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## **CODE-SWITCHING AND CODE-MIXING IN TRILINGUAL EDUCATION IN HONG KONG: A CASE STUDY**

**Wang Lixun**

The Education University of Hong Kong, HKSAR, China

[lixun@eduhk.hk](mailto:lixun@eduhk.hk)

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### **Abstract**

*Classroom instructions in Hong Kong secondary school context often involve code-switching/code-mixing, with textbooks in English yet the lessons being taught in Cantonese (A variety of spoken Chinese) or a Cantonese/English mix. The code-switching/code-mixing instruction has been a common practice in Hong Kong classroom teaching. However, the Education Commission of Hong Kong considered code-switching/code-mixing instruction as the primary reason for students' inadequate levels of English and Chinese. Therefore, the Government adopted the policy of 'mother-tongue teaching' to promote Chinese-medium instruction so as to reduce code-switching/code-mixing instruction. In this paper, firstly, a summary of the historical background of the Hong Kong language policies will be introduced. Secondly, the role of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in classroom teaching will be discussed by illustrating examples from a case study in a Hong Kong secondary school. Finally, the reasons behind using mixed code and its impact on student learning will be analyzed and discussed. A number of research methods were employed: questionnaire survey, student focus group interviews and classroom discourse analysis. The research findings show that students in the case study school found the use of mixed code beneficial even though the school language policy does not encourage code-switching/code-*



*mixing instruction. We anticipate that this study will shed some light on the study of code-switching/code-mixing.*

## **Keywords**

Code-Switching, Code-Mixing, Mother-Tongue Teaching, Biliterate and Trilingual, Hong Kong

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Hong Kong Language Policies**

The majority of Hong Kong people (ninety five percent) are ethnic Chinese, and Cantonese, English and Putonghua are their main languages, but each one “carries different political, economic, social and cultural values locally” (Chen, 2005, p. 528). Although Cantonese is the first language of most of the Hong Kong people (Sze, 1997), its grammar is significantly different from that of Modern Standard Chinese (MSC), which is the written Chinese taught in schools. On the contrary, Putonghua, which is the national language of China, follows the same grammar as MSC does (Tse, 2009). Under the British colonial rule for 155 years, Cantonese was the predominant language used in daily life while English, the official language in Hong Kong, was the prevailing language used in legal, administrative, judicial, and educational sectors (Poon, 2000). In 1974, Chinese became a co-official language in Hong Kong due to public pressure (Poon, 2000).

Before 1997, both English and Cantonese were used in schools for instructions. After 1997, the HKSAR government adopted the policy of ‘biliteracy & trilingualism’ with an aim to enable Hong Kong people to write English and Chinese, and speak English, Cantonese and Putonghua. Before the 1990s, there were two main types of secondary schools: the Anglo-Chinese Schools (English medium schools), and the Chinese Middle Schools (Chinese medium schools). Regardless of their names, different schools had the freedom of choosing different medium of instruction for different subjects under the British laissez-faire attitude to language education policy (Bolton, 2011; Luk, 2000; Poon, Lau & Chu, 2013). Many Chinese medium schools used English as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) to meet the parents’ requirements (Luke & Richards, 1982), but “Cantonese was also used in accompanying English to a varying extent in classroom instruction for easier understanding” (Teng & Wang, 2020, p. 64). Lai and Byram (2003) point out that about ninety percent of secondary school students studied through EMI (English as Medium of Instruction) before the Handover in 1997 (Sweeting, 1991; So, 1992).



## **1.2 Code-Switching/Code-Mixing Instruction in Hong Kong Education**

Many of the EMI schools used mixed code of English and Chinese (Pan, 2000; Poon et al., 2013). Code-switching/code-mixing between English and Cantonese was a common phenomenon in secondary school education due to students' limited English ability. English textbooks were used while instructions and explanations were given in mixed code (English and Cantonese). Chen (2005) points out that although mixed code is criticized in society, it has turned into a societal norm. Although many teachers found code-switching/code-mixing helpful (Hirvela & Law, 1991), the Education Department of Hong Kong considered it harmful, as it would lead to the falling of language standards (Li, 1998). In addition, the Education Commission of Hong Kong considered code-switching/code-mixing instruction as the primary reason for students' inadequate levels of English and Chinese (Education Commission, 1990).

The Government has adopted some measures to deal with the issue of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in secondary school education. The Education Commission (EC) Report No. 4 in November 1990 specified that mixed-code should be minimized and consistent use of a particular MOI in a lesson should be promoted, and students would learn better in their mother tongue (Education Commission, 1990). In 1997, a policy guidance 'The Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools' was issued by the Education Department (ED), compelling all local public sector secondary schools to use Cantonese as the basic MOI. Schools that wished to use English as the basic MOI must offer adequate justification to ED (Education Department, 1997). As there were voices from the public stating that mother tongue education has caused a falling of English standards in Hong Kong, the Education Bureau (EDB) initiated a policy change and proclaimed in May 2009 that a fine-tuning of MOI policy would be brought about in September 2010. After the fine-tuning of MOI policy, secondary schools are not categorized into EMI and CMI schools any more, instead they are allowed to choose more varied MOI teaching arrangements, such as all CMI, CMI/EMI in different subjects, and total EMI immersion (Kan, Lai, Kirkpatrick & Law, 2011; Poon, 2013).

## **2. Code-Switching and Code-Mixing**

Code-switching and code-mixing are very common phenomena in multilingual contexts as classroom language practices are not always in accord with official policies (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). Code-switching is about speakers in a language community switching from one language to another according to the situation of utterance, where the switches take place at sentence/clause



boundaries (Lyons, 1977; Moradi, 2014; Li, 2008). Code-switching in the classroom means that teachers/students use more than one language alternatively in the classroom (Lin, 2008). Code mixing occurs when the change of one language to another takes place within the same utterance (Ho, 2007; Li, 2008; Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2019). Ferguson (2003) suggests that code-switching/code-mixing instruction has the potential to help students to overcome difficulties when studying content subjects using a foreign language as the MOI.

Various functions of code-switching and code-mixing have been acknowledged by researchers, such as to mark emphasis, elaboration, clarification, retention, topic shift, and addressee shift (McClure 1977), and for translation, building and maintaining group membership, giving instructions/explanations, and checking understanding (Guthrie, 1983). In addition, Li (2008, p. 84) points out that the use of Cantonese in EMI lessons can help clarify difficult concepts, introduce or consolidate students' bilingual lexicon, and help build rapport by reducing social distance.

Researchers in Hong Kong have been studying code-switching/code-mixing in different school contexts ever since the late 1970s (Li, 2000; Regan, 2003). Johnson (1983; 1985) researched and analyzed instances of classroom code-switching. Ho and Van Naerssen (1986) investigated the usefulness of code-switching as a pedagogical resource through a diary study in a secondary school. Lin (1990) investigated the reasons for code-switching in English language classrooms in four Anglo-Chinese secondary schools. It appears that these scholars agreed that code-switching/code-mixing instruction can be beneficial. Both Li (2008) and Hirvela and Law (1991) hold the view that code-switching/code-mixing instruction has great potential for facilitating learning and teaching within certain contexts.

We hope that the current case study can help to identify the role of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in teaching and learning under the fine-tuning of MOI policy, and the findings can shed some light on the study of code-switching/code-mixing, and provide some references to education policy makers when they consider language policies in secondary schools.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Methods**

A multi-modal research method was adopted for this case study. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. Qualitative data was collected through interviewing teachers and parents, focus group interview with students, classroom discourse analysis, and



teachers' reflection; while student questionnaire survey was the source of quantitative data. In the case study we interviewed eight teachers individually, including the school principal, the vice-principal, the Chinese Language subject panel, the Chinese Language subject teacher who uses PMI to teach the subject, the Putonghua subject panel, the English Language subject panel, the Integrated Science subject panel and the Mathematics subject teacher. In addition, we observed and tape-recorded six 40-minute lessons as shown in Table 1. After class observation, the subject teachers had to complete the teacher's 'Reflection Form', i.e., reflection-on-actions. This engages them in reviewing, analyzing and evaluating the situation which would enhance professional growth (Schön, 1987).

**Table 1:** *The Information of Class Observation*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>MOI under school policy</b>	<b>MOI in the classroom</b>
Chinese Language	S4	Cantonese	Cantonese
Chinese Language	S2	Putonghua	Putonghua
English Language	S2	English	English
Putonghua	S2	Putonghua	Putonghua
Integrated Science	S3	English	Mixed code in Cantonese & English
Mathematics	S2	English	Mixed code in Cantonese & English

S1 to S4 students of the case-study school were asked to fill in a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 18 items, and 126 copies of questionnaire were collected. After the survey, eight students from S3 and S4 were invited to attend an one-hour Focus Group Interview. Lastly, six parents (four are local Hongkongers while two came from Mainland China) were invited to attend a 15-minute interview. Either Cantonese or Putonghua were used during the interviews according to the parents' preferred language. The case study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What trilingual education approach can be identified in the case-study school?
- What is the role of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in classroom teaching and learning?

Below are some samples of questionnaire items regarding students' perception of code-switching/code-mixing:

Item 5: I find it acceptable switching from one language to another when studying different subjects in the school.



Item 6: I find myself code-switching/code-mixing between English and Cantonese regularly during the study of the English Language subject.

Item 7: I find myself code-switching/code-mixing between Cantonese and Putonghua regularly during the study of the Chinese Language subject.

Item 8: I find code-switching/code-mixing in different subjects useful for my language development in general.

### **3.2 Information of the Case-Study School**

The case-study school is a co-educational CMI secondary school established by a Christianity association in 1962. It was initially a private school and was not fully subsidized by the government until 1982. All subjects were taught in Cantonese other than the English Language subject before the implementation of the fine-tuning medium of instruction policy in 2010. During the time of the case study, the school operated 18 classes for S1-S6: 3 classes in each level. The school started to use Putonghua as the MOI (PMI) in the study of the Chinese Language subject in 2008, offering for one group of students in each junior level (S1-S3). This is to attract more students for survival reason, especially those from Mainland China. Students are given the chance to choose between CMI and PMI in the study of the subject in S1 and those who have chosen PMI need to take an assessment test on their language proficiency in Putonghua before admitted to the PMI class. If students find it inappropriate to use PMI in the study of the subject, they can switch back to CMI classes when they are promoted to S2. Under the ‘fine-tuning of the MOI’ policy in 2010, the school started to use English as MOI in teaching one group of students in S1-S3 Mathematics and Integrated Science, but only for certain topics in related subjects. English has been used as the MOI for Liberal Studies, Mathematics, Integrated Science and Computer for South Asian students in S1-S3 since the school year 2015-2016 as more and more South Asian students were enrolled in the school.

## **4. Data Analysis and Discussion**

### **4.1 The Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Code-Switching/Code-Mixing in Teaching and Learning**

#### **4.1.1 Students**

As shown in Figure 1, S4 students found switching from one language to another when studying different subjects most acceptable as they gave the highest mean score of 3.84 to item 5 (see Section 3.1) when compared with students in other levels. However, S1 students did not share



the same view of S4 students as they gave the lowest mean score of 3.29 to the same item, which is significantly below the average mean score of 3.69. S3 students found themselves code-switching/code-mixing between English and Cantonese on a regular basis when studying the English Language subject and between Cantonese and Putonghua when studying the Chinese Language subject as they gave the highest mean scores of 3.7 to item 6 (see Section 3.1) and 3.2 to item 7 (see Section 3.1) respectively. However, S3 students also found code-switching/code-mixing less beneficial to their language development as they gave the lowest mean score of 3.43 to item 8 (see Section 3.1), which is below the average mean score of 3.58. S2 students found code-switching/code-mixing more beneficial to their language development as they gave the highest mean score of 3.83 to item 8. Interestingly, they found themselves code-switching/code-mixing between English and Cantonese less regularly when studying the English Language subject and between Cantonese and Putonghua when studying the Chinese Language subject as they gave the lowest mean scores of 3.22 to item 6 and 2.7 to item 7 respectively, which are below the average mean scores of 3.51 and 3.08. Overall, students found code-switching/code-mixing during the study of different subjects acceptable (mean score of item 5 is 3.69). Many students practiced code-switching/code-mixing regularly when studying the English Language subject (mean score of item 6 is 3.51). Not as many students found themselves code-switching/code-mixing between Cantonese and Putonghua regularly when studying the Chinese Language subject (mean score of item 7 is 3.08). In general, students felt that code-switching/code-mixing played a positive role in their language development (mean score of item 8 is 3.58).

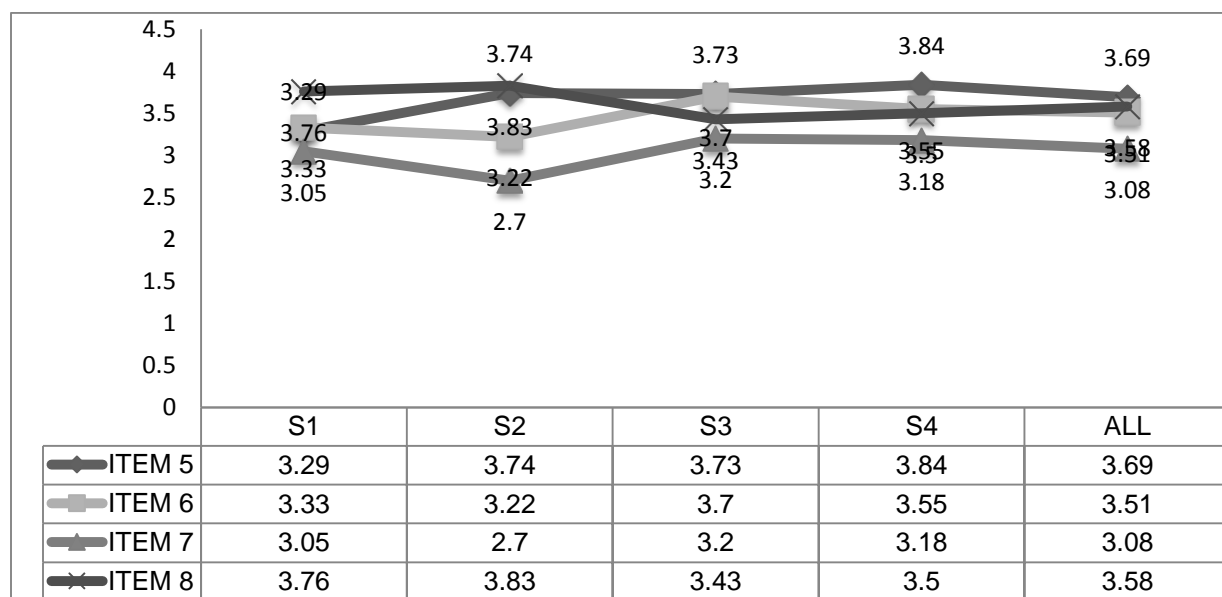


Figure 1: Students' Perception of Code-Switching/Code-Mixing



In the Focus Group interview, one student pointed out that she would practice code-switching/code-mixing between Cantonese and Putonghua when communicating with her peers from the Mainland as her Putonghua proficiency was not high enough. The students agreed that code-switching/code-mixing was a usual phenomenon in English lessons:

“Teachers speak in Cantonese very often. They will use English once and use Cantonese to explain the content immediately.”

“In our A1 group (using EMI), the teacher will answer you according to the language you use. For example, she answers in English if we ask questions in English, but answers in Cantonese if we ask questions in either Cantonese or Putonghua.”

“Our teacher would not stop us discussing issues related to the teaching content in Cantonese or Putonghua. When asking her questions, we will switch back to English.”

Students expressed that code-switching/code-mixing was not allowed in Putonghua lessons as the teachers were strict and their marks would be deducted if they spoke Cantonese in class.

#### **4.1.2 Principal and Teachers**

The principal disagreed to code-switching/code-mixing instruction in language teaching. When he was an English Language subject teacher before being promoted to the present rank, he insisted on using 100% English and he would use gestures and pictures to help students understand him. He also emphasized that students would be able to learn a language better by listening more to that particular language. The teachers’ ‘Reflection Forms’ show that language teachers did not support the use of mixed code in classroom instruction. The Chinese Language subject teacher using CMI stated that she used 100% Cantonese in her teaching as she believed that it enhanced the effectiveness of her teaching, resulting in students’ good understanding of the content. However, she would allow students from the Mainland to use Putonghua to answer her questions if they found it difficult to express themselves in Cantonese. The Chinese Language subject teacher using PMI and the Putonghua subject teacher stated that they used 100% Putonghua in teaching as they insisted on providing students with a fruitful Putonghua learning environment to enhance students’ writing skills in Chinese and facilitate their learning of the Putonghua language. From class observations, these three teachers did not use mixed code in their classroom instruction. Just as the students said in the Focus Group Interview, they were not allowed to use Cantonese in Putonghua lessons, and the Putonghua teacher stuck to her principle that no Cantonese is allowed so as to offer students with an ample Putonghua-speaking environment in the classroom. In her





Reflection Form, the English Language subject teacher stated that she used 99.9% English as she wanted her students to be exposed to an English-speaking environment. In class observation she code-switched from English to Cantonese once to ensure if her students understood the requirement of the task in class and she translated her question “anyone wants me to explain it in Cantonese?” from English to Cantonese for clarification (McClure, 1977; Guthrie, 1983; Li, 2008) in the example below. (In subsequent dialogues, translation and explanation are in italics and in brackets).

T: Do you understand? Do you know what to do? Ok, anyone wants me to explain it in Cantonese? 老師使唔使用中文講解一次?” (*The teacher repeated her question in Cantonese once again*).

Then one student answered her in Cantonese that he needed, resulting in the teacher’s explanation in English once again. Also, she would allow students to use Cantonese or Putonghua in group discussions, just like what the students said in the Focus Group Interview. In class observation, this English teacher restated a student’s answer in Cantonese and then in English after he/she had given the answer in Cantonese for clarification and focus as well (McClure, 1977; Guthrie, 1983):

T: Can you take the light rail if you want to go to Sham Shui Po? Do you know what Light Rail is?

S: 輕鐵。 (*Light Rail in Cantonese*)

T: Yeah, Terry. Correct 輕鐵。 (*Light Rail in Cantonese*). Light rail operates in Tuen Mun and Yuen Long.

The non-language teachers, Mathematics and Integrated Science (IS) teachers, were more flexible to the use of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in class. The school’s language policy slightly changed under the ‘Fine-tuning of Hong Kong’s Medium of Instruction’ Policy in 2010: EMI was used in teaching one group of students in S1-S3 Mathematics and Integrated Science, but only for certain topics in related subjects. In the Mathematics lesson we observed, the teacher code-switched between English, Cantonese and a little bit Putonghua even though English is the MOI of the topic taught. The dialogue below shows how she began her lesson by using mixed code to check students’ understanding (Guthrie, 1983; Ferguson, 2003) and draw the students’ attention (McClure, 1977).



T: All of you please put your book, workbook on your desk. 睇吓邊個有做先？睇吓明唔明我個指示先。 (*Let me see if you understand my instructions.*) All of you please put your book, workbook on your desk. (To a student) Where is your book? Locker? Where is your book? Ok, so please share the book with your classmate, don't forget your book next time. 同同學一齊睇啦。下次唔好咁喇。 (*The teacher repeated what she said once again in Cantonese.*) Oh, today we will talk about chapter 11. 我哋今日會講第十一課。 (*The teacher repeated what she said once again in Cantonese.*) Please look at the screen. 先睇睇個螢光幕先。 (*The teacher repeated what she said once again in Cantonese.*) Sine ratio? Have you read this name or have you even seen it before?

She usually repeated the abstract English terminologies in Cantonese to check her students' understanding (Guthrie, 1983; Ferguson, 2003). For example:

T: Here is the angle, the marked angle 角 (*the terminology 'angle' is repeated in Cantonese*). And then opposite to this angle, is what we call opposite side 對邊。 (*The terminology 'opposite side' is repeated in Cantonese*) 對著依隻角, opposite to this marked angle, we call this side 'opposite side' 對邊, ok? So, what is this side called?

S: 斜邊。

T: Hypotenuse. 斜邊。 (*The terminology 'hypotenuse' is repeated in Cantonese*) Hypotenuse. Do you think, what is the relationship between the three lines? What is the longest, the longest? What is meant by the longest?

The Mathematics teacher used about 80% English and about 20% Cantonese and about 1% Putonghua in the lesson. She stated in her Reflection Form that the advantage of using different languages in teaching is that students could understand her teaching better and would become more confident in learning the subject. Putonghua was used when there were misunderstandings on the learning materials as many of the students came from Mainland China. The use of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in the Mathematics lesson was for translation and as a device for checking understanding (Guthrie, 1983; Ferguson, 2003).

In the IS lesson we observed, the teacher code-switched between English and Cantonese even though the MOI of the topic taught was English. The teacher wrote in his Reflection Form that he code-switched because his students' English proficiency was weak and he believed the use of mixed code could help the students to immediately understand the meaning of the English

terminologies and enhance students' understanding of the content in an efficient way. He used mixed code to translate, clarify, mark emphasis and mode shift (McClure, 1977; Guthrie, 1983; Li, 2008). For example:

T: Ok. Ah, so first question: Do you separate your waste?

S: What is waste separation?

T: 垃圾分類。 (*Explanation of waste separation in Cantonese*)

S: Oh.

He sometimes used Cantonese to repeat his questions and also encouraged his students to respond to his questions in Cantonese to check students' understanding (Guthrie, 1983; Ferguson, 2003). For example:

T: So, another question, what are the environmental problems associated with the landfills?

好喇, 堆填區用黎拋棄垃圾, 有咩問題? What is the problem? (*the teacher repeated her question in Cantonese once again*)

S: Chemical pollution.

T: Chemical pollution, just write pollution. Ok, and the others? 堆填區有咩問題? (*the teacher repeated her question in Cantonese once again*) You can answer me in Cantonese.

S: 要用很多地方。 (*need to occupy more space*)

T: 啱呀, 要用很多地方。係香港有 d 人呢做 d 抗議建堆填區, 有冇諗過 reasons? (*Yes, it needs to occupy more space. However, some people in Hong Kong protest against building up the landfills, have you thought of the reasons why?*)

S: 臭。

T: 臭, good. 臭 嘅英文係咩呀? (*What is the English meaning of 臭?*)

S: Bad smell.

To conclude, the principal would encourage the teachers not to use code-switching/code-mixing instruction in teaching as he believed 'one language at a time' could help students learn that particular language more effectively. However, he would allow the teachers to have flexibility of using mixed code in class when deemed necessary.

The roles of code-switching/code-mixing instruction shown in our study match those identified in previous studies (McClure, 1977; Guthrie, 1983; Ferguson, 2003; Li, 2008), such as for clarification, easy understanding, elaboration and building rapport with students. Hirvela and



Law (1991) indicate that teachers can decide and justify whether to use or to avoid code-switching/code-mixing instruction in different contexts with intelligence. In this case study, it appears that the language teachers would rather not adopt code-switching/code-mixing instruction in language teaching, as they wish to establish a sound language learning environment for their students. As for teachers teaching other subjects such as Mathematics and Integrated Science, they were happy to adopt code-switching/code-mixing instruction, so as to take advantage of various functions of code-mixing/code-switching mentioned earlier.

The above findings are similar to the case studies of three Hong Kong primary schools conducted by Wang and Kirkpatrick (2019) that the school principals and the language teachers were not in favor of using mixed code in teaching, while the students and non-language teachers were not resistant to code-switching/code-mixing instruction. Wang (2019, p. 330) further recommends that code-switching/code-mixing can be adopted in the classroom where appropriate, with the aim of enhancing students' trilingual development.

## **5. Conclusion**

The school's language policy did not allow the use of code-switching/code-mixing instruction in teaching in theory. In practice, the language teachers, such as the Putonghua subject teacher and the Chinese Language subject teacher using Putonghua as the MOI, did follow the school's policy. However, the English Language subject teacher was found code-switching occasionally when trying to help students to understand certain concepts better in order to complete certain tasks. The non-language teachers did not follow the school's policy in a strict manner, as they applied mixed code when explaining some English jargons in Cantonese, hence enhancing students' understanding of the content. They were more tolerant to code-switching/code-mixing instruction than the language teachers. The students agreed that code-switching/code-mixing in the study of different subjects could be beneficial to their language development. Although some subjects such as Science and Mathematics were taught using English as the MOI, mixed code is prevalent in classroom teaching. The non-language subject teachers held the view that students could learn better in a non-language subject with the aid of their mother tongue if a foreign language is used as the MOI of the subject.

Through the case study conducted in one Hong Kong secondary school, it is discovered that, code-switching/code-mixing instruction does not always facilitate effective learning and teaching, but if it could be adopted wisely and strategically, especially in non-language subjects



where a foreign language is used as the MOI, it could be very beneficial to students' learning. Language policy makers should take these into account when implementing language policies in Hong Kong secondary schools. We hope that this case study will shed some light on the study of code-switching/code-mixing instruction, which may be taken as a reference for multilingual education research in other contexts. However, as it is a case study, the research findings cannot be generalized to the wider population. It is hoped that further studies can be conducted in this area to help provide a fuller picture of the issue under investigation.

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