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The Tacit Dimension of Medium of Instruction

Lou Jia Jackie

The medium of instruction has long been a controversial problem in Hong Kong. Although the British colonized the territory in 1842, the colonial government did not have an official language policy until the Official Language Ordinance of 1974, and it was left to the principal of each school to decide whether teaching should be conducted in Chinese or English (Bolton 2002). Representative of the “non-interventionist” policies of moderate imperialism (Arendt 1966), British colonial educators, who established mission schools in Hong Kong in the mid-nineteenth century favored Chinese as the language of education for local pupils. Central School founder Frederic Steward said “Schools should be secular and give strong support to Chinese education” (Pennycook 1998, 109). However, the liberal views of these early British educators, who themselves were interested in the study of Oriental languages and cultures (Bolton 2002), were quickly challenged by colonial governors, as well as by the parents of school pupils. Thus, it was not surprising that the first attempt by the colonial government to implement a mother-tongue education policy in 1973 was quickly aborted and reverted in 1974 to a *laissez-faire* approach. Consequently, 90% of all schools nominally used English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in 1994. It was also unsurprising that, when the exiting colonial government finally implemented the mother-tongue education policy in March 1997, it was met with fierce opposition from parents, and the policy has been adjusted or fine-tuned multiple times since then.

According to Bolton (2002), the sudden implementation of the mother-tongue education policy only a few months before the handover was likely motivated by the British concern that Cantonese language and culture would be slowly replaced by Putonghua, threatening the local Hong Kong identity. However, at least on paper, the rationale was mainly educational. The Green Paper of 1973 states the following:

The medium of instruction bears significantly upon the quality of education offered at a post-primary level. Pupils coming from primary schools where they have been taught in the medium of Cantonese have a grievous burden put on them when required to absorb new subjects through the medium of English. We recommend that Chinese become the usual language of instruction in the lower forms of

secondary schools, and that English should be studied as the second language. (Hong Kong Government 1973, 6, quoted in Gibbons 1982, 117).

The apparent aim of this policy was thus to improve the quality of education, and copious studies have demonstrated the educational benefits of teaching and learning in the mother tongue. Despite this convincing evidence, as a global and colonial language, English is still preferred by many in Hong Kong society to be the language of education, not only because of its instrumental value but also because of its associated social prestige. Transforming this stubborn mindset is a challenging task, which will likely take several generations to complete. At the same time, I believe that to change people's view of language or, more specifically in this situation, the medium of instruction, it is also necessary to change people's view of learning. It is therefore the aim of this paper to support the importance of mother-tongue education by drawing upon Michael Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge; our native language is an indispensable aspect of tacit knowing.

Breaking away from objectivism, Polanyi returned humans to the center of epistemological theory. In modern science, the knower is detached from the external world that they are seeking to know, to achieve objective observations. According to Polanyi, this view that knowledge exists externally to the observer is self-defeating. For example, scientific discoveries often start from a problem, and the quality of the research depends on the originality of the problem; that is, it has not yet been noticed by others. The contradiction is then how a person can argue that this process of discovery is objective if only a small number of people are able to identify the problem and engage in finding its solution. Many researchers, especially those working in the humanities and social sciences, have acknowledged this "observer's paradox." Polanyi, however, not only indicates that the paradox is there but also embraces it as a process that "underlies all observations," which he calls "indwelling" (Polanyi 2009 [1966], 17). Knowing then becomes an extension of our body as we live in the external world and interiorize parts of it.

His view of knowing as a process of "indwelling" is directly relevant to people's concern regarding the medium of instruction in two ways. First, it reaffirms the difference between first and second language learning. Children acquire their mother tongue by

imitating the language speakers around them, and they literally dwell in the language. Their body is their first tool for meaning making, as they cry to get attention or laugh in response to stimuli. Later, language develops as a tool for performing simple actions, such as handing objects (Scollon 2001). In other words, the performance of action precedes or even motivates the acquisition of language. First language acquisition is, then, an intensely corporeal process. By contrast, except for bilinguals, learning a second language is typically more abstract and disembodied. It often takes place in the classroom with few other physical activities other than listening to the teacher or reading the textbook, in which language is broken into analytical entities from words to sentences and put together by using grammar and other rules. If learning stops here, which applies to many secondary school graduates beginning university studies in Hong Kong, the students will have only “looked at” the language, as Polanyi would say, instead of knowing it. This brings me to the second connection between Polanyi’s theory and the problem of medium of instruction. That is, if knowledge is presented to students in a second language that has yet to be internalized, indwelling then becomes virtually impossible, which poses a more severe challenge to the education quality of Hong Kong schools and universities than the perceived threat of mother-tongue education to English language proficiency. In the following, I will explain why this might be the situation by referencing the four aspects of tacit knowing.

“We can know more than we can tell.” Polanyi’s theory of knowledge starts with this basic observation (2009 [1966], 4). We know how to walk without necessarily being able to articulate the exact steps that we need to take to walk. Which foot should go out first? Where should I put my arms? Should my arm move at the same time as my foot? If we think about these questions, we will not be able to walk at all. This applies to language learning as well. It is often quite difficult for an untrained native speaker of any language to teach the grammar of their mother tongue. Polanyi refers to this knowledge that we know but cannot communicate as the tacit dimension of knowing and proceeds to outline precisely its mechanism in four aspects. This is where we can clearly see the influence of his early training as a scientist.

For Polanyi, knowing is the integration of two types of awareness: focal and subsidiary. Focal awareness attends to external knowledge including the practical skills that we are acquiring, and subsidiary awareness attends to secondary things involved in the knowing

process. These secondary things include material tools, such as pen and paper when we write, and body, such as our teeth, tongue, oral, and nasal cavity when we talk. As Polanyi clarifies (KB, 197, quoted in Mitchell 2006, 74), we are not unconscious of these subsidiary things, but they are pushed into the background of awareness. There are four types of relationship between focal and subsidiary awareness.

The first aspect is functional: “We know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second” (Polanyi 2009 [1966], 10). Our awareness of the first term is focal, and the second is subsidiary. In his example of probing with a stick, the first term is referred to spatially as “proximal” and the second term as “distal.” When a person is learning a new language, this language itself becomes the “distal,” the subject of focal awareness, and the different parts of our body that are mobilized to write or talk are the “proximal.” For example, when people learn to speak the four tones of Mandarin or the nine tones of Cantonese, they find it helpful to move their heads up and down along with the change in pitch. However, when the tones are internalized, they are hardly noticed. Instead, our focal awareness now shifts to the content of what is said. Language, and especially our mother tongue, then becomes the “proximal” as we pursue knowledge in it. However, when we learn in a new or second language that has yet to be internalized, both language and non-language knowledge become the “distal” and occupy the focal awareness of the learner, which naturally causes a greater cognitive burden.

The second aspect is phenomenal: “We may say, in general, that we are aware of the proximal term of act of knowing in the appearance of its distal term” (Polanyi 2009 [1966], 11). When we write, we are aware of the muscular movements of our hands and their coordination with pen and paper by looking at the appearance of our handwriting or drawing. If we stop writing by hand for a few months, the handwriting might, at least for the first few minutes, look rather clumsy and different from how it appeared before. Similarly, when a subject is presented in an unfamiliar language, it appears to be more difficult than when the same subject is presented in the mother tongue. This is why my students often help their classmates understand a concept, not by explaining it, but by translating it into Chinese.

The third aspect is semantic: “We become aware of the feelings in our hand in terms of their meaning located at the tip of the probe or stick to which we are attending” (Polanyi

2009 [1966], 13). To continue with the example of handwriting, the muscular movements in our hand and its physical contact with the pen feel different when we write the amount of a payment on a check, which should be in legible block letters, than when we sign our name below it in a highly personalized signature. The meanings of words also become more opaque in a less familiar language and thus prompt weaker emotional reactions, just as many of us find foul language in a foreign tongue less offensive than in our mother tongue.

From these three aspects of tacit knowing, “we can deduce a fourth aspect, which tells us what tacit knowing is a knowledge of” (Polanyi 2009 [1966], 13); in other words, the fourth is the ontological aspect. Knowing in this sense is not an acquisition of external knowledge, but a holistic understanding of the relationship between the distal and the proximal. The medium of instruction is well integrated with the content of instruction. As Polanyi puts it, “I cannot speak except from inside a language” (PK, 253, quoted in Mitchell 2006, 89).

To summarize, I have in this essay argued the benefits of native language and, conversely, the downside of a second language, for learning by applying Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge. While people’s mother tongue can be thought of as a part of their bodies and serves as the “proximal” end of knowing, a second language is itself “distal” and competes with distal knowledge for focal awareness. Even when students overcome this overloaded cognitive challenge through practices such as memorization, the knowledge that they have acquired is still “distal” and disembodied because tacit knowing cannot occur in the absence of the “proximal.” Theoretically, there are two solutions to this problem. If EMI is still the popular choice, then English must be taught earlier to all children regardless of their socioeconomic background and made the medium of instruction starting in primary school, as has been done in Singapore, so that it has already been internalized when they begin university studies. Although this is indeed what some researchers have suggested (e.g., Poon 2000), such a policy will create a gulf between generations and destroy the continuity of cultural traditions and the emergence of a coherent Hong Kong identity, which have been expressed largely through Cantonese. In addition, it is practically impossible to implement because such a policy would require a large number of English-speaking (not necessarily native) teachers at all levels of education, allowing students to apprentice with “masters.”

A more realistic solution is to continue with Cantonese as the medium of instruction, possibly even promoting it more widely at the tertiary level. University teaching in Hong Kong is often conducted in a manner in which students are treated as if they were native speakers of English. The prestige of EMI blinds the general public as well as the upper management of universities to the cognitive detriments that it brings. Through this essay, I merely hope that Polanyi's theory can strengthen support for the mother-tongue education policy, support already given by many sociolinguists and education scholars. Although, I wonder whether the policymakers behind EMI are truly unaware of the obstacle it presents to learning or are "cynically" promoting a policy that they know is not working. What type of future university graduate would they like to see, independent thinkers or thoughtless "robots" that are supposedly bilingual? This situation is when an epistemological theory becomes politically and ideologically motivated, which returns us to the point at which Polanyi turned to philosophy from science.

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