

Evaluation of a support intervention for senior secondary school English immersion

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Abstract

This paper reports on part of an evaluation of a 2-year program providing preparatory support for 430 Cantonese Chinese-native-speaking students switching from Chinese to English-medium instruction late in their secondary schooling, mainly because of aspiration to English-medium tertiary study. Focusing quantitatively and qualitatively on scientific English achievement, the paper addresses the content or cognitive–academic dimension, so far as underrepresented in English-as-foreign-language research, as is senior secondary school immersion itself. While no direct cause-effect relationship between the program and achievement levels was to be claimed, the observed differences between program participants and non-participants were ultimately minimal. Reasons proposed for the intervention’s outcome seemed mainly related to key stakeholders’ apparent limited awareness of cognitive–academic language and its development. The discussion identifies factors arguably crucial for support programs for senior secondary school academic study through English-as-foreign-language.

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1. Introduction

English-medium immersion education is politicized (Tsui, 2004) in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (HK) mainly because of the social capital English proficiency brings, e.g. tertiary education. In the late 1990s, some schools, required by government to use mother tongue Cantonese Chinese as the medium of instruction, felt compelled to change to the foreign English-medium in secondary 4 (S4 – students aged 16), to ensure the school’s competitiveness in attracting the top 25% of students, who choose English-medium schooling. The switch to English-medium in S4 is very late in the students’ schooling (So and Jones, 2002), so the government responded to the demands of Chinese-medium students’ schools and parents, and commissioned a 2-year Pilot Enrichment Program (EP) one of the stated aims of which was to ‘smoothen the transfer to S4’ which means in effect to support students from selected Chinese-medium schools to develop the high English

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proficiency level required to learn academic subjects through English at senior secondary school level, and eventually tertiary level. The EP was conceptualized by a high-level government steering committee including senior academics; content design was tendered to English-language specialists in a local university; and the Pilot's evaluation was tendered to the author's university. The evaluation took 3 years because it was undertaken pre, during and post-implementation of the EP. This paper aims to report only one part of the evaluation, using data from a test comparing participating and non-participating students' scientific English proficiency after the Pilot had finished, several months into the students' S4 studies.

1.1. The intervention

The EP occurred across the 2 years prior to the students' change to English-medium teaching in S4. It comprised 60 modules, from which teachers in each pilot school selected. Topics covered the main areas of the curriculum, e.g. consumer education, old HK (social sciences), shapes (mathematics), weather, deserts (geography, science), music and cooking. The modules and teachers' notes resembled an integrated-skills *language* syllabus, with standard communicative *language* teaching methodology. The module materials included highly detailed teaching notes and materials. The teaching notes listed sequential learning activities for each lesson, with detail such as '*step 3: Let students work in pairs to identify the timber products from the photos. Note: students may have problems with the pronunciation of Canterbury, sculpture, plate ... read these words aloud and then ask students to repeat*' (from a module called 'The Environment'). The materials comprised visuals, and texts for reading or listening, with many writing and speaking exercises based on the input, as preparation for the output. For example, in a module called 'Natural Hazards' there was a short reading text with word search activities using text-derived lexis such as monsoon, drought; a series of exercises in preparation for listening to a (scripted) radio report on flooding, and guidance for writing an 80-word news report on a flood.

In-school teaching time per module depended on the extent of materials use, available time and staff allocation. In some schools, the program was taught for about an hour after school, once or twice per week, by English-language teachers; while in others it was taught after school by subject teachers (hence the detailed teaching notes) or as a subject within the curriculum in place of other subject lessons. No school replaced its English-as-subject lessons with the EP modules, since the political imperative was to provide *additional* English exposure. Furthermore, training sessions had to be provided by the module writers because many of the subject teachers found the module's EFL-type teaching strategies too hard to follow from the teachers' notes.

This paper reports some of the findings of the commissioned evaluation of the EP, in which the author led the proficiency testing, mandated by the EP's steering committee. The paper uses the proficiency test data to compare the academic (scientific) English proficiency of participant and non-participant students about three months after all students had begun S4 English-medium science studies. Specifically, the paper investigates the question: *is there a significant difference in test performance in science-related English of S4 students who took a 2-year EP and those who did not?* If a significant difference is observed, one factor in the difference might be the EP, indicating the viability of such a support program in enhancing *subject-related* English proficiency. This is important because EFL research has not much considered the content dimension of the language–content relationship, nor the nature of support (Marsh et al., 2000) required in secondary school English classes for development of cognitive–academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979, 1991), essential at tertiary level. This paper's focus on the content dimension justifies the attention to CALP-related literature in the following Literature review pertaining to the particular nature of senior secondary immersion learning, and relevant support interventions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dilemmas in late immersion learning as cognitive–academic language learning

'Immersion' is a category of bilingual education with a set of well-known prototypical characteristics set out by Swain and Johnson (1997), all of which are met in the junior secondary HK context. While 'late immersion' refers to that around age 12, and 'late late immersion' (Burger et al., 1997) refers to university level,

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