

# LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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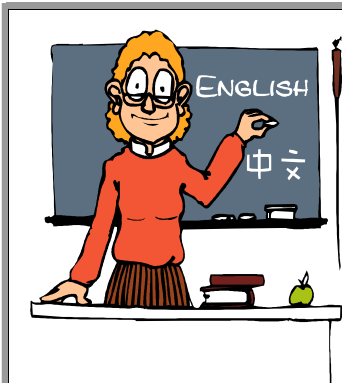


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This edition is contributed by Dr. Terence Pang discussing the highly contentious issue of medium of instruction for classrooms in Hong Kong. Should it be English, Cantonese, or a mixed-code?



## Ping fan code-mixing<sup>1</sup>

Just before term started, our President, Professor Edward Chen, reminded teachers at Lingnan of our language policy. The following statement makes interesting reading: “Apart from language courses and courses in the Chinese and Translation Departments, the University uses English mainly as the language of instruction, which may be supplemented with Cantonese/Putonghua or switched to Cantonese as appropriate. This policy decision was based on the fact that English is an international language and Hong Kong being cosmopolitan and globalised.”

In recent years our post-colonial government has made it mandatory that classes can only be conducted in either the mother tongue for Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI) schools, and in English for English as the medium of instruction (EMI) schools. Starting from the 1998/1999 school year, there are 114 public aided schools (government and aided schools) using English as the medium of instruction, fewer than one third of the total. A certain linguistic purism dictates that the use of code-switching, i.e. changing the language in between utterances, and code-mixing, i.e. changing the language within an utterance, are not allowed. In the MA course *English as an International Language* that I co-teach with Professor Tom McArthur, some students, who are full time teachers, remarked that they could accept code-switching but not code-mixing in their classroom.

Apart from the pretense behind the so-called ‘biliterate and trilingual’ education policy of our government (Is Cantonese ever promoted as a respectable language at all?), one must ask: “What’s wrong with code-mixing?” The de facto education policy is actually triglossic rather than trilingual. The three languages do not enjoy equal status. English is still the high language because of economic and social realities, but Putonghua is rising as another prestigious tongue owing to economic and political forces. Cantonese remains obstinately as the playful and even mischievous *muvver* tongue. By triglossia, I mean different languages enjoy different status owing to the different or even at times segregated functions they perform.

The stigma attached to code-mixing was partly historical and partly the result of illogical interpretation of research data. Pidgin English, used as the lingua franca of China trade starting from the late seventeenth century, was frowned upon in Hong Kong by the late nineteenth century. Speaking proper English was much emphasized in the *Education Reports* of Eitel, head of education of the time. However, bilingualism received its greatest damage in the U.S. some thirty years ago in the U.S. where some researchers based on the public test results of Spanish speaking bilinguals concluded that bilingualism was the reason behind their poor performance, that they cannot represent their thoughts properly in either language.

P.T.O. ↗

<sup>1</sup> Ping fan means ‘correcting a wrong’, often involving restoring the prestige of a person.

Superficially, when teachers code-switch, they act as translators for their students, hence the grammar translation method in early language teaching, which went into disfavor with the rise of the Direct Method using English, the target language, as the sole medium of instruction.<sup>2</sup> Often, the reason for using translation is the perceived low proficiency of the learners, which means that explanation cannot be made in the target language. However, it can also be observed that English is used in the opening and concluding remarks and Cantonese is reserved for the body of the explanation. Thus, the target language is privileged and acts as a frame for the overall explanation. Another interpretation of the situation is that English is regarded as a kind of technical discourse, with a special kind of grammar and meanings.<sup>3</sup> Indeed in the code-mixed lectures at secondary and tertiary levels, often the technical terms appear in English. It becomes a language of power, and ultimately of control. Much teacher talk used for enforcing discipline appears in the foreign language, an extension of the discourse of ‘colonialism’. Eventually, English acquires “outer values having to do with success, stylishness, and academic achievement, while Cantonese is associated with ‘inner’ values having to do with tradition, home, and solidarity” (Pennington, 1998, p.13).

Code-mixing is not a simple contingency measure for the learner who has not mastered either language adequately, or a new form of pidginization, as language purists would prefer us to believe. Rather, it is the expression of an identity, an identity of cultural mediation or in-betweenness. It offers the speaker a dual identity at times, a dual role. It is a discourse unto itself. The ability to incorporate the embedded language, often the foreign language, into the grammar and syntax of the matrix language, normally the mother tongue, demands a certain linguistic maturity, as shown in English academic papers with Latin or French words. Often we hear our students say: *ngo gum yat yiu jo present* (I have to do the presentation today). And then we judge the grammaticality of the utterance and conclude that the verb ‘present’ cannot be used as a noun, but we have to admire their ingenuity, as Cantonese words are very flexible in grammatical functions. The English word has in this case been appropriated into the grammar of Cantonese. I believe our students can tell the difference between ‘present’ and ‘presentation’.

Using two languages simultaneously represents mastery of two linguistic and representational systems, each with a particular lexicon and culture (Pennington, 1996). While code-mixing requires lexico-grammatical competence, code-switching requires discourse strategies. The phenomenon can serve various pragmatic intents too, like showing off one’s linguistic knowledge, or displaying an in-group identity, or signaling the change to a kind of technical or instructional discourse. The speaker can be regarded variably as lax, innovative, playful or even snobbish. Code-mixing can often enhance the semantic value of an utterance, as in: *bei go offer ngo la* (Give me an offer please). Here ‘offer’ has got pragmatic meaning apart from lexical meaning.

I would suggest that code-switching and code-mixing are desirable in this climate of post-modernism and post-colonialism. What better way can we appropriate the ex-colonizer’s language and embrace the world than to use English words through creative manipulation?

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*References:*

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<sup>2</sup> The Direct Method, paradoxically, was adopted mainly because there was a shortage of teachers who could understand the learners’ home language.

<sup>3</sup> the use of grammatical terms in the teaching of English renders the discourse highly technical