Foreword

In the past few years, universities in Hong Kong have been gearing up for the transition from three-year to four-year undergraduate degrees in 2012. Among the multifarious aspects of the new undergraduate curriculum, English language support for students to study through the medium of English is critical. The rapid changes spearheaded by technology and the increasingly porous geographical, social, economic and political boundaries brought about by globalization have imposed a strong demand for English medium teaching and learning in universities so that new information and new knowledge can be accessed instantaneously, and communication can take place simultaneously. The demand is intensified by the push for internationalization of university education, resulting in increasingly multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural student bodies, and hence the need for a lingua-franca for learning and communication both inside and outside the classroom. Witness the increasing percentage of English-medium university courses and programs even in countries where using English to teach and learn was unheard of and unthinkable a couple of decades ago. These countries include Japan, South Korea, and not least the People’s Republic of China.

The transition from secondary to university education and the role of language in facilitating this transition has not been fully understood by university communities at large, unfortunately. The change from primary to secondary schooling involves a fundamental shift in the way the world is being interpreted, constructed, and represented, a shift from constructing everyday knowledge to educational knowledge, and hence a different linguistic demand is made of the students. Similarly, the shift from secondary to university education involves the representation and construction of knowledge not only at a higher level of thinking and a higher level of abstraction, but also the engagement in academic discourses specific to the disciplinary and professional communities. Students, irrespective of their linguistic background, need to be supported in making the transition and in participating in these discourses, to be provided with the necessary scaffolding to enable them to move from peripheral participation to full participation in these communities. For students whose first language is not English, the challenge is even greater and the language support they need is even stronger.

The extension of a three-year to a four-year undergraduate education provided a golden opportunity for universities in Hong Kong to further strengthen the language support provided to students. The responsibility of English language teachers in English-medium universities has often been perceived as merely helping students to learn technical vocabulary in the disciplines and to produce grammatically correct sentences which somehow students failed to achieve even after twelve or thirteen years of learning English. This misconception must be dispelled and it can only be dispelled when English language teachers work closely with disciplinary teachers, and when disciplinary teachers feel that it is as much their responsibility as English language teachers to help students to articulate their ideas succinctly, to present an argument cogently, to make a convincing case for a position that they take that is well supported by data and evidence in academic discourses.

The hosting of this symposium on the eve of the launch of the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum in September 2012 was very timely. The rich array of
papers showed the creative and innovative ways in which universities in Hong Kong have tried to make English language learning relevant and enjoyable to the students. In particular, the focus on academic literacy is particularly important. The collaboration between language and disciplinary teachers in designing and, in some cases, in teaching the courses has yielded very positive results and has shown the way forward for English language provision at universities.

The University of Hong Kong, being the oldest English-medium university in Hong Kong, is pleased to host this symposium, and to bring together dedicated practitioners and researchers at such an important time in the history of higher education in Hong Kong. I would like to thank our Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES), particularly, Professor Ken Hyland, the Director, for his leadership in promoting academic literacy and the collaboration between language and disciplinary teachers at HKU, and the Organizing Committee, particularly Dr. Lillian Wong, for excellent work that she and her team have done in making this event a great success.

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