

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE PROPOSED REFORM OF HONG KONG SECONDARY AND TERTIARY ACADEMIC STRUCTURE

A Position Paper

Outline

This paper calls for the formation of a pertinent education policy in respect of the teaching and learning of foreign languages (other than Chinese and English) within the proposed new secondary and tertiary academic structure (3+3+4).

The reform under study has the potential to allow a significant development of foreign language education in Hong Kong schools that would in turn underscore the international stature of the SAR, its position as a major economic and cultural hub in Asia and its unique identity as a multicultural society.

This paper advocates that foreign language studies be incorporated as an Elective subject into the new Senior Secondary curriculum under the proposed reform. The paper also charts a vision for a co-ordinated and meaningful study path in foreign language education across both the upper secondary and the tertiary sectors. (Para.4)

Finally, this paper outlines the benefits and outcomes for our community that would derive from a positive policy toward foreign language education in local schools and universities. (Para.5)

1. The situation of foreign language education in local secondary schools.

At present, about a dozen local government schools offer the opportunity to study a foreign language (French essentially) as a full-fledged subject. All these schools enjoy good standing and have a long and respectable history in teaching this subject. Recently, four schools have also introduced Japanese as a curricular subject, and 18 more schools have arrangements for the extra-curricular teaching of Japanese. By contrast, a wide range of foreign languages are taught in nearly all of Hong Kong ESF and international schools and assessed through standard examinations of various kinds.

French is currently the only foreign language featured as a subject in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCE) administered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEEA). The candidates are examined through the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) prepared by the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES). Over the years, an average of 150 to 200 candidates chose French as one of their HKCE subjects. Until 2001, French and German were also offered as subjects in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE). Japanese does not feature in the HKEEA examinations, but the demand for Japanese language study in Hong Kong is shown by the fact that the number in Hong Kong and Macau taking the main internationally recognized test,

the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (the equivalent to TOEFL) has risen steadily from 1,905 in 1990 to 8,658 in 2004.

It is a cause of concern for the French and Japanese teachers currently employed in local schools that, under the proposed reform and with the discontinuation of the Certificate of Education, their subject may disappear completely from the list of offerings as early as Form 1 of the Junior Secondary. Besides depriving both the schools, parents and students of this particular subject, a significant number of graders with no sufficient background in Chinese should be left as a result without an alternative choice of study in local English-medium schools.

In this context, it is worth to note that foreign languages are listed among the university entrance requirements *in lieu* of Chinese in most of the tertiary institutions. This measure is in favour in particular of international and non-JUPAS applicants.

2. Foreign languages in the Hong Kong tertiary education sector

Most of the SAR tertiary institutions have made provisions to offer foreign language studies to their students. Through a variety of settings and programmes in local universities, undergraduates with or without previous experience of a foreign language may elect to study Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish or Thai.

These programmes - generally spanning over the three-year undergraduate curriculum, range from certificate programmes to credit-bearing courses, minor or major tracks fully integrated into the academic degree structure. The University of Hong Kong (HKU) offers a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), M.Phil. and Ph.D in Japanese Studies, as well as a B.A. in French or in German. Minor options in various European languages as well as in Thai or Arabic are also offered at HKU and at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). The Baptist University (BU) offers French and German as key components of the European Studies stream of the four-year B.Sc. in Government and International Studies. Other departments and centres offer degree courses in various foreign languages (BU, CityU, PolyU and HKUST).

The demand for foreign language studies among university students is very high and beyond the resource capacities of most department and centres in tertiary institutions. Recent funding cuts have further strained these capacities. At the University of Hong Kong, 60% of First Year undergraduates apply to study a foreign language but fewer than half eventually get enrolled due to limited resources that do not allow the running of extra small-sized classes.

3. The benefits of foreign language education

The benefits derived from foreign language education have been documented by specialists and acknowledged by educational authorities worldwide. These benefits span several areas : the personal and cognitive, the academic and societal.

Students in foreign languages tend to perform better in verbal and nonverbal intelligence, they show greater ability at solving complex problems as a result of enhanced cognitive processing. Other studies also lay evidence that foreign language

learners reach a greater grasp and understanding of their native tongue than monolingual individuals.

Academic fallouts of foreign language education among junior and high school students or younger can be measured in terms of increased abilities in all core subjects, including mathematics and science. Students in foreign languages also show enhanced performance in presentation and interactive skills through the process of developing a communicative personality.

The embedded cultural dimension of foreign language studies leads to greater awareness of diversity and difference. Learners cultivate a contrastive approach to societal issues and therefore tend to adapt better to a pluricultural environment.

4. A vision for an integrated study path in foreign language education

The proposed reform of the secondary and tertiary academic structure (3+3+4) strives to create the conditions of a cogent, focused and less stressful educational environment that will better serve the interests and goals of the community. At this juncture of this far-reaching reform, there is a potential for the development of an integrated study path in foreign language studies that will be both efficient and beneficial to the SAR young generation.

The time factor is one of the overarching features of language learning. The move toward a four-year university curriculum will undoubtedly benefit the programmes in foreign languages currently in place across the SAR tertiary institutions. The benefits will be in depth and breadth, more will be achieved on a firmer ground. There will also be added opportunities for academic exchanges, study abroad experience and international cooperation.

Incorporating foreign languages into the new Secondary curriculum would further ensure the strength of the system. The creation of a three-year segment from Senior Secondary 1 (SS1) to Senior Secondary 3 (SS3) would not only constitute a valuable option at this level but would also gain worth through its interface with existing programmes at tertiary level. Quite understandably, schools, parents and students recognize the need for a coherent path of study that ensures that objectives are properly set and profit is eventually accrued. In short, an articulated sequence of study between Senior Secondary level (3 years) and Tertiary level (4 years) would appear as an attractive feature of our local education and guarantee that our city positions itself at the forefront of educational excellence. The offering of a second foreign language as an elective subject at Senior Secondary level would allow the consolidation and development of existing initiatives to teach foreign languages in secondary schools, in response to demands from students and society. If more students were to study foreign languages as an elective at Senior Secondary level, it would also be possible for Tertiary foreign language programmes to develop the linguistic abilities of such students to an even higher level than is possible with students who are taught from absolute beginner level.

To this effect, this paper recommends that foreign languages be incorporated into the range of the 20 elective subjects made available to SS1 students in the reformed secondary curriculum. Elective subjects are preferred to career-oriented study options in that the former should eventually be conducive to stable and standardized teaching

objectives and assessment practices that are recognizable across all institutions teaching the subject, as well as by the community at large. A commonly designed mandate of assessment would also facilitate meeting the requirements of international benchmarks.

It is therefore further recommended that the HKEAA, along with related specialists serving in local teaching institutions, provide assistance and expertise in conducting formal validation procedures in respect of foreign language programmes offered by the schools. In this respect, foreign language subjects should adapt well, as advised in the proposed reform, to a combination of coursework and final examination that would form the core of the assessment and classification processes at the end of the three-year programmes.

5. Outcomes and prospects

An integrated 3+4 path of study in foreign languages across the secondary and the tertiary sectors would ultimately ensure that there is enough scope to achieve optimal results in this discipline. A high level of proficiency in foreign languages should also provide added chances to the young generation to experience life and study in a wider range of places overseas that are not English-speaking countries.

At present, the SAR relies heavily for foreign language expertise on foreign specialists who may not have the full ability to relate to local realities. Such a collaborative policy would lead to the formation of a body of local experts with excellent skills who are ready to serve the community in a wide range of corporate sectors, businesses, services and industries.

In the context of the increased mobility of people and circulation of information, global exchange, there are more need and opportunities for language specialists in our city : interpreters, translators, journalists, editors, publishers, teachers, international negotiators, business advisors, market researchers, information providers etc. In many key sectors of the economy, proficiency in a foreign language is a value-added bonus.

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