

# Education Convergence

## Response to the English language curriculum framework

### proposed by the CDC 2000

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The resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong has an immediate impact on the education of Hong Kong students. The Special Administrative Region (SAR) government has made a decision on the medium of instruction. Except for 114 schools, all secondary schools are required to use Chinese, the mother tongue, as the medium of instruction for content subjects in junior levels. The success of this policy depends largely on two factors. First, will instruction conducted in the mother tongue lead to improvements in learners' Chinese language skills and learning of content subjects? The other factor is: will learners' English standard deteriorate because of reduced exposure to English?

As long as Hong Kong remains an international city, English, an international language of trade, commerce and science, will remain one of the most important assets of the Hong Kong labour force. To retain Hong Kong's international profile in the academic arena, the policy of English as the medium of instruction in most tertiary institutes will subject to no change. Since the demand on the English proficiency of students is as great as before, the controversy about whether English is better acquired through the learning of content subjects in English will remain. Despite the education Department's reiteration that mother tongue education would not hold back the acquisition of English, there has been no public dissemination of the English proficiency levels of students studying in CMI schools compared to their counterparts in EMI schools. To ensure student's English proficiency will not decline because of lessened exposure to the target language in the CMI schools, the Education Department granted funds for CMI schools to conduct extra English lessons for the form one students in the first year (1998-99) the policy was implemented. As expected, financial support for extra lessons did not alleviate principals' and parents' worry about students' exposure to English, but rather made the issue of when to switch back to EMI more urgent.

Two developments with the MOI policy further complicated the issue of English language education. First, the financial support for extra English lessons was not continued for reasons not disclosed. That means the fall in language proficiency due to 'reduced exposure to English' will not be addressed by the government. CMI students are obviously disadvantaged in their English learning. Second, there were reports on the Education Department's piloting a new model of MOI in ten schools. The pilot schools will have different medium of instruction for different subjects in the junior levels. Although the Education Department denied that there was such a scheme, the issue points to the difficulties of bilingual education in the local context.

Before the implementation of the mother-tongue education policy, over 70% of secondary one students had to adjust to instruction conducted in English. The MOI policy launched in 1998 has only delayed the adjustment period by three years. To remain competitive, CMI schools will switch back to English medium in secondary four. Secondary three will be the critical year when students will undergo a language program that prepares them to study in English in the senior secondary years.

How to upgrade the teaching effectiveness of English in schools has always been high on the agenda of policy makers, school principals and frontline teachers. The Benchmarking scheme has been one of the measures and introduction of TOC was another attempt. It is true that there are many factors leading to successful English language teaching. However, the fact that the existing and proposed English curricular are not satisfactory has resulted in ineffective teaching. For instance, the issues of how to keep students at a high level of English proficiency in CMI schools and how to enable students to switch to EMI study in senior secondary levels are not

addressed in the recent Education reform programs. In neither A Holistic Review of Hong Kong School Curriculum Proposed Reforms (CDC 1999) and the Consultation Document of the English curriculum (CDC 2000) has these highly contextual problems been mentioned.

Since the Learning to Learn English Language Education Consultation Document (CDC 2000) recommends the CDC Syllabuses for English Language (Secondary 1-5) for teachers in planning the English Language Education curriculum, the following section is an attempt to review the aims, targets and strategies of the Secondary Syllabuses.

Review of the 1999 English Syllabus a. aims and 'targets' The English curriculum development in Hong Kong has undergone mainly two phases in the last twenty years. The influence of 'communicative approach' has resulted in the English syllabuses issued in 1983. This syllabus has clear aims and objectives, teaching contents, teaching methods and assessments (CDC 1983). However, there were complaints

about the 'decline' in English standards in the late 1980s. A team of consultants reviewed the English language education situation and proposed Targets and

Targets-related Assessments. The TTRA later became Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) which extended beyond the ESL program. The education reforms called for by the Education Commission resulted in a series of curriculum reforms launched by the Curriculum Development Council. The English Syllabuses (Secondary I-V) (CDC 1999) is an 'interpersonal dimension targets' in the new syllabus are in fact 'communication' objectives, influenced by sociolinguistic theory. The language teaching program should enable learners to know what they say or write to whom in what situation (Dubi & Olshtain 1986: 70). Among the knowledge dimension targets, 'to clarify and develop ideas by making revisions to own written texts through personal reflection and talk with others' (CDC: 15), for example, is developed from studies on writing as a process (Grabe & Kaplan 1996) and psychological studies on the development of thinking and language through social interaction (Vygotsky 1978).

However, examination of the chapters 1 and 2 of the new English syllabuses for secondary schools (CDC 1999) reveals a discrepancy between the philosophy, aims, guiding principles and targets and objectives. The fact that English language is treated as if it were Hong Kong students' first language is, however, bound to result in difficulties in implementation of the curriculum.

It is undeniable that every student in Hong Kong has a right to a second language--English, an international language. However, English, to the majority of the students, is a foreign language, rather than a second language. In Hong Kong, where over 98% of the population speak Cantonese, we do not have the speech community for English to establish itself as a second language. This is particularly so when three quarters of the secondary schools have switched to CMI. There are actually three major aims of the secondary English language curriculum:

- (1) to enable students to develop the English proficiency for academic studies and processing information represented in English,
- (2) acquire knowledge of foreign cultures transmitted through English, and
- (3) communicating with English speaking populations in both informal and informal exchanges. The role of English language in students' social, personal and aesthetic dimensions is relatively small.

Section 1.4. of this syllabus (CDC 1999: 8) lists five principles of the curriculum. The emphasis on targets seems to point to standards- societal demands. The five fundamental intertwining ways of learning and using knowledge seem to come from psychology of learning. The third principle of 'communicative purposes' and fifth principle 'integrative language use' seem to come from second language acquisition theories- from subject specialists. The 'learner-centered' principle seems to point to the learner's interest as an important consideration. The combination of these principles show that the curriculum is an attempt to select learning targets and objectives addressing the (a) the interests and needs of learners, (b) socio-economic development, (c)

second language acquisition characteristics, and (d) general learning theories.

However, the relationship between the interpersonal, knowledge and experience targets is not explicated in the document. The targets of the three dimensions are listed separately rather than forming a coherent whole. Another feature is that the quantity of targets put feasibility of the curriculum in doubt. Review of the learning objectives point to the same problem. Take text-types for example. This is one of the four 'forms and functions'. Its relationship with the other three 'forms and functions' - vocabulary, communicative functions and language items is not indicated. Neither is its relationship with the language skills and language development strategies. The list of text types (CDC 1999: 20) actually lists only the format of texts. The genre and degree of informality and formality are ignored. This is a critical issue. If English is learnt as a foreign language, the use of students' knowledge and skills in first language will facilitate English learning. If English is mainly learnt to process information through Information Technology and acquire knowledge in academic studies, the role of content reading and writing will have a significant share in the English language curriculum. Subsequently, the learning targets will become much more specific than the ones offered in this syllabus. A different method of organization of the targets will emerge.

Teaching strategies in the new English Syllabuses Like the old syllabuses (CDC 1983), the new syllabuses (CDC 1999) present the 'ends' - targets and objectives separately from the 'means'-selection and organization of learning experiences (Tyler 1949). One of the major curriculum elements, time allocated to the English subject, remains to be 7-8 periods, 40-minute each, per week. Another--textbooks are also recommended as the major source of learning materials. The major part of learning experiences are presented as teaching strategies which include:

- a. using English in the classroom
- b. task-based learning
- c. listening
- d. speaking
- e. reading
- f. writing
- g. study skills
- h. language arts
- i. catering for learner differences
- j. extra-curricular activities

When looked at separately, the presentations of the teaching strategies are improved versions of the old. However, teachers are faced with difficulties in

implementing the new syllabuses. Firstly, the ten 'strategies' do not tell explicitly an organizing center. The exemplar task-based module provided by the English Unit (CDI: 1999) can hardly convince language teachers of its success. With tasks as the organizing center of the module and units, students will be exposed to and are required to produce a variety of spoken and written texts, of different text types. Each text type will be seen once a module which may last one month at least. For example, students have to read a pamphlet and complete a floor plan of 'Hong Kong Theme Park'. The pamphlet text type may not recur in the same academic year. Yet, with only one sample pamphlet at hand, students have to identify features of a pamphlet. This happens similarly with all tasks. Research shows that an average learner, even with first language learning, need to be exposed to a new word about 15 times in different contexts before the automaticity is reached in decoding the word (Honig 1996). Understanding text features and

constructing text of appropriate format, structure and rhetoric are no less demanding. Mastery comes only after explicit teaching and a lot of practice. Skills like rewriting a story showing a clear story structure takes a whole year to develop (Morrow, Pressley, Smith and Smith 1997). The selection and sequencing of grammatical items is another controversial issue. Since the CDC insists on not providing the themes or topics for the design of task-based modules, and presenting an exemplar grammar syllabus related to tasks, grammatical items that have a high frequency of occurrence in the tasks will be dealt with because teachers want to ensure students have the structures needed for the writing tasks. However, the reality with language acquisition is learners who do not read beyond the teaching materials provided by teachers hardly progress. If learners are to develop the reading competencies for extensive reading, particularly content area reading (Vacca & Vacca 1999), they need knowledge of all the language structures for comprehension.

It is not easy for a frontline teacher in Hong Kong, to be able to adapt the targets and objectives to their syllabuses and design learning activities to bridge the gaps between the intended curriculum and the students' proficiency. The quality of textbooks is a crucial factor of success. But how can good quality textbooks be produced when commercial publishers are usually given one year to produce a series of five coursebooks?

Modes of curriculum planning, and teaching, learning and assessment

The directions of these proposals are acceptable. However, the existing manpower and professional expertise on the part of both school administrators and English language teachers render the implementation of these strategies a slow and sluggish process. The government should provide financial support for longitudinal research-based curriculum development in different types of school in different areas. Teams of experienced teachers should be given the opportunities to conduct systematic field study of how effective language teaching (ESL or EFL) is implemented in local, overseas and the mainland.

Meanwhile, the Education Department should continuous refine the English Syllabuses, providing topics, teaching materials and assessment instruments. These are particularly important to schools where curriculum reform is still in its first phase.