Learning English and Other Languages in Multilingual Settings: Myths and Principles

Andy KIRKPATRICK

Chair Professor of English as International Language
The Hong Kong Institute of Education
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Andy KIRKPATRICK (柯安竹)

is the Chair Professor of English as International Language and the Director of the Research Centre into Language Education and Acquisition in Multilingual Societies (RCLEAMS).

Prior to joining the Institute in January 2006, Professor Kirkpatrick had been Professor of Language Education at Curtin University for more than ten years. He has also worked at the Institutes of Education of Singapore and Rangoon, at the Australian National University, and been a visiting scholar at Beijing University, the Beijing University of Astronautics and Aeronautics, Cambridge University, The University of Malaya and Oxford Brookes University. He first worked in Hong Kong in the late 1970s, partly as a journalist and partly with the Professional and Company English unit of the British Council, for whom he carried out a review of communication problems in the then ‘Royal’ Hong Kong Police Force.

Professor Kirkpatrick holds a BA in Chinese Studies from the University of Leeds, a Postgraduate Diploma in Chinese Literature from Fudan University, Shanghai (obtained in 1977, at the end of the Cultural Revolution), an MA in ELT and Linguistics from York University, UK, and a PhD in Chinese Linguistics from the Australian National University. His major areas of research interest are in the development of World Englishes and the inter-relationship and roles of English and local languages, particularly in Asia. He is internationally known for his work on Chinese rhetoric, and he is on the editorial board of eleven international journals.

He is currently working on a number of projects including editing the *Handbook of World Englishes* for Routledge, and preparing *English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: Roles, Features and the Multilingual Model of*...
Language Teaching for Hong Kong University Press, Chinese Academic Writing Styles: An Introduction for Teachers of Writing for Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) / Parlor Press, and Chinese Rhetoric and Persuasion for Klincksieck.
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Abstract

More than one billion people now use English as a second or additional language, largely to communicate with other second language users with whom they do not share a cultural and linguistic background. While some may debate whether English is really as important for all as is claimed, the widespread demand for English is here for the foreseeable future. Without exception, Ministries of Education throughout East and Southeast Asia have decided that English is a vital skill that must be learned by their citizens from as early an age as possible, if their respective countries are to modernize and to be able to participate in today’s globalised world.

In this seminar, I want to discuss the teaching and learning of English by these multilingual users, and consider the challenges that the desire to learn English places on the learner and the curriculum. My context will be on schools in the Asian region and my focus will be on the relationship between English and local languages in the school curriculum. Is, for example, the relationship between English and local languages complementary or competitive? In this context I shall also consider the recent fine-tuning debate about EMI in Hong Kong schools and propose an alternative.

This seminar will consider ways in which English might be taught which would help maintain and nurture the child’s mother tongue as a basis for the acquisition of multilingualism on the one hand, and allow the child to develop an understanding of English as a pluricentric language on the other. This will require arguing that three well-accepted beliefs about the learning of languages are, in fact, myths. Three new principles will be proposed to replace the three myths, principles which would more easily allow the teaching and learning of English alongside local languages.
Introduction

More than one billion people now use English as a second or additional language, ‘largely to communicate with other second language users with whom they do not share a cultural and linguistic background’ (Clyne and Sharifian 2008: 1). In this essay I want to discuss the teaching and learning of English by these multilingual users, and consider the challenges that the desire to learn English places on the learner and the curriculum. My context will be on schools in the Asian region and my focus will be on the relationship between English and local languages in the school curriculum. Is, for example, the relationship between English and local languages complementary or competitive?

While we may debate whether English is really as important for all as is claimed, the widespread demand for English is here for the foreseeable future. Without exception, Ministries of Education throughout East and Southeast Asia have decided that English is a vital skill that must be learned by their citizens from as early an age as possible, if their respective countries are to modernize and to be able to participate in today’s globalised world.

This essay is an attempt to consider ways in which English might be taught which would help maintain and nurture the child’s mother tongue as a basis for the acquisition of multilingualism on the one hand, and allow the child to develop an understanding of English as a pluricentric language on the other (Kirkpatrick 2008). This will not be easy. As will be illustrated below, the perceived need for English along with the need to learn the national language and/or a regional lingua franca commonly presents a serious threat to mother tongues and local languages, especially those which are spoken by a relatively small population and which have no script. The early introduction of English also places extreme linguistic and cognitive demands on children, especially when the classroom model remains an idealised native speaker model against which the learners’ performance is measured.

Three Myths

Benson (2008 pp. 2 ff) identifies three myths, acceptance of which routinely bedevils language learning and the maintenance of the mother tongue. These three myths are:
(i) ‘the best way to learn a second language is to use it as a medium of instruction’;
(ii) ‘to learn a second language you must start as early as possible’;
(iii) ‘the home language gets in the way of learning a second language’.

In the next section of this essay, I shall consider each of these myths in turn, and provide specific examples where acceptance of them has been realised in language education policy and the teaching of English.

Several educational systems accept the first myth, as English is used in many countries as a medium of instruction. For example, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines teach maths and science subjects through English from primary school (Jones 2007, Gonzalez 1996). In the case of Malaysia, in a reversal of the Malaysianisation policy under which Malay was the medium of instruction, maths has been taught through English from primary one since 2002 (Gill 2007). In recent months, however, the Malaysian Government has decided to rescind this policy and will revert to using Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction from 2012. Singapore also uses English as a medium of instruction from primary 1, but for all subjects. English is therefore the medium of instruction in Singaporean schools. In Hong Kong, some 25% of secondary schools are English medium. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of Hong Kong’s primary schools retain Cantonese – the mother tongue of the overwhelming majority of the population – as the medium of instruction.

Despite its popularity, the use of a second language as a medium of instruction in the early years of primary schools is not recommended by experts. It is agreed that at least five years of instruction in the second language is needed before children can learn academic concepts through that language, (Benson 2008, Cummins 1981). With regard to the teaching of maths through English, the Filipino scholar Bernardo is unequivocal,

‘there seems to be no theoretical or empirical basis…to obligate the use of English in teaching mathematics’, and that,

‘there are clear and consistent advantages to using the students’ first language…at the stage of learning where the student is acquiring the basic understanding of the various mathematical concepts and procedures’ (Bernardo 2000: 313)
The second myth states that the earlier English is learned the better. This may be true, all things being equal, but things very seldom are equal in the contexts which we are describing. If there are qualified, proficient and committed teachers, if there are excellent facilities and materials, and if the child already has literacy in the mother tongue, then learning an L2 early can indeed be beneficial. But in most contexts in Asia, there are seldom sufficient teachers, materials or facilities to justify the early introduction of English, even as a subject, let alone as a medium of instruction. All too often the perceived demand for English sees it introduced too early and taught by teachers with low levels of English proficiency and who have access only to inadequate materials. This early introduction of English is often at the expense of literacy in the child’s mother tongue. Rather than introducing English in such circumstances, a wiser long-term investment would be to ensure that the child first achieves literacy and fluency in the mother tongue, as the L1 knowledge then acts as a bridge to L2 and L3 literacy and learning. Far from the home language getting in the way of learning a second language, as claimed in the third myth listed above, the greater the investment in the child’s first language, the more successful the acquisition of a second and third language will be. Children are able to transfer the L1 skills they have learned to L2 learning (Benson 2008, Cummins 2008). Support for the L1 is a crucial principle in the successful Canadian immersion bilingual programmes (Swain and Johnson 1997).

Three Principles

Given the widespread demand for English, how might English best be taught in schools in East and Southeast Asia? I here propose replacing the three myths with three related principles.

The first principle is that the child’s first language should be the language in which the child learns. English should only be introduced in the earliest years of primary schools when conditions allow. This, at the very least, means there needs to be sufficient proficient and trained teachers and suitable materials. Most importantly, it should be introduced only as a subject. If these conditions cannot be met, the teaching of English needs to be delayed. There is no reason why children cannot successfully learn a language if they start learning later in the curriculum.

The second principle is thus to delay the introduction of English until the child has literacy in the first language, and until conditions and facilities merit it. Introducing English too early either as a subject or especially as a
medium of instruction will adversely effect the development of the child’s L1. ‘The danger is for education programmes to focus on the L2 and L3 without building on a strong L1 foundation’ (Benson 2008: 9). In Singapore, where English is the medium of instruction and the ethnic languages, Chinese – although this is actually Mandarin (Putonghua) rather than a local dialect of Chinese – Malay and Tamil, are taught as subjects, there is now concern that many ethnically Chinese students are graduating from secondary school without being literate in Chinese (Goh 2009). It is therefore ironic that Singapore is often considered to have adopted a successful language policy based on the relative proficiency in English possessed by most Singaporeans. Compare this with Hong Kong, where the home language of the great majority of the children, Cantonese, is the medium of instruction in almost all government primary schools and where English is taught as a subject. This allows the children to develop literacy in Chinese at an early stage. The special cognitive demands of learning the Chinese logographic script means that it takes two and a half years longer for a child to become literate in this than it does for a child to become literate in an alphabetic language (Chen Ping 1999, Taylor and Taylor 1995). In prioritizing literacy in Chinese in Hong Kong’s primary schools, the Hong Kong government is ensuring its children inherit an invaluable ‘birthright’. And in making Cantonese the medium of instruction in primary schools, it is supporting and validating the child’s L1 and sense of identity. It could be argued that a language policy that sees its citizens literate in Chinese and with some proficiency in English is more successful than one which sees its citizens fluent in English, but with poor levels of literacy in Chinese.

To move now from when to introduce English to what type of English to introduce, one can ask whether non-native varieties of English and non-native but intelligible pronunciation can be accepted as standard (this volume). One of Kachru’s great contributions has been to demonstrate the plurality of Englishes (cf. 1982, 1992) and where there is a local variety of English which has been codified, there is no reason, other than social acceptability, why the local variety should not provide the classroom model. It is important to note, however, that social acceptability can be some time coming (Schneider 2003), as Australians know only too well (Delbridge 1999). Nevertheless, the educated varieties of Singaporean and Filipino English, for example, could provide the linguistic benchmarks for Singaporean and Filipino children. By the same token, trained Singaporean and Filipino English language teachers should not only be role models for their learners but also linguistic models. The native speaker model, which is based on monolingual performance, is replaced by a performance model derived from a relevant multilingual speaker. This requires a shift of
paradigm from the traditional second language acquisition perspective which sees the target of second language learning as native-like proficiency (cf. Firth and Wagner 2007, 1997, Jenkins 2006). In García’s words, we must understand that a bilingual education ‘doesn’t accommodate to monolingual standards’ and we therefore must ‘avoid the inequities in comparing bilingual children to a monolingual child in one of the languages’ (García 2009: 386). Instead we need to consider language acquisition in the context of complex multilingual settings, where it may be difficult for speakers to be able to identify which is their first and which is their second language. Language contact is seen as natural and inevitable. Multilinguals who speak many languages will naturally sound multilingual. An individual who speaks four languages will not sound like four different native speakers. The third principle, therefore, is that multilingual performance and proficiency should be adopted as the language learning goal, not idealized native-like proficiency. We need to move from the traditional cognitivist second language acquisition perspective where the goal of second language learning is seen to be native-like proficiency (Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam 2009) to a more social SLA perspective, where language learning goals are measured in terms of successful language use (Larsen Freeman 2007, Swain and Deters 2007).

**Teaching English as a Lingua Franca**

In many of the multilingual nations and regions of Southeast Asia, English is commonly used as a lingua franca. Following the third principle, where English is used primarily as a lingua franca it should be taught as a lingua franca. This would see the following implications for English language teaching in the region. First, international intelligibility becomes a more important goal than the acquisition of a pronunciation model based on native speaker and monolingual performance (Jenkins 2000). The successful multilingual user of English provides a more relevant and attainable ‘model’ of English. L1 influence on the speaker’s English need not be seen negatively as ‘interference’, but positively, as evidence of a multilingual speaker. L1 influence can, in any event, heighten the speaker’s international intelligibility, especially if the speaker’s L1 has a tendency to syllable timing, as is the case for many African and Asian languages (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006, Hung 2002). The speaker’s identity is also crucially important. Multilinguals using English with fellow multilinguals are likely to identify with multilinguals, and therefore neither seek nor need a native speaker accent. Multilingual English teachers (METs) thus become seen as more relevant and appropriate than native English.
teaching (NETs), especially those who are monolingual. The local, well-trained and highly proficient English-knowing multilingual English language teacher is now seen as possessing the linguistic skills, resources and language variety most useful for the regional English language classroom.

Acceptance and adoption of the multilingual performance principle would lead to significant changes in ELT pedagogy. For example, a monolingual pedagogy, whereby it is argued that only English should be used in the English classroom, would be replaced by a multilingual pedagogy, whereby the teacher is encouraged to use the linguistic resources of the teachers and learners to facilitate the learning of English.

Cummins (2005: 9) points that the ‘dominant monolingual instructional orientation’ is based on three sets of assumptions, ‘none of which is empirically supported’. They are:

Instruction should be carried out exclusively in the target language without recourse to the students’ L1. Bilingual dictionary use is discouraged (= direct method assumption);

Translation between L1 and L2 has no place in the teaching of language or literacy. Encouragement of translation in L2 teaching is viewed as a regression to the discredited grammar/translation method; or in bilingual/immersion programs, use of translation is equated with the discredited concurrent translation methods in which teachers switch constantly between languages translating all relevant instructional content;

Within immersion and bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept rigidly separate (= two solitudes assumption).

Cummins urges, however, the adoption of ‘bilingual instructional strategies’. The children’s first language can be used in systematic ways to enhance second language learning. For example, the use of the first language can explain concepts and phenomena in the most time effective way. This can range from simple translations to explanations of grammatical structures and cultural values. This can be especially informative when ways of naming, patterning and functioning in the first and target languages are compared.

More sophisticated uses of the first language include allowing children to use the first language while working on tasks which will need to
be reported – either orally or in written form – in the target language. A strategy which promotes ‘literacy engagement in both L1 and L2’ (Cummins 2005: 9-10) is the creation of ‘dual language books’. An example of the ‘dual language books’ strategy is the authoring of a bilingual Urdu-English book, ‘The New Country’ by three recent migrants to Canada. The three girls discussed the draft in Urdu but wrote the initial draft in English. The final product was a dual language book, and is an example of what Cummins refers to as an ‘identity text’. More examples of these dual books and identity texts can be seen at http://thornwood.peelschools.org/DUAL/.

Teaching English as a lingua franca would also see significant changes in ELT curricula and materials. For example, the English language classroom would provide a cross-cultural learning environment, as lingua franca speakers need to know about the cultures of the people they are likely to be communicating with. At the same time, they need to be able to discuss and describe their own cultures and cultural values to other people. Thus, in the ASEAN context, students can learn about, and learn to talk about, regional cultures through English (Kirkpatrick 2007a, 2002).

Regional lingua franca speakers would become commonly represented and heard in English language teaching materials. One example where this is already happening is at the Far East University in Vladivostok where Russian students of English use materials which familiarise them with the English spoken by Chinese, Japanese and Korean speakers (Proshina 2005). This raises the interesting question of cross-cultural communication and pragmatics. In these multilingual contexts, the pragmatics preferred by the English users may conform more to the cultural norms of their first language. This, for example, Asian lingua franca users of English may well feel more comfortable forming requests by providing prefacing the request with a number of reasons and justifications for it, as is common in Chinese (Kirkpatrick 1991) and other Asian speech styles (Scollon and Scollon 1991). They may feel more comfortable using forms of address that conform to their own cultural norms and wish to avoid the feeling of ‘pragmatic dissonance’ caused by adopting Anglo cultural norms which violate their own cultural norms (Li 2002: 580). The transfer of the pragmatic norms of the L1 to a speaker’s variety of English is a natural way of adapting English to the speaker’s own cultural norms (Sharifian 2006).

For the same reason, local literatures in English can become important and valuable teaching materials. A striking example of this comes from a Filipino secondary syllabus for English literature, which
chooses literary texts based on the following grade year themes (Thomson 2003):

S1: ‘I am a Filipino’
S2: ‘I am an Asian’
S3: ‘I am an English speaker’
S4: ‘I am a citizen of the world’

In summary, the adoption of the multilingual performance principle to English promotes and validates the multilingual. It focuses on regional and international communication. It draws on the learner’s LI to achieve competence in English. It uses local multilinguals, cultures and literatures in teaching materials. It recognizes that the local trained multilingual English language teacher provides a more relevant, appropriate and attainable variety of English than the native English speaker. The move is from a monolingual restrictive ideology to a multilingual liberating ideology.

In the preceding discussion, ways have been described in which English could be taught in East and Southeast Asia given the development of Asian varieties of English and its major role as a regional lingua franca. The fact is, however, that in the great majority of Asian educational systems, it is not taught in these ways. On the contrary, the privileged position of the native speaker model and the native speaker teacher remains entrenched, while the local variety of English and the local teacher’s model are negatively evaluated, not least by the locals themselves (Jenkins 2007). Linguistic benchmarks for the English language classroom remain derived from the native speaker model (Kirkpatrick 2007b). Not surprisingly, therefore, the native speaker remains highly sought after in Asian language classrooms, both as model and teacher, so much so that it is a commonplace to find English teachers employed solely on the grounds that they are native speakers of the language. That is to say, they are employed as English language teachers even when they have no teaching qualifications, often at the expense of local and suitably qualified English language teachers.

At the same time, as reported above, most educational systems in the region introduce English into the primary classroom, sometimes as early as in primary one and sometimes as a medium of instruction. This seriously disadvantages the poor and those without access to English. Success in content subjects – and in education itself – is dependent upon success in English (Graddol 2006:120). Introducing English too early into the primary curriculum, especially when it is at the expense of local languages of education, does great disservice to most children (Bruthiaux 2002). While
using a national language as the medium of instruction is greatly preferable, when the child’s L1 is not the national language, the linguistic and developmental burden this places on the child is even greater, especially when no support is given to the child’s mother tongue. Some systems allow instruction in the child’s mother tongue for the early years of primary school, typically switching to the national language in primary three, but these programmes are ad hoc and there is no guarantee that a child can learn though the mother tongue in many contexts. Some governments – and Cambodia and Vietnam are examples – have inclusive education policies which respect the linguistic rights of ethnic minority groups but these are not often implemented (Haddad 2008). In Vietnam, for example, while the government has worked with UNESCO and other NGOs to develop scripts for several of Vietnam’s ethnic and minority languages, this has not, to date, proved effective in attracting minority groups to schools, as literacy in the mother tongue has been used primarily to teach the children Vietnamese. Indeed Vietnam provides a good example of how pressures to learn the national language along with regional and international lingua francas means that local languages are in serious danger of dying out. Vietnamese, the language spoken by over 80% of the population as a mother tongue is the medium of instruction. The foreign language curriculum is now dominated by English with over 90% of children learning it (Baker and Baker 2003). The other languages taught include Putonghua and French and the French francophone agency AUPELF has the ambitious goal of 5% of Vietnamese secondary school students graduating through a French-Vietnamese bilingual system (Wright 2002).

Typically, therefore a child in Vietnam will learn through Vietnamese as a medium of instruction and also learn English and either Putonghua and/or French. Given that these languages are not cognate and, while Vietnamese now has an alphabetic script, it is different from the English/French scripts and that Putonghua has a logographic script, the linguistic demands this places even on the LI Vietnamese child are challenging to say the least. If the child comes from one of the ethnic minorities, the challenge is even greater. Indeed it is likely that such children will drop out of school at an early age. Less than 7% of Yao and Hmong children remain in school (Thaveeporn 2003). Primary school drop-out rates are a serious concern in many countries of Asia. In Cambodia for example, only 10% of the Primary 1 cohort will graduate from secondary school (Heder 2007). A major cause of these drop-out rates is that children are not taught in their first language.

The need to focus on local languages in multilingual contexts is well-recognised by experts. Table 1 is adapted from the UNESCO report
Education For All by 2015 (UNESCO 2007). It identifies main challenges facing a selection of countries in ASEAN and suggests measures to help meet these challenges. The measures are all connected with the provision of bilingual and mother-tongue education designed to improve retention rates up to Primary (Grade) 5.

Table 1: Education for All: Challenges and Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Main challenges</th>
<th>Measures to help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>reduce low levels of survival to grade 5</td>
<td>develop bilingual education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>reduce low levels of survival to grade 5</td>
<td>add mother tongue education for early grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>reduce low levels of survival to grade 5</td>
<td>develop multilingual materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>reduce low levels of survival to grade 5</td>
<td>make curriculum flexible to allow for cultural diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>decrease number of children out of school</td>
<td>develop bilingual education for ethnic minorities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

The pressure to learn the national language, Putonghua and English is common in educational systems in Asia. The perceived need for these languages is tied to globalization and modernization. A national language is seen as essential for national unity; Putonghua is seen as increasingly important as China’s economic and political power increases; and English is seen as essential as the language of modernisation, knowledge transfer and international communication. The importance of a language is currently measured its cultural capital, of which linguistic capital is a part (Bourdieu 1986). These are highly instrumental motivations for language learning (Rappa and Wee 2006). While such instrumental motivations remain strong, the future for local languages which are neither national nor which act as lingua francas appears extremely bleak. Unless education systems accept that the three myths outlined at the beginning of this essay
are indeed myths – and the evidence strongly suggests that these myths are still considered uncontestable truths by most systems – many local languages will soon die out. The Endangered Languages Project predicts that half of the world’s 6,500 languages will be lost by the end of the century and that the major reason for this is people’s switch to learning the national language and lingua francas (Hans Rausing 2008). While a new multilingual performance approach to the teaching and learning of English may help validate and promote the local English-knowing multilingual speaker, there is also little evidence that this approach is being adopted in East and Southeast Asia, where the native speaker and the native speaker model remain highly privileged. It is all the more important, therefore, that applied linguists constantly challenge the myths outlined at the beginning of this essay, while at the same time promoting a pluralist approach to English language teaching. Replacing the three myths with the following three principles would help retain local languages on the one hand and validate and promote multilingualism on the other:

(i) wherever possible, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction; otherwise a local language should be used;

(ii) English can happily be delayed until at least the later years of primary school;

(iii) the goal of learners of English in multilingual and lingua franca settings should be multilingual performance and proficiency, not an idealized native-like proficiency.
References


Selected Academic Publications

**Books / Edited Books**

1. (Forthcoming a). *English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: Roles, Features and the Multilingual Model of Language Teaching*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

2. (Forthcoming b). *A Handbook of World Englishes*: Routledge (Editor).


**Course Books**


Book Chapters


15. (2002). *The Use of Citation Conventions and Authorial Voice in a*


23. (1995). ‘Teaching and learning the four priority Asian languages’. In Kirkpatrick A. et al. (Eds.)


Journal Articles

Guest editorship of special issue of *Asian Englishes* on Australian Aboriginal English (Vol 3, 2, 2000)

Articles


11. (2007). Teaching English Across Cultures. What do English language...


Selected Research Projects


2. 2006. ‘A comparative study into the international intelligibility of HKIEd English majors’ English: implications for English language teacher education’ Internal Research Grant, HKIEd (HK$ 84,109). (Principal Investigator).

3. 2002. Australia Indonesia Institute funded (A$12000) project for the development of an ASEAN-culture-based English language course for Indonesian university students. (Principal Investigator).


6. 1999. Australia-Japan Foundation funded project (total funding A$120,000) to develop distance English language and professional development courses (to Masters level) for Japanese secondary school English teachers. (In a consortium with University Technology, Sydney as lead partner.)

7. 1998/9. Australian Department of Education funded (total funding A$266,719) The attainment of language proficiency (with Language Australia, the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Sydney). (Co-Investigator).

8. 1996/7. Australian Department of Education funded STEP grant (A$25,000) for the development of an innovative teacher training course for Australia’s strategic partners. (Principal Investigator).
9. 1996. Education Department of Western Australia funded (A$39,500) Language Teacher Proficiency Assessment. (Principal Investigator).

10. 1995/6. Australian Research Council (ARC) large grant project ($247,000) Framing student literacy: cross-cultural aspects of English communications skills in Australian University settings. (Professor Ian Reid as Chief Investigator.)
Research excellence is a combination of scholarship, professionalism and service through knowledge transfer and application. With this philosophy, The Hong Kong Institute of Education endeavors to create spaces for dialogues and exchanges so as to promote research and development in the field. This Lecture Series aims to bring all stakeholders together to address contemporary education issues. It will also identify areas where further effort is needed to strengthen the evidence base that informs education policy and practice.