

19/2000

From the Editor

23 November 2000

'Learning Matters at Lingnan' are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.



Cantonese or English as the Medium of Instruction for Lingnan?

It has long been argued and debated by the government and educators alike about an instructional problem that is unique to Hong Kong — a Chinese community whose 98% of the population speaks Cantonese on a day-to-day basis, yet aspiring to become an international city where English must be spoken and used ably by its citizens in order to stay competitive in international trade and business. The problem is whether English or Cantonese or even Putonghua be adopted as the medium of instruction in classrooms for schools in Hong Kong, such that a greater exposure to a particular language is believed to result in a higher level of proficiency of that language, but at the same time not at the expense of effective learning of the subject matter taught.

Lingnan University faces this dilemma too. To assist the University to work out its language policy and to determine which medium of instruction is to be used for Lingnan classrooms, the Teaching and Learning Centre has recently conducted an online student survey on Medium of Instruction. Data were collected and analyzed from a sample of 1,570 students yielding a very high response rate of 75%. This edition of 'Learning Matters at Lingnan' reports some of the major findings and views expressed by students regarding the language policy and medium of instruction.

Summary of Student Views

There are two key questions in the questionnaire which aim to solicit students' views about, first, the medium of instruction for Lingnan courses in general and, second, the University language policy.

Responses to the first question indicate that most students prefer 'English supplemented with Cantonese' (53%) as the medium of instruction for Lingnan courses in general. This is followed by 'English' (20.8%), then 'Cantonese supplemented with English' (17.8%), 'Cantonese' (7.7%) and finally, 'Putonghua' (0.7%).

Responses to the second question about the language policy for this University are consistent with the above views. The majority of

respondents selected 'English in general but switchable to Cantonese if ALL students in the class prefer the switch' as the most preferred language policy (54.7%). This is followed by 'English for all courses' (22.4%), then 'Cantonese in general but switchable to English when there are non-Cantonese-speaking students in the class' (12.6%) and lastly, 'Cantonese for all courses' (9.0%).

A consistent pattern seems to have emerged from these students' views about the medium of instruction. It is quite apparent that the majority of students favour 'English supplemented with Cantonese' and 'English switchable' as the instructional medium and language policy for this University. A closer look at the other choices indicated by students reveals that more students actually prefer 'English' to 'Cantonese' as the main medium of instruction. This finding is somehow contradictory to what most academic colleagues think should be the case in Lingnan classrooms. There is always the folklore belief that students prefer 'Cantonese' more than 'English' as the medium of instruction, thereby compelling some colleagues who can speak both languages to teach in Cantonese. In this connection, the survey findings seem to have disproved this assumption about Cantonese being more preferred than English and provided new evidence for the support of using English as the main medium of instruction for this University.

A cross-tabulation of the students' preference for a particular instructional medium with their background (in terms of gender, year of study, prior language ability, study program, GPA and self-assessment of language proficiency) shows some interesting relationships. While there is no noticeable difference in their preference among students of either sex and any year of study, there is a significant tendency for students to choose 'English' or 'English supplemented with Cantonese' if their prior language ability is higher (in terms of both A-level English and Chinese results). This similar pattern is also identified for students who have higher GPAs and a higher self-assessment of language proficiency.

The programme of study naturally affects the medium of instruction which depends on whether English or Chinese is the primary means of information from books and reference materials. Despite the slight variations among some academic disciplines, the majority of students in most study programmes prefer 'English switchable' as the medium of instruction.

While students realize that it is easier for them to understand the subject matter if Cantonese is used as the medium of instruction, they express regret when there is less chance for them to be exposed to English. The same dilemma is felt when English, being the medium of instruction, can on one hand help to improve the standard of English by providing opportunities for English expression and preparing for studies abroad, but on the other hand, will discourage discussion and interaction between the instructor and students and among the students themselves.

In most cases, the advantages of English-medium instruction mirror the disadvantages of Cantonese-medium instruction, and vice versa, which suggests the dilemma that is implicit in the issue of medium of instruction and the antithetical nature of the problem.