

*Against the Odds - A Hong Kong Primary One English Immersion Class*

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**Abstract**

This study reports the findings of a Hong Kong aided school which debuted one English (L2) immersion class in Primary one (Grade one equivalent) in 2019-20 in the midst of legal uncertainty and the predominantly Chinese (L1) environment. Data were collected using MOLT Classroom Observation Scheme (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008), and teacher and parent interviews. Despite being constrained by the initial language barrier, there is evidence showing the immersion class students displayed the following favourable attributes: 1. Motivation in class participation and 2. greater improvement in L2 when compared to those enrolled in normal classes. The study enriches understanding of the strengths and challenges faced by lower primary level immersion classes in Asia where similar undertaking and research literature are scarce.

Keywords: Immersion, Primary Level, English as a Second Language, Hong Kong

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## **I. Introduction**

The target school is a local aided school in Hong Kong which debuted one English (L2) immersion class in Primary one (Grade one equivalent) in the academic year 2019-20 in the predominantly Chinese (L1) environment within the school and its neighbourhood, a remote public-housing-dense town sited in a district with a larger poor population (Government of the HKSAR, 2019). Demand for English medium classes there, like the other districts of Hong Kong, has nevertheless been strong because of the prestige attached to English. Such demand is typically catered for by fee-paying private or direct-subsidy (semi-private) schools. The default medium of instruction (MOI) in tuition-free government or aided primary schools is Chinese (L1). While tuition-free primary schools which adopt English as the MOI are present<sup>1</sup>, their student populations are often ethnically and linguistically diverse, justifying the use of English as the lingua franca there. A casual chat with a local primary school principal revealed that it was widely understood, though never written as rules, that Education Bureau (EDB) in Hong Kong was not ever in favour of seeing (partial) English (L2) as the MOI adopted at primary level in tuition-free schools, because of its skepticism on the effectiveness of immersion education at the said level. The immersion class initiated at the target school, therefore, is one of the few pioneers of Hong Kong immersion education at primary level in a largely monolingual, tuition-free setting.

The immersion class of the target school generally admits students whose performance in English was better. Parents' readiness to support their children in learning in L2 is also an important consideration. It is fair to say that the majority of the students in the target class (n=25) possessed desirable qualities of L2 learning, though there was a sizeable minority not possessing all such qualities out of the lack of suitable candidates as reported by the target school.

It is noteworthy pointing out that immersion as a means of raising students' L2 proficiency is akin to another educational approach, namely Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which has been widely adopted in Europe in the last two decades with generally positive results (See for example Merino and Lasagabaster 2018).

## **II. Scope of evaluation and methods**

There are two objectives of this study. First, it presents staff members' views of immersion class students' language and content subject achievement, and personal development. Second, it presents the evidence, if any, that students were motivated when attending content subjects conducted in L2. Where applicable, evidence facilitative or detrimental to the programme as a whole will also be presented.

Data were collected from two methods, namely, semi-structured interviews and observations. The semi-structured interviews which took place in March 2020 were 20-30 minutes long for each stakeholder. This kind of interview gives the interviewer 'some latitude to ask further questions in response to ... significant replies' (Bryman, 2016). There were three groups of stakeholders. The first group consists of the immersion class core subject teachers of English Language & General Studies (G.S.) (1), Chinese Language & Putonghua (1), and Maths & Computer Studies (C.S.) (1). The second group consists of School administrators, namely Principal (1) and School Curriculum Leader (1). The last group consists of only one

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Li Cheng Uk Government Primary School <http://www.lcu.edu.hk/>

stakeholder: a parent representative whose daughter was studying in the immersion class and who was a teacher at the same school without teaching involvement in the target class. The English version of the set of general questions asked in the interview is attached in Appendix I.

As for the observations, there were two kinds. The first involved two face-to-face lesson observations in Maths and General Studies respectively conducted by the researcher in October 2019. In the observations, MOLT (motivation orientation of language teaching) classroom observation scheme (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008) was used (See Appendix II) to gauge student motivated behaviour in the content lessons taught in L2. MOLT allowed observers to code and gather students' motivated behavior in classroom in a minute-to-minute fashion objectively. Its' validity is empirically tested (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, *ibid*). The variables of observation and the details are extracted as follows:

**Table 1: Variables of MOLT classroom observation scheme**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Attention</b>	<b>Participation</b>	<b>Volunteering for teacher-fronted activity</b>
<b>Description</b>	The extent to which students appear to be paying attention without displaying any inattentive or disruptive behavior.	Students are actively taking part in classroom interaction or working on assigned activity.	Students are volunteering without the teacher having to coax them in any way.
<b>Proportion needed</b>	At least two-thirds of the class	At least two-thirds of the class	At least one-third of the class
<b>Examples (where applicable)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- looking at the teacher and following his/her her movements</li> <li>- looking at visual stimuli</li> <li>- turning to watch another student who is contributing to the task</li> <li>- following the text being read</li> <li>- making appropriate nonverbal responses</li> </ul>	NA	NA

It is worthwhile pointing out that the part on teacher's motivating behaviour in the original version was skipped, so as to give exclusive focus for students' motivated behaviour, which is the second objective of this study and what truly matters in L2 classroom where demotivation is a common threat. Also, while both lessons lasted for 30 minutes, only 25 minutes of which were evaluated. The reduced time of observation allowed the teacher and the students to settle before the teacher began to teach and end the lesson, the latter of which was particularly important as some students were getting excited (instead of motivated) with the recess right afterwards.

The second kind of observation involved inspection of three videos clips, showing vignettes in three content subject lessons, namely Maths, General Studies (G.S.) and Computer Studies (C.S.). There was also another video clip showing student interacting with each other in recess time. The four clips, each ranged from 1.5 to 4.5 minutes long, were compiled in December 2019 by the school for promotional purpose.

Worth noting are the limitations of the methods used. The academic year of 2019-20 presented major difficulties to all schools in Hong Kong. F2F lessons and/or school suspension were in place from mid-November to mid-December 2019, and from the end of

January to early June 2020 because of COVID-19 mingled with social unrest in Hong Kong. As such, only a small scale evaluation based primarily on the qualitative evidence gathered in a mixed method approach was felt viable. Nevertheless, because of the presence of multiple sources of information, data triangulation remained in place, securing the reliability of the qualitative data gathered.

### **III. Findings**

The findings based on the data gathered from interviews and observations shed lights on two questions, namely, stakeholders' views of immersion students' language and content subject achievement, and personal development, and if there is objective evidence showing students were motivated despite the challenge of L2 instruction in content subjects. Towards the end, stakeholders' view on programme administration will also be presented.

#### **i) Stakeholders' views of immersion students' language and content subject achievement, and personal development**

In general, stakeholders were positive on immersion student academic achievement. The English teacher (who also taught G.S.) reported that there was 'a big difference' in English improvement in the immersion class, especially among the weaker students, when compared to the normal class which she taught concurrently. Using English in and outside the classroom among classmates became natural as she and some other teachers observed.

The teacher of Chinese and Putonghua reported no negative effect was observed in student participation in class. Handwriting and homework collected also did not reveal observable differences compared to ordinary primary one students based on the teacher's experience. Immersion class performance in Putonghua, however, was reported to be not as strong as the normal class performance. However, that was due to less Mainland students present in the immersion class rather than other factors like MOI in her judgment.

A NET who taught C.S. and Maths reported that students were generally doing well in both subjects but had difficulty in long questions in the latter. This was echoed by the original Maths teacher, who specified that topics under 'Shape and Space Strand' involved a great deal of Mathematical terms such as 'base' and 'vertex'. But topics in other strands which were more concrete were generally well handled by students.

Similar to Maths, the G.S. teacher (who was also the English teacher) revealed that some G.S. topics such as 'Materials' were a challenge, because they were not within students' experience and vocabulary. The challenge was partially offset with in-class interactive activities and multi-modal presentations (e.g. videos and realia). The G.S. teacher maintained that despite the challenge, student performance was not severely affected in general, thanks to the school policy of prioritising knowledge and concept acquisition rather than spelling and long questions in homework and assessment. Noteworthy pointing out here is that the same priority was also in place for the ordinary classes taught in L1 as well.

The parent representative reiterated that she was delighted to see the 'amazing' improvement in reading and listening of her child after enrolment in the immersion class. For reading, she reported that her child no longer had problems reading in prose quickly. For listening, her child was able to understand English cartoons without difficulty. She credited these positive developments to the immersion class because even when studying in a kindergarten with

English as the medium of instruction previously, her child did not display the rate of improvement she saw. As for Chinese, she conceded that her child was not as strong probably because of more exclusive focus on English both at school and at home. However, she was satisfied with the way Chinese was taught at school and in the zoom sessions, where learner diversity was catered effectively thanks to the well-designed lessons by the subject teacher.

No interviewee was aware of any negative effect in the personal development in the immersion class when asked if that was the case. Problems in motivation of learning and stress level were again not observed. On the contrary, some teachers speculated that immersion students were in general on the stronger side of personal development because those enrolled in the class typically came from family of stronger parental care and involvement. This is an observation which may be ascertained through the more established psychological tools (e.g. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. See Hills and Argyle, 2002) in the future.

**ii) Evidence showing if students’ motivated behaviour was present in the content subjects conducted in L2**

This question would be answered based on the data gathered using the simplified version of MOLT Classroom Observation Scheme from the two class visits in Maths and G.S. respectively. In addition, some vignettes of daily classroom teaching and learning which were produced for school promotional purpose would be looked at as well. Albeit in a small way, they did supplement with the rather limited observation data.

In the lessons observed (25 minutes each X 2 lessons), the class (n=25) fared well in all three variables (i.e. attention, participation and volunteering) in the MOLT scheme. Here is the table summarising the data collected:

**Table 2: Data collected using the MOLT classroom observation scheme**

<b>Variables of motivation</b>	<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Minutes observed</b>	<b>% of class time fulfilling the criterion</b>
Attention	2/3 class (i.e. $\geq 17/25$ )	30 out of 34 minutes	88
Participation	2/3 class (i.e. $\geq 17/25$ )	14 out of 16 minutes	88
Volunteering	1/3 class (i.e. $\geq 9/25$ )	9 out of 12 minutes	75

About 88% of the class time where the whole class teaching took place, students were observably paying attention, displaying favourable observable behaviours such as looking at teacher’s visual stimuli and watching other students’ contributing to the tasks. For participation, again in 88% of the class time, students were actively participating in the assigned group or individual activities. Finally, for volunteering in the teacher-fronted activity, about 75% of the class time such criterion was met. The minutes which fell short of that criterion actually involved the teacher consciously ignoring stronger students’ intention to answer a couple of difficult questions and calling out names one by one of the quieter majority.

As for the four video clips, a number of observations could be made. First, similar level of student motivation was present in the three curricular subjects filmed (Maths, G.S. and C.S.). This was in line with the observations of the class visits aforementioned. Second, the subject teachers involved conducted the lessons methodically, with clear progression of revision, demonstration, practice and finally consolidation. Games and activities were commonplace.

In addition, there was evidence showing students were using L2 for casual interaction among themselves and with their class teacher in the recess (non-curricular time). The utterances observed ranged from one or two words to a complete sentence. As such, students display age-appropriate to age-superior level of L2 in their rest time in the researcher's view. The practice of using L2 during the rest time also follows the tradition of immersion programmes in Canada and Wales, U.K., which were regarded as the protocols in bilingual education (See Baker 2011).

There are a number of caveats which concern the validity of the data collected and must be pointed out though. First, despite the presence of favourable motivated behaviour in the lessons observed, participant bias, the tendency for the observed subjects to exhibit behaviour felt desirable, was possible, which could result in the presence of a confounding variable. This is especially the case when only two lessons were observed and both fell on the same day. For future improvement, the participant bias could be made less likely by observing more lessons in a longer stretch of time, which makes displaying the desirable traits more difficult if the subjects so wish.

Also, the clips inspected were rather short and created for school promotional purpose; deletion of unfitting screens was expected. Still, given 1) the number of content subjects the clips covered, 2) their assemblance with the general observations in the earlier face-to-face class visits, and 3) staff comments about students' use of English in and outside class, there was credible evidence of effective learning and teaching taking place in the immersion class. The extent, though, need to be ascertained further with greater amount of evidence.

### **iii) Stakeholders' view on programme administration**

Regarding stakeholders' view on programme administration, no major difficulties were recalled. The administrators and teachers attributed the smooth delivery of the immersion programme to the contemplation and preparation in human resources which had taken place as long as nine years before the programme's debut. One example was about getting financial resources for recruiting extra NETs (Native English Teacher) and ELTAs (English Language Teaching Assistant) by submitting Quality Education Fund<sup>2</sup> proposals and leasing school out for paid events during school holiday. Another example was active recruitment of subject teachers of Chinese ethnicity but were born and raised in English-speaking countries. Those teachers were said to be more conversant with the local working culture and have higher English proficiency.

An issue in the immersion class which was rectified is worth reporting. The administrative team noticed that one subject teacher who was fluent in English experienced some difficulty expressing the content subject knowledge clearly in English in their routine observations. This was the case because, as research pointed out (See Lin, 2020), L2 Academic Language is rather different from L2 Everyday Language; command in one does not necessarily guarantee command in another. To rectify the issue, the school arranged a NET to co-teach with the subject teacher, who was delegated the new role of advising the NET the way of teaching the subject and designing and correcting the homework in addition to serving as the Assistant Teacher in the lesson. Both the subject teacher and the NET expressed satisfaction of the arrangement and acknowledged the improved teaching effects. The practice of co-

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<sup>2</sup> Quality Education Fund aims to finance projects for the promotion of quality education in Hong Kong. In 2016/17, 560 projects were supported, with the total grant of \$169.6 million (US\$21.7 million).

teaching would become another option of teaching assignment in the immersion class the year after as reported by the administrators.

#### **IV. Summary and the way forward**

To reiterate, the two objectives of this study are to 1) reveal staff members' views of immersion students' language and content subject achievement, and personal development, and 2) ascertain if students were motivated when attending content subjects conducted in L2.

Unanimously positive views were expressed by the teachers and administrators on the immersion class students' language and content subject achievement. As the English cum G.S. teacher and the parent representative reported, students' improvement in English was significant, especially when compared to those enrolled in normal classes. Content subject achievement of the immersion class was speculated to be on par with that of the normal classes despite challenges in certain topics which required more abstract thinking and vocabulary. There was no evidence showing that students' rapid advancement of L2 was made at the expense of their L1, as the caveat put forward by some literature in bilingual education, nor was there evidence showing any negative personal development among students because of the greater linguistic challenge.

Based on the data gathered from teachers, class visits and video clips, there was evidence showing that immersion students were motivated in class and participated well in the lessons conducted in L2. This was likely the result of the teachers' competence in English and their ability to deliver lessons methodically. Interactive activities and multi-modal presentations also went a long way in enhancing learning and teaching effectiveness.

In addition, there was evidence showing that the administrative team's ability to implement policy which eased the linguistic demand in the early stage and handle issues which might potentially affect the learning and teaching quality when they arose. It is noteworthy pointing out that co-teaching between the NETs and local teachers could be a possible way out for the potential lack of expertise in L2 content subject instruction among local teachers should such an issue arise.

Looking forward, the major challenge would be the increasing linguistic demand in homework and assessment, where fill in the blanks, and short and long questions involving writing, would be more dominant as the immersion students are promoted to the higher forms. Vocabulary, in both receptive and productive sense, is another major challenge, as successful completion of homework and assessment cannot be rid of accurate understanding and spelling of key words.

In fact, when evaluating a partial immersion programme in another local primary school, the researcher observed that the challenges aforementioned limited student performance rather significantly in formal assessments despite that similarly favorable conditions were present in class observations. To raise students' ability to cope with the increasing linguistic demand, schools running immersion programmes can consider adopting Language across the curriculum (LaC).

A major feature of LaC is called curriculum mapping, which involves language and subject teachers in finding related topics and presenting them around the same time of the year. With this arrangement, students could learn the subject content in multiple perspectives and use the

language taught authentically (See Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Structured repetition of vocabulary, essential to vocabulary acquisition (See Chu, 2019), is also much more likely with this arrangement. As such, students' mastery of the subject language is facilitated in a more promising way.

In fact, the target school is of good potential to undertake LaC as the immersion program involves only a finite number of staff who are already set to teach in the programme. There are occasions where a teacher would teach multiple subjects within the same immersion class as revealed in the present study. The comparatively small number of staff involved allows convenient communication and cooperation among themselves within the same form or even across forms when LaC is adopted in the future.

As for the possible improvement of the future evaluation of the immersion programme, quantitative data (e.g. exam results), where situation permits, shall be collected to ascertain academic achievement with greater confidence. Students, the major stakeholder, can also be interviewed in an age-appropriate way to see if they are satisfied with the programme and grow healthily despite the linguistic challenge.



## **Appendix I**

### **General questions of the Stakeholder Interview**

#### **Stakeholder Interview on P1 Immersion class**

##### **Objective:**

To gather impressions of the Primary One English Immersion class from the perspective of the key stakeholders after its debut in September 2019.

##### **Questions:**

1. Why did your School implement an English immersion class?
2. What expectations did you have for the immersion class prior to its commencement?
3. Is there anything of the class that is out of your expectation so far?
4. What are the major difficulties when implementing the immersion class?
5. What remedial actions were taken? How well did they work?

Please answer the following question to the best of your knowledge. You can skip any part though if you do not feel you have the knowledge.

6. What's your impression of the students in the class so far in:
  - a) language achievement (English, Chinese & PTH)
  - b) content subject achievement, and
  - c) personal development (e.g. learning motivation, stress level, happiness level, etc)
7. If the immersion class is to be extended next academic year, are there any extra measures needed?

END



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