

Investigating the role of bilingual teaching assistants in Hong Kong: an exploratory study

Fang Gao* and Mark S.K. Shum

Hui Oi Chow Science Building, Faculty of Education, Hong Kong University, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

(Received 12 July 2010; final version received 3 September 2010)

Background: Recent government initiatives in Hong Kong have focused on raising the participation of students from South Asian backgrounds in mainstream schools, to encourage their further integration into Hong Kong's educational system and society. These students' learning in mainstream schools takes place within the context of the central curriculum and, thus, students face the challenge of learning Chinese as an additional language. Mainstream schools sometimes provide additional support, including the provision of bilingual teaching assistants to address the specific needs of the students from South Asian backgrounds.

Purpose: This exploratory study aims to investigate the roles of bilingual teaching assistants in Hong Kong.

Method: Interviews were held with two bilingual teaching assistants from the South Asian community in Hong Kong who were working in a mainstream secondary school. Teachers from the school were also interviewed. Open-ended interview questions focused on perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of bilingual teaching assistants in Chinese-language-medium classes. The data were analysed to identify any emergent patterns and themes.

Findings: The research findings indicate that the bilingual teaching assistants from the South Asian community not only took on the role of helping the learners from South Asian backgrounds in Chinese language acquisition, but also acted as cultural mediators between mainstream school culture and the culture of the South Asian community in Hong Kong.

Conclusions: This small-scale exploratory research study suggests the importance of the role of bilingual teaching assistants in promoting equal access to quality education for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

Keywords: bilingual teaching assistant; South Asian; Chinese language learning; linguistic support; cultural mediation; equality of education

Introduction

In many educational settings, classrooms are no longer the sole preserve of teachers. In Hong Kong, teaching assistants have, in recent years, gained recognition from the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) as a means of supporting teaching staff generally. However, the role of bilingual teaching assistants for linguistic minorities has, in contrast, received little attention in Hong Kong over

*Corresponding author. Email: gaofang@graduate.hku.hk

the past decades. This is despite the fact that the increasing number of ethnic minority and immigrant students has led to linguistic diversity in the classroom, which arguably makes the support of bilingual teaching assistants essential (DfEs 2000).

Employing bilingual teaching assistants is one of the strategies used in the UK to provide support to students with English as an additional language in the mainstream educational system. In spite of the relatively established practice of providing teaching assistants in UK classrooms, it is estimated that teaching assistants from minority communities are still under-represented in the teaching assistant training courses (Bourne 2001).

The ability to speak a mainstream language is a key determinant that allows members of a minority group to share state and market resources with fellow citizens from a majority group (Gao et al., accepted). Many countries target language minority populations for recruiting bilingual teaching assistants in order to benefit in at least two ways (Bačlija 2008; Bourne 2001; Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003; Richards 2008; Thompson 1999). Firstly, while the linguistic minority students experience difficulties in learning from instruction offered in the mainstream language, bilingual teaching assistants could help the learning of the target language through using learners' first language. Secondly, linguistic minority teaching assistants are often from the same cultural background as the learners, and thus may make the school experience less alienating and more connected to learners' cultural experiences.

These two roles that bilingual teaching assistants can fulfil highlight the linguistic and cultural opportunities for learning in target language classrooms. Linguistically, bilingual teaching assistants use learners' first language to support and develop their learning. They also draw on their knowledge of learners' background to activate their prior knowledge in relation to the subject or topic being taught. Culturally, bilingual teaching assistants play an important role in sharing this cultural knowledge with learners and in helping to build learners' confidence, self-esteem and independence so that learners are enabled to reach their full potential alongside their peers (Bourne 2001; Martin-Jones and Saxena 2003; Richards 2008; Thompson 1999).

Along with the implementation of education reform in 2008, many teachers in Hong Kong feel that their workload has risen. Especially with the increased number of students from South Asian backgrounds participating in mainstream schools, which have been traditionally dominated by first language Chinese students, the employment of bilingual teaching assistants is perceived as a necessity with the intention of easing the stress of teachers and also catering for the students' specific needs. According to the 2006 Population Census (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2006), there are 5% of people of non-Chinese origin in Hong Kong, of whom the main subgroups are 20,444 Indian, 15,950 Nepalese, 11,111 Pakistani and people from other South Asian countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. As around 95% of the population speak Chinese as a first language in Hong Kong (Census 2006), learning Chinese for South Asian immigrants and minorities falls into the realm of second/additional language acquisition with the aim of integrating or assimilating people of South Asian background into the mainstream society (Ku et al. 2003; Ku, Chan, and Sandhu 2005; Lee 2006; Loper 2004; Tsung and Gao, under review; Tsung, Shum, and Ki 2008; YMMSS 2002).

In order to overcome language barriers and promote wider social integration, the Hong Kong government currently suggests an earlier induction of children from South Asian backgrounds into mainstream schooling (Education Bureau 2008). According to Bourdieu (1991), all speakers will recognise the authorised, prestige language but will have very unequal knowledge of its usage. Many South Asian pupils are unable to function in Chinese, or, even if they can speak Cantonese (the spoken form of Chinese language in Hong Kong), their Chinese reading and writing skills are not good enough for them to receive Chinese-medium-instruction teaching (Ku, Chan, and Sandhu 2005; Lee 2006; Loper 2004; Tsung, Shum, and Ki 2008). It can be argued, therefore, that the presence of bilingual teaching assistants in mainstream classrooms is of great importance.

In contrast to the increasing numbers of students from South Asian backgrounds in mainstream schools, bilingual teaching assistants from such backgrounds are still quite rare in Hong Kong. The range of roles for bilingual teaching assistants can be various and is mainly dependent upon the school, even though the fundamental task often remains the same. Their work mainly includes: effective support for bilingual learners; contributions to school awareness of the needs of bilingual learners; appropriate use of learners' bilingual skills; contributing ideas to the planning of teaching and the assessment of learning for bilingual learners; and facilitating supportive contact with parents from minority groups.

An estimated 3000 teaching assistants work in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. However, a relatively small number of bilingual teaching assistants are working in schools that include South Asian minority and immigrant children. While there has been considerable media coverage of how Hong Kong might best address the issue of Chinese language learning for South Asian students, there is a shortage of research that systematically examines the role of bilingual teaching assistants in Chinese-medium classes attended by learners from South Asian backgrounds. This small-scale, exploratory study aims to contribute to the research by examining the roles of two bilingual teaching assistants from South Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong. It explores the situation of bilingual teaching assistants in one Hong Kong mainstream school and attempts to illustrate how bilingual teaching assistants are effective and how their services could be better utilised.

Research methodology

School context

At the time of data collection, the secondary mainstream school involved in the research study included approximately 30 students from South Asian backgrounds in the age range of 11–19, with a total school population of close to 800 students. The linguistic difficulties presented by the South Asian learners promoted the school to provide after-school tutorials in Chinese language learning. The school employed two bilingual teaching assistants from the South Asian community. In addition, supportive staff members from the South Asian community were also recruited. Specifically, there was an adult from the South Asian community in a non-classroom-based role who was working in the school as an assistant mainly engaged in liaison between the school and the parents from the South Asian community.

Research participants

Accessibility, to some extent, was a determining factor in the selection of the research school. However, preliminary knowledge of the backgrounds of the two bilingual teaching assistants suggested that they would be highly suitable research participants for this exploratory study. The two bilingual teaching assistants from the South Asian community who were interviewed for this research were both female and of Pakistani heritage. They both had classroom-based roles, working with the Chinese-first-language teachers and providing assistance to the students from South Asian backgrounds. Both of them were third-generation South Asians and had been born or raised in Hong Kong. They were both Form 5 graduates (in secondary education in Hong Kong, the end of Form 5 leads to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination – HKCEE) with a high mastery of the Chinese language. They had both been educated in the mainstream secondary school where they were now serving as teaching assistants. For the purposes of this research, their names have been anonymised and they will be referred to as Neha and Sashi. It is likely that the anonymity helped to create a context where our research participants, to some extent, could speak freely and for themselves.

In addition, individual interviews were also undertaken with four Chinese-language subject teachers and nine non Chinese-language subject teachers who were teaching Mathematics, Chinese history, Liberal studies or English in the classes where the teaching assistants worked.

Data collection

Prior to conducting the individual interviews, we undertook classroom observations of classes in which the teachers and teaching assistants were working. These classroom observations were considered alongside the data from the interviews.

The interviews with the teaching assistants and the teachers comprised of open-ended questions focused on the issues around perceptions of the roles of bilingual classroom assistants. Each participant was interviewed once only. The length of each interview ranged from one to two hours. Interviews with the teaching assistants were mainly conducted in English, whilst interviews with the teachers were conducted in Chinese.

Data analysis

Classroom observations were audio-recorded; in addition, field notes were written at the time of the observations or very soon after. These were transcribed and used to further guide and compare classroom events with what participants said in interview, and to obtain overall understanding of the roles of bilingual teaching assistants. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis commenced during the data collection process in order to select salient features out of the data and to move from description to explanation. The first step of data analysis was to ascribe codes to the field notes and interview data and to identify emergent structure. After initial coding, this was the process of focused coding in which the researchers searched for repeating ideas (the same ideas expressed by different participants) and larger themes that connected codes, while eliminating less useful codes. Eventually, the final codes were categorised into

themes. This research seeks to identify patterns and themes from a variety of data and to establish relationships and linkages across the data collected. The reliability of data is established through a variety of research participants and different data collection methods (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007).

Findings

Perceptions of the role of linguistic support

The bilingual teaching assistants felt that their first and paramount role was to assist the young learners from South Asian backgrounds in their Chinese language skills. Neha told me:

In Hong Kong, you cannot get along with the society if you don't know Chinese. For example, they [South Asian learners' parents] need to speak Cantonese when they want to buy things, especially when there are a lot of things that we cannot eat. And sometimes they need children to read the documents about applying [for] public housing. If you want to adapt to the life in Hong Kong, you need to know Chinese. Most of their parents are working as factory workers or construction workers. They think that they are doing this kind of job because they don't know Chinese, and they don't want their children to end up like them. (Quotation in English)

The importance of Chinese language learning, according to Neha, was largely linked to the success of ethnic minorities in adjusting to the mainstream society and acquiring upward mobility. In addition, with an overwhelming Chinese-speaking population in Hong Kong, the mastery of the Chinese language is necessary for everyday life communication. All of these factors contributed to the importance of the role of linguistic supporter, according to the teaching assistants. For example, Sashi commented:

Some students are good [at Chinese language], and some students don't [even] know 'I', 'You', 'S/He'. I need to know what kind of problem one student has and I also need to ask them: 'what is your situation?' Because . . . I need to tell the teacher that [a student's] problem [of Chinese language] is like this. Because some students don't like to talk too much, or are afraid to tell [the] teachers that 'I don't understand'. (Quotation in English)

All of the 13 teachers in interviews shared the view that learners from South Asian backgrounds were much more likely to attempt to ask the teaching assistants about their language problems rather than the teachers. For instance, while talking about the role and function of bilingual teaching assistants, one teacher of Chinese remarked:

South Asian teaching assistants are very helpful. Sometimes, when the South Asian learners have academic problems, somehow they are afraid to ask us. So if there is a teaching assistant to help the learners, the one-to-one assistance could be so much better. (Translated from Chinese)

Research with Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong frequently suggests that teachers do not possess the appropriate skills and knowledge for teaching children from racial/ethnic backgrounds different from their own (e.g. Ku, Chan, and Sandhu 2005; Loper 2004). One important factor contributing to the difficulty is that the teachers do not have familiarity with the South Asian learners' first languages. According to Thomas and Collier (1997), while first language serves the role of maintaining racial/ethnic identification, the student's first language system, which is

developed to a high cognitive level, also assures cognitive and academic acquisition in second language. Thus, in academic work transition from first language to second language is the most efficient means of developing second language teaching and learning. In this sense, it could be argued that Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong are inadequately prepared to teach South Asian students within a bilingual framework. The linguistic discontinuity could lead to pedagogical problems (Brito, Lima, and Auerbach 2004). However, the presence of the bilingual teaching assistants could remedy this difficulty. Neha said this:

I need to tell them [South Asian learners] and I need to help sometimes with their homework. They come from primary school or even kindergarten where they were educated in English. But now there are Chinese-only lessons. They need to communicate in Chinese or Putonghua, and all the things are in Chinese. The homework is so hard for them. If I know [the homework], I will try to explain. If I don't know I will talk to the teachers. Because I have a Form 5 education, I can help, and then I will help. (Quotation in English)

The bilingual teaching assistants shared first languages with the South Asian learners. Their role as linguistic helper was also reflected by the four Chinese language teachers involved. One teacher of Chinese language commented:

It is especially in Chinese language lessons that they [South Asian teaching assistants] are helpful. After all, the teacher is facing the whole class rather than one or two individual students. If the learners are self-motivated, the assistants could use their mother tongues to explain and help the learners to progress. (Translated from Chinese)

Teachers of the Chinese language classes generally felt that they had difficulty in paying attention to the specific needs of the students from South Asian backgrounds in the class. In contrast, the bilingual teaching assistants, who had themselves experienced mainstream schooling with Chinese as the medium of instruction, were more able to understand the learning difficulties of the South Asian students. According to Sashi:

Sometimes they [South Asian learners] will ask me why this word means this . . . such as 'Shouzhū daitū' [A Chinese idiom: Standing by a tree trunk, waiting for more rabbits to come and dash against it]. I need to tell them the story, and then they will know. The Chinese students have been educated in Chinese when they were young. But the South Asian students don't know. I have to tell them this kind of story, this kind of word. (Quotation in English)

The role of teaching assistants has evolved throughout the years, and more and more schools notice the value and importance of teaching assistants inside the school system. Consequently, they have had more teaching duties assigned to them. The bilingual teaching assistants felt that they had a strong role to play in the process of teaching. Neha remarked:

Teachers don't know what kind of difficulty South Asian learners are facing. So I need to tell the teachers what you may prepare for them. For example, one important thing for the learners is that they want to know why the word is here, why we need to have something like 'figures of speech'. (Quotation in English)

In Hong Kong, it is still the assimilative language model that is being practised in educational settings. In this model, minority groups acquire the language of the

dominant group, often with no encouragement to maintain their home languages (Shohamy 2004; Tankersley 2001). The South Asian languages are not represented in the educational system of Hong Kong. Regarding the medium of instruction (MOI), the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) states: 'Our public-sector schools will not adopt ethnic minority languages as the MOI, for this would not be conducive to the learning of Chinese and English by ethnic minority students' (Education Bureau November/2006). With this policy in mind, most Chinese teachers in mainstream schools require their South Asian students to not speak their first languages, at least whilst in Chinese language classes, to achieve total immersion into Chinese language learning. According to the teaching assistants in this study, one of their roles was thus to behaviourally control the use of first languages among learners from South Asian backgrounds for total immersion in the Chinese language. Sashi stressed:

The teachers need us to control them [South Asian learners]. Teachers don't speak our languages, so they don't know what they [South Asian learners] are talking about. I need to tell learners not to do that, not to talk in their languages. And they must stop speaking their own languages at this time, at this lesson. (Quotation in English)

Perceptions of the role of cultural mediator

The main obstacles precluding the better inclusion of learners of South Asian backgrounds are the isolation of the South Asian community, cultural barriers and linguistic barriers. According to Townsend and Parker (2009), some roles carried out by teaching assistants are considered increasingly important nowadays. These include working closely with diverse communities, communicating effectively with external agencies and promoting strong partnership with parents. Placing bilingual teaching assistants from the minority community into classrooms to act as a mediator between regular teachers and students from minority backgrounds is a common strategy used by schools around the world in order to help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between schools and minority communities.

This was the case for the bilingual teaching assistants from South Asian backgrounds in our research. The two bilingual teaching assistants asserted their role as cultural mediators (Bačlija 2008). They were mainly engaged in mediating between school, teachers and parents, especially regarding the sensitive issues of culture and religion. As Neha stated:

This is a first thing; the first of all is our religion. If the teachers [say] something sensitive, they [South Asian learners] will not answer at all or they will mind [it]. Then teachers may ask why [do] you mind? Why [can't] you be open-minded? The children will tell their parents and ask why the teachers ask something like that. And then their parents will call the school and complain. Because it is the first time that the students come to the school, a Chinese school, I mean all subjects are in Chinese, and they will meet so many difficulties. So we need to be the middle [people] that explain our religion to the local teachers. (Quotation in English)

Respecting cultural and linguistic codes that are different from one's own is necessary to create equality in society (Delpit 1995; Kubota 2004). This needs the mainstream teachers to be engaged in critical learning about cultural and linguistic diversity and work with the marginalised minority students as equal

partners (Kubota 2004; Luke 2004). In Hong Kong, it has been suggested that 'exclusion' is a more accurate term for the government's policy about South Asian people (Ku, Chan, and Sandhu 2005; Loper 2004). Though many trace its roots as far back as when most of the South Asia was still under British colonial rule within the 'modern globalisation' process (Hopkins 2002), its main issues remain largely unsettled in the post-colonial Hong Kong (Gao et al., accepted). The racial and ethnic identities of South Asians make their position vulnerable in areas such as education, employment, housing, health and social services (Ku, Chan, and Sandhu 2005).

For instance, in education, the celebration of South Asian culture and festivals in local schools can be seen as superficial and leads to what Derman-Sparks (1998) calls 'cultural tourism' in the sense that the school and teachers, as 'tourists', do not necessarily have knowledge of the everyday life of people from South Asian backgrounds; nor do they experience oppressive or discriminative practices. Dealing with cultural contradictions in the classroom is, thus, not an easy task (Silberstein 2003). For example, in asking students from South Asian backgrounds to critique their own contradictory and multiple societies, Chinese teachers from dominant positions could potentially render students more vulnerable. As a result, South Asian students could be made to feel that they were being asked to reveal weaknesses in their home cultures.

What the South Asian teaching assistants attempted was to mediate the understanding between teachers and learners from South Asian backgrounds (Soan 2004). Sashi said this:

We are not only [being] a teaching assistant. We need to understand our religion, our culture and the Chinese's culture. They [Local teachers] are so sensitive. I don't mind [if] they talk [about our religion] because they really don't know. But if we tell them, they will say 'oh, that's a good explanation'. (Quotation in English)

Linguistic and racial tensions sometimes arise when students from linguistic minorities attempt to integrate into the school community (Goldstein 2004). The classroom as a community of practice involves conflicts and inequalities for linguistic minority students (Toohey 2000). According to Neha:

Because of our face colour, our religion, and our culture, the local students will try to [dislike] us. They will try to [say] something bad to us, like 'acha'. I have [been] in Hong Kong [for] a long time. Even in the kindergarten, the local parents will talk 'Oh, 'acha' is here, 'acha' is studying in this kindergarten.' There is too much, too much. In my secondary schooling, I cried every single day. They were all Hong Kongese. You know, it's a big pressure. And even some of the teachers... they feel your culture is a trouble, your religion is a trouble and you don't know Chinese. I need to make the youngsters feel confident and be understood by the mainstream. (Quotation in English)

For Schumann (1986), within multiculturalism and multilingualism, some ethnic minorities tend to maintain their own traditional language and culture, and form the so-called 'separationalism' from mainstream society. Some minorities tend to integrate into mainstream society and adapt well to the mainstream culture and language and form 'acculturation'. Others not only maintain their traditional culture, but also accept mainstream language and culture in order to achieve the multiple self-identifications, which form 'interculturalism' (Schumann 1986).

Second language learners, according to Canagarajah (2004), who researched teaching and learning English as second language, have to negotiate competing and contradictory subject identities in conflicting discourse communities while struggling to shape their practices of language learning. The South Asian learners were generally perceived by the mainstream society to be 'culturally deficient', which could lead to lower educational attainments (Education Bureau 2008). In such situations, it is possible for the public space of the classroom to adopt a narrower range of legitimised discourses.

The teaching assistants' observations suggested that South Asian learners felt pressured to adopt uniform identities that were consistent with the image of mainstream society. In order to construct identities that were potentially empowering, many of the students from South Asian backgrounds in the mainstream school were adapting themselves to the mainstream culture, showing increasingly distilled identification with ethnic identity and culture. Sashi commented:

Some of the students [South Asian students] will question our presence [in] Chinese lessons. I think the reason is that they want to blend with the Chinese, and they don't want us to supervise them. For example, they want to join a lot of activities, such as night camp. But actually we are not allowed to do so because of our religious background. I know some children want to give up their religion in order to blend with local Chinese. (Quotation in English)

Education might contribute to conserve, change or redefine cultural identities. It may be a useful instrument towards the harmonious coexistence of linguistic and religious collectives. Ethnic identification generally recognises the importance of ethnicity to situate oneself culturally as having rights of cultural identity (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Tové Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) points out that people's ethnicity and languages can become positive forces and strengths that can help to empower them. The teaching assistants from South Asian backgrounds generally highlighted the importance of maintaining ethnic identity and culture for the young South Asians in Hong Kong. They asserted a positive influence upon South Asian learners by emphasising awareness of the cultural environment (Kay 2005). Neha claimed:

In fact, I don't think we have to throw all of our tradition [away] to blend with the Hong Kong culture. We have to defend our own stuff. This is why people will like us more. I don't think that the students will give up all the things and change themselves. In our way, we blend with and even appreciate the local culture, but we also defend our culture and religion. This is exactly the thing we want to tell the students. (Quotation in English)

The very survival of a multicultural or a multilingual country or region not only implies cultural pluralism among its ethnic minorities, but also implies the pluralism among its majority people. It is a two-sided acceptance: minority people learn majority language and culture, and majority people learn minority culture and language (Gao 2010; Gao et al., accepted). The teaching assistants from South Asian backgrounds were attempting to enable the South Asian learners' culture and religion to be understood by the mainstream and to become an emotional support for the learners, to help them establish self-esteem and confidence in mainstream classrooms.

Discussion and conclusion: unlocking South Asian community resources for Chinese language learning

Whether learners from South Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong can acquire linguistic and cultural 'capital' is closely related to whether they can succeed academically and socially at school. Evidence is clear about the importance of languages in the host countries for children and young people from minority communities to facilitate their adjustment to study and life in the mainstream (e.g. Ku, Chan, and Sandhu 2005; Loper 2004).

Arguably, it is now the responsibility of Hong Kong schools to employ bilingual teaching assistants to help students from the South Asian community to be integrated into the school system as legitimate speakers of Chinese to enable authentic integration into the mainstream society. Our exploratory study suggests that the main tasks of bilingual teaching assistants from the South Asian community were as follows: to help learners from South Asian backgrounds to master the Chinese language, facilitate a process of cultural and linguistic communication between the school teachers and the learners, form a positive attitude towards the process of education, and facilitate the full integration of students into the school environment, while taking their specific needs into account.

What the two teaching assistants in our research hoped for was that mainstream education in Hong Kong would enable learners from South Asian backgrounds to participate in the mainstream community, while maintaining their home language and culture to ensure affiliation with their heritage communities in Hong Kong and abroad. Although it seemed that the role of cultural mediator was not as strongly perceived by the Chinese teachers compared with the role of academic helper, our observation and interviews, overall, suggested that these two roles are, in fact, inseparably bound. A total immersion into Chinese language teaching might imply that the existence of bilingual teaching assistants might be less desirable because a third person always translates Chinese-medium instructions into the children's first languages. However, we would suggest that this argument does not take full account of the enabling and confidence-boosting nature of the teaching assistants' linguistic and cultural roles in the classroom.

This small-scale, exploratory research study is clearly limited in scope: it is not the intention of the study to suggest that the research participants are necessarily representative of the wider context. The issues explored imply a need for further research involving a greater number of bilingual teaching assistants from a variety of demographic backgrounds.

Despite these limitations, this study has aimed to offer some exploratory insights into the roles of bilingual teaching assistants in supporting students from South Asian backgrounds. The evidence from interviews with the bilingual teaching assistants and the Chinese teachers suggests that the teaching assistants have important roles to play in the Chinese-medium-instruction classroom in Hong Kong, not only in supporting Chinese language acquisition, but also in acting as cultural mediators.

Notwithstanding the increasing significance of bilingual teaching assistants in Hong Kong, it is evident that there are few related courses, training sessions or career development framework for teaching assistants in general, and bilingual teaching assistants in particular. Therefore, we would also argue that this research highlights the importance of ensuring appropriate professional development

opportunities for teaching assistants working with minority linguistic groups in the Hong Kong education system.

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