English Bridging Programme for Immigrant Children in Hong Kong: Inclusion or Exclusion?

Eddy Li [a]

[a] *English Language Teaching Unit, The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

This paper reports on a study designed to examine how the school-based curriculum of a government-funded English bridging programme in Hong Kong respondsto the linguistic needs of newly arrived children with limited English proficiency. By a case study approach with multiple data collection methods, which includethe collection of documents, lesson observations, and interviews, this qualitative studyattempts to offer insight into how an inclusive curriculum is perceived and realized by language teachers in the cultural context. Recommendations on curriculum design and implementation are made, with the aim of better equipping immigrant students with essential linguistics skills and knowledge to participate and achieve in mainstream classrooms.

Key words: English bridging programme, inclusion, immigrant students, Chinese learners

Introduction

Since its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong has been populated by a significant number of newly arrived children (NAC) from the Chinese mainland. In 2008, more than 4000 immigrant students were admitted to local primary schools within the territory, compared to around 3000 in the secondary setting (Education Bureau, 2010). Similar to migrant

Corresponding author: Eddy Li, Email: eddyli@cantab.net

children elsewhere, this group of learners faces a number of challenges, such as securing age-appropriate school placements, adjusting to a new educational curriculum, and confronting segregation and marginalization (Chan, Ip, & Yuen., 1996; Rao & Yuen, 2007). Due to the lack of appropriate pedagogic response in classrooms, however, literature has suggested that the NAC are most of the time excluded from opportunities to participate and achieve in the mainstream curriculum of Hong Kong (see, Yuen, 2002, for example).

One of the major challenges that hinders NAC from integrating into the education system is the language barrier (Poon-McBrayer, 2002). While in mainland China, Putonghua is widely used as the medium of verbal instruction in schools, it is replaced by the spoken dialect of Cantonese in Hong Kong. English, on the other hand, is introduced to the school curriculum in mainland China only at upper primary levels, whereas students in Hong Kong start to learn the language since kindergarten. In a study conducted by Rao & Yuen (2007) with respect to immigrant children's perceptions of their learning experiences, more than 80 per cent of the 37research participants, who had lived in Hong Kong for less than 2 years, expressed concerns with their performance in English-language examinations. In fact, similar findings have been reported in different research, which suggest that English is considered as a major barrier by the NAC (Chan et al., 1996; Ho, 1997; HKFYG, 1995). All in all, it may be argued that a significant number ofNAC are notlinguistically well-prepared to participate in the English curriculum in Hong Kong.

In order to support the inclusion of immigrant children, and to enhance their proficiency in both Cantonese and English, the Education Bureau (EDB) in Hong Kong has invited schools within the territory to provide an Initiation Programme (IP) for the NAC prior to their admission to mainstream schools. As a full-time bridging programme in a school setting that lasts for six months (Education Bureau, 2009), the IP aims to:

1. enhance the standard in the English and Chinese languages of the participating children;
2. foster their personal development and social adaptation; and
3. strengthen their learning experience/exposure to real classroom situation.

In 2009, two secondary schools in Hong Kong were funded to operate theProgramme for NAC from mainland China (EDB, 2009). Each school is offered a block grant for organizing the bridging programme, in which teachers are entitled to use the grant flexibility to design and implement a school-based curriculum.

This paper investigates with a case study approach the design and implementation of a school-based IP curriculum. The design of the curriculum may offer insight as to how an "inclusive" English curriculum – a curriculum that is intended to respond to the diversity of language learners in the IP - is interpreted by local teachers. Also, a close examination of the curriculum implementation may reveal challenges that the teacher participants face in relation to accommodating learners with limited English proficiency.

Methodology

Sampling

This research sets out to follow a multiple-case design. According to Herriott & Firestone (1983), the investigation of multiple cases allows direct replication of the research in different settings. Analytical conclusions can be generated collectively from different studies. The following Table (Table 1) shows the list of schools that offer IP in Hong Kong.

Table 1.*Initiation Programme – School List.*

	Initiation Programme for NAC (Mainland China)	
	Primary	Secondary
School V	√	√
School W	√	
School X	√	
School Y		
School Z		√

(Source: Education Bureau, 2009)

Through a purposive sampling process (Silverman, 2005), School V and School Z were selected as two of the research cases, as they are the only schools across the territory that offer IP for secondary-age immigrant children from the mainland China. Invitation letters to participate in the research was sent to both schools. Some major aspects of the study, such as

its objectives, the data collection procedures, and its degree of confidentiality, were outlined in the letter for the recipients to make an informed decision on their commitment to the study. A telephone conversation with each of the head teachers was initiated a month later, in which only School V expressed interest in committing to the project. Under such a circumstance, the multiple-case design of the study was revised to a single-case approach due to the particularity of School V and School Z.

As all teachers from the English panel of School Vconsented to participate in the research, the study could be considered as a single case study with multiple embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2009). With the participation of three teachers in total, the replication logic used in the multiple-case approach as discussed earlier could arguably be employed in this project, strengthening the research findings by achieving data triangulation (Patton, 2002) across the three embedded units within the single case. Interpretations of the research data can thus be supported by different sources of evidence as in a multiple-case approach.

Research approach

The variety of data collection methods used in this research includes documentary analysis, classroom observations, and interviews (See Table 2). Teaching materials and schemes of work were collected from the school, with an aim to delineate the school-based learning experience of the NAC as planned by the participating teachers. Teaching activities in three classrooms were observed and video-recorded, for the better understanding of classroom practices within the IP. Interviews were conducted with each of the participating teachers at the final stage of the data collection process. They were carried out with an intention to explore the linkages, if any, between the preliminary findings arising from the two aforementioned data collection methods and the teaching philosophy of the teacher participants.

Table 2. *Data collection methods.*

Methods	Data Collected
Documentary Analysis	• Schemes of work • Teaching materials
Classroom Observations	• Video clips of 3 sessions
Interviews with teachers	• Audio clips of 3 interviews

The actual procedure for data collection was planned in negotiation with the research participants in an arranged visit to the school before the study. Different dates were fixed by the teachers for the collection of multiple data after considering factors like, for example, timetabling and school holidays.

Data analysis

The procedure for data analysis in this project follows the five constructive stages as proposed by Altrichter, Posch, &Somekh (1993), viz. reading, selecting, presenting, interpreting, and concluding. After reading carefully the raw data collected from documents, interviews, and classroom observations, important pieces of information were selected out of the less important ones with reference to the research questions. They were then presented in the form of transcription in order to provide an easy access for future retrieval. As the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, selected transcriptions were translated into English. A bilingual speaker of Cantonese and English later reviewed, crosschecked, and confirmed the translations.

With all the selected data in hand, both deductive and inductive types of coding were performed by making use of the knowledge from literature that existed prior to the study, as well as accepting new ideas that emerged in course of the analysis process. With all the initial codes generated, axial coding was performed thereafter (Neuman, 2007), in which different yet similar codes were clustered under collective themes. Codes related tothe schemes of work and teaching foci, for example, were grouped within the category titled "curriculum design", whereas those relatedto the teaching approachin classroomswas grouped within the category titled "curriculum implementation".

A matrix of codes was developed after all the coding processes were completed. With such a tool for analysis, meaningful patterns and linkages between the codes were discovered, and associations were made between them and the research questions. Each interpretation was supported by at least three confirmations from multiple sources, with an aim to achieve data triangulation (Stake, 2000). The final step of the coding process involves selective coding (Neuman, 2007). The transcription was revisited purposively with the codes generated so as to locate supportive information, if any, that may had initially been overlooked. Evidence that

supports the interpretations, such as quotations and transcriptions, was extracted and included in this paper. Readers can thusmake a reasonable assessment of the credibility of the findings (Boulton&Hammersley, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Curriculum framework

According to the schemes of work collected, the planned English curricula in all three classes are structured in terms of the teaching of grammar knowledge, as well as that of the fourmajor language skills, viz. reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each week, a fixed number of lessons are allocated to the teaching of each linguistic component. Such design appears to resemble a topic-based syllabus (Harmer, 2001), wherein the organizing principle of the curriculum is based largely on different topics or themes. Yet, as revealed by the range of dissimilar topics within a single week across different language components (see, for example, Table 3), the scheme of work seems to suggest a lack of topical coherence between the teaching of different kinds of language knowledge and skills. Meaningful linkages between the planned learning experiences of different linguistic components in the IP are arguably weak.

Table 3.*Scheme of work for Class-SB (a selected section).*

Week	Comprehension and Reading	Grammar	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Dictation	Homework
2	Big apple tours to USA, lasting friendship club	-Time, date, week, month - is, am, are, has, have	Tony's Childhood	Self-introduction, Wh-question	Valentine's Day	Recite passage (a letter to cousin)	Write a Valentine card

In theory, such a skill-oriented English curriculum could be considered as an alternative to the national task-based English curriculum in Hong Kong as recommended by the Curriculum Development Council (Curriculum Development Council, 1999). In a task-based curriculum, the focus of teaching is primarily on meaning and communication, rather than the different types of linguistic knowledge and skills (Curriculum Development Council, 1999; Lee, 2008). Language learners are expected to engage themselves in genuine acts of communication through different types of learning tasks, with an intention to foster the development of their communicative competence. As language use in real life is most of the time

integrative, it is essential that the teaching and learning of English in a task-based curriculum are also integrative.

However, as pointed out earlier, instead of promoting an integrative use of language in each learning task comprising multiple language skills and grammar knowledge, the design of the English curriculum in the IP is organized in terms of the teaching of discrete language skills, which are structured in dissimilar and disconnected topics. Such a skill-oriented curriculum in the bridging programme, when compared to the task-based curriculum as implemented in mainstream schools, seems to suggest an organizational difference between the planned language learning experiences of the NAC and that of mainstream students. While the mainstream English curriculum is organized in thematically related tasks, the IP curriculum is structured by the teaching of discrete linguistic skills.

Curriculum planning
Apart from its organizational structure, evidence seems to suggest that the teaching focus of the IP is also different from that of the mainstream curriculum. Table 4 below summarizes the allocation of weekly teaching periods as delineated on the schemes of work:

Table 4. *Allocation of weekly teaching period.*

	Grammar	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking	Integrated skills
Class-SA	7 to 8	1 to 2	1	2	1	-
Class-SB	7 to 8	1 to 2	1	2	1	-
Class-SC	2 to 3	2 to 3	2	2	1 to 2	3

As indicated by the figures, the teaching of grammar knowledge in Class-SA and Class-SB has far outweighed that of the other linguistic components. Half of the lessons in a week are devoted to the teaching of grammar, whereas only a single or two periods are assigned to the development of other linguistic skills.

When accounting for the emphasis on grammar teaching, Teacher-B explained:

I believe it [grammar] is the fundamental component that the students need to manage, as they have to sit for the entrance examination of the mainstream schools after the completion [of

the IP] […] the [entrance] examinations are in black and white, and most of the time testing their knowledge in grammar […](T-B/25:25)

All the other teachers have views similar to Teacher-B, in which the teaching of grammar is constructed as the major emphasis of the curriculum, with a view to prepare the NAC for the paper-and-pencil admission tests that they will face by the end of the study programme.

A close examination of a sample placement test, which was designed by the former Education Department in Hong Kong, may help to shed light on both the format and content of the written entrance tests that are administered by individual mainstream schools. Table 5 below shows the different kinds of linguistic components that are being assessed in each section of the placement test:

Table 5. *Assessments of different language skills in the placement test.*

	Grammar	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking
Section A	√	√	-	√	-
Section B	√	√	-	-	-
Section C	√	√	-	√	-
Section D	√	√	-	√	-

As shown in the table, the assessment of grammar knowledge is evident in all sections. Such a design of the test paper seems to coincide with the aforementioned teachers' belief with respect to the importance of grammar learning. It is noteworthy that both listening and speaking skills do not appear to prove significant in the test. This may be due to the foreseeable difficulties in test administration, or other reasons that are yet to be explored.

All in all, the planning principle of the English curriculum in the IP seems to be based largely on the assessment needs of the admission system, rather than the linguistic needs of individual learners. The 'teaching to test' phenomenon (Menken, 2006) is revealed by the uneven allocations of weekly teaching periods, which attempt to favor strongly the learning of grammar knowledge in preparation for the high-stakes paper-and-pencil tests. Minimal attention is paid to the acquisition of other linguistic skills.

Curriculum implementation

Although the schemes of work have outlined all the planned teaching activities for the IP, only the teacher from class-SB was found to be teaching according to the scheme. During the research period, a standalone lesson on language arts, which is not represented on the curriculum document, was arranged for class-SA, whereas a grammar class related to the 'preposition of time and place' was conducted in class-SC – a topic that is originally scheduled three months after on paper.

In relation to this, Teacher-C pointed out in the interview:

> It is really difficult to follow the scheme of work owing to the individual differences between learners. The background knowledge of each student is unpredictable, and so it is difficult to design a single scheme of work for all students […] Some students may join the class in the middle of the course, and I have to adjust the teaching pace and content in order to meet the needs of these students.(T-C/05:25)

In fact, as learnt from all teacher participants, there are two reasons behind such a discrepancy between curriculum planning and its actual implementation. Firstly, all teachers found it difficult to design a single scheme of work that is accessible to all learners in their classes, given their diversified linguistic and educational backgrounds. In other words, it may be attributed to the failure to construct a 'curriculum for all' that responds to pupil's diverse learning needs present in the classroom (Byers, 2004). Secondly, it appears that the mobility of students has posed challenges to the continuous implementation of a planned teaching scheme. As there is no restriction on the enrolment period, immigrant children from mainland China may join the Programme as soon as they arrive in Hong Kong, but not necessarily at the official commencements in every September and March (Education Bureau, 2009). With the unforeseeable number of newcomers throughout the study programme, as well as their unpredictable linguistic backgrounds, teachers expressed difficulties in carrying out a progressive teaching plan in the IP. Many of the teaching activities, therefore, remain on an ad hoc basis in spite of the seemingly planned teaching experience as depicted on the schemes of work. This may also account for the lack of meaningful topical linkages between the teaching of different linguistic skills and grammar knowledge as discussed.

Implications

The above discussion on curriculum planning and implementations has suggested quite an alternative kind of language learning experience that the NAC may encounter in comparison with local students in mainstream schools. Instead of providing students with the opportunity to use English in an integrated manner through different communicative tasks, a 'teaching to test' school-based curriculum is observed in the IP, which focuses largely on the teaching of grammar knowledge. A gap was found between curriculum planning and curriculum implementation, in which ad-hoc decisions on teaching activities werefound in most of the lessons observed. It may be attributed to the huge yet perceived differences in linguistic competence of theNAC within classes, or the unpredictable linguistic backgrounds of the possible newcomers in course of the Programme.

As set out by the Education Bureau (Education Bureau, 2009), one of the objectives of the IP is to strengthen the exposure of the NAC to 'real' classroom situation. Nevertheless, in relation to the aforementioned features of its school-based curriculum, it remains speculative whether the planned English learning experience in the IP would resemble that offered by mainstream schools in Hong Kong. Rather, it seems to suggest a possibility that the NAC were, to a certain extent, denied access and entitlement to the national task-based English curriculum in Hong Kong by the grammatical syllabus in the IP. While students are on one hand being equipped to integrate into the local education system by 'achieving' in the admission test, they are on the other hand excluded from the opportunities to participate in the national task-based curriculum.

The purpose of the English curriculum in Hong Kong is to lay the foundation of English language development through interesting communicative tasks (Curriculum Development Council, 1999). Such an emphasis in the curriculum may require teachersin the IP to shift away from the present grammatical focus in curriculum planning, and to introduce appropriate communicative learning activities into the bridging programme. In addition, as most of the NAC attended primary schools in mainland China, they do not share the linguistic learning experience that students in Hong Kongare offered during their primary education. Therefore, given the degree of English proficiency of the NAC, and their limited prior exposure to the language, it is as important for the IP to introduce learning experiences that resemble, and may therefore

compensate for the form of primary education that the immigrant children have missed.

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