

**The government should help students improve their English  
language standard**

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## **Introduction**

Language is the tool with which we acquire and construct knowledge. The ability to understand and use language plays a significant role in the development of a person's intellect, socializing skills, academic and career prospects.

The statistics of Hong Kong Public Examinations show that students' performance in English exams has deteriorated since the implementation of the policy of mother-tongue teaching, which has seriously hampered students' confidence in learning English. Nowadays Hong Kong has gone through transformations and become a knowledge-based and service-led international economy. Students need better English to cope with demands in their education and future professional needs.

As pointed out in Article 29 1(a) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 'States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.' Therefore our group believes that the government should implement measures to enhance the English standard of students so that they can learn more effectively and make preparations for their future life as adults in society.

## **Survey**

This October our group conducted a survey on 380 students with questionnaires to find out their opinions about the English standard of Hong Kong students.

## **Present Situation**

In Hong Kong, one of Asia's most cosmopolitan cities, English is frequently used in daily communication. However, the English standard of young people in Hong Kong is declining. This phenomenon is directly related to the following four factors:

### **1. Mother-Tongue Teaching**

With mother-tongue teaching students get less exposure to English and fewer opportunities to use it. Since they have lost the opportunities to enhance their English competence in secondary school, many students who are in fact capable, later find it difficult to adapt to the English-medium curricula in universities.

### **2. Distribution of Resources**

Currently, the Hong Kong government puts a lot of resources into universities, whilst a much smaller amount of money is spent on foundational education. According to the Hong Kong Year Book 2007, during the fiscal year of 2007–2008, the government's expenditure on education accounted for 3.4% of the local GDP, with the percentage of recurrent expenditure on primary education being 22.4%, secondary education 36.4% and tertiary education 27.4%. However, since secondary school students greatly outnumber university students, if counted by heads, the subsidies received by every student in primary school, secondary school and university are respectively HK\$27,300, HK\$34,200 and HK\$69,300 on average. A good comparison is Finland, a country that has always been leading the world in the field of education. Finland spends as much as 6.1% of its GDP on education, with over 30% of its education expenditure spent on primary education; expenditure on every school student per year is similar to that spent on tertiary and university students. It is worth noting that the

figures published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development show that their educational expenditure takes up 6.3% of the GNP on average. Through this comparison, we can get a better understanding of how the Hong Kong government has allocated insufficient resources to foundational education. Its policy has tilted towards tertiary education.

### **3. Students' Interest in Language**

In this age of information explosion, new technological products such as computers and video games have become part of young people's life and this has resulted in reduced exposure to extra-curricular reading. Furthermore, nowadays in schools, the exam-oriented teaching method for English has led to a fall in students' interest in learning.

### **4. The Workload and the Quality of Teachers' Work**

#### *The Workload for Teachers*

The waves of education reform have come one after another in recent years, which have greatly increased the workload for teachers. Apart from their daily teaching, they also need to spend time on further studies, administrative duties, counseling students and leading extra-curricular activities. The heavy workload has undoubtedly affected the quality of their teaching in class.

#### *The Quality of Teachers*

Currently, Hong Kong teachers of language courses are required to pass the Benchmark Test and to hold either a degree of Bachelor of Arts in corresponding languages, or a Bachelor of Education or a Certificate or Diploma in Education Programmes. However, according to the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, 30% of secondary school teachers and 50% of primary school teachers in Hong Kong cannot meet such requirements. This shows room for improvement in the area of the quality of language teachers.

### **Suggestions**

#### **1. To allow schools to decide their own medium of instruction**

With the government's current policy on medium of instruction in schools, students cannot study in English even if they are capable of it. This has reduced their opportunities of exposure to the English language.

Therefore, our group maintains that the government should believe in the professional decisions made by schools. They should thus be able to decide their medium of instruction according to these three aspects: 'the competence of students', 'the capability of teachers' and 'the supporting measure offered by the school'. Schools should also be free to decide whether they adopt one medium of instruction in the whole school, or in certain classes, or for certain subjects, in order to provide the most effective teaching. Meanwhile, the government should offer complementary resources and professional support, and, when necessary, appropriate assistance.

#### **2. To Increase Educational Resources for English Teaching in Primary Schools**

Our group suggests that the government should raise the percentage of resources distributed for primary education. Various researches show that people learn English most effectively during their childhood. More resources for primary schools mean a better foundation of English for the students. This will be very beneficial to tertiary education. Only by doing so can the future masters of our society be competitive enough to progress along with the rest of the world.

### **3. To increase students' exposure to English-Context Teaching**

'Context Teaching' can provide students with a language environment in which they can 'see and hear English anytime'. In Hong Kong, many schools have begun to reallocate their resources to promote 'context teaching'. Relevant measures include posting bilingual signs on campus, training bilingual student prefects, and facilitating bilingual interactions and communications among peer members. These can increase the students' exposure to English in school. Therefore, our group believes that the government should encourage 'context teaching' to benefit more schools.

### **4. Small class teaching and Activity Approach**

#### *Small Class Teaching*

The research results of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) point out that when the ratio of student to teacher exceeds twenty-five to one, the students' reading ability will decline proportionately. In recent years, the government has been slow in the promotion of small class teaching on the ground of its low cost-effectiveness and secondary schools' failure to adapt to the new education system. Therefore, our group believes that the government should implement small class teaching in primary and secondary schools as soon as possible.

'Small class' refers to a class size of 20-25 pupils. At this well-balanced teacher-student ratio, students can participate better in class; and meanwhile, teachers can give individual guidance to students in need to ensure their study progress. In this kind of teaching, students' listening and speaking skills, which are particularly important for language learning, can be enhanced because small class teaching enables more interactions between students and teachers. For example, in pronunciation lessons, teachers can give individual attention to students and correct their mistakes.

#### *Activity Approach Teaching*

According to the results of a research survey conducted by our group, 63% of the respondents do not have much interest in language learning, and 69% have had difficulties in learning English, among whom 64% support Activity Approach Teaching.

Activity Approach Teaching focuses on the skills of thinking, analysis and expression. It stresses raising students' interest in learning, and encourages students to learn in practice. To take the teaching of writing as an example, teachers can take students on outings and ask them to write down what they see and hear on the way. As for speaking, the Activity Approach encourages more discussions among students, which not only allows them to exchange views, but also helps them improve their speaking skills.

With the decline in the number of school children in Hong Kong, the teacher-student ratio is increasing. This is the best time to implement small class teaching and Activity Approach Teaching.

Whether the above two suggestions can be put into practice will depend on the following factors: the cooperation of parents and children, proper teaching methods on the part of teachers, selection of appropriate teaching materials and so on. Without suitable supplementary facilities, the effectiveness of small class teaching could be greatly affected. Therefore, our group hopes the government will provide support to ensure maximum effectiveness of small class teaching and Activity Approach Teaching.

## **5. To reduce teachers' workload by implementing Specialised Teaching and raising the Amount of Capacity Enhancement Grant**

### *Implementing Specialised Teaching*

Since English is not the first language in Hong Kong, English teachers inevitably face difficulties in their teaching. To make matters worse, in primary school, English teachers also teach other subjects. This definitely puts extra workload and pressure on them. Therefore, our group proposes that the government should implement 'specialised teaching' so that teachers can concentrate on teaching the language.

### *Raising Capacity Enhancement Grant*

Besides teaching six classes per day, teachers in Hong Kong also need to deal with heavy administrative duties. At present, the Capacity Enhancement Grant and Additional Capacity Enhancement Grant appropriated by the Education and Manpower Bureau every year helps schools recruit extra contract teachers and teaching assistants. However, in 2007 the government raised the 'entry-level salary point' of new teachers, so schools also raised the salaries of contract teachers and teaching assistants to follow the market and attract talents. As a result, the grants no longer provide enough money for the above purpose. Therefore, in order to reduce teachers' workload, we propose increasing the amount of these two grants.

## **6. To improve teachers' language proficiency: providing teachers with paid leave to attend refresher courses**

To improve the quality of teaching requires more than evaluating teachers' competence with an examination system. A good teacher, besides having good knowledge of a language, also needs to know how to take good care of students' needs. Therefore, our group proposes that the government should offer refresher courses to teachers so that they can return to school on a regular basis to refresh their skills and acquire new knowledge.

Our group also hopes that the government will provide paid leave for teachers to attend training courses. This will ensure that teachers can concentrate on their study during training. On the other hand, suitable substitute teachers are needed to replace teachers in training.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, in order to maintain Hong Kong's international status, the language proficiency of students in Hong Kong should be attached great importance to. We urge the government to pay full attention to the English proficiency of students and spare no effort to improve it.

We believe that our proposal will help to improve the English proficiency of students in Hong Kong, especially those with lower competence. These measures will ensure them sufficient ability to cope with language requirements in work and everyday life when they grow up.

To this end, on behalf of the 16 child councilors in my group, I move that the motion 'The government should help students improve their English language standard' be passed.

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