

Executive Summary

The Study of Good Practices in Secondary Schools for Enhancing Students' English Language Proficiency

(conducted by the Faculty of Education of The University of Hong Kong)

The aims of this study were two-fold. The first aim was to identify good practices in the teaching of English in local secondary schools, i.e., practices that bring about positive English learning outcomes which include overall improvement in English language proficiency and the development of a positive attitude towards learning English. The second aim was to investigate conditions that maximise English language learning.

As good practices adopted by schools are highly context specific and dependent on the complex interplay between various situational factors, a case study approach was deemed most suitable for the purposes of our research. The study was carried out from February 2003 to September 2004. A total of 12 secondary schools (8 CMI schools and 4 EMI schools) were selected for the study according to the following criteria: 1) medium of instruction, 2) school banding (Bands 1 - 5), 3) value-added scores of the Hong Kong English Attainment Test, 4) a minimum of 2 effective teachers as determined by a teacher effectiveness index, 5) willingness of schools to participate in the study. Thirty teachers from these schools participated in this study. Eight pairs of researchers and research assistants conducted a total of 377 school visits, 383 lesson observations and 337 interviews with principals, panel chairs, English teachers and students. In addition, 58 out-of-class English activities were observed and various types of data and artifacts were collected. Apart from the qualitative data gathered, two English assessment tests were administered in the case study schools/classes in order to study the effect of teaching on the English proficiency of students. A total of 388 teacher questionnaires were administered to obtain an overview of the current teaching practices and beliefs of English teachers in secondary schools. A total of 6,716 student questionnaires were also administered. The findings of the questionnaires were triangulated with the qualitative data collected to examine the impact of the good practices identified on the changes in students' perceptions of their achievements, their self-assessment of their English performance, their motivations for learning English, their strategies for learning English, etc.

A grounded approach was adopted in the analysis of the qualitative data. Distinctive features of practices in each case study school or teacher were identified. A cross-case analysis was conducted to determine the existence of common features among schools. The analysis showed that these features appeared to be clustered around six themes: a) the promotion of reading, b) the promotion of writing, c) the adaptation of curriculum materials, d) catering for students of lower academic ability, e) a whole-school approach to English enhancement, and f) building confidence through student empowerment and engagement with the language.

The findings of this study suggest that the schools which have been successful in promoting English language learning have managed to achieve one or more of the following: first, they have maximised resources and opportunities for students to engage in the meaningful use of the language in both the formal and the informal curricula. Second, they have involved all stakeholders in the promotion of English language learning. Third, they have allowed enough flexibility in the curriculum to enable teachers to address the particular needs of their students. Fourth, they have successfully integrated the formal and the informal curricula. Fifth, they have provided necessary scaffolding for students to perform tasks in English. Finally, they have created a school culture that is positive, non-threatening and collaborative so that students are ready to take risks with the use of English, and teachers have ample opportunities for professional collaboration.

All of the above dimensions are relevant to all schools, and the research findings show that the related good practices can be implemented in all schools regardless of their medium of

instruction. There is a commonly shared misconception that using English as the medium of instruction is *the* most effective way of raising students' English proficiency. The findings of this study suggest that students whose English proficiency has not reached the threshold level for using it as the medium for learning content subjects would benefit a great deal from good practices in English language teaching which address their particular needs in specific contexts.