

For information
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Legislative Council Panel on Education
Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction Policy

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the progress of consultation on the fine-tuning of the medium of instruction (MOI) policy.

Background

2. Since the 1980s, the Government has encouraged secondary schools to use the mother tongue of the majority of Hong Kong students (i.e. Chinese) as the MOI to facilitate students' learning. At the time, many schools claimed to adopt English as the MOI but actually used Chinese in teaching, or forced students to learn in English and in so doing compromised the learning of the content subjects. In view of this, the Government strengthened its efforts in promoting mother-tongue teaching in the late 1990s and issued the Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools (the Guidance), requiring schools to adopt mother-tongue teaching in all academic subjects, except the subject of English Language, at junior secondary levels. For those schools that wish to use English as the MOI, they must demonstrate that they have satisfied the three prescribed criteria of student ability, teacher capability and support strategies and measures. Since the implementation of the Guidance, of the 400-odd public sector secondary schools, 112 have been allowed to use English as the MOI (EMI), while the remaining some 300 schools have been using Chinese as the MOI (CMI) in non-language subjects as required. According to the Guidance, schools which adopt

mother-tongue teaching at junior secondary levels may choose to switch to EMI teaching to various extent at senior secondary levels in the light of the needs and ability of students.

3. In its Report on Review of Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools and Secondary School Places Allocation published in December 2005 (the Report), the Education Commission (EC) upheld the policy direction of the Guidance and proposed specific standards for the three prescribed criteria of student ability, teacher capability and support measures and a review mechanism. The Report also stressed that in implementing mother-tongue teaching, it was essential to ensure that students would also be proficient in English, and proposed specific measures in this regard. The Government accepted the recommendations of the Report and agreed that the revised MOI arrangements for secondary schools should be implemented with effect from September 2010, starting with Secondary 1 (S1) classes and progressing each year to a higher grade level.

The Need for Refining the MOI Policy and Objectives

4. Over the past few months, different stakeholders have raised the following concerns over the MOI policy:

- (a) Although mother-tongue teaching can remove the language barriers for students, effectively stimulate their interest in learning and encourage greater involvement in the learning process, students learning in their mother tongue have limited exposure to English during lesson time and this may affect their bridging over to EMI teaching at senior secondary and/or post-secondary levels. On the other hand, since most students

learn in their mother tongue in primary schools, the full adoption of EMI teaching in S1 in EMI schools may not be suitable for some students;

- (b) the bifurcation of schools into CMI schools and EMI schools may not fully meet the needs of individual students; and
- (c) the labelling of secondary schools as “CMI schools” and “EMI schools” has adversely affected schools and students alike, creating undue pressure on the teachers and students of CMI schools and dampening the students’ motivation to learn English.

5. To address the above concerns, we are now actively exploring ways to fine-tune the MOI policy. Our aim is not to overturn the policy. The policy has laid the foundation for mother-tongue teaching, something which can indeed facilitate students’ learning of content subjects. Nor do we have any intention of adopting a laissez-faire policy which allows schools complete freedom to decide their MOI arrangements. This is because, under the present social environment, schools may still adopt EMI teaching to pander to parents’ preference even though the choice of EMI may create learning barriers for students. We hope to give some flexibility to schools in an orderly manner under the existing policy framework with a view to achieving the following objectives:

- (a) While promoting mother tongue teaching, to increase the exposure of junior secondary students to English inside the classroom, so as to facilitate their transition to senior secondary and/or post-secondary education;

- (b) while ensuring effective learning of students, to allow secondary schools greater autonomy and room for development in selecting the appropriate MOI with regard to students' learning ability, teachers' capability and the requirements of individual subjects; and
- (c) to minimise the labelling effect arising from the classification of secondary schools into CMI schools and EMI schools, with a view to ensuring that all students are motivated and confident in learning English and facilitating the steady development of mother-tongue teaching in an environment free of negative labelling.

Possible Options

6. In considering the refinement of the MOI policy to give schools greater flexibility and room for development, the Government must continue to adopt the three objective criteria, namely, student ability, teacher capability and support measures. In addition, the Government should set up a credible mechanism with high transparency to ensure the effectiveness of the measures and to keep parents informed of the specific MOI arrangements adopted by each school.

7. Over the past few months, we have exchanged views with different stakeholders and are continuing the discussions along the line of the following proposals :

- (a) In order to increase, from the beginning of junior secondary education, the exposure to English during lesson time for students learning in their mother tongue, schools may increase the

percentage of total lesson time allowed for English-medium extended teaching activities from the original 15%, 20% and 25% for S1, S2 and S3 respectively (the percentage refers to the proportion of lesson time for English-medium extended teaching activities to the total lesson time for subjects other than English) to a maximum of 25% for each of the junior secondary levels. This is generally described as MOI arrangements “by sessions”.

- (b) If a school has admitted to a class a critical mass of S1 students who have the ability to learn all subjects in English (i.e. students belonging to the “ top 40% group”), it may enjoy flexibility in deciding the MOI for that class. Specifically, if the average proportion of S1 intake belonging to the top 40% group in the previous two years reaches 85%¹ of the size of a class, the school may use English to teach all or some subjects in the class(es) concerned. This is generally called a “by class” arrangement.

- (c) Since the labelling effect arising from the classification of schools into CMI and EMI is deep-rooted in Hong Kong society, students who are not studying in the classes under (b) above may feel that they are being labelled. There are views that, by allowing these students to learn a limited number of subjects in English and thereby increase their exposure to English, the labelling effect may be further minimized and the students better motivated in learning. As such, we will consider allowing the schools

¹ According to the Report on Review of Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools and Secondary School Places Allocation published in December 2005 by the Education Commission, a school meets the prescribed criteria of an EMI school if 85% of its S1 intakes belong to the top 40% group.

concerned to adopt EMI for individual subjects within a certain limit. However, we need to examine in detail the lesson time and nature of the subjects concerned and set up a credible quality assurance mechanism to ensure the effective learning of such subjects.

Other Considerations

8. Throughout the discussion on fine-tuning the MOI policy, we have also emphasised the following:

- (a) The fine-tuning should be in the interest of students. While schools will be given some flexibility in implementation, the teaching quality in the classroom should be upheld in all circumstances. Accordingly, the English qualification requirements for EMI teachers (including those conducting English-medium extended learning activities) as set out in the Report in 2005 will remain unchanged.
- (b) We need to provide training and professional support for subject teachers who are switching from CMI to EMI to strengthen their English teaching strategies and capability, so as to ensure the quality of learning and teaching in the classroom.
- (c) According to the current direction of fine-tuning, secondary schools will no longer be classified simply into CMI schools and EMI schools in the future. The MOI arrangements will be diversified. That being the case, each school should make known its policies and implementation details to the Education Bureau (EDB) and parents, specifying clearly the MOI for each

class, each subject and each session.

- (d) While enjoying greater flexibility in the MOI arrangements, a school is obliged to report to its stakeholders on how it proposes to exercise the flexibility to suit its circumstances. It should also conduct regular reviews and report its assessment.
- (e) With the diversification of MOI arrangements, the Administration should consider conducting a longitudinal study to analyse the effectiveness of and collect data on different teaching modes. Such a study will support future review of the policy and the dissemination of good teaching modes and strategies to schools.

Teaching and Learning of English

9. Education policies are inter-related; one education policy should be well aligned with the others. Enhancing students' proficiency in English does not mean dismissing mother-tongue teaching. Likewise, promoting mother-tongue teaching does not mean laying less emphasis on the learning of English.

10. Effective teaching and learning of the English subject is fundamental in enhancing students' proficiency in the language. In addition, it is essential to provide an English environment inside and outside the school to expose our students to English. While it is true that using the EMI helps provide an English learning environment, it is not the only means for cultivating that environment. Nor does the use of EMI suit all students.

11. We have introduced a number of measures over the years to

improve the English language education as well as English environment in schools and raise students' English proficiency. We are at present reviewing the effectiveness of these measures and exploring ways for improvement, especially in the area of enhancing English teaching and learning in primary schools to help our students build a solid foundation. We hope, inter alia, to further strengthen teacher training and encourage our English teachers to engage in continuous professional development. We also hope to enhance the Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme to better draw on the expertise of the expatriate teachers and to enliven the teaching and learning of English.

The Way Forward

12. We will continue our discussions with the stakeholders in order to finalise proposals for fine-tuning the MOI policy and the quality assurance mechanism. The schedule of implementation will depend on the progress of the discussions. Meanwhile, we will also formulate measures to further enhance the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of English.

Education Bureau

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