

For discussion on
14 December 2015

Legislative Council Panel on Education
Issues related to the Chinese and English proficiency of students and the
policy on fine-tuning of the medium of instruction
for secondary schools

Purpose

This paper reports the issues related to the Chinese and English proficiency of students and the policy on fine-tuning of the medium of instruction for secondary schools.

Background

2. Our language education policy is to enhance the biliteracy and trilingualism of our students. In the 1997 Policy Address, the Chief Executive reiterated the goal for “secondary school graduates to be proficient in writing English and Chinese and able to communicate confidently in Cantonese, English and Putonghua”. All along, the Government is committed to nurturing students’ ability to communicate effectively in English, Cantonese and Putonghua.

The primary and secondary Chinese Language Curriculum in Hong Kong

3. The current primary and secondary Chinese Language curriculum (Primary 1 (P1) – Secondary 6 (S6)) in Hong Kong, which consists of nine learning strands including Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Literature, Chinese Culture, Moral and Affective Development, Thinking and Independent Language Learning, aims at enhancing students’ abilities in oracy, literacy, thinking, appreciation and independent language learning, as well as nurturing students’ interest in language learning. The objective of the Putonghua subject offered from P1 to S3 is to enable Hong Kong students to master the common spoken language of the Han nationality, to equip them with the ability of listening and speaking the language to facilitate effective communication.

The primary and secondary English Language Curriculum in Hong Kong

4. The English Language curriculum at primary and secondary levels aims to develop students' English proficiency, provide them with opportunities for personal and intellectual development, further studies, pleasure and work as well as opportunities for extending their knowledge and experience of the cultures of other people in the English medium; and enable them to prepare for the changing socio-economic demands resulting from advances in information technology, including the interpretation, use and production of materials for study, work and daily activities in the English medium.

The Chinese and English proficiency of Hong Kong students

5. The Education Bureau (EDB) has been keeping track of the Chinese and English proficiency of students through a number of channels, for instance, Hong Kong students' results in the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA), the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examinations as well as international assessments. Results of these have shown that the language standards of Hong Kong students are progressing steadily.

6. Details of the performance of primary and secondary students in Chinese Language are set out as below:

- In 2012-2015 HKDSE Examinations, the percentage of candidates attaining Level 2 or above increased from 79.3% to 81.9%. The performance is on a par with the results of candidates attaining Level 2 or above in the HKCE Examination of 2007-2011 (percentages ranging from 69.9 to 73.2). Though the standards of Level 2 in the two different examinations are not equivalent, candidates attaining Level 2 in the HKDSE or HKCE Examination are regarded as having reached the basically acceptable level of competence and are eligible for applying for civil service posts and sub-degree programmes. In this regard, it can be concluded that the percentage of students achieving the relevant performance level in the HKDSE was increasing. Besides, the percentage of candidates attaining Level 3 or above (i.e. the minimum requirement for admission to local 4-year undergraduate university programmes) increased from 49.8% in 2012 to 52.6% in 2015.
- Both primary and secondary students performed steadily in TSA from 2006-2014. Over the past nine years, the percentage of P3 students

achieving Chinese Language Basic Competency maintained in the range of 84.9% to 86.6%, whereas P6 and S3 were in the range of 76.4% to 78.1% and 75.6% to 77.1% respectively.

- There has been significant improvement in Hong Kong students' reading performance, which is evident in the results of international assessments on students' reading ability. For example, in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the ranking of Hong Kong P4 students' reading performance progressed from the 14th place in 2001 to the top in 2011. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the reading performance of the 15-year-old Hong Kong students progressed from the 10th place in PISA 2003 to the 2nd in 2012 while their digital reading performance was ranked 3rd.

7. Details of the performance of primary and secondary students in English Language are set out as below:

- Over the past four cohorts of the HKDSE Examination (i.e. 2012 - 2015), secondary students' performance in the English Language subject was satisfactory, with 77% of them attaining Level 2 or above, i.e. the minimum requirements for the application of civil service posts and sub-degree programmes. The percentage of students attaining Level 3 or above, i.e. the minimum requirement for admission to local 4-year undergraduate university programmes, increased from 50.1% in 2012 to 52.4% in 2015.
- P3 students' performance in TSA was improved from 75.9% in 2004 to 80.3% in 2014, whereas P6 from 70.5% in 2005 to 72.4% in 2013 (the P.6 TSA has been suspended in even years since 2012) and S3 from 68.6% in 2006 to 69.3% in 2014.

Support Measures

8. The development of the Hong Kong school curriculum has advanced into a new phase of ongoing curriculum renewal and updating to enhance the sustainable impact of the Curriculum Reform, "Learning to Learn". One of the key emphases in curriculum planning is placed on the promotion of reading across the curriculum, which aims to enrich students' reading experiences through different Key Learning Areas and subjects, thereby enhancing their language proficiency. Over the years, EDB has taken a number of support

measures to improve classroom teaching as well as to enhance the learning and teaching effectiveness.

Chinese Language

9. All along, EDB has been encouraging schools to make use of the flexibility provided by the curriculum to extend students' learning space both in and outside class and create diversified language environment in accordance with students' abilities, so as to enhance students' language proficiency through practice and application. EDB will continue to organise various teacher training programmes to enrich teachers' professional knowledge and enhance their teaching skills. Besides, learning and teaching resource packages and ETV programmes have been produced to help teachers design language learning materials. EDB has also been conducting school visits to make contacts with different schools and teachers and collect schools' good practices. Effective language teaching methods and experiences will be disseminated to other schools through teacher training programmes, curriculum visits, "EDB One-stop Portal for Learning and Teaching Resources" and on-site school support. Meanwhile, to enhance Chinese teachers' Putonghua proficiency, with funding from EDB, Language Immersion Programmes are included in the Initial Teacher Education Programmes to allow prospective Chinese teachers to improve their language skills in an authentic language environment.

10. In addition, with a view to nurturing a writing culture in schools, developing students' interest and proficiency in writing, the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) has been promoting Chinese writing to local students through various activities, including writing workshops, literary field trips and writing competitions. SCOLAR has also been organising a variety of activities including public speaking, debate and singing competitions, drama performances, radio broadcasting training, workplace Putonghua as well as radio and television programmes to create a richer language environment for the promotion of Putonghua for students and the people of Hong Kong.

English Language

11. EDB has taken a number of support measures to enhance the effectiveness of English Language learning and teaching. Examples include conducting professional development programmes, developing learning and teaching resources, providing school-based support services and implementing the "Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme".

- A variety of teacher development programmes is organised for English Language teachers every year to raise their teaching standard. 41 professional development programmes are organised in the 2015/16 school year. 11 and 20 Empowerment Workshops have been organised for primary and secondary schools respectively in 2014 and 2015.
- The “One-stop Portal for Learning and Teaching Resources” was launched in 2011 to support teachers in selecting and adapting learning and teaching materials based on students’ needs. The “e-Textbook Market Development Scheme” (EMADS) was implemented in 2012 to encourage the development of interactive and diversified e-textbooks which is a global educational trend to enhance students’ learning through strengthening the use of information technology. EDB also actively promotes e-learning and implemented the “Fourth Strategy on Information Technology in Education”, which emphasises a student-centred mode of learning, in 2014. Schools are encouraged to enhance students’ lifelong learning capability with effective use of information technology and make good use of resources available on the Internet to enhance the learning and teaching of English.
- In response to the recommendations in the Final Report of Language Education Review published by SCOLAR in 2003, the Language Learning Support Team was set up to enhance language learning through supporting individual schools to improve their school-based Chinese Language and English Language curricula, develop curriculum leadership and enhance the quality of classroom learning and teaching. Every year, a large number of schools participate in the programme and over 70% of primary and secondary schools have benefited from it so far.
- The NET Scheme has been implemented since 1998. In the 2015/16 school year, 459 public-sector primary schools and 406 public-sector secondary schools have joined the NET Scheme. The major aim of the NET Scheme is to enhance learning and teaching effectiveness by involving NETs in providing assistance in designing the school-based curriculum, introducing innovative learning and teaching strategies, enhancing the professional development of local English teachers, organising various English learning activities and creating an English-rich environment. The findings based on studies commissioned by EDB to local and overseas academics to evaluate the

impact of the NET Scheme indicate that the NET Scheme has helped strengthen the English learning environment in local schools, improve students' attitude towards English learning, increase opportunities for students to use English as a tool for classroom learning and daily communication, and enhance local English teachers' professional development. The initial data analysis of the second large-scale evaluation of the NET Scheme in Primary Schools indicates that the majority of stakeholders, including principals, local English teachers, NETs and parents, consider that the NET Scheme contributes to students' English learning. EDB is currently studying the possibility of providing an additional NET for public-sector primary schools with a greater number of classes and will design a pilot plan based on the study findings.

- EDB also works in collaboration with different professional bodies to organise English debates, dramas, puppet shows, writing and short clip production competitions, so as to provide diversified English activities and related language training for primary and secondary students.
- To enhance the English proficiency of English teachers, with funding from EDB, overseas Language Immersion Programmes are included in the Initial Teacher Education Programmes to allow prospective English teachers to improve their language skills in an authentic English language environment.

12. Apart from the above, with the funding from the Quality Education Fund (QEF), EDB has been organising and promoting different varieties of Chinese and English language activities to meet the needs of schools. Examples include dramas, online story-writing competitions, debate competitions, puppet show competitions, English camp, English day, campus radio, overseas exchange programmes. SCOLAR, with the use of the Language Fund, implements the “English Alliance” Project, and series of English language programmes have been organised every year, such as drama workshops, English storytelling workshops, story-writing competition for junior secondary students and “Fun Day”. SCOLAR also collaborates with different community partners to organise various language-related activities for enriching the language environment of Hong Kong.

13. To encourage serving language teachers to enhance their subject knowledge and pedagogy in the language that they teach, EDB launched the Professional Development Incentive Grant Scheme for Language Teachers with

the funding of the Language Fund in 2004. Each eligible teacher may receive grants of up to a maximum of \$50,000. In addition, EDB organises professional development programmes for English teachers to upskill their teaching every year. The Scholarship for Prospective English Teachers has also been set up to attract persons proficient in English to pursue relevant local bachelor degree programmes and/or teacher training programmes which will qualify them to become English teachers on graduation.

Supporting the non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students in learning Chinese language

14. The Government is committed to encouraging and supporting the integration of non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students (notably ethnic minority students) into the community, including facilitating their early adaptation to the local education system and mastery of the Chinese language. Starting from the 2014/15 school year, the “Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework” (“Learning Framework”) has been implemented in primary and secondary schools to help NCS students overcome the difficulties of learning Chinese as a second language and bridge over to the mainstream Chinese Language classes. Schools could make evidence-based recommendations as to whether individual NCS students may bridge over to the mainstream Chinese Language classes based on their aptitudes and aspirations as to whether they should choose to take the mainstream Chinese Language examination in the HKDSE, or the Applied Learning Chinese (for NCS students) (ApL(C)) courses and/or attain other internationally recognised Chinese Language qualifications. Hence, the “Learning Framework” applicable in the learning and teaching of Chinese for NCS students at school is a “learning Chinese as a second language” curriculum.

15. EDB will continue to organise diversified and progressively advanced teachers professional development programmes to help schools implement the “Learning Framework” and ensure that all teachers teaching NCS students are provided with adequate training opportunities. Besides, EDB has launched the “Professional Enhancement Grant Scheme for Chinese Teachers (Teaching Chinese as a Second Language)” under the Language Fund in 2014 to encourage professional development of serving Chinese Language teachers and enhance their professional capability in teaching the Chinese language to NCS students.

16. With the support of the Language Fund, SCOLAR will continue to commission non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to organise district-based

programmes for NCS children to motivate them to learn Chinese through fun activities. From the 2012/13 school year (i.e. launching of the programmes) to now, a total of about 1 700 NCS students have joined the programmes organised by four Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs). Regarding NCS school leavers, SCOLAR has launched the “Vocational Chinese Language Courses for NCS School Leavers”. Post-secondary institutions and education/training organisations have been invited to develop and operate Vocational Chinese Language courses pegged at Level 1 or 2 of the Qualifications Framework with a view to helping NCS school leavers to obtain qualifications recognised by the Government and different sectors, and enhancing their employability. It is expected that the first course will be launched in early 2016.

Enhanced Support to young children in learning Chinese and English language

17. World-wide research has shown that language development in the early years is powerful. The opportunity to develop good language proficiency in the early years is beneficial to young children’s learning. In response to the recommendations of the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum issued in 2006, SCOLAR, through the use of the Language Fund, has implemented a research and development project to help kindergartens develop effective strategies for exposing young children to English. Since the 2007/08 school year, more than 290 kindergartens and 800 teachers have participated in the project. With a view to motivating young children’s interest in Chinese and English language learning and fostering effective Chinese and English language development of young children, SCOLAR has launched a new research and development project in kindergartens to provide kindergartens with support related to the learning/exposure of Chinese and English. They include helping kindergarten teachers have a better understanding of language development in early childhood, improving Chinese and English language pedagogy of teachers and promoting continuous professional development of kindergarten teachers in teaching of Chinese and English language.

Providing continuous support in raising the language standard of people of Hong Kong using the Language Fund

18. Since its set up in 1994, the Language Fund has been funding many projects, programmes and activities, such as implementing research and development projects on language learning and language education issues, enhancing Chinese and language teachers’ professional development, providing

school-based support and funding for schools on school-based development plans to raise students' English standard, and promoting biliteracy and trilingualism in schools as well as in the community. The various projects, programmes and activities have been complementing and supplementing the policy and efforts of EDB on enhancing Chinese and English language learning and teaching, implementing curriculum reform and enhancing professional development of Chinese and language teachers.

19. In 2014, the Legislative Council approved a new injection of \$5 billion into the Language Fund, in the form of seed capital, for a stable stream of investment income for planning and implementing various new initiatives of the following six strategic areas:

- Facilitating effective language education policy formulation and implementation through initiating research studies, including longitudinal research and comparative studies in local and international settings;
- Strengthening support of language learning in Chinese and English language on young children;
- Enhancing professional preparation and continuous development of language teachers;
- Catering for learner diversity, including the needs of Non-Chinese Speaking (NCS) students;
- Creating and nurturing a language-rich learning environment for students inside and outside school through establishing partnership with relevant stakeholders, in particular, the community; and
- Raising language proficiency of Hong Kong's workforce in response to the changing language landscape.

20. SCOLAR is planning and implementing various learner-centred, targeted and cost-effective new initiatives. To facilitate the formulation of language education policy, SCOLAR will continue to review the effectiveness of the short-term and medium-and-long-term initiatives under the six strategic areas.

Fine-tuning medium of instruction arrangements in secondary schools

21. Stakeholders are generally concerned about the bifurcation of schools into schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction (“CMI schools”) and schools using English as the medium of instruction (“EMI schools”) which may not complement the lack of English learning environment in the society or fully meet the needs of individual students. The Education Bureau (EDB), premised on the learning effectiveness of mother-tongue teaching, has fine-tuned the medium of instruction (MOI) arrangements in secondary schools (the fine-tuning arrangements) starting from the 2010/11 school year with a view to providing students with more opportunities to be exposed to and use English at junior secondary levels so as to enhance their English proficiency and prepare them for further studies and career pursuits.

22. The fine-tuning arrangements maintain the prescribed criteria under the MOI policy (including student ability, teacher capability and support measures)¹. Schools are no longer bifurcated into “CMI schools” and “EMI schools”. All schools have the discretion with varying degrees to make professional judgment having regard to their school circumstances to devise school-based MOI arrangements in each of the school years within a six-year fine-tuned MOI cycle. In brief, a school with all Secondary 1 students using the English medium based on the criteria may choose not to use the English medium to the full. For instance, schools may adopt the mother tongue in some non-language subjects for some students. In parallel, schools adopting mother-tongue teaching may complement with extended learning activities² (ELA) in English or with the ELA time transformed into teaching not more than two non-language subjects in English. As such, students are given more

¹ The fine-tuning arrangements maintain the prescribed criteria for schools using the English medium starting from the 1998/99 school year under the “Medium of Instruction Guidance for Secondary Schools”, viz. student ability, teacher capability and support measures provided by schools. Under the fine-tuning arrangements, public-sector secondary schools have to fulfill the following requirements in order to have the discretion to use English as MOI:

- Student ability is an objective indicator. At the start of a 6-year cycle, the average proportion of Secondary 1 intake admitted to a class belonging to the “top 40% group” for the previous two years of a school should reach 85% of the size of a class.
- Teacher capability is to be vetted by schools. Teachers adopting the English medium should have Grade C or above in English Language (Syllabus B) of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) (or Level 3 or above in English Language of the HKCEE starting from 2007), or other recognised equivalent qualifications (e.g. Band 6 or above in the International English Language Testing System (academic domain)).
- Support measures refer to support and related packages provided by schools for students in adopting the English medium.

² The percentage of the total lesson time allowed for extended learning activities in English for junior secondary levels is standardised at 25% at the maximum.

opportunities to be exposed to, and progressively use, English in schools. Premised on the policy goal of “upholding mother-tongue teaching while enhancing students’ proficiency in both Chinese and English”, the MOI arrangements at junior secondary levels have become more flexible and diversified. In fact, the fine-tuning arrangements do not call for a simple segregation of classes using either Chinese or English within a school. Schools’ whole-school language policy (including the MOI arrangements) must tie in with the curriculum and school context to ensure learning effectiveness.

Arrangements for the Second Cycle

23. The aforementioned six-year cycle for the fine-tuning arrangements aims at facilitating schools to accumulate experience and develop their whole-school language policy (including school-based MOI arrangements) in a more stable environment. While the second MOI cycle will start from the 2016/17 school year, schools have to timely notify parents of relevant information one year in advance (i.e. in late 2015) for parents’ reference in making school choices.

24. A comprehensive review of the first cycle of the fine-tuning arrangements can only be conducted in 2016 at the earliest when the first cohort of the students concerned sit for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. EDB, upon examination, considers that the MOI arrangements of schools (including schools which first started to adopt English as the MOI fully or partially in the first cycle) have begun to take root with students benefitting from teachers’ experience and the effectiveness of school-based support measures. A stable language environment is also crucial for teachers to develop learning and teaching strategies of various subjects. Should EDB require schools to change their MOI arrangements in haste for the second cycle from the 2016/17 school year merely on the basis of the ‘student ability’ criterion, the needs of the schools and teachers will not be well catered for and the effectiveness of the school-based MOI arrangements will be affected.

25. Against the above, EDB has decided to maintain the policy goal and overall arrangement of MOI fine-tuning for the second cycle. Schools may also extend their school-based MOI arrangements of the first cycle to the second cycle. Schools are required, as usual, to devise professionally their MOI arrangements taking into account their school-based situation in each of the school years of the cycle.

Related Matters

26. We note that some stakeholders are concerned how the fine-tuning arrangements can ensure the learning effectiveness of non-language subjects and enhance students' ability to use English. The spirit of the fine-tuning arrangements is premised on having students' learning of non-language subjects unaffected while allowing schools to systematically and strategically enhance students' learning of relevant non-language subjects in English progressively to bridge to senior secondary levels. As such, students would be able to learn the non-language subjects concerned in English at senior secondary levels and enhance their confidence and motivation in learning English. We have conducted focus inspections on MOI in the first MOI cycle (from the 2010/11 to 2015/16 school years). It has been found that schools generally implemented Language-across-the-Curriculum when using English in individual non-language subjects to help students master the language skills required by the subjects concerned. Schools were also able to boost students' confidence in learning English through diversified extended learning activities such as promoting Reading-across-the-Curriculum, providing a rich English learning environment. Moreover, cross-subject collaboration between the English panel and content subject panels also helped enhance teachers' professional capacity. Based on the findings of the focus inspections in the first MOI cycle, EDB will strengthen the External School Review and focus inspections on subject/Key Learning Area with the fine-tuning arrangements, which belong to teaching strategies, of the second MOI cycle included.

27. We will provide professional development for teachers and conduct studies to consolidate and conceptualise experience gained and good practices of school-based support with a view to further enhancing the MOI policy.

28. In tandem, schools are required to report annually to EDB their school-based MOI arrangements and EDB will engage schools in professional dialogue where appropriate. In line with the spirit of the School Development and Accountability Framework, schools are held accountable for their arrangements and may need to explain to EDB and review and revise their arrangements if situation warrants. To enable parents to understand schools' MOI arrangements for individual non-language subjects, schools will continue with the existing practice of providing information of subjects offered and their respective MOI arrangements with elaborations in the "Whole-school Language Policy" under "Learning and Teaching Strategies of School Characteristics" of the Secondary School Profiles. EDB also encourages schools to have close liaison with parents to explain the details of their MOI

arrangements and disseminate relevant information in school website. We encourage schools and parents not to focus solely on the extent of schools using Chinese or English and not to simplify and generalise schools' medium of instruction (e.g. by counting the number of the so-called "English classes" of schools).

Present Situation and Way Forward

29. We have just reviewed the school-based MOI plans of the 2016/17 school year from schools and are working in collaboration with the Committee on Home-School Cooperation on compiling the Secondary School Profiles. We will analyse students' performance under the fine-tuning arrangements, liaise with schools closely and tie in with the aforementioned studies to keep the policy in pace with the changing needs of the society and cater for students' diverse needs.

Way Forward

30. Language is the cornerstone and instrument of learning. It is also the foundation of quality education as well as precious resources of quality population and life. Language competencies can generate better returns for individuals as well as for society and economy. With a view to continuously raising the standards of Chinese and English of Hong Kong students, we are committed to promoting biliteracy and trilingualism for effective communication.

Education Bureau
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