

## Challenges and Issues of the Policy of Bi-Literacy and Tri-Lingualism for Non-Chinese-Speaking Students: The Inclusivity and Integration in Hong Kong

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### 1. Introduction

In 2024, The Taiwan Educational Review Monthly published an article titled “從香港的「兩文三語」發展淺析臺灣中小學推動雙語政策之問題” (黃卓明，2024). This article discussed the policy of Bi-Literacy and Tri-Lingualism (PBLTL) in Hong Kong (HK). The researchers in this section aim to share and analyze some challenges and issues related to the policy, paying attention and insights from the published article.

Since 1998, a significant number of kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools in Hong Kong have switched their instructional languages to Chinese, based on the Mother Tongue Teaching policy (母語教學). While this policy has helped eliminate some language barriers and teaching challenges based on language-based misunderstanding, many students, teachers, and even parents have not enjoyed the long-term benefits due to their ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2019).

Hong Kong is a unique city where East meets West. For centuries, it has attracted a diverse population, including international expatriates, visitors, blue-collar workers, and skilled professionals from countries such as India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, for both short-term and long-term development (Fleming, 2019; Loper, 2004). While some parents can afford the tuition fees of international schools, families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have no choice but to send their children to local (i.e., funded) schools for compulsory education. Consequently, non-Chinese-speaking students (NCSSs)—particularly those from families lacking connections to local Chinese communities—face significant challenges. Many of these students do not possess any background or knowledge of the Chinese language, which prevents them from benefiting from the PBLTL. More importantly, many of these NCSSs could only attend some schools exclusively for NCSSs with arrangements of inclusivity and

integration (IE) (Forlin, 2010).

## 2. Language and School Selection Challenges of NCSSs

Since the 20th century, a significant number of non-Chinese-speaking and heritage immigrants have come to Hong Kong for both short-term and long-term opportunities. According to the 2021 Population Census by the Home Affairs Department, there are 142,065 Indonesians, 201,291 Filipinos, 61,582 White residents, 42,569 Indians, 24,385 Pakistanis, 29,701 Nepalese, 10,291 Japanese, 12,972 Thai, 24,588 Other Asians, and 70,124 individuals classified as Others living in Hong Kong (The Demographics : Ethnic Groups, 2021). Although some international schools, such as The Hong Kong Japanese School and the Japanese International School, have been established for expatriates' children (e.g., Japanese), families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often cannot afford to send their children to these schools. As a result, under the current policy, non-Chinese speakers not only miss out on the benefits of the PBLTL but also face challenges in enrolling in traditional mainstream schools in Hong Kong. The researchers have outlined and concluded several challenges, which are discussed below.

First, the language barrier significantly affects the academic achievements and experiences of NCSSs. Their inability to communicate in Chinese (i.e., Cantonese and Mandarin) limits their opportunities to fully engage with and understand the current curriculum and instruction in classrooms (Ng, 2024). This can lead to difficulties in understanding materials, completing assignments, taking exams, and interacting with peers, which impacts their academic results.

Second, NCSSs may face challenges related to social inclusion and integration both during enrollment and after graduation. Their inability to speak Chinese can limit their ability to connect socially with teachers, classmates, and members of the community, potentially leading to feelings of isolation, exclusion, and separation from the overall environment (Erni & Leung, 2014).

Third, understanding classroom materials can be particularly challenging for NCSSs. While many educational resources in Hong Kong are available in both English and Chinese, not all NCSSs and their parents are proficient in either language. Given that Chinese is one of the most difficult languages for second-language learners to master, NCSSs may feel overlooked and confused in many classroom settings (Gu et al., 2017).

### 3. Inclusivity and Integration of NCSSs

Currently, approximately 30% of secondary schools in Hong Kong are managed as English-medium-of-instruction (EMI) schools. As 黃卓明 (2024) noted, most EMI schools require admission interviews, advanced academic qualifications, and special talents for potential enrollment. In other words, these schools are designed for some well-prepared who joined and studied in the after-school programs and training aimed at succeeding in admission interviews or entrance exams. It is important to highlight that while NCSSs can seek admission to EMI schools, the limited resources and information available often make it difficult for all students—particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—to access these opportunities. Currently, only a few schools offer specialized educational support for NCSSs in various languages, including but not limited to English, Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Nepali, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu, and Punjabi. As a result, many NCSSs need to rely on IE for several reasons.

First, IE has become one of the few avenues available for NCSSs to complete their secondary education, especially for those from low-income families (Yiu, 2024). Schools with IE programs, along with teachers and Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), can allocate resources to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. For instance, bilingual and multilingual materials may be provided (Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Szeto et al., 2020).

Second, in schools that emphasize IE education, teachers and SENCOs are prepared for the sociocultural needs and backgrounds of NCSSs, including religious practices and dietary requirements. This awareness facilitates appropriate accommodation, such as prayer rooms, and consideration of dietary restrictions (Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Szeto et al., 2020).

Third, schools, teachers, and SENCOs can assist students and their families by offering additional support services, such as after-school language training and counseling. These resources enable NCSSs to enhance their language skills and adapt more effectively to both the educational system and the broader social environment in Hong Kong after graduation (Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Szeto et al., 2020).

### 4. Conclusion

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