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The study for Chinese language proficiency of the non-language subjects textbooks used in primary and secondary schools

Executive Summary

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Background

In 2000, Hong Kong introduced the Education Reform. By emphasizing the students as ‘the focus of the reform’ and establishing the general principle that there are ‘no losers’, it was expressed that through the Reform, “the goal is to ensure that every student attains the basic competencies”, including the non-Chinese speaking ethnic minority students. The government has implemented supplementary Chinese curriculum guide, Second Language Learning Framework for Chinese Language Courses, Applied Chinese, etc. In dealing with this issue, the government and the education sector created a discourse of "non-Chinese Speaking", essentially exchanging the concept of "ethnic minority" for "language minority".

Although much effort has been placed, the results are less than satisfactory, as evidenced by the low enrolment of ethnic minorities in universities. In the 2016/17, a total of 17,891 students were enrolled in the first year of undergraduate courses funded by the University Grants Committee, and only 265 of them were non-Chinese speaking students, which accounts for about 1.4% of the total enrolment, much lower than the proportion of Chinese-speaking students.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the learning situations of non-Chinese speaking students in primary and secondary schools, Hong Kong Policy Research Institute (HKPRI) has been funded by Equal Opportunities Commission, under ‘Funding Programme of Research Projects on Equal Opportunity 2017/18’ to investigate students’ reading and writing ability of Chinese for non-language subjects such as General Studies and Mathematics. This study uses textbooks available in the market and questions of Territory-wide System Assessment, on the subjects including Mathematics, General Studies, Integrated Humanities/Liberal Studies, Integrated Science, History, Chinese History, Music, and etc. About 200 participants of Upper Primary (101 students from 10 schools) and Lower Secondary levels (96 students from 7 schools) from Chinese-medium schools were interviewed through questionnaire survey in early 2018.

Survey Findings

The results show that students scored an average of below 30 out of 100 for Chinese reading and writing for non-language subjects. Respondents of Upper Primary levels correctly answered 23-27% of questions, approximately scored 25 out of 100, when tested on vocabularies and passages relating to Mathematics, general knowledge, Physical Education, Musical and Visual Arts (those non-language subjects). When tested on terms relating to Chinese, English and their corresponding meanings in those non-language subjects, respondents correctly answered 20-24%, achieved scores of 22 out of 100. Similarly, respondents of Lower Secondary scored 30 out of 100 on the non-language test. Overall, students were weak in Chinese reading and writing ability, even for non-language subjects; respondents revealed that they did not understand about 3 out of 10 words in the text provided (32%).

Based on responses from our questionnaire survey, over 60% of non-Chinese speaking students reported that they could not effectively cope with non-language subjects (Upper Primary: 60%; Lower Secondary: 72%). At the same time, over 60% of students surveyed indicated that they did not have a clear understanding about the contents of non-language subjects taught in Chinese (Upper Primary: 61%; Lower Secondary: 77%) and

expressed that catching-up with the curriculum was difficult for them (Upper Primary: 63%; Lower Secondary: 76%).

Based on the survey conducted for this study, about 40% of students reported that they wished to either sign up for HKDSE or GCSE (HKDSE: 39%; GCSE: 38%). According to the statistics provided by Hong Kong Unison, the level of Chinese in GCSE is equivalent to that of around Primary 2 to 3. Hence, non-Chinese speaking students who wish to take GCSE would face an examination of non-language subjects having Chinese standards exceeding their level of Chinese.

Conclusions

The results of this study reveal that difficulties faced by ethnic minorities regarding non-language subjects can be attributed to the following reasons:

1. Course guide amendments are limited to support Chinese Language learning only

The curriculum guidelines and learning frameworks revised by the Education Bureau aim to provide non-Chinese speaking students and their teachers with strategies and principles for Chinese-learning. Although non-Chinese speaking students can improve their Chinese listening, speaking, reading and writing skills through these guidelines, the improvement and enhancement may not be applicable to the learning of non-language subjects. As shown through the student assessment conducted in this study, students' scores reflected relatively weak Chinese reading and writing skills in non-language subjects.

2. Teachers of non-language subjects lack training in dealing with the learning needs of non-Chinese students

This study reflects a situation whereby non-language subject teachers are not well-equipped to address the learning needs of non-Chinese speaking students. Although Upper Primary respondents are satisfied with the teaching quality of teachers, about 7 out of 10 (74%) students were dissatisfied with the Chinese learning materials provided by their schools and 8 out of 10 students from Lower Secondary levels thought that teachers were unclear about language learning difficulties experienced by non-Chinese students. In fact, at present, there is only relevant training given to Chinese language teachers who teach non-Chinese speaking students.

3. Existence of challenges not related to Chinese-learning when progressing from Primary to Secondary school

The survey results show more negative learning outcomes and attitudes for non-language subjects among secondary school students as compared to their counterparts in primary schools. Secondary school students showed lower levels of ability to cope with non-language subjects and lower levels of satisfaction towards teaching materials when compared to primary school students. Our survey further shows that non-Chinese speaking students found it difficult to use both English and Chinese to converse with their peers, and the situation was particularly serious for those in secondary schools.

4. Blind spots of off-campus and community support

Lastly, the support provided beyond schools is not enough to meet the demands of learning. Though there are many institutions providing non-Chinese speaking students with learning aid such as tuition, these forms of support mainly focus on Chinese-learning and overlook the learning needs of students with regards to non-language subjects. Our survey showed that over 80% of students thought that they required additional tuition for non-language subjects but only less than 20% of students participated in these tuition programmes.

In reality, the government and NGOs have placed a disproportionate amount of time and effort in helping non-Chinese speaking students in the study of languages. However, for students, the multi-faceted curriculum in Hong Kong's education system requires them to use terms and vocabularies interchangeably across subjects. Moreover, different subjects require different language-using skills, each having its own specific set of challenges. For non-language subjects, simply putting more effort in Chinese learning is not sufficient to overcome difficulties faced by non-Chinese speaking students in their school experiences.

Recommendations

This study hopes to reflect the learning needs of non-Chinese speaking students in non-language subjects. The primary or sole objective of current policies is positioned to help ethnic minority students learn Chinese and English, yet support for non-language subjects needs to be strengthened. Through this study, we hope that the authorities and the stakeholders who provide learning opportunities to ethnic minority students could consider the learning needs of students in non-language subjects so that these students can truly integrate into the education system of Hong Kong.

Hence, the research team proposes the following:

1. To design guidelines to provide ethnic minority students with comprehensive support for learning non-language subjects;
2. To empower non-language teachers with relevant resources to allow them to offer quality education to ethnic minority students: this could possibly include providing non-language teachers with related training or relaxing the requirements for registering teacher training programmes of non-language subjects;
3. To support ethnic minority students in transitioning from primary to secondary school: Not only Chinese Language learning support should be provided, but also relevant social support, including counselling, should be given to help ethnic minority students in dealing with the social challenges when progressing to secondary education (such as adapting to a new environment and building meaningful relationships);
4. To encourage off-campus learning support institutions to help ethnic minorities with both Chinese language and non-language subjects.