

Choice in language studies should not be denied

The presence of all things French in Hong Kong has been particularly prominent in recent weeks.

There was a visit from the French president last month and an aerial display by the French air force. Thousands flocked to see the exhibition of Picasso's stage curtain *Parade* at Two IFC and it was revealed that the Pompidou Centre is interested in building an arts museum in West Kowloon.

Amid all this enthusiasm for French culture, it is perhaps a little surprising to learn that the teaching of the French language in our schools might be under threat.

As we report today, one little-noticed detail in the plans for sweeping education reforms is the absence of French among the subjects to be made available to secondary school students from 2008.

This is an omission of some importance, as French is the only foreign language taught in local secondary schools – apart from English and Chinese.

Under the reforms, it does not feature among either the four core subjects or the 21 elective subjects. French, it would appear, is on the way out.

One section of the community did notice its absence – French teachers. They are expressing concern and are keen to meet education chief Arthur Li Kwok-cheung to discuss the situation. The government, meanwhile, has sought to ease concerns, promising that French – which has some 77 million native speakers

around the world – would continue to be “provided”. But it is unclear whether it will remain part of the formal curriculum and be a subject featuring in public exams.

The move by the government might reflect a perception that French – and other European languages – are not as popular as they once were.

Only 10 schools are teaching it, to nearly 1,000 students. Fewer than 200 took the Hong Kong Certificate of Education in French this year. Others, with parents who can afford the fees, are learning the language at international schools.

But there are also signs that members of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong are opting to learn Chinese rather than languages such as French, Spanish and German. This trend can be expected to continue as job opportunities on the mainland continue to increase.

Hong Kong students may justifiably feel that the tough linguistic challenges facing them are sufficient. Learning English and Putonghua – it might be thought – is quite enough. But they deserve to be given a choice.

If Hong Kong is to preserve its status as an international city then it is important that languages other than English and Chinese are made available to students who have an interest in learning them.

The mastering of a foreign language often fuels an interest in the culture of that country. It is one facet of a broad education that should not be overlooked.