Research Article

Language Policy and Student Language Identities in Bilingual Classrooms: A Hong Kong Primary School

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Within Hong Kong, the historical and political context has shaped educational policy and views about languages. This research explores school language policy within a bilingual English and Putonghua (Mandarin) primary school, where the majority of students are first language Cantonese. The aim of the study was to understand how school language policy interacts with student language learning practices and language identities. Two primary classrooms were the focus of the research. Data were collected through recorded classroom observations and student interviews. A quantitative analysis compared the amount of time the different languages were used during classroom sessions. Qualitative data from interviews underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the focus on bilingualism did not always honour students' language identities. The assumed Putonghua identity constrained learning and participation for some students, in particular where their Cantonese language identity was rejected through a perceived language hierarchy at the school.

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1. Introduction

Hong Kong has two official languages, English and Chinese. Within the Hong Kong context, Chinese means written Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin) and spoken Cantonese. Mandarin, referred to in Hong Kong as Putonghua, has always been taught in schools as part of the language curriculum, but has grown in significance since the reintegration of Hong Kong as part of the People's Republic of China post-1997.

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In the context of Hong Kong, most students speak Cantonese at home but are expected to learn a different form of Chinese outside of the home, a language that could be considered a heritage language due to the assumed "familial or ancestral ties" to the language[1]. However, given the complexity of Chinese, with its many different variations, it is problematic to assume that one should have a single heritage language. Garcia (2009) argues that reducing an individual's identities to that of a single heritage restricts the potential to appreciate bilingualism and biliteracy. Wu and Leung[2] note that attributing Putonghua as a common heritage language to all ethnic Chinese imposes a language identity and can hinder full social and cultural participation.

A brief overview of the recent history of Cantonese, English and Putonghua use in schools is key to understanding the context of this case study. Since the late 1970s, the government has implemented reforms to improve the country's participation in international trade as part of the global economy. These reforms further increased the status of English across Hong Kong[3]. Up until the 1990s, this resulted in a "mixed-code" problem with English being used in textbooks and examinations, and Cantonese being used for explanations, resulting in lost curriculum time for translation and learning being reduced to memorisation of facts in English (Education Commission, 1990). The Education Commission proposed a streaming policy requiring schools to adopt one language of instruction, describing *Chinese* (meaning Cantonese) as the mother tongue of students, and therefore the most effective medium of instruction and a way of resolving "mixed-code" in schools.

Parental preference for English Medium Instruction (EMI) did not subside under the streaming policy. To resolve this conflict, the Education Commission (1990) proposed that students were streamed based on their language abilities determined by a Medium of Instruction Grouping Assessment (MIGA). Schools were also grouped into three types based on language – Chinese, English, or bilingual. Parents could choose which school their child attended, but the results of the MIGA informed them of their child's suitability to attend (Education Commission, 1990). Schools too had the choice of instruction, and with the MIGA results, they were able to make an informed choice to meet student needs. This streaming policy was implemented in 1994, but by 1998 it was replaced with the compulsory Chinese Medium Instruction (CMI) policy[4], meaning that all schools needed to change to CMI. The policy was met with much opposition, leading to a policy revision later that same year, which further exempted 14 schools from the policy. This meant 70% of Hong Kong schools were now CMI, up from just 12%[4]. International schools were part of the exemption, sparking an increase in demand for school places, a demand that has not subsided.

The current language policy was shaped in early 2001 by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR). Following a review of schools, they concluded that Hong Kong should be biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua, and English), a policy aim that still exists today. International schools, such as the one in this case study, are not mandated on medium of instruction in the way that government schools are, which has allowed the continued growth of EMI and bilingual (English and Putonghua) schools.

In response to these national language policies, schools have formulated their own policies. The international school used in this study is bilingual, with students learning English and Putonghua in order that all students become bilingual and biliterate. The school mission seeks to promote and develop a pride in Chinese heritage while ensuring students have a strong bilingual foundation (School Mission Statement, 2018). Every class has two teachers, one first-language Chinese teacher and one first-language English teacher. All lessons are therefore bilingual, with students working interchangeably in each language. As students transition into high school (Year 7), the medium of instruction moves to English.

1.1. School Language Policy

The school language policy aims to support the school mission of bilingual and biliterate students with a pride in Chinese heritage. This sentiment is supported in the philosophy statement at the start of the language policy: 'We believe that by placing an emphasis on competence in more than one language we are supporting children in developing respect, international mindedness and intercultural awareness as well as personal and cultural identity.' Competence in more than one language refers to Putonghua and English. 'Personal and cultural identity' could be seen to make assumptions about student cultural identity, which can become part of the figured world of the students. It could also represent a school curriculum goal, to move children towards an identity as a bilingual student. This could be problematic for students that are multilingual.

The policy continues: 'Our language policy defines our identity.' This position is followed by stating a goal for students to 'become open-minded, active members of the global community with a focus on bilingualism in Chinese and English.'

There is no mention of a different goal for students with a home language that is not one of the languages of the school. Cantonese is also not mentioned; instead, only Chinese is, which could refer to Cantonese or Putonghua.

The policy moves on to specify the language of instruction: 'The school's aim is for a student to become bilingual and biliterate in both English and Chinese. All teachers are language teachers.' This suggests that the value of English and Chinese within the school comes from the academic outcomes of being bilingual and biliterate. Teachers are responsible for developing these languages as part of their practice, but missing from the text is information about how teachers are to support language learning. Cantonese is not mentioned in this section; instead, it is in a section entitled 'Other Languages', signifying that Cantonese has less value than Putonghua and English, which are seen here in terms of their value as academic languages. The policy recognises that Cantonese is 'commonly spoken in Hong Kong, including by many of our families.' For this reason, 'Cantonese is therefore used in class where necessary and possible to explain concepts, support understanding and make connections between languages.' This section concludes with 'Cantonese is a common social dialect within the school.' The use of the terms 'dialect' and 'social language' diminishes the value of Cantonese. Moreover, stating that Cantonese can be used 'where necessary' suggests that the preference is for it not to be used, and 'where possible' reflects the reality, which is that students do not necessarily have the academic vocabulary in Cantonese to explain or understand the concepts they are learning.

The current study employs classroom observations and structured interviews to understand the relationship between language policy at an international school and the reality of the classroom. Specifically, this study examines how student language identities are supported at the school, along with the role of status and attitude towards languages in the bilingual classroom. This study forms part of a larger study [5] which looked at the perspectives of co-teachers as well. These perspectives aligned well with the student experiences and views.

1.2. Bilingualism and Identity

Bilingualism is a contested term, with no single agreed-upon definition. The order of language acquisition, level of proficiency and frequency of their use have all been suggested, but none fully embraces the complexities of every case[6]. The additional complexity of language status is particularly pertinent to the role of English and Chinese within the Hong Kong context. According to the 2016 by-census results, 51.9% of people aged 5 years and over are bilingual (English and Cantonese). Hall's[7] broad definition of bilingualism captures student language learning in Hong Kong in terms of English and Chinese (Putonghua):

> ‘Students who live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use, two or more languages at home and at school. It does not mean they have fluency in both languages or that they are competent and literate in both languages’ (p.5).

Looking at children’s language development, MacLeod et al. (2022) identified three factors that influence a child’s bilingualism: input, language status and the age of acquisition of each of the languages. Pearson (2007) argues for five key factors which overlap with those identified by MacLeod et al. (2022): input, language status, access to literacy, family language use and community support (which includes schooling).

There is much debate as to whether Cantonese supports or hinders language proficiency in Putonghua. One belief is that Cantonese ‘spoils’ a student’s ability to learn written Putonghua with any accuracy[8]. Bauer[9] argues that using Cantonese as a medium of instruction is not conducive to learning Standard Written Chinese. These arguments stem from the understanding that when speaking and writing in Modern Standard Chinese (Putonghua), the written and spoken forms match each other word for word. When speaking in Cantonese and writing in Modern Standard Chinese, the two forms vary greatly, requiring conversion rules to transfer grammar structures and vocabulary, and in some instances, spoken words do not have a written form (Wang and Kirkpatrick, 2012). Despite this, others argue that the close linguistic distance of the two languages supports learning[10] (Lin, 1997; Wang and Kirkpatrick, 2012).

In bilingual settings, language choice and attitudes are inseparable from politics, language ideologies and interlocutors’ views of their own and others’ identities[11] (Chan and Clarke, 2014). Attitudes that take the view that Cantonese hinders a student’s ability to learn Putonghua, as well as attitudes that support the view that it is a dialect or social language, reduce the value of this mother-tongue language. As Lee and Leung[12] assert, the low status of Cantonese in all aspects of education and curriculum continues to undermine the linguistic and cultural identity of the Hong Kong people. Other studies have pointed out that bilingualism is greatly enhanced if a child feels their mother tongue is valued[13][14].

As mentioned above, bilingual settings are inseparable from language ideologies and individuals’ language identities. Language ideologies refer broadly to beliefs and assumptions about the learning and using of certain languages or language varieties[15]. They are language users’ evaluative views of a language based on their beliefs about the social usefulness, power, and value, or prestige, of a language in their society[16]. These language ideologies are reflected in the language policies implemented by

governments and, more specifically, by the policies implemented by schools, such as that used in this study. Language identities in the context of learning also stem from and reflect ideologies and are one of the focuses of this study.

Learning transforms who we are and what we do and so is an experience of identity[17]. Collett[18] in her study of emergent elementary school bilinguals argues that learning and identity are both outcomes of participation. Learning involves a change in identity, since a person's identity is enacted at all times, emerging through our interactions with others.

Through their interactions with others, students are extended positional identities associated with the dialect they speak, as well as their perceived language proficiency. For example, Flores et al.'s,[19] study of long-term English Language Learners notes how young emergent bilinguals grapple with the deficit label and underlying implications of being positioned as having poor language skills, an identity that is not congruent with their lived experiences. These positional identities do not acknowledge their linguistic backgrounds. Lee and Anderson[20] use the term 'oppositional' identities to describe this situation where students disassociate from school in order to maintain a sense of self that is not recognised within the classroom. Wu and Leung[2] found that Cantonese students within the Mandarin heritage language classroom were hindered from participating due to an assumed default knowledge of Mandarin. As Collett[18] argues, positional identities are informed by how students are granted and denied agency in social interactions. Agency and choice in language use inform how a student is positioned within the classroom as part of their figured worlds. As Holland et al. (1998) note, behaviour is mediated by a person's identity, defined as a sense of self. Identities are shaped by social positioning, and where identities are imposed on a language learner, this shapes their opportunities for agency.

2. The Present Study

2.1. Research questions

The focus of this research was to understand how school language policy shapes student learning and identities within the bilingual classroom. With this in mind, the research questions were:

1. How are student language identities constructed and supported by the school?
2. What role do status and attitude towards languages play in the classroom?

2.2. Participants

Initial classroom observations over a six-month period, ensuring that every classroom was observed at least once a week (Years 1 to 5), were used to identify participants for the case study. These observations were unstructured in nature. Two bilingual classrooms, one Y3 and one Y5, of 28 students in each were selected as the focus for structured observations and participant interviews. Three students were selected from each class (three male and three female participants); consideration was given to linguistic backgrounds to ensure the research captured the variety represented in the classrooms. Participant information of the selected students is given in Table 1 below.

Pseudonym	Year level	Gender	Age	Language(s) spoken at home	Other languages
Winston	Y5	M	9 years 10 months	Cantonese	English and Putonghua (school)
Jeffery	Y5	M	10 years 2 months	English and Putonghua	
Ashley	Y5	F	9 years 9 months	English	Putonghua (school), Cantonese and Malaysian (home)
Kevin	Y3	M	6 years and 6 months	Cantonese and English	Putonghua (school)
Angela	Y3	F	7 years and 5 months	Putonghua	English (school)
Chloe	Y3	F	6 years and 5 months	Cantonese and English	Putonghua (school), Fujian Chinese (home grandparents)

Table 1. *Student interview participants*

3. Methods

Sixteen structured classroom observations of the two bilingual classes (eight sessions each) were conducted over a five-month period. For each group, five sessions were video-recorded. In addition,

audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students (three from each class).

Field notes were the main observational data collection method. These notes focused on the interactions between students and teachers to see which language was chosen during each interaction and how this impacted student engagement. Field notes were used to record conversations with students during the activities about their language choices both in their interactions and in the classwork they produced. A thirty-minute section of the start of each lesson was video-recorded and transcribed. The first thirty minutes was selected as it was mainly teacher talk, as classroom activities were introduced, supporting good audio quality. Transcriptions provided an understanding of when and how each of the classroom languages was used.

Having observed the students over an extended period, interviews were used to understand their perceptions and actions within the classroom and how they felt about the value placed on different languages within the school. Examples of questions included for pupils were: Do you think it is important to learn languages? What does language learning look like at school (when can you use each of your languages)? Interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded and transcribed.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical tool to analyse the findings. Following Braun and Clarke, [21] the analysis drew the qualitative data together through a process of notetaking (transcribing and rereading the data multiple times), organising (open-coding of the data, line by line using Word), describing (co-occurring codes clustered together to form themes relevant to the research questions) and finally reporting.

4. Findings

Student interview data are discussed first as they offer context to the discussion of data collected during classroom observation.

4.1. Student Interview data

The data from the six student interviews were open-coded. From this open coding, themes were identified relevant to the research questions. The two key themes were:

1. Language and cultural identities
2. Language hegemony

4.1.1. Language and cultural identities

Each Y3 participant spoke about their language use in school and at home and which language(s) they considered to be their mother tongue. The language identities of the students were often complex in terms of their sense of belonging to the language and culture with which they identified.

Kevin (Y3) identified his mother tongue languages as English and Cantonese. When speaking about his perceived linguistic competence in Putonghua he stated: 'Because Chinese I'm not very good at. I know bits…….. I also think I'm not very Hong Kongese sort of thing because I speak English almost most of the time'. Kevin connects language and culture, feeling that he cannot be very Hong Kongese because of his use of English.

Chloe also identified her home languages as English and Cantonese. Her family moved to Hong Kong from Mainland China and consequently she was also learning Fujian Chinese so that she could communicate with family members. She noted, 'I'm learning my own type of Chinese', stating that it was because her grandmother 'doesn't know normal Chinese'. Referring to Fujian as her 'own type of Chinese' suggests a connection and sense of belonging to the language, even though she did not consider it to be 'normal Chinese.'

Another Y3 student, Angela, identified her mother tongue as Putonghua but noted that she mainly uses English at home with her older sisters who study in the US and are now more fluent in English. She notes that this is the case for her as well as a result of speaking English with friends. In talking about her communications with her friends, she stated that:

> 'I have friends who I think … their English is better than their Putonghua Chinese. So, I communicate with them with English but like sometimes they act like Cantonese inside.' (Angela Y3)

Angela positioned her friends as Cantonese, feeling that culturally or 'inside' her friends act Cantonese. There appears to be an assumption that by speaking another language, such as English, her friends should act differently, despite their first language backgrounds and the cultural context in which they live. Angela has made a similar connection to Kevin (above) between the language spoken and culture.

The complex language backgrounds of the Y3 participants were echoed in the Y5 data. Ashley, for example, stated that her mother tongue is English, but that her mother is Chinese and her father Malaysian. They therefore communicate in English at home as the language that unites them. Ashley

noted that she considered herself 50% Australian and 50% Chinese despite the heritage of her parents. She associates English with her mother's time in Australia, rather than a language of Hong Kong where she has lived most of her life. She also noted that she speaks English all the time because she can 'talk faster' and that when she speaks Chinese 'it sounds weird'. While Ashley clearly has a connection and sense of belonging to her Chinese heritage, the connection to the language did not appear to be as strong.

Language identities also emerged where participants noted the influence of English on their identity:

> 'In school I usually speak English and at home I speak just Cantonese. Well, except sometimes if I don't know the word for it in Chinese I replace it with the English word instead..... I am also better in English than Chinese' Winston (Y5)

Despite identifying his mother tongue as Cantonese, Winston recognised that his linguistic skills in English are stronger. He stated that he 'feels 50% Chinese and 50% English' even though both his parents are 'fully Chinese'. However, he also noted that in the context of the international school he feels 'Chinese,' suggesting the school and its practices may be responsible for positioning him in this way.

How languages are positioned within the school further shapes student identities as language learners. Angela (Y3), for example, reflected on her understanding of the school language policy. She understood that she should use each of the classroom languages equally, but that in the classrooms there was much more English than Putonghua. She noted that if the instruction was really bilingual, in equal amounts, she and others would not understand much of the Putonghua.

4.1.2. Language hegemony

Language hegemony was the second theme identified in the student interview data. When speaking to the students about their languages, the Y3 participants explained that they were not allowed to speak Cantonese in class. For example, Chloe stated: 'in play time you can speak it [Cantonese]. In Chinese class, you cannot say Cantonese and English. In English class you cannot say Cantonese and Chinese.' (Chloe Y3).

Angela (Y3) and Kevin (Y3) also noted the same with respect to speaking Cantonese in class. It was, however, understood to be allowed outside of class. Chloe specifically noted that it is allowed 'at play time'. Kevin stated he could speak it to his 'friends at lunch'.

Cantonese appeared to be marginalised through students' understanding of the language policy. For example, Kevin noted in his interview that he went to the school nurse and 'heard that they [office staff]

speak Cantonese' and that he felt they 'should be bilingual [Cantonese/English] so they can communicate with us.' This preference to avoid Cantonese is also seen in Angela's interview: 'my friends – friends can't speak Chinese very well, only Cantonese so it's better to use English.' Angela's reference to Cantonese as 'only Cantonese' could suggest that she did not perceive it as having a status within the school.

In Y5 this marginalisation of Cantonese was also present. All Y5 participants were told by their teachers that they could not use Cantonese in class. Ashley's interview reiterates this point when she noted that the school is 'bilingual' and not 'trilingual' in respect of Cantonese.

There was also evidence of the hegemony of English over Chinese, firstly as a result of student preference for English due to the perceived difficulty in learning Chinese and secondly as a result of the dominance of English generally within the school. In Y3, students noted their struggles with Putonghua, which they perceived as more difficult to learn than English; for example, Kevin stated that he is 'not very good at it [Putonghua]' and 'it's really hard to read'. He added that 'Chinese is just not that big. People love English class.' The other Y5 participants also expressed preferences for speaking English over Chinese and that this is attributed largely to the difficulty in reading the logographic system of Chinese.

The ease of using English compared to Chinese meant that students tended to use English as a preference where they could, noting that they spend a lot of time at school and at home speaking English.

4.2. Classroom Observations

There were two key themes from the observational data that support the findings above:

1. Language hegemony
2. Student language learning identities

These two themes are discussed together since language hegemony can manifest in the learners' participation and engagement, shaping their identities as language learners.

The thirty-minute filmed lesson segments of classroom observations have been separated to show time spent conversing in each language. The data for Y3 can be seen in Table 2 below. In addition to the three languages, 'other' denotes classroom activities taking place, where individual language use was inaudible or times when no one was speaking.

Video number	Length	Language use (minutes)
S3200001	00:29:56	English:18:03 Putonghua: 0:12 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 11:41
S3200002	00:25:16	English: 12:44 Putonghua: 0:21 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 12:11
S308001	00:29:56	English:10:27 Putonghua:1:04 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 18:25
S308002	00:29:25	English:11:49 Putonghua: 0:0 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 17:36
S3080003	00:29:56	English: 17:31 Putonghua: 0:0 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 12:25

Table 2. *Language use in filmed segments of Y3 classroom observation*

Two of the five lessons recorded no Chinese speaking in the first 30 minutes of instruction. Across the three other lessons, a total of 1 minute and 37 seconds was recorded in Putonghua. This compares to a

total of 1 hour, 10 minutes and 34 seconds in English across the five lessons. There were no instances of Cantonese recorded in the video transcripts.

Teaching content during observations was delivered by the English teacher, who invited participation from the Chinese teacher at convenient times. In one of the observed classes, for example, the following interaction was recorded:

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Scene setting: **Two teachers in the classroom, the English-speaking teacher leading from the front of the classroom, the Chinese teacher at the front of the classroom stood to the side.** **Students sat in groups of four at desks.**		
Speaker	**Speech**	**Actions**
Adrian	'Open your books and turn to a new page'	Circulating close to the front of the classroom
Janet	'Turn the page' 轉下頁 zhǔan xià yè	Circulating close to the front of the classroom
Adrian	'Make sure you write the date and title down'	
Janet	'The date is here' 日期在這裡 rì qī zài zhè lǐ	Motions to the whiteboard where the date can be found
Adrian	老師 *[Lao Shi]* (teacher) can you answer this question?	Points to the question on the board
Janet	No I can't 不，我不能 Bù, wǒ bù néng	
Adrian	'I can't either, I don't know all the words. Do you understand all of the words?'	
Janet	'I don't know this one' 我不知道這個 wǒ bù zhī dào zhè ge	Points to the word 'impact' on the board

Table 3. *Excerpt from Y3 classroom observation*

The dominance of English is evidenced by the classroom instruction being led in English. The inclusion of Chinese at the request of the English teacher supports perceptions of language hegemony where English is dominant. One might assume that this dominance is a consequence of the students' linguistic competence in Putonghua. However, the following excerpt from a Y3 classroom seems to reveal that students have a good grasp of the language:

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Scene setting: **Two teachers in the classroom. The teachers stood on either side of the whiteboard at the front of the class. The English-speaking teacher was leading a dialogue with the students as a class.** **Students sat in groups of four at desks.**		
Speaker	**Speech**	**Actions**
Adrian	‘老師 *[Lao Shi]* (teacher) do you want to pick someone to give feedback?’	Moves to the front.
Janet	‘Yep’ 你寫了什麼答案? nǐ xiě le shén me dá àn? ‘What answer have you written?’	Motions to Sophie [pseudonym] to answer
Sophie	我覺得水會從兩個瓶子裏蒸發 wǒ jué dé shuǐ huì cóng liǎng gè píng zi lǐ zhēng fā ‘I think that the water will evaporate from both bottles’.	Reading from her book
Adrian	‘Anyone else? Adora – ‘	
Adora (Y3)	‘I think water can’t escape with the lid on’	
Adrian	‘Anyone else? Anyone else got anything? 老師 *[Lao Shi]* (teacher) do you want to pick?’	Looking around at the students
Janet	是的, Kevin shī de, Kevin ‘Yes, Kevin?’	Motions to a student
Kevin	我認為水遇熱時會蒸發 wǒ rèn wéi shuǐ yù rè shí huì zhēng fā ‘I think the water will evaporate when it gets hot’	Reading from his book
Janet	是的，好的，謝謝 shǐ de, hǎo de, xiè xiè	Returns to the side of the classroom

doi.org/10.32388/EBBS2Z.2

Scene setting: Two teachers in the classroom. The teachers stood on either side of the whiteboard at the front of the class. The English-speaking teacher was leading a dialogue with the students as a class. Students sat in groups of four at desks.		
Speaker	**Speech**	**Actions**
	‘Yes ok, thank you’	

Table 4. *Excerpt from Y3 classroom observation*

Students can express scientific ideas about what will happen to the bottles of water if left in the sun. However, it should be noted that in answering the questions posed, students answering in Chinese read the answers from their books, whereas those that answered in English were able to speak without reference to what they had written. This supports the interview data in which students reported feeling more confident in their linguistic abilities in English.

This confidence and dominance in English can also be seen in the written work of Y3 students. In one session, students had been discussing a frog called Kelso who had been making decisions about conflict resolution. Students were asked to write on a piece of paper how they felt about Kelso’s choice wheel. The statements could be written in English or Putonghua. There were twenty-six responses: sixteen were given in English, nine in Chinese and two bilingually. Students were expressing their language-learning identities, which reinforce the hegemony of language seen in classroom practices.

In Y5, the breakdown by language of the first thirty minutes of each lesson observation is given in Table 5 below. As with the Y3 data, ‘other’ denotes periods of group activities where there was little to no speaking and language was not audible.

doi.org/10.32388/EBBS2Z.2

Video number	Length	Language used
S3140001	00:29:56	English: 19:29 Putonghua: 4:14 Cantonese:0:0 Other: 6:13
S3140002	00:29:57	English: 2:34 Putonghua: 2:09 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 25:14
S3140003	00:29:57	English: 3:31 Putonghua: 2:04 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 24:22
S3140005	00:29:56	English: 7:11 Putonghua: 3:31 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 19:14
S3160001 S3160002	00:16:12 00:07:59	English: 6:06 Putonghua: 4:03 Cantonese: 0:0 Other: 14:02

Table 5. *Language use in filmed sections of Y5 classroom observations*

Unlike the Y3 classes, all eight of the video-recorded lessons were bilingual to some degree. There was still a dominance of English noted, with a total of 38 minutes and 51 seconds spoken in English compared

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to a total of 16 minutes and 1 second in Putonghua. On two occasions, the dominance of English stemmed from resourcing issues rather than co-teaching language preference. This finding is supported by an exploratory case study by Tam (2011), who noted the tensions and conflicts that arise from teaching Putonghua within Hong Kong as a result of a shortage of appropriate resources to support curriculum programmes.

The classroom observations in Y5 revealed a student preference for English. For example, in one lesson, instruction had started in English and had been passed to the Chinese teacher. One of the students understood the instruction in Chinese but chose to ask a question in English, which could be interpreted as a way of expressing a language identity. In this example, the teacher responded in Chinese and the lesson continued.

In another observation, students were asked to think about how they express themselves at home and at school and how they feel about each of those languages. Student written work highlighted their language learning identities and supports an understanding of how language hegemony is taken up as an identity within the classroom. One student wrote, 'my first language is Cantonese. I am fluent with speaking Cantonese, but I am not really good at writing Chinese.' He referred to English as his 'most common language' because it is easy to 'pronounce all the words'. He noted that Putonghua is his least favourite, and he 'wishes it had never been invented' due to the difficulty that he experiences in writing the characters.

In contrast to this, another student, whose first language is Putonghua, states that he 'hates Cantonese' because Hong Kong people 'speak so loud' it sounds like shouting. He notes that Putonghua is 'in his blood, although culture wise, not so much'. His linguistic and cultural identities seem to be held in conflict. This supports the findings in the interview data, where students understand there to be a connection between their linguistic and cultural identities. He goes on to say that English is 'easy to understand', supporting the view that English is dominant in the school, shaping the figured worlds of the students.

In her essay, another student noted that English is the language she prefers and uses most often, referring to it as the 'language that stands for happiness.' She wrote that Cantonese is the language of anger, as this is the language used at home when she misbehaves: 'when my mum scolds me she calls me my full Chinese name and scolds me in Cantonese.'

Language hegemony shapes classroom practices, which further shape student linguistic identities through participation and non-participation. During the five months of observation, there were only two

instances recorded of Cantonese being used in the classroom; both occurred in Y5 during peer interaction. In one instance, at the start of a group activity, one student asks another in Cantonese if he knows what they are supposed to do. In the other instance, one student asks another in Cantonese if he could borrow a pen. Both examples might be classified as social interactions since neither involved a discussion of class content. This is perhaps not surprising since the school language policy refers to Cantonese as a social language.

5. Discussion

This research takes the view that the language policy does not represent the linguistic diversity and backgrounds of the students it seeks to support. The assumption that learning English and Putonghua will support their personal and cultural identities was found to be problematic.

Student interviews with both Y3 and Y5 highlighted some of the inherent problems with making assumptions about personal and cultural identities. Students repeatedly make the connection between culture and language, therefore situating themselves between two or more cultures as they cultivate their bilingual or multilingual identities. As students negotiate their language and cultural identities, school language dominance shapes how these students position themselves culturally and linguistically.

The language policy assumes a Chinese cultural and personal identity, but it is unclear if this is inclusive of a Hong Kongese identity. In this study, students spoke of a Hong Kongese identity, a Chinese identity and 'acting Cantonese' despite speaking English. This exemplifies the finding that the students understood there to be a strong link between language and culture. Kayi-Aydar (2014) argues that 'if students cannot be heard representing themselves and enacting social roles in ways that other students can recognise, a degree of exclusion from social interaction seems inevitable' (p.73). Students position themselves and others as they negotiate their identities, each of which has consequences for their social interactions[22].

Angela and her friends' behaviours, as described by Angela in her interview, reveal one of the ways in which these young bilingual children can express their agency, culturally and linguistically, despite not being able to access their Cantonese language skills in the classroom. Agency plays a critical role in language identity negotiation[18]. Where identities are imposed on a language learner, opportunities for agency are impacted. In the example of Angela's friends, they exert their agency in their Cantonese behaviour. Angela appears to position this behaviour differently from what she would expect of

individuals speaking in English. The connection between language and behaviour was also apparent in Ashley's description of her mother's use of Cantonese, where her mother switches to Cantonese to scold her.

The findings of this case study support Kayi-Aydar's (2014) study, which illustrated how positioning a student as good or bad at a language shaped classroom participation. For example, Winston (Y5) reported that he feels stressed by the teacher's perspective that he is good at Chinese. The assumed identity that Winston is thought to have, and his positioning as a competent Putonghua speaker, had not supported a positive identity for him as a language learner. He recognised aspects of his identity that he associates with being Chinese, but his international education and perceived linguistic abilities also place him outside of how he expected to feel and act as an international school student. Jabal[23] writes about a 'fourth culture' to describe an international school setting, which captures a little of what Winston might have been feeling.

Student interviews, as well as observational data, evidence a dominance of English in the classroom. This dominance reduces student exposure to Putonghua, making it difficult for them to use both languages with the balance the policy seeks. Moreover, the student interviews revealed confusion about the place of Cantonese, which ultimately led to the devaluing of this linguistic resource and a missed opportunity for the possible transformative benefits of co-construction of knowledge between Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking students (Ching, 2024). School policy expects equal exposure to Putonghua and English without taking account of the complex language backgrounds of the children or how these might be used to support their linguistic development. These hegemonic values that support English language dominance are taken up within the figured world shaping the language classroom, as students negotiate their linguistic identities and social relationships.

These young bilingual students were mainly Cantonese first-language speakers, trying to learn Putonghua, a language that for most students is not a community or home language. Wang and Kirkpatrick[24] argue that students in learning environments where Putonghua is used, but where they do not have the proficiency to discuss and present ideas effectively, will suffer in terms of their proficiency, potentially even losing interest in the subject. English is a second language for most of the students. The difference is that English is a widely spoken community language within Hong Kong. Students therefore have more exposure to English, changing their relationship with the language. How each language is valued and used within the community impacts student motivation and investment.

The language policy seeks bilingual proficiency in two languages that for many students is not inclusive of their mother tongue. The classroom observations found very limited evidence of Cantonese language use, and it was restricted to social interactions between students. Despite the policy allowing for Cantonese to be used 'in class where necessary and possible to explain concepts, support understanding and make connections between languages,' there were few or no opportunities for students to do this.

Hegemonic language ideologies arise as a result of power relations in society where the language resources of some social groups become elevated over others, conferring social advantage. Hong Kong recognises the cultural, political and economic importance of Putonghua. Within Hong Kong, Cantonese is viewed as a 'home language' (Wang and Kirkpatrick, 2014) and therefore has little status outside of familial or social settings. Cultural language valuations that circulate as part of the community are reflected in the school policy and are taken up in classroom practices which legitimise language identity for some and marginalise that of others.

The language policy focuses on achieving bilingual and biliterate student identities. Cantonese as the mother tongue of the majority of the students is not given a formal place as part of the curriculum. Within the language policy, Cantonese is referred to as a 'dialect' and as a 'social language'. These views circulate as part of the wider community, with parents insisting on the importance of learning Mandarin Chinese[25] and requesting the school 'ban' the use of Cantonese entirely at school. These language valuations influence how and when students can access their mother tongue to support their understanding and language identities. Many of the children interviewed reported that they found writing in Chinese to be difficult when compared to English, and this accounted, in part, for their language choices in the classroom.

There is evidence in the interview data of this language hierarchy. English was the dominant language, not least because it is the language of their final IB exams. The students' perceived value of Cantonese is linked to the context of its use, with both English and Putonghua having status within the school due to their perceived usefulness for exams and future employability. The language policy that states that Cantonese can be used where 'possible' or where 'necessary' feeds student narratives about language use within the school. The use of phrases such as 'where necessary' is the opposite of encouragement, and so although Cantonese use is allowed within the classroom as an aid to understanding, students perceive that this is not the case.

Given these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that Cantonese has a low status within the school. As Lin (1997) and Ching & Ruowei[26] argue, in education, Cantonese is placed at the bottom of the language

hierarchy. To[27] notes the exclusionary status of English, linked to power and socioeconomic status, despite the social and cultural importance of Cantonese for the majority of people in Hong Kong. In Y5 language essays, each student spoke about their languages and tied them to the context and experiences of their use. Two of the students brought to the classroom context these views about their home and community languages, and particularly a negative disposition towards Cantonese. This negative disposition shapes their investment in and motivation for Cantonese. In the school context where Cantonese has already been defined as a social language with no value or place within the formal classroom setting, there were signs of a marginalisation of the language and with it the Cantonese identities of students.

This research shares the views of Wang and Kirkpatrick (2014) who argue that it is unnatural and unnecessary to forbid the use of other languages within the classroom. The opportunity to switch between languages, to support the linguistic challenges of learning in a language other than your mother tongue, is an important part of the learning process.

6. Conclusion

The research questions that formed the basis of this paper were as follows:

1. How are student language identities constructed and supported by the school?
2. What role do status and attitude towards languages play in the classroom?

This study has shown that while the school language policy seeks to support students' bilingual language identities, there are inherent problems with the assumptions that the policy makes about students' personal and cultural identities. As this study has demonstrated, student identities connected to language and their sociocultural histories are multiple and complex. A focus on bilingualism alone does not allow for a celebration of student linguistic diversity, and for some students, the imposed Chinese identity constrains their learning and participation within the classroom.

Hegemonic values that support English language dominance within the school shaped classroom practices and student linguistic identities. There was evidence of students using their agency in language choices, which further supported the dominance of English. Hegemonic values are shaped by power relations within society, creating an explicit language hierarchy that was evident within the classroom, legitimising the language identities of some students and marginalising those of others.

Cantonese is not part of the formal curriculum, despite being the mother tongue of the majority of students. Interview data reported student perception that Cantonese could not be used within the classroom. This rejection of their mother tongue in favour of classroom languages further exemplifies the explicit hierarchy in which some students do not feel their language and cultural identities are acknowledged.

Statements and Declarations

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. HREC/2014/1799, 16 May 2017). Written informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians of all child participants, and assent was obtained from the children themselves.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy reasons related to child participants, but anonymised data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Dr Natasha Williams: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data collection, Writing—original draft; Dr Paola Trimarco: Supervision, Additional secondary sources, Writing—review & editing. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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