

Hong Kong's Window Dressers

What sound reasoning would not dictate

If a friend offers you something for nothing, and tells you to take as much as you want, your first reaction might be: "What is the special occasion?" or "What nice thing have I done to deserve this?" Then too, you may wonder what your friend will be expecting from you in the future. Of course, if she is simply trying to get rid of something, you may just take all she has and forget the matter. Whatever you decide, surely you will consider how much you truly need. After all, having to store something can be costly, unless you have a lot of unused space with no special plans for its future use. In effect there is little that is free in this world, and even those things that are, almost always cost something to obtain and hold.

Now suppose the government offers a special free service that not everyone can use, but many do. If you can use this service, meet the government's requirements, and are able to obtain it with no additional obligation or cost, will you not take as much as you want? Surely the service must cost something to provide, and surely you are paying a portion of the taxes that pay for its provision. Besides, if you do not make use of it, somebody else will, and you will finish by denying yourself a service whose benefits you are paying others to enjoy. Moreover, are there not already many services offered by the government from which others benefit, but you do not? In short, you will probably take as much as you can, and maybe even more than you need, if not too many people are looking. Then too, you may not take very much at all for fear of developing a false dependence. What the government offers you free today, it may charge you for tomorrow, and where will you be then?

With the latter point in mind suppose you have to purchase the same service on the open market rather than receiving it from the government at no cost. How will your need for it change? Do you think you can get by with less? Will you not consider other goods and services that you can no longer afford, because you have to purchase now, what before you were able to obtain for free? Probably so. Where before there was little or no trade-off, now there is a substantial sacrifice. No longer will you utilise the good or service until its last increment is no longer of value; rather, you will employ it to the point where additional use detracts unduly from your utilisation of other goods and services that you deem at least as important.

Now consider a government that has been providing a free service to everyone for some time, but has come to realise that those who utilise it are complaining about its quality. What course of action should the government take? Should it listen to the ungrateful complainers, who are getting something paid for by everyone, but used primarily by the complainers. Or should it concentrate on those services where the complaints are fewer and the provision likely far more rewarding? Probably the latter, unless of course the complaints are very loud, very numerous, and/or coming from very influential people. Many loud voices and even a few quiet voices from people of power and influence can cause weak government officials enormous trouble. Stronger officials may be tempted to ignore the complaints, unless of course they find them to be valid, their own positions are not threatened, and they see a chance for personal advancement

Now let us suppose the complaints are very loud, numerous, quiet, influential,

and valid. Surely, the government will have to take action, and surely the government as a service provider will find itself in a position similar to that of the consumer of a good or service who has to choose among other goods and services for which he must also pay. Indeed, free services cost something to provide. Unless the government raises taxes, providing better quality service is likely to mean reducing the quality and/or quantity of other goods and services. As raising taxes is rarely a popular action for any government to initiate, and penalising others on behalf of the complainers will lead to new sources of complaint, the government may want to consider a different sort of remedy or trade-off -- say, increasing the quality of the service, but reducing the amount provided. Since the service has always been provided free of charge, there is likely to be significant excess demand. In short, whoever is using the service is probably using much more than the government can provide and still be fair to users of other government services for which payment is required.

So, how should the government determine what is truly needed and still be fair to everyone? Asking users how much of the service they might employ, if they were made to pay, will not be appropriate. This is because having never paid for the service most users have little idea about its true market worth. The same goes for quality. Users may know they want better, but asking them how much they need when the service is given to them for free is neither a fair nor reasonable standard for judging how much to provide. Surely better quality is always better, but for whom? Those who must pay, or those who get to use?

Having determined what sound reasoning would *not* dictate let us now turn to the Hong Kong government's approach to resolving its own language problem. Before rendering judgement, however, some additional background material would be wise to consider. Let us begin with better precision about what is provided and who the real users are. The service is certified, English language trained, Hong Kong secondary and tertiary school graduates. The users represent a wide variety of Hong Kongers including those who use their certification as a means to obtain employment, and those who purchase the services of those who hold certificates. Other users neither buy the skills of others nor sell their own, but employ them as a means to enhance their personal leisure or edification. For these latter government certification is of little worth.

What makes the provision of government-sponsored, free language training and certification so different from other *free* services is the cost of provision. In particular, Hong Kong's universal English language (UEL) requirement compels all Hong Kong primary and secondary students to sacrifice nearly a fifth of their classroom hours, and likely equal proportion of their homework study time. In short, the cost of providing this service far exceeds the typical cost of other government services that can be easily, or often not so easily, measured by adding up the tax dollars allotted to each.

A second important difference between this service, and many other government services, is that it caters primarily to Hong Kong's wealthiest -- those who can eventually afford to live and travel overseas to acquire effective spoken use of the language, those who have been brought up in an environment conducive to English language acquisition, and those who have passed through Hong Kong's English language academic and employment credential filters. As the English language is generally a requisite for entry into local universities and for

government and private sector job advancement little further explanation should be required. Certainly there are a large number of other Hong Kongers who employ the English language for a wide variety of reasons, but just how many, no one appears ever to have asked. A comprehensive study of government and private sector employers also appears missing.

A third important aspect not previously discussed are the timing and general economic environment in which the Hong Kong government is seeking to improve its free language service. Afflicted by last year's SARS economic crisis and still recovering from East Asia's 1997 financial crisis, the Hong Kong government is in search of ways to shore up impending budget deficits. Thus, improving free language services at the expense of other, already reduced government services can only serve to magnify the problem of possible new sources of complaint.

With this backdrop and our previous analytical framework let us now consider Hong Kong's Education and Manpower Bureau's approach to language improvement. In June 2003 Hong Kong's Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) issued its final report entitled the *Language Education Review*.¹ The two primary recommendations of this report can be summarised as certification and motivation enhancement. Nothing in the report suggests the slightest interest in attempting to assess the actual number of competent English language speakers required to meet Hong Kong's English language needs. Nothing in the report indicates that consideration was ever given to a possible trade-off between the quantity of users and the quality of use. No discussion was entertained with regard to what might be a reasonable economic approach to assessing Hong Kong's true language needs. Rather, based on this report the government is currently planning a survey on private sector English language demand for trained tertiary school graduates -- an eventual source of English language usage reflecting only a small fraction of everyone subjected to Hong Kong's UEL requirement.² In the same breadth the report recommends that no minimum language skill-requirements should be imposed on university graduates. Meanwhile, Hong Kong higher education is crying over looming budget cuts while continuing to demand that all new university entrants be equipped with a full quiver of English language skills. If this potage of blatant inefficiency and self-contradicting recommendations and demands were not enough to make your already budget-strapped stomach turn, a very large number of the quality improvement suggestions will require significant additional monetary outlays, if implemented.

Mr. Michael Tien, SCOLAR's Head, is an accomplished Hong Kong businessman. The EMB's Deputy Secretary for Curriculum and Quality Assurance, Mr. Chris Wardlaw, is an economist by training. These are the people whom the current Hong Kong government has placed in charge of formulating Hong Kong's language education policy. It is with their stamp of approval that a totally

¹ Hong Kong S.A.R. Government. Standing Committee on Language Education and Research. 2003. Language Education Review. Summary of final report [online pdf document - 120KB] <http://cd.emb.gov.hk/scolar/html/summary_en.pdf> (28 December 2003). The full report [online pdf document - 540KB] and accompanying press release are available at <http://cd.emb.gov.hk/scolar/html/inew01_en.htm> (28 December 2003).

² Judging from past experience one can rest confident that this survey will query demand based on current freely provided use and not take into consideration how much would be required, if employers were compelled to pay for the amount of service rendered and employed.

uneconomic policy has been formulated and is currently being implemented. Maybe it is not a coincidence that Mr. Tien is a G2000 clothing store retailer and Mr Wardlaw a native speaker of Australian English. One could wish better for *Asia's World City* and former British colony, but then, who cares enough about Hong Kong to make a true difference, anyway? Are appearances not enough to keep attracting tourists?

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