the issues outlined above, we will proceed by first gaining a micro, contrastive linguistic perspective before assessing the effectiveness of macro language-in-education policy measures. Chapter 2 will describe and illustrate the typical language contact phenomena, notably what is traditionally referred to in the literature as code-switching, code-mixing or code-alternation, and more recently termed translanguaging or translanguing practice. In Hong Kong, where Cantonese/Chinese and English have been in contact for over 150 years, many English words have been borrowed and incorporated into the Cantonese lexicon. Apart from lexical borrowing, English words and phrases, especially monosyllabic ones, tend to be inserted into Cantonese, displacing the corresponding open-class words in Cantonese, resulting in translanguaging. Such a trend is not limited to speaking, but writing as well. With the help of five short texts covering a half-a-page column in the soft section of a tabloid-like Chinese newspaper distributed free of charge, we will exemplify some of the typical language contact phenomena between informal HKWC and English. As we will see, both datasets exhibit considerable influence from English, suggesting that translanguing practice involving Cantonese, SWC and English is a society-wide phenomenon among Chinese Hongkongers, in speech as well as in writing.

Chapter 3 will address the question: why is it such a big challenge for Cantonese-L1 Hongkongers to develop literacy in SWC and to master Putonghua? By analyzing the orthographic characteristics of the logographic Chinese script and some of the systematic lexico-grammatical differences between Cantonese and SWC on one hand, and phonological differences between Cantonese and Putonghua on the other, we will try to unpack some of the typical learning difficulties encountered by Cantonese-L1 learners in Hong Kong. In Chap. 4, we will exemplify and discuss a number of non-standard EFL features commonly found in the English outputs of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) learners and users in Hong Kong. The purpose is to demonstrate how cross-linguistic influence (CLI) from Cantonese impacts on their English outputs as they are engaged in meaning-making. Much of the CLI may be accounted for by the tremendous typological distance between

Cantonese/Chinese and English, whose linguistic subsystems (phonology, lexis, grammar, discourse, writing system) have very little in common. This is essentially why the majority of Cantonese-L1 learners find English so difficult to master.

In Chap. 5, we will outline the sociopolitical background and important milestones leading to the ‘mother tongue education’ or dual MoI streaming policy implemented in September 1998. We will do this by conducting a fairly comprehensive review of a number of critical studies occasioned by various reports produced by government-appointed education panels at different times as well as Education Commission Reports, notably ECR4 (1990). In so doing, we will try to elucidate the widely perceived adverse impact of and controversial issues surrounding the dual MoI streaming policy. Chapter 6 will extend the discussion in the previous chapter by focusing on the concerns of various groups of stakeholders towards CMI and EMI education from their respective vantage points. Apart from the SAR government, the dilemmas faced by employers, school principals, teachers and educationists, parents and students will also be discussed. In view of divergent views regarding the status of English as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in Hong Kong, we will address this question by examining the sociolinguistic conditions under which English is learned and used in Hong Kong.

Chapter 7 will be devoted to another MoI debate concerning the feasibility and desirability of Teaching Chinese in Putonghua (TCP) in primary school.¹⁴ After outlining the background to the introduction of Putonghua into the local curricula since the 1990s and updating progress made since then, we will review a body of the TCP literature, with a view to teasing out the main pedagogical challenge faced by the education authorities and the community of Chinese Language teachers. The main concerns of various stakeholders who are disinclined to accept TCP will be elucidated and discussed. This will be followed by a review of a separate body of psycholinguistic and neuroscience research, the purpose being to examine the question, in which life stage, in terms of biological age, language acquisition in monolingual or multilingual environments is neuro-cognitively facilitated in terms of accuracy and relative ease.

In Chap. 8, we will discuss how ethnic minorities are disadvantaged by the post-1997 language policy of biliteracy and trilingualism: the ability to read and write Chinese and English, and to be conversant in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. Our focus is on the needs of Hong Kong students of South(east) Asian descent for the vernacular Cantonese and SWC, in which ways they are disadvantaged by a new language policy in place since 1998, and how such socio-educational inequities could be redressed through a number of amendments in the SAR’s policy measures. The book will close with Chap. 9, where we will recapitulate the critical issues pertaining to the language-in-education policy to date and assess the effectiveness of its implementation. Then, on the basis of this critical review, a number of recommendations will be proposed, with a view to addressing the research questions and related problems identified in the previous chapters.

¹⁴ 普教中 (*pou³⁵gau³³zung⁵⁵/pǔ jiào zhōng*) in popular parlance.

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