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Good afternoon, Chairman and government officials. I am Kristeen Romero, a Filipino born and raised in Hong Kong who has completed the HKCEEs, HK A-Levels, and a BA in Language & Communication at Centennial College. I am also a committee member for Section Juan, a support group for Filipino youths in the city.

The issue I would like to bring forward concerns the government's lack of consideration for EMs' social environments in language learning and acquisition. Currently, many of the government's efforts have been focused on tailoring a NCS curriculum, providing professional development and support for teachers and students, and making improvements in other academic-related areas overall – which makes sense.

However, the importance of social and cultural interactions in second language acquisition has been substantiated by academia for decades. Evelyn Hatch famously wrote about this in 1978: “one learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of the interaction syntactic structures are developed” – which resonates with how I have learnt most of my Cantonese.

Despite this, the government has not done enough to encourage intercultural interactions. Worse yet, segregation continues to exist in many schools in the city. Ranging from pre-school to secondary, we still see Chinese-speaking students separated from NCS students. The effects of this are two-fold.

Firstly, it decreases the opportunities for NCS students to gain experience in using the language with native speaking peers. Currently, many NCS students are limited to practicing in controlled classroom settings that do not always reflect real life interactions. Considering that many of us with a NCS background have more fellow NCS than local Chinese in our circles, many are unlikely to get the practice they need. Successful instructed language learning requires opportunities for output, where students are able to obtain constructive feedback – something better received from a friend rather than an angry minibus driver.

Secondly, segregation decreases NCS students' motivation to learn the language. Because the different cultures are given little opportunity to interact, an “us versus them” mentality develops. According to social-psychology, creating social distance between two groups creates resistance towards learning the target language. In that sense, depriving EMs of these intercultural interactions is detrimental to their acquisition of Chinese. Most EMs I know who have successfully become fluent in Cantonese tend to have had positive experiences with native speakers at an earlier age than their peers.

Considering importance of encouraging intercultural interactions in second language learning, we would like to request the government to look beyond academics when forming policies. To prevent segregation within the schooling system, all schools should be equipped with the skills and resources for teaching CSL. Additionally, the government should enforce against in-school segregation and give recognition to schools that encourage harmonious integration. On a larger scale, we need to celebrate the diversity that exists in the city through public education or even city-wide festivals to increase appreciation for the different cultures.

Since Hong Kong is supposed to be an “international city”, I believe there is no excuse for us to continue moving so slowly in the integration of EMs. Thank you.