



Macao English Education in the globalized world: opportunities and challenges

Iris Mak Ngan Leng (麥雁鈴)

Being the official language of 73 countries, English enjoys absolute superiority over other languages. It is the most learned language and in fact, a world-wide, or the so-called universal language that each and every man is expected to know a little, if not a lot. This is particularly paramount in a globalized era when an individual's livelihood no longer limits to his or her own birth place but stretches out, and a country's survival depends no more only on domestic growth but intertwines with policies and interests of its counterparts from the rest of the world.

The learning of English as a second language or foreign language is evidently important. In many Asian countries, English is a required subject in primary and secondary curriculum, and it is as well a compulsory test subject for university entrance exam. Macao is no exception. Situated at the Pearl River Delta of the south-eastern coast of Mainland China, the Cantonese-speaking region demonstrates prominent demand and application of English in various respects. Cantonese remains the lingua franca among Chinese in the region on one hand while English,

on the other, maintains to be a de facto official status within civil services and educational system in Macao.

English in Macao: *Status and functions*

Chinese and Portuguese are specified as the official languages of the region according to the Basic Law of Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) (Chinese Government, 1993); however, there is a prevalent use of English among government departments, business sectors, and local populace within the territory. The Basic Law of Macao SAR *per se* offers an English version along with the two official languages. Moody (2008) reported that about 70% of the government websites provide in English, and among all civil servants in Macao, more than 58% have fair command of English (SAFP, Macao, 2008). The prevalence of English is also illustrated by the English ability of its local residents. In 2011, more than 113,000 Macao residents (21.1% of the population that time) are able to speak English, almost five times the number and percentage ten years ago (Statistics and Census

Service, 2011). All suggest that English permeates official and daily operation and as well fulfills a wide range of functions within the region.

English education in Macao

A brief review of the Macao schooling system is necessary prior to a closer look of its current English education, and its teaching and learning practices. Viewing from history, Macao has been a Portuguese colony for more than four hundred years before it was handed over to Mainland China in 1999. This tiny fishing village was almost left unattended by both countries until the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1987 which implied the end of Portuguese colonial rule and obliged the colonial government to pave the way for China's takeover of Macao's sovereignty (Vong, 2006, 2007).

Macao-Portuguese government's *laissez-faire* attitude and non-intervention policy exerted profound influence to the region's development, and education is the best-case scenario. For a long time, Macao's educational landscape has been characterized by a huge majority of private schools and a "self-reliance" culture. A total of 120 school sections are officially registered in Macao region-wide (DSEJ, 2013) and of which 103 are private schools. The majority enjoys considerable autonomy over curriculum, teacher recruitment, school policy-making and the like. The government has little say over education affairs, restricting its involvement to offering financial sponsorships and supports (Vong, 2006).

Public schools are, on the other hand, owned by the government and adopt the Portuguese education system. No standardized curriculum and school-leaving examination hitherto have been established even though the Education and Youth Affairs Bureau successfully outlined a school system and standardized the principles and objectives of non-tertiary education, as well as the number of years attended by students from different education systems with the implementation of Law No.9/2006 "Fundamental Law of Non-tertiary Education System" (MSAR Government, 2007).

Among the sizeable proportion of private schools, only 13 (13%) of them are English-medium. These commonly-called "private English-medium schools" instruct all subjects (except Chinese) in English and typically carry prestige since parents, more often than not, believe that a fluent command of English guarantees their children a better future. Some 13% of Macao students were enrolled in such English medium schools in 2009 (Moody, 2009). Meanwhile, all private Chinese-medium schools specify English as a mandatory subject and require teachers to lecture in English as much as they can. That is not often the case, however. In most cases, low-end private Chinese-medium schools found themselves trapped in a vicious circle—unenviable reputation and meagre resources attract no quality teachers, mediocre or inferior quality of teaching team results in low

proficiency students which in turn labels the schools a poor reputation. English is taught in students' mother tongue, Cantonese, in quite a lot of these schools and students are deprived of listening and speaking English in a context to which they are limitedly exposed.

Yet to note, high-end private Chinese-medium schools are catching up. They make attempts to get equal or even ahead of their English-medium counterparts, for example, by placing Form 1 students into "English class" and "Chinese class" in which the former group receives "English only" in all subjects and is strategically trained for meeting admission standards of oversea universities. The latter group, on the other hand, is designed to equip students with higher English proficiency and aims for universities in Macao and Asia.

In this sense, English education in Macao appears to be even more complex and highlights the fact that almost all students in Macao are English-knowing yet their proficiency level varies widely (Education and Youth Affairs Bureau, 2001). A report revealed by the ETS (Educational Testing Services) in 2011 in which Macao was ranked at 117th among 163 countries in TOEFL could be a clue to this. Macau test-takers' scores in the four skills—listening, speaking, writing, and reading across-the-board were below average. Another set of research data from Mak (2014) is also alarming. In her study of 236 pieces of Macao students' writings of the university entrance exam, more than 70% scored below 9 out of

20, and more than 10% were marked zero. The 10% test-takers simply left the writing section blank. Mak's(2014) findings have particular implication and alarming when the situation is barely acknowledged.

Challenges and opportunities

In a globalized village we are dwelling in, English soon becomes one of the basic living skills that each and every one should possess. For many, it is no longer taken for granted as a competitive edge but in fact a minimum requirement in order to survive in workplace. One should be flexible enough in the current fast-changing world where variation happens in a twinkle. And this holds especially true to educational systems. The necessity to respond to new social demands requires them to establish new educational goals, impose stronger integration of different educational agencies, and even deconstruct and reconstruct their identities and social functions.

Looking back at Macao where its education system is characterized by the government's long-standing non-intervention approach, the region was only able to carry out its very first education reform in 1991. Since then several measures have been implemented including the fifteen years of free education, the launching of "Macao Youth Policy", the "Ten-year program of the development of non-tertiary education 2011-2020, the enacting of the "System Framework for Private School Teaching Staff of Non-tertiary Education" and



a latest “Curriculum Framework for Formal Education of Local Education System” officially announced this June. As Huang & Huang (2010) commented, Macao government is aiming at a more solid and coherent education system and adopting a more active interventionist stance in this long contested terrain. Nonetheless, no policy on English education has been implemented or even proposed so far, much less than a long-term strategic scheme to improve the region’s English proficiency. This appears to be even more bizarre as the Macao SAR government claimed to position the region as “World Center of Tourism and Leisure” for the years to come. English undoubtedly is one of the keys to this gate casting not only for the minority of elites but also the most populace. Unfortunately the entire expertise and practice receives little or no attention, leaving schools and teachers struggling in the trap.


The situation grows thorny and teachers are put between a rock and a hard place when a recent research on student repetition rate listed Macao the first in the world—a hard slap on the face of its relaxed attitude towards education, and of its “more autonomy less standardization” school management that once been encouraged. To fail or not to fail those less capable students becomes a big question to both teachers and school principals who found themselves ready to compromise—letting students scrapping passes easier than before. The consequence is salient. Local universities are admitting weaker freshmen

and university English teachers are seeing more low proficiency year-ones. As suggested in Lau (2009) and Young’s (2008) report, a considerable amount of undergraduates who have been exposed to English since kindergarten fail to communicate in English in everyday situations.

In addition, when it comes to an academic perspective, very scanty research on English education has been conducted and empirical studies regarding English teaching and learning are in severe need.

Obviously there is a gap between what the populace is facing and the government’s response. And all the aforementioned demonstrate a challenging complexion for English education in Macao. Challenges and opportunities are two sides of a coin. The momentum provides the Macao SAR government a good chance to mobilize resources, invite experts and scholars to team up an English education committee and the like. Together they brainstorm solutions and policies on English curriculum, proficiency and quality assurance as well as teacher training and development. Of late, the proposal of a Joint College Admission Exam by the Tertiary Education Service Office (GAES) provokes hot debate in the society. The act seems imperative although mixed voices and opinions were heard. Some regarded it as a further step to centralize resources and power while others criticized the joint practice a negative force driving schools, teachers, and students to be exam-oriented. If perceives, however, from an aggressive perspective, it could be an initial move

the Macao SAR government take to examine and eventually come up with a universal standard to improve students' general proficiency in required tested subjects including Chinese, English and math, which is expected to be a timely remedy for English education in the territory.

Excessive autonomy could turn into chaos. Now that the Macao SAR government wrestles to coordinate and integrate educational resources that were and still are privatized. English education emerges as a tip of the iceberg requiring the governing body to fasten the pace of getting adjusted and in line with the global educational trend. 

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Iris Mak Ngan Leng (麥雁鈴)

Lecturer, Macau University of Science and Technology.