



## INTERNATIONALER KONGRESS

FRÜHKINDLICHE MEHRSPRACHIGKEIT  
MULTILINGUISME PRÉCOCE  
MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

CONGRESSHALLE SAARBRÜCKEN · 17./18. SEPTEMBER 2007

### **Wai Ming, CHEUNG (PhD)**

Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong

## **Teaching Chinese and English in Hong Kong Kindergartens: Pedagogical Approaches in Early Bilingual Education**

### **Introduction**

As a former British colony and an international gateway to Mainland China, Hong Kong aims to maintain itself as a biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, English, and Putonghua) society. Although statistics from the 2006 by-census shows that 95% of the Hong Kong population is ethnic Chinese (Hong Kong Government, 2006), both Chinese and English are official languages.

With the rapid development in pre-school policy and parents' aspirations for their children's education, the coverage rate of preschool education in Hong Kong has been as high as 95% (Rao, Koong, Kwong & Wong, 2003). The promotion of cognitive and language development is one of the four developmental objectives for young children set out in the Government Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). Cantonese is the mother-tongue and the language used for communication by most children in Hong Kong while English is an auxiliary language.

This unique sociocultural context presents an array of challenges to educational researchers and curriculum experts in developing bilingual language competence of the preschool children. This paper reviews various pedagogical issues that need to be considered in providing children with an educational environment conducive to bilingual development.

### **Pedagogical Issues and Approaches**

#### *Differences in Language to be Taught*

English is an alphabetic, phonemic language and Chinese is a morphological language. The number of letters and morphemes in alphabetic language of English is usually limited, whereas the differences in tones, grammar and orthography of Chinese is huge. The meaning, sound and shape of each Chinese character have to be learned individually by rote. In Chinese language, each written character corresponds to one syllable in the spoken language and carries its special meaning. For example, the character 老 sounds as 'bak3' which carries the meaning of an old man.

In English, with its morphophonemic orthography, research indicates that the ability to segment and mentally manipulate patterns and rhymes in word pronunciation, the ability to see sub-lexical units in the written language, and their correspondence to the sound patterns and meanings of the word significantly affect the learner's reading ability (Leong & Joshi, 1997).

Visually each Chinese character occupies an imaginary square space. Chinese characters are well known for their ideographic origins. Most Chinese characters are composite in nature making up of multiple reusable components that fit into the square space. The shape, the sound and the meaning constitutes a combined unit of language (Tse, 2000).

Wai Ming, CHEUNG:

Teaching Chinese and English in Hong Kong Kindergartens: Pedagogical Approaches in Early Bilingual Education



## INTERNATIONALER KONGRESS

FRÜHKINDLICHE MEHRSPRACHIGKEIT  
MULTILINGUISME PRÉCOCE  
MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

CONGRESSHALLE SAARBRÜCKEN · 17./18. SEPTEMBER 2007

The differences in learning Chinese and English would have some pedagogical implications.

### ***Drill and practice vs innovative approach***

In Hong Kong, bilingualism is additive as Cantonese parents value both Chinese and English language development of their children (Lee, 2005). English is valued by parents as a route for advancement in the education system and society. Parental desire for early literacy has resulted in the extensive whole-group instruction, intensive drilling and a focus on rote memorization of isolated skills (Opper, 1992; Ho & Byrant, 1997). Kindergartens teach children to read and write in both English and Chinese at the preschool level as a form of preparation for primary school (Wong & Rao, 2004; Rao & Li, 2006).

Traditionally, young pupils learn Chinese characters by repeatedly copying and do dictation them until they can automatically and correctly reproduce their form and pronunciation. The characters pupils learn are selected from adult written communications rather than in everyday child usage. Learning to write and recognize individual Chinese character is demanding and exceedingly tedious (Tse, Marton, Ki & Loh, in press). In the teaching of a character, teachers typically teach children to recognize Chinese characters and practice writing the characters which they have just learned, using traditional methods (Li & Rao, 2005). After instruction, children had to copy alphabets and characters for homework. The most frequently used procedure for assessing pupils' learning is dictation. In order to meet dictation requirements, parents usually make their children rehearse all the characters that school has asked them to learn.

Observations in other kindergartens by Rao et al. (in preparation) reflected a significant shift to an innovative approach. Early childhood centers were focused on providing literacy-rich environments and embracing "informal" skills that helped promote the more formal abilities of reading and writing commonly associated with literacy. Children were encouraged to read and interact with books, and to share stories with their teachers. Enquiry-based approaches were employed in language and literacy activities. Children did not have to copy alphabets or characters for homework.

### ***Teacher-centered vs Child-centered Approach***

Chan and Chan (2003) found that there is a tendency for childhood educators to adopt the teacher-centered and academically oriented methods that are associated with primary schooling and Confucian culture. Kindergartens tend to have highly structured days with children moving from activity to activity according to fairly rigidly followed time-table (Rao, Ng & Pearson, in press). Children are instructed to complete assigned tasks like copying the one alphabet and one Chinese character for 24 and 30 times respectively. The teachers traditionally follow a strict sequence that emphasizes the order of strokes in the character and the exact position of each stroke. The teachers insist that every pupil writes each character by memory. Progress is thus slow. Pupils make no independent contribution to lessons or their own learning.

The 1996 Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum published by Hong Kong's Curriculum Development Institute (Education Department, 1996) followed a child-centered approach. Unlike the practice using traditional approaches of learning Chinese, the new approach (Tse, Marton, Ki & Loh, in press) takes spoken language as its starting point with meanings familiar to the learner. It deliberately adopts nursery rhymes as teaching materials. It has a major focus on the learning of characters within realistic and meaningful language contexts. The children use the words while playing games so that they may associate structures and sounds of words with meanings. Learning to read is thus a natural progression. The forms and sounds of words are linked to their meaning in an enjoyable context. The children are able to discern the relationship between the form, pronunciation and meaning of the characters simultaneously. Employing a child-centred approach, the children can make the connection between current characters and text to their previous knowledge and life experience.

With the introduction of the phonics system, song singing and rhymes reciting, story telling and role-play activities in learning English, children found learning English more enjoyable. The bilingual schools employ

Wai Ming, CHEUNG:

Teaching Chinese and English in Hong Kong Kindergartens: Pedagogical Approaches in Early Bilingual Education



## INTERNATIONALER KONGRESS

FRÜHKINDLICHE MEHRSPRACHIGKEIT  
MULTILINGUISME PRÉCOCE  
MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

CONGRESSHALLE SAARBRÜCKEN · 17./18. SEPTEMBER 2007

native speakers to teach English. There are usually 2 types of arrangement. In some schools, the English native speaking teacher visits the school twice a week to have English lesson with the children. Other schools have two teachers including a native English speaking teacher and a native Chinese speaking teacher. These two teachers will work together full-time for the whole week. There are both English and Chinese lessons in a day. Teachers find that students communicate with the English speaking teacher in English and Chinese with the Chinese speaking teacher.

### *Language Competence of teachers*

The role of teachers in implementing bilingualism is critical. Preschool teachers have lower academic and professional qualifications than teachers in primary and secondary schools. Preschool professionals in the past expressed concerns over the tendency for teachers in kindergartens to adopt formal teaching methods with children as young as 3 years of age (Sweeting & Ching, 1988; Opper, 1992). The Hong Kong government has put enormous financial resources into teacher training hoping that all kindergarten teachers are properly trained. In 1998, only 38.4% of kindergarten teachers had received qualified kindergarten teacher status. This figure had sharply increased to 64.8% in 2000-2001, 92% in 2004-2005 and 94.4% in 2005-2006 (Hong Kong Government, 2006). The remarkable increase in the number of kindergarten teachers with acquired professional education qualification can ostensibly improve preschool quality. Rao and Li (2006) argues that early childhood education has entered a very positive era in Hong Kong. Enabling policies are critical to ensuring that all Children will have access to high quality early bilingual education. Teacher training has a major influence on the teachers' beliefs in Hong Kong which reflects Western emphases upon child-centeredness and learning through play. These teachers shift their paradigm to emergent literacy approach as opposed to reading readiness as observed by Rao et al. (in press).

### *The influence of parents and home environment*

Parents conventionally regard preschool as a downward extension of primary school (Rao & Li, 2006). Lee (2005) studied the bilingual language development among 4-year-old children in preschool settings of Hong Kong. The findings show that children's Cantonese listening skills and verbal fluencies are similar which are independent of socio-economic status and not significantly related to parental language input at home. However, the results support that English listening and verbal fluency scores are significantly related to SES, language use of father, reading language at home, and home reading time in English. High SES children had 24 times more home reading time in English per week than low SES children. On the other hand, children's English receptive and productive skills are significantly related to the amount of English learning time at preschool level. It was found that the amount of English learning minutes per week at the elite, agency-operated, and estate kindergartens significantly differed, with 450 minutes, 50 minutes and 25 minutes respectively. Children from high SES background attended preschools that offered 8 times more English learning time than preschools attended by low SES children.

Another study, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2001, also found unfavorable parental factor in nurturing children's reading ability of language development in preschool stage. The Index of Early Home Literacy Activities (EHLA) was calculated based on parents' responses to the frequency of the following activities in which they engaged with their child prior to entry into primary school: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with component toys, playing word games, and reading aloud signs and labels. It was reported that 16% parents reached the "high level" of EHLA, 54% the "medium level" of EHLA, and 30% the "level" of EHLA. Hong Kong was ranked least out of the 32 participating countries and was far below the international average.

## Implications

The study of Tse et al. (in press) combined language learning and language development which opens a springboard for the children to learn the shape, sound and meaning of the characters simultaneously.

Wai Ming, CHEUNG:

Teaching Chinese and English in Hong Kong Kindergartens: Pedagogical Approaches in Early Bilingual Education



## INTERNATIONALER KONGRESS

FRÜHKINDLICHE MEHRSPRACHIGKEIT  
MULTILINGUISME PRÉCOCE  
MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

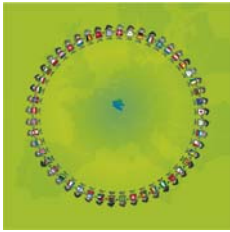
CONGRESSHALLE SAARBRÜCKEN · 17./18. SEPTEMBER 2007

Eventually the lesson returns to the enjoyment of the context and meaning of the whole text. This new and integrative approach should be advocated in the language learning of preschool. Teachers should be encouraged to focus on the learning of characters within realistic and meaningful language contexts. For example, students are allowed to look at the text while playing the game that they may associate structures and sounds with meanings.

It is evidence based on PIRLS 2001 and Lee's study that such factors as SES, parents' language use at home in reading and interacting with children, and amount of English learning time at preschool, are strongly associated with children's English language competencies. Language use of fathers and reading language at home are significantly predictors of preschoolers' English language attainment. Recent study by Tse (2007) indicated that families which had Philippino maids had higher English competence. Policy makers should therefore need to formulate strategies to help low SES children with their English in the first few years of their lives. These may include the provision of community English language programmes for low SES parents and children, and allocation of additional funds for preschools to purchase English reading materials and audio-visual resources to support parents to read more and communicate more to children. Early childhood educators need to make a difference in low SES children's English language development, by providing more English learning time in preschools and purchase more English reading materials for shared reading schemes. They can foster closer partnerships with parents and encourage them to speak more English at home, if possible; or at least, increase their home language input, such as spending more time to communicate with their children, and read stories together.

Painting a beautiful picture of early bilingual education needs the two brushes of teachers' innovative approaches and parents' active participation in early home literacy activities work together at the same time. The recent development of teacher training in early childhood education and parent education are the two new brushes that would probably be an important component for a successful educational biography in bilingualism.

Last but not the least, I would particularly like to acknowledge Dr. Nirmala Rao for her input to this article.



## INTERNATIONALER KONGRESS

FRÜHKINDLICHE MEHRSPRACHIGKEIT  
MULTILINGUISME PRÉCOCE  
MULTILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

CONGRESSHALLE SAARBRÜCKEN · 17./18. SEPTEMBER 2007

### References

Chan, L.K.S., & Chan, L. (2003). Early childhood education in Hong Kong and its challenges. *Early Child Development and Care*, 173(1), 7-17.

Curriculum Development Council (2006). *Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum*. Hong Kong: The Education and Manpower Bureau.

Education Department (1996). *Guide to the pre-primary curriculum*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.

Ho, S.H. & Byrant, P. (1997). Phonological skills are important in learning to read Chinese. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(6), 946-951.

Hong Kong Government. (2006). *Key statistics for kindergarten education*. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from <http://www.emb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=1&nodeid=1037>

Leong, C.K. & Joshi, R.M. (1997). *Cross-language studies of learning to read and spell: phonologic and orthographic processing*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Lee, P.L.D. (2005). *Bilingual language development in 4-year-old children in Hong Kong preschools*. Master thesis. Hong Kong: the University of Hong Kong.

Li, H. & Rao, N. (2005). Curricular and Instructional Influences on Early Literacy Attainment: Evidence from Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 13(3), 235-253.

Opper, S. (1992). *Hong Kong's young children: Their preschools and families*. Hong Kong: the University of Hong Kong.

Rao, N., Koong, M., Kwong, M., & Wong, M. (2003). Predictors of preschool process quality in a Chinese context. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 18, 331-350.

Rao, N. & Li, H. (In press). Quality matters: early childhood education policy in Hong Kong. *Early Child Development and Care*.

Rao, N., Ng, S.S.N., & Pearson, E. (In preparation). Preschool pedagogy: A fusion of traditional Chinese beliefs and contemporary notions of appropriate practice. In C.K.K. Chan, & N. Rao (Eds) . *Revisiting the Chinese Learner: Psychological and Pedagogical Perspectives*. The University of Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre/Springer Academic Publishers.

Sweeting, T., & Ching, S. (1988). *The marriage of Chinese cultural tradition with modern kindergarten practice in Hong Kong: A question of compatibility*. Hong Kong: the University of Hong Kong.

Tse, S.K., Marton, F., Ki, W.W., & Loh, E.K.Y. (in press). An integrative perceptual approach for teaching Chinese characters. *Instructional Science*.

Wong, N.C.M. & Rao, N. (2004). Preschool education. In M. Bray & R. Koo (Eds), *Education and society in Hong Kong and Macau: comparative perspectives on continuity and change* (pp. 15-34). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong.

Wai Ming, CHEUNG:

Teaching Chinese and English in Hong Kong Kindergartens: Pedagogical Approaches in Early Bilingual Education