Study on Language across the Curriculum

Final Report

Executive Summary

(i)   This Study on Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) set out to examine the implementation and effectiveness of LAC in secondary schools with different medium of instruction (MOI) arrangements, as well as to identify good practices of LAC and their contributing factors. LAC is an approach to address the language and literacy needs of students studying in different subject areas. It emphasises the practice through which the *use* and *study* of languages take place throughout the content curriculum. Adopting this approach, teachers across different subject areas should pay due attention to the language aspects. It is a potential approach to help students who use English as the MOI to learn some or most content subjects to overcome language barriers and master content and (academic) language simultaneously. The fine-tuning of MOI for secondary schools in Hong Kong has started from the 2010/11 school year. Under this policy, schools are given more flexibility in using English as the MOI for different subjects in different classes and groups in junior secondary levels. This results in a variety of MOI arrangements in secondary schools. In this regard, LAC has been promoted to enhance the collaboration between content subject teachers and English teachers for students' learning effectiveness. Towards the end of the second six-year review cycle of MOI fine-tuning, it is high time to carry out a systematic evaluation of the implementation of LAC in secondary schools in Hong Kong. The three research questions that guided this Study are:

1. How is LAC implemented in Hong Kong secondary schools with different MOI arrangements?
2. To what extent does LAC affect classroom practices and students' learning?
3. What may be some contributing factors to effective LAC in secondary schools?

(ii)   This Study adopted a multi-case study design to examine the LAC practices of each case school and how they affected teaching and learning. Cross-case analyses could then identify contributing factors to effective LAC in secondary schools. 12 schools were recruited purposively to become the cases in this Study. These schools are located in different districts and have different characteristics (e.g. student intake, MOI arrangements). In each school, the informants for the Study included the principal, vice-principal/assistant principal, prefect of studies (or curriculum leaders), content subject and English teachers, students and parents. Various research methods were employed to collect rich data from different informants in the schools. These included semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, lesson observations and collection of school documents and artefacts (e.g. LAC/MOI committee plans, schemes of work of different subjects, lesson plans, teaching and learning materials and students' sample work). Data analyses of each school and across schools allowed the research team to identify different modes of LAC practices in secondary schools, evaluate the impact of LAC on teaching and learning, and infer contributing factors to effective LAC.

(iii) All the case schools in this Study have been implementing LAC with different scopes and modes. There are in general three ways where LAC practices are manifested in a school, namely formal collaboration, informal collaboration and LAC/English-related activities. Formal collaboration between English and content subject teachers is usually coordinated by an LAC committee or task force, which oversees and facilitates the planning, implementation and review of LAC initiatives. Informal collaboration refers to ad hoc consultation and sharing between English and content subject teachers, which may take place more frequently and address teachers' specific needs in a timely manner. LAC or English related activities aim to provide more opportunities for students to apply what they learn in English and content subject lessons to activities outside the classroom, thereby arousing students' interest in language and content and creating a rich English learning environment in the school. Based on the cross-case analysis of the case schools in this Study, a continuum of developmental stages of LAC is proposed, which consists of "exploring", "developing" and "maturing" stages. These stages are characterised by a) whether LAC is well planned *and* implemented; b) subject-specific or integrated across the English and content subject curricula; c) level-confined or connecting LAC between different key stages of education; and d) LAC in the formal curriculum only, or extending to the informal curriculum/co-curricular activities. Exemplary practices or strategies associated with the three developmental stages have been identified. In the "exploring" stage, schools recognise that the teaching of content subjects through English can be significantly different from English language teaching and thus are willing to explore and embrace LAC pedagogical approaches. In addition, a MOI Committee coordinating cross-curricular design and peer lesson observations is established, and the LAC collaboration is mainly theme-based and skill-based. Meanwhile, schools seek external professional development resources related to LAC or English as the medium of instruction (EMI). When it comes to the "developing" stage, schools build an LAC team involving both English teachers and content subject teachers, develop diverse modes of cross-departmental collaboration, and adopt an LAC conceptual framework (e.g. Knowledge Structure) consistently in different subjects. Schools also commit to the development of school-based LAC teaching and learning resources such as LAC booklets and cross-subject writing tasks. In the "maturing" stage, taking a whole-school approach, schools establish a sizeable LAC committee/task force involving a number of English teachers and content subject teachers. They also recognise the evolving and integrative nature of LAC arrangement and the underlying rationales while reviewing and refining LAC policies and practices on a regular basis. To extend the LAC practices from formal to informal curricula, schools organise LAC co-curricular activities with a view to arousing students' interest in both content and language. Lastly, they provide teachers with internal professional development opportunities and highlight in the process of LAC planning the significance of facilitating students' transition from primary to junior secondary levels and from junior secondary to senior secondary levels.

(iv) The Study has observed the potential impact of LAC on teaching. At the macro level, English and content subject teachers collaborate to design a more content and language integrated curriculum through curriculum mapping, lesson planning and material design. At the micro level, the impact of LAC is reflected in teachers' classroom practices, particularly their teaching strategies of helping students to learn content through English more effectively. In content subject lessons, teachers incorporate some language instruction to help students master subject-specific vocabulary, relevant grammar items and particular text types. At the

same time, English teachers develop students' vocabulary learning strategies and other generic skills to prepare them to learn content subjects in English. They also make good use of content subject texts or knowledge to provide a more meaningful context for students to master the use of some grammar features.

(v)   In this Study, the evaluation of the impact of LAC on student learning was based on the evaluation of school administrators and teachers, complemented with lesson observations and students' sample work. School administrators and teachers tended to agree that LAC is effective in boosting students' confidence and motivation, enhancing students' English proficiency, helping students to learn content subjects through English, facilitating transition between key stages, and addressing students' diverse needs, though some of them were also aware that students' learning outcomes could be affected by many other factors (e.g. student academic ability, family support). Students also acknowledged the support provided by their English and content subject teachers to help them learn content knowledge in English more effectively. They appreciated the provision of LAC materials, LAC activities and bridging courses.

(vi)   Two key contributing factors to effective LAC have been identified. The first one is related to teachers' collaboration, which involves teachers' language awareness and willingness to collaborate. Teachers' close collaboration is necessary for planning, implementing and reviewing LAC initiatives and practices. The second contributing factor is the support and leadership of school administrators, who provide clear vision and direction for LAC implementation, coordinate teachers' collaboration and offer support for teachers in aspects like workload arrangement, timetabling, professional development opportunities and external support.

(vii)   LAC practices are closely related to MOI arrangements and so this Study also examined different stakeholders' views about their school's MOI arrangements and the Government's MOI policies. Different groups of stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, students and parents, were generally positive about the impact of adopting English as the MOI in some subjects/classes on students' English proficiency (especially vocabulary learning) and they did not think it would adversely affect student learning of content knowledge. Most school administrators and teachers felt that their school's current MOI arrangements and the existing fine-tuned MOI policies were appropriate. However, they called for more flexibility for schools when deciding on the MOI arrangement in the future.

(viii) Based on the findings of this Study, the following recommendations are made:
   (a) Schools should plan and implement LAC practices according to their MOI arrangements, school context, student intake, teachers' expertise and resources available. As this Study observed, there are different modes and scales of LAC practices. Regardless of the mode and scale that schools have decided on, it is recommended that schools should have a clear vision, expectations, detailed planning, a mechanism of review and revision, along with teachers' professional development and collaboration.

   (b) The Study observed the important role played by the LAC committee/task force to coordinate a school's LAC practices. The LAC committee usually comprises a member

of the senior management team (e.g. vice-principal), LAC coordinator, English teachers and content subject teachers. In some schools, there is also an LAC coordinator in each grade level. While senior managers can deploy resources and formulate blueprints to support the implementation and development of LAC at a macro level, LAC coordinators can 1) manage curriculum mapping by coordinating English teachers' and content subject teachers' efforts in identifying curriculum areas (e.g. common topics, skills, knowledge across subjects) that can promote cross-subject collaboration and 2) provide such administrative support as devising a teaching schedule that provides favourable conditions for curriculum mapping and collaborative lesson planning. As for English teachers, they are expected to integrate the teaching of subject-specific language features and generic skills into their lessons and offer language advice to content subject teachers. Meanwhile, content subject teachers should 1) advise English teachers on what types of language support students need and 2) work with English teachers to design lessons and teaching materials that can provide students with a meaningful and authentic context to master academic language and subject content simultaneously. It is understood that different schools have different administrative structures, and the composition of the LAC committee may vary. Yet, it is important for the LAC committee to involve teachers of different departments who understand the curriculum and needs of different content subjects. This will in turn promote better communication among different subject departments.

(c) The Study observed that effective LAC not only promotes language use and learning across the formal curriculum, but also the informal curriculum, such as co-curricular activities and the whole-school English learning environment. This is also what some students and parents called for in the Study. It is recommended that schools consider how to extend LAC to the informal curriculum, so as to complement student learning in English and content subject lessons, especially in terms of arousing students' interest and motivation.

(d) Through providing bridging courses and tailor-made teaching and learning materials, LAC is considered to be effective in facilitating transition between different key stages (e.g. from primary to secondary, from junior to senior secondary, from secondary to tertiary). Schools could consider the requirements of different key stages when designing those bridging courses and materials. For instance, bridging courses for pre-S1 students could focus more on common classroom language, question words, word building and dictionary skills, so that students can get used to lessons which use English as the MOI; bridging courses for senior secondary students may focus on sentence patterns and text structures. In some schools, students may be allocated to another class with different MOI arrangements each year. Schools should also consider providing extra support for those students.

(e) Leadership and support from school administrators has been identified as a key contributing factor to effective LAC in schools. School administrators should provide necessary support to facilitate teacher collaboration to promote LAC. Such support includes workload arrangement, timetabling, professional development opportunities and external support. After setting the vision, goals and overall direction for LAC, school administrators could allow teachers to have some flexibility and autonomy when it

comes to actual implementation. This may empower teachers to develop and implement LAC practices and enhance their ownership and professional development.

(f) Teachers are the key agents in any educational initiatives. One key contributing factor to effective LAC is teachers' willingness to collaborate and their language awareness. It is recommended that teachers can attend professional development workshops from time to time to update their language knowledge and knowledge about pedagogical theories and practices. Professional development can also be promoted through working with other teachers in the school, reflecting on the experience and sharing and discussing with others. It is through this kind of lesson study cycle that LAC practices can be improved and sustained.

(g) Students and parents, especially the latter, have a strong desire for more use of English as the MOI. Considering huge learner diversity, LAC may be an effective way to enhance the effectiveness of using English as the MOI for different groups of students. It is recommended that the Government should continue to provide resources to support LAC, including provision of school support and teachers' professional development programmes.

(h) This Study observed that, after implementing the fine-tuned MOI policies for a decade, most schools have established their own MOI arrangements, based on their context and students' needs. Such arrangements were believed to be appropriate by different groups of stakeholders. However, there was also a call for more flexibility to be given to schools when deciding on their MOI arrangements in the future. While this Study may not be able to provide evidence on how to provide more flexibility to schools, the Government may consider stipulating a percentage range that extended learning activities (ELAs) in English could take up in the curriculum. This may provide more flexibility for schools to have more holistic vertical and horizontal curriculum planning, especially for schools with huge learner diversity. There could be more room for schools to make appropriate arrangements for students in different classes in the same grade level and for students' transition between different key stages. However, schools should be reminded to continue with their efforts in promoting LAC and supporting both teachers and students to overcome the challenges involved in teaching and learning in English.