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# The Conflict Between NETs and LETs in a Chinese Medium of Instruction in Secondary School in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

*The Hong Kong government has employed native English speaking teachers (NETs) to teach English in secondary schools since 1987. This scheme has been scrutinized by many educators, students, and parents. One concern has involved the effectiveness of NETs in teaching English when compared to local English teachers (LETs). This article looks at the history of NET scheme, the tensions between NETs and LETs from an insider's view, and the effectiveness of instruction between NETs and LETs. Recommendations are provided for prospective NETs and local educators in Hong Kong.*

**Key Words:** EFL teachers, English proficiency

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Most people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese, which is the native language. English is taught routinely in Hong Kong education, and most students receive instruction by nonnative English teachers, that is, persons born in Hong Kong who learned English as a second language. According to Education Bureau (2004), all new English language teachers in primary and secondary schools need to obtain at least a Bachelor of Education degree in English plus a recognized teacher training qualification such as Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PCED) majoring in the English language subject. After the degree and qualifications obtained,

they become registered English teachers who are referred to as local English teachers, or LETs.

The author of this paper was a LET in a secondary school in Hong Kong for 10 years. In this school, which served students from age 12 to 18, instruction in all subject areas except English was provided in Chinese. This type of school is referred to as a Chinese medium of instruction (CMI) school. There were also some teachers in this school for whom English was their native language, or native English speaking teachers (NETs) as they are officially titled. These were expatriates from English-speaking countries like Australia, England, Canada, and the United States.

In a CMI school, few tensions with the NET scheme were identified. This article describes the tensions and offers suggestions for how the NET scheme might be improved to enhance teachers' teaching and students' learning of English. This information will be of value to current teachers and education officials in Hong Kong as well as to teachers who are considering working as NETs in Hong Kong or other Asian countries with similar programs. This article is organized into four parts. Historical background on English language instruction in secondary schools in Hong Kong is provided first. Second, the roles of LETs and NETs, the tensions between LETs and NETs, and the effectiveness of instruction of NETs and LETs are discussed. Recommendations to improve the NET scheme to enhance students' English instruction in Hong Kong are provided next, followed by a brief conclusion.

### **Historical Background on English Language Instruction in Hong Kong**

Almost 90% of secondary schools in Hong Kong used English as the medium of instruction before Hong Kong reverted to China in 1997 after being colonized by Britain for 99 years. The schools used English textbooks for all subjects except Chinese language and Chinese history. Classroom oral language instruction was provided in English as well. Some research suggested that schools employing English as the medium instruction (referred to as EMI schools) negatively affected students' understanding of the subject matter (Pennycook, 1998). Yu and Atkinson (1998) concurred, claiming that "English medium education in Hong Kong adversely affects many students' educational attainment" (p. 283).

After Hong Kong was returned to China 1997, there were many changes in education policy (Griffin, et al, 2005). One of the main changes was to return schools to a

CMI framework, which aligned with the policy in Mainland China, making Chinese the medium of instruction in the majority of schools in Hong Kong.

A few highly selective EMI schools remained in Hong Kong for high-performing students from affluent, influential families. Thus, the CMI schools tended to include more students who struggled academically. Morrison and Lui (2000) predicted this situation: "CMI schools would become second-class institutions, recruiting less able children from less educated parents. Students from EMI schools would constitute the elite" (p. 447). There was also concern within the business community that English proficiency would fall if English was phased out as the medium of instruction.

The holistic education review (Curriculum Development Council, 1999) reaffirmed the importance of the English language in the Hong Kong curriculum in the context of a new English curriculum. This curriculum includes eight key learning areas (KLAs) where generic and specific skills, competencies and knowledge areas are developed.

The colonial Hong Kong government of the time began the development of English; a task carried forward to the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China after 1997. The continuing growth in the economy of Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Macau competes with Hong Kong's economy, but Hong Kong stands still in the form of the language competence of its population (Griffin, et al, 2005). Griffin, et, al (2005) also noted that in spite of alarmist comments about the falling standards of English, the English linguistic heritage in Hong Kong is still the main asset. This asset has been fostered by the Hong Kong government policy on language and on the qualifications, training, professional development, and support for LETs (Griffin, et al, 2005).

English has been a major focus at all levels of education in Hong Kong for many years because English competence is essential in business, finance, and international trade, and it is important in the daily life of Hong Kong citizens (Walker, 2001). The importance of English to the Hong Kong economy is obvious (Griffin, et, al;2005). Thus, English is a required subject at all levels of education from kindergarten to the university level. Even though English proficiency is highly desired in Hong Kong, the decline of English proficiency among Hong Kong students still exists (Wong, 2001). This is because English is used inside classrooms only for study and examination purposes, not for daily conversational use (Luk & Lin 2007). Additionally, based on the opinion of the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, Hong Kong business leaders have attributed the low English proficiency of students to ineffective teaching methods and declining standards for LETs (Luk & Lin, 2007). The Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications established new standards to help unqualified language teachers to become qualified to teach the language. One of the ways is the benchmark examination for those local English language teachers without a degree in English education. They must pass the examination in order to become qualified English language teachers.

The Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme (NET) is another major support for English teaching in Hong Kong. In fact, the NET scheme was originally called the Pilot Expatriate English Language Teacher Scheme in 1987. Later, the scheme was called Permanent Expatriate English Language Teacher scheme in 1991. In October 1997, the new Chief Executive in Hong Kong decided to implement a NET Scheme because he truly believed that the NET Scheme was worth investing (Hong Kong SAR, 1997). Over 700 NETs were provided for secondary schools to “make an immediate impact on improving the

English language standards of our students” (Hong Kong SAR, 1997) at the beginning of the 1998 academic year. It was expanded to include primary schools a few years later.

The Hong Kong government decided to employ NETs in secondary schools. In order to be employed as a NET, a person has to be a native English speaker with a Bachelor’s degree in English literature, TESOL, Linguistics, or comparable field from a university in an English-speaking country. It was assumed that by employing NETs, students in Hong Kong would improve their English by engaging in authentic English use (Barratt & Kontra, 2000) and by providing them opportunities to mingle with native speakers (Storey et al, 2001). NETs are usually centrally recruited and funded by the Education and Manpower Bureau. However, the employment contract a NET signs is with an individual school or education funding body so there does appear to be considerable differences among NETs in terms of the sort of workload they are required to undertake. It should, of course, be remembered that there is a large degree of difference among local schools generally due to the banding system, so it does make sense that not all NETs can have the same workload.

In summary, it is clear that there are two main catalysts that contribute to the establishment of the NET Scheme. The first one is the policy of the Chinese medium of instruction in most schools after the handover of Hong Kong to Mainland China in 1997. Yet, the importance of English in Hong Kong could not be neglected due to the role Hong Kong plays as the international trade metropolitan.

Another factor is the outcry from Hong Kong business leaders who complaint about the decline of the English language ability of students resulting from the low English proficiency of LETs. According to Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination result, only 1.2 percent of the candidates received the

highest level, and 87.9 percent received the lowest level in the English language subject in 2010, and in 2011, 1.0 percent received the highest level and 94.7 percent received the lowest level in the English language subject (Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority site, 2011). These business leaders believe that some changes have to be made in order to raise the English standards of the students in Hong Kong. Although the costly recruitment and housing allowance became a big issue, the Hong Kong government still implemented the NET Scheme to continue to keep Hong Kong competitive with other economic development cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Macau. Yet, the roles of LETs and NETs became another issue.

### **The Roles of NETs and LETs in a CMI Secondary School**

NETs were never intended to replace LETs (Education Bureau, 2011); instead, their role was to extend and enhance English instruction due to their native English speaking abilities, and to play the role of additional English teachers. According to Hong Kong Education Bureau (2011), NET's roles are to enrich the English language learning environment in schools; enhance the teaching and learning of English with linguistically and culturally authentic materials and resources; and build up teaching expertise through school-based professional development and collaboration between NETs and other English panel members.

The actual duties of NETs were determined by their principals based on the needs of their individual schools, but they *theoretically* included the following (Education Bureau, 2011):

1. Provide a variety of opportunities for students to practice oral skills and communicate with others in English with confidence

2. Promote the learning of English through the use of language arts resources and activities.
3. Organize and implement a variety of extracurricular activities related to English.
4. Develop in students the habit of reading in English.
5. Conduct school-based activities such as public exam preparation.
6. Research, compile and present teaching materials and strategies that address the objectives of the NET Scheme and the targets of the school-based English curriculum.
7. Collaborate with English Panel Members in broadening the context for learning English.
8. Facilitate access to cultural experiences and/or exchanges.
9. Facilitate self-assessment and reflection on current teaching practices and model effective teaching strategies.
10. Assist the English Panel Chairs in developing and facilitating professional development workshops or planning panel meetings.

Ideally, to enhance the teaching and learning of English with linguistically and culturally authentic materials and resources, 98% of NETs meet with other form teachers and members of the entire English panel to co-plan; 91% provide authentic language support through modeling or consultation; and 82% provide linguistic support and cultural references such as using multimedia materials or realia (Education Bureau, 2008). To build up teaching expertise through school-based professional development and collaboration between NETs and other English panel members, 94% of NETs provide language support for panel members; 67% share strategies through co-teaching; and 59% facilitate opportunities for professional sharing and reflection (Education Bureau, 2008). In terms of collaboration between NETs and LETs, however, Griffin and Woods (2009)

noted that collaboration did not indeed occur in more than half of the secondary schools in Hong Kong.

For LETs, in addition to teaching English and marking essays, the roles of LETs *practically* included the following (Griffin & Woods, 2009):

1. Take up at least two after-school activities.
2. Attend all the necessary meetings, meet with students' parents for teacher-parent conference and whenever needed.
3. Attend certain amount of hours of compulsory training throughout a year.
4. For panel chairs, their role includes administrative tasks concerning the English program, monitoring the work of English teachers and supporting the deployment of the NET at the school.
5. Ensure that all teachers follow curriculum guidelines.
6. Review evidence of teaching and learning success.
7. Set goals and objectives
8. Monitor student progress and attitudes
9. Organize extracurricular activities and programs and professional development designed to improve school conditions for English language studies.
10. Discuss the effectiveness of resources and strategies with panel members.
11. Organize collaboration between NETs and LETs such as co-planning and co-teaching.

In summary, NETs were required to teach English as a foreign language to Hong Kong students and to assist in teacher and curriculum development in secondary schools, whereas LETs carry more responsibilities besides teaching English. However, the implementation of the NET Scheme unintentionally brings tensions between NETs and LETs.

## **Tensions between NETs and LETs**

### *Financial Conflict*

In spite of the over 10-year history of NETs in schools in Hong Kong, the scheme “was not well received by local English teachers and some principals in general due to a multitude of administrative, pedagogical, and cultural complications” (Luk & Lin, 2007, p. 13), such as the fact that NETs became competitors of LETs in terms of job opportunities. Additionally, many LETs viewed this scheme “as a form of discrimination and an insult to their English-teaching competence” (Luk & Lin, 2007, p. 13). It was considered to be discriminatory because most of the NETs had the benefit of a Special Allowance, which LETs did not receive (Walker, 2001). Besides the monthly salary of HK\$23,530-25,965, according to the Education Bureau (EDB) (2011), in the school year of 2008-09, the Special Allowance for NETs was HK\$14,245 per month. From the 2011/12 school year onwards, the EDB has adjusted the Special Allowance rate to HK\$16,859 per month for eligible NETs under the NET Schemes. The purpose of this Special Allowance is to “assist NETs in meeting cost of living (mainly accommodation cost) in Hong Kong on condition that their normal place of residence has been established as outside Hong Kong” (2012, p.1). The NETs' salary and allowance are more than twice the average salaries of most LETs who receive HK\$16,165 per month. In addition to the housing allowance, NETs also receive medical allowance with HK\$1,400 per year for a single appointee and HK\$5,400 per year for a married appointee, and a retention incentive of 5% increase of the NET's current base salary after two years of teaching (2012). LETs do not receive any of these different allowances, and therefore this disparity creates a negative impact on LETs' morale because it implied that they did not perform well as NETs and

thus did not deserve the benefits (Walker, 2001).

### *Policy Conflict*

There are two areas of tension in policy conflict. The first source of resentment is the workload imbalance. LETs resented NETs because NETs taught fewer classes, and the classes they taught included students who had higher English proficiency and tended to have fewer disciplinary problems. According to the EDB (2008), in teaching assignment, on average, NETs teach 27 lessons in a 6-day cycle. They teach full classes and skills-focused lessons. In a full class, the NET delivers the core English curriculum as the main teacher to a class of students. Now, 17% of NETs teach 3 or more full classes, 29% teach 2 full classes, while 26% teach 1 full class, and 28% of NETs teach skill-focused lessons only. The author's CMI school is a case in point. LETs teach from 33 to 35 lessons in a 6-day cycle on average. The students that the NET taught were usually well-behaved and had higher English language proficiency than other students in other classes. Additionally, NETs taught mostly oral classes as opposed to LETs, who typically taught writing and reading classes that required considerably more time to correct students' assignments. As the EDB (2008) pointed out, in a skills-focused lesson, 38% of NETs focus on developing oral skills, 28% focus on phonics; 20% focus on language arts; and 50% of the lessons are co-taught.

The second source of resentment is that NETs assumed very few additional duties, and they were responsible for less difficult duties, such as English Society or drama club, than LETs who were responsible for more and challenging ones like English remedial classes, administrative and after-school duties, such as handling students' discipline problems, meeting with parents, and attending many teacher meetings. Additionally, LETs were required to attend workshops and seminars up

to 50 hours per year to improve their teaching skills, whereas NETs were exempted from this requirement. According to Tang and Johnson (1993), these differing responsibilities tended to marginalize NETs and further widen the gap between LETs and NETs. Lung (1999) also pointed out that administrators had unknowingly marginalized LETs by recognizing NETs' ability in English. She resents that "this marginalization demoralizes and diminishes the usefulness of local teachers and does a disservice both to the teachers and the students" (§2).

Today, according to the EDB (2012), the duties of NETs are much more generally stated than before. It reads: "NETs should work collaboratively with the English panel in the preparation of teaching materials, curriculum development, organization of English-related activities and staff development, etc., and act as resource persons for the schools" (§3). It seems that the duties of NETs are less specific than they used to be. This may allow principals more autonomy to arrange teaching and non-teaching duties for NETs at the discretion of the principals of individual schools. However, whether the principals are willing to try to ease the LETs' workload by having NETs share the workload is uncertain today, but it is certain that NETs just cannot replace LETs in some of the duties because of the language barrier between NETs and students' parents.

### *Effectiveness of Instruction between NETs and LETs*

According to Ma (2012), there are some advantages and disadvantages between NETs and LETs in terms of the effectiveness of instruction:

#### Advantages of NETs

1. NETs can facilitate learning English because they are English native speakers and students are forced to use

English since NETs could not understand Cantonese.

2. NETs have good English proficiency mainly in accurate pronunciation.
3. NETs can create a relaxed and fun learning environment through storytelling, sharing of life experiences, or making jokes in class rather than textbook-bound teaching.

#### Disadvantages of NETs

1. Students have difficulty in understanding the teaching of NETs because NETs speak too fast and use more difficult vocabulary than LETs do.
2. Students experience anxiety while communicating with NETs because students fear that NETs may not understand what they say and vice versa.
3. Students have difficulty in developing a relationship with NETs because NETs only teach one oral lesson per week.
4. NETs do not focus on examination-oriented teaching styles and grammar. Hong Kong students only care about public examinations which cover many grammar rules.

Likewise, some advantages and disadvantages are perceived in the instruction of LETs.

#### Advantages of LETs

1. LETs have the ability to use students' first language which is Cantonese to enhance students' understanding in class.
2. LETs have better understanding of students' needs or difficulties. LETs are also English learners who know what kind of English their students need to know for Hong Kong public examinations.

3. Students find it easier to understand the teaching of LETs since LETs can explain English grammar rules and English vocabulary in Cantonese.
4. Students find it easier to establish a closer relationship with LETs because both share the same linguistic and cultural background.

#### Disadvantages of LETs

1. LETs' pronunciation and grammar are inaccurate. Because English is still not the first language of LETs, it is quite difficult for LETs to achieve native-like pronunciation.
2. LETs heavily rely on textbook in their teaching. Therefore, students consider LETs' teaching style old-fashioned and boring. As a result, students' participation in class decreases.
3. Students have less opportunity to practice English. Although students feel more comfortable raising and answering questions in Cantonese in class, they have few chances to use English in school.

All LETs are bilingual teachers. They understand the difficulties of learning and using English. LETs may not have the ability to speak "good" English as NETs do, but they do have certain advantages that NETs cannot provide to Hong Kong students. Being a native speaker of Cantonese and for more than 10 years of teaching English in Hong Kong, what Lung (1999) said below can imply her resentment toward the NET Scheme, and represent some, if not all, of the LETs' voices in Hong Kong.

Local teachers can't have been doing everything wrong! The special treatment of NETs appears to reflect Hong Kong's deference to the British image and its aura of success. However, care must be taken not to

denigrate and demoralize hardworking local teachers. In matters of maintaining discipline, communicating instructions, forming relationships with fellow teachers, empathizing with the students, sharing teaching loads and administrative responsibilities, and keeping up with the needs of students, local teachers are irreplaceable (2).

In summary, there are significant tensions between LETs and NETs in CMI secondary schools in Hong Kong such as financial and policy conflicts. NETs receive more salary and benefits but have fewer responsibilities than LETs although both types of teachers carry similar qualifications and experiences. Perhaps, it is time for the government to revisit the scheme in terms of the equality of benefits and responsibilities, and the effectiveness of instruction provided by NETs in the manner they are currently being assigned to teach.

### **Recommendations to ease the tensions between NETs and LETs**

Given the tensions between NETs and LETs and the effectiveness of instruction of NETs and LETs, a few recommendations are offered. The first set is directed toward educators considering or planning to work as NETs in Hong Kong, and the second set is directed to LETs, principals, and Hong Kong Education Bureau officials.

#### *Recommendation for Prospective NETs*

Certain actions can be taken by NETs and to better prepare them for teaching in Hong Kong and to alleviate some of the tensions between LETs and NETs.

1. *NETs should learn Cantonese before and during teaching English in a CMI school in Hong Kong.* Luk and Lin (2007) argued that learning Cantonese helps NETs develop a

kind of “mutual sympathy” (p. 65) with students, which enables them to understand the students better and appreciate the challenges in learning a foreign language. They continued to point out that having some knowledge of the students’ primary language would help NETs understand their students better and narrow the psychological gap between them. Most importantly, with the local language skill, NETs, accompanied by LETs, could meet with their students’ parents for teacher-parent conference and for any behavioral issues.

2. *NETs should be more involved in students’ school lives often besides teaching oral lessons.* NETs should take the initiative to get to know their students more during lunch time and after school in order to establish a closer relationship with their students. As a result, students will have more opportunities to practice their English and feel less anxious talking with NETs.
3. *NETs should be co-teaching and co-planning with LETs more often.* Workload is one of the tensions between NETs and LETs. Through co-teaching and co-planning, both NETs and LETs not only can share teaching ideas with each other so that both can use effective teaching strategies in their own classroom to maximize students’ learning (Carless & Walker, 2006), but also can help lessen the workload of LETs. In the meantime, communication between NETs and LETs will increase, and as a result, misunderstanding will decrease (Carless & Walker, 2006).
4. *NETs should be assigned more classes to teach besides speaking and listening ones.* It is obvious that NETs have the privileged and dominant position in the teaching of speaking and listening because of their native language; however, they cannot clearly explain grammar rules in the eyes of students (Ma, 2012). Therefore, the Education Bureau should make sure that all



the applicants have the ability to explain grammar clearly and have a good understanding of the Hong Kong public examinations before they are appointed for the NET position. With that ability and understanding, NETs then can be assigned to teach more English classes so that they can share the same amount of workload with LETs.

5. *NETs should be aware of their speech rate and choice of vocabulary.* When teaching a lesson, NETs should adjust the speed they speak and the types of words they use in class to make sure that students can follow the discussion and the teaching of NETs.

#### *Recommendations for Educators in Hong Kong*

Besides NETs, LETs, the Education Bureau, and principals should also take some actions to ensure the success of collaboration with NETs.

1. *The Education Bureau should consider increasing the pay and benefits for LETs.* It is understandable that the government would like to hire NETs with an attractive salary and benefits. However, with similar qualifications and even the advantage of being able to communicate with students in the local dialect, Cantonese, LETs also deserve a better, if not equal, salary and benefits in order to keep the morale to work in a challenging school setting.
2. *LETs should develop a higher level of English competence, particularly in pronunciation.* Many LETs can write well in English, but they cannot speak fluently. This can cause comprehension problems and misunderstandings when LETs communicate with NETs, and students may learn the wrong pronunciation. Therefore, it is important that administrators employ LETs that have the strongest English competence.
3. *LETs should use more English in the classroom.* The opportunity to practice English

is valuable for students in EFL contexts since English is not used in a daily conversation in Hong Kong. Although using L1 can enhance students' understanding, overreliance on it could deprive students' chance of practicing English. LETs must keep the balance between enhancing students' understanding with L1 and at the same time providing a room for English practice.

4. *LETs should be allocated more time to focus on teaching and collaborating with NETs.* Rather than burdening them down with endless paperwork and administrative duties, schools need to provide LETs more time to prepare their lessons and to share teaching strategies with NETs so that LETs can be more creative in their teaching rather than relying on textbook only.

5. *Principals should take an active role as well.* They should listen to the concerns of LETs and NETs, and they should use this feedback to improve the effectiveness of the NET scheme. They should encourage collaboration between native and non-native English teachers in course design and implementation, material development, assessment, and teacher training by having LETs teach less regular classes. Given that, LETs will have more time to work with NETs and attend teacher training, and at the same time, LETs will not have any excuses not to collaborate.

NETs are not unique to Hong Kong. There are analogous programs in countries such as Japan and Korea (Luk & Lin, 2007). They have also implemented similar scheme by importing NETs to improve the English language skills of their students (Forrester & Lok, 2008). However, there have been significant differences among these three schemes. The scheme in Korea focuses mainly on learning, whereas the goal of the scheme in Japan is for English native speakers to be expose to Japanese culture (Forrester & Lok, 2008). For Hong Kong, the scheme aims at improving both teaching and learning.

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but hopefully they will be of particular interest to colleagues, educators, principals, and policymakers in Hong Kong and some other countries such as Korea and Japan where some form of NET Scheme is found.

### Conclusion

Both LETs and NETs are treated differently in terms of the financial benefits, the duties and the workloads. There is also a room for improvement of classroom instruction between NETs and LETs. Neither NET nor LET is inherently superior to the other (Medgyes, 1992). They both carry some advantages and disadvantages in the effectiveness of teaching. Instead of debating who is better or worth more, teachers, principals, and administrators should make a concerted effort to find better ways for NETs and LETs to work together to maximize respective strengths and minimize weaknesses for the benefit of the students in Hong Kong.

Given my extensive teaching and working experience with NETs, it is my opinion that the NET Scheme in Hong Kong has to be revisited and revised. The NET scheme has existed in Hong Kong for more than a decade and yet the conflicts between NETs and LETs still occur. It is time to acknowledge the tensions and differences, and work toward improvement.

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