

The language issue that divides this cosmopolitan city of ours

The way reform is being implemented is perpetuating an 'us and them' system which threatens the potential of many Hong Kong students

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In a competitive society, education is an important factor influencing a person's future and prosperity. Unfortunately, the Education and Manpower Bureau's response to a key matter - the issue of "language" - is a sad indictment of the way in which curriculum decisions are made and communicated.

At present, "students whose mother tongue is not Chinese" have been allowed to study French or other modern languages such as German or Spanish, to complete a second language requirement. Schools, especially those which have been accommodating these students as well as ethnic Chinese returnees, have enrolled their students in HKEAA examinations in these subjects for many years.

Such custom and practice was reiterated in a statement from the EMB in May 2005: "As Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city, more encouragement should be given to the study of languages other than Chinese and English ... the tradition of providing access to the study of other languages, such as French ... is to be upheld ... This provision acknowledges that some students cannot learn Chinese effectively." (Proposed New Senior Secondary Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks, May 2005).

However, the same document also said: "Students whose mother tongue is not Chinese are encouraged to take the NSS Chinese Language or some other overseas Chinese curriculum with examinations administered by the HKEAA."

There is an obvious divergence between the sentiments expressed in the two statements. Non-Chinese speaking students are "encouraged" to study Chinese because they stay in Hong Kong and at the same time they are also "encouraged" to study languages other than Chinese, as Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city.

Word leaked that there would be a change and that all non-Chinese speaking students would be required to study Chinese or risk failing to gain admission to a degree programme at a local university.

Unfortunately, while schools waited anxiously to learn about the results of the EMB's deliberation on the issue of language requirement, a group of students had already been admitted to Junior Secondary One in September 2006. They would be the first batch of graduates of the NSS curriculum in 2012, having gone through the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE), thereby being affected by any changes made to the status quo.

Even up until 2007, schools were still asking themselves: "What exactly does the EMB want in terms of how a school should organise its new NSS curriculum to address the above concern? Would any such change even be communicated?"

The Hong Kong school curriculum is congested, filled to the top so that the addition of any new subject or requirement implies the removal or deletion of certain old subject(s) and/or practices. That is why the perennial curriculum question of "What is worth learning?" takes on a special significance for those who are responsible for designing a school's curriculum.

It is not that schools should discourage students to become multi-lingual but that the basic language requirements must be both achievable and communicated to the relevant stakeholders in such a way that they have time to prepare.

Still not knowing what exactly the NSS curriculum and the HKDSE required, most schools which offered French and/or other modern languages to non-Chinese speaking students continued to hire French and German teachers and offered these subjects to their students. Learning a language takes time. No school could afford to risk teaching their students a foreign language in only two or three years before they sat a public examination.

Veronica Ma Kit-ching, principal of Marymount Secondary School, which is affected by any such change, made a pertinent remark on the way in which the EMB had handled such a sensitive issue. She said: "No matter whether



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Gallic gall: From Vietnam to Africa and Europe, French is a language in demand for business but whether it will count in Hong Kong university admission is murky.
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they are Chinese, non-Chinese-speaking or ethnic minorities, they should be told from the start, when they enter primary school. It should not be our responsibility to tell the parents. The EMB should be informing people they have this policy. Many people are not aware of this problem." (SCMP, December 16, 2006).

Our school is in a similarly frustrating position. That is why we were very much interested in two recent articles released on the EMB's website this month. The first was by Education Secretary Arthur Li Kwok-cheung. Interestingly enough, the article, "EMB attaches importance to providing education support for ethnic minorities", announced that the government was developing an alternative curriculum and examination for Chinese as a second language and that it would offer the GCSE (Chinese) examination starting from 2007.

Nothing was said about whether or not such an examination would become a "requirement" for all non-Chinese speaking students. Nor was there any hint about whether the modern languages that these students were already studying would meet any second language requirement.

The second article, by Catherine Chan Ka-ki, principal assistant secretary (curriculum development), was "The Positioning of Chinese Language Education in the New Senior Secondary Academic Structure".

Again, children from ethnic minorities and non-Chinese speaking families were "encouraged" to study GCSE-style Chinese, the results of which would appear in the HKDSE, while if students continued to study French, German, Hindi or Japanese, their results in these subjects would obtain only a "separate" mention on their HKDSE.

Dr Chan threatened in the same article that if students did not accept this "encouragement", their chances of getting into a Hong Kong university would be compromised. There are a number of issues that have resulted from the haphazard plan slowly released by the EMB. It created and still operates a system whereby French is taught as a recognised alternative to Chinese.

By leaking changes to this system, it treats schools as if no history of custom and practice existed. What will happen to the teachers and resources that schools currently devote to the teaching of modern languages other than Chinese? Is Chinese compulsory or to be "encouraged"? Will French still be recognised as an alternative by local universities in place of Chinese? These and many other such questions remain unanswered.

Sadly, how has the EMB communicated such broad changes that affect the prospects of people who many not be fluent in spoken and written Chinese? By publishing a few articles on its website. Wouldn't it be commonsense for any changes to be articulated both well in advance and to use media relevant to the language competencies of the various groups affected?

The EMB's way of handling this matter verges on racial discrimination, in the sense that local Chinese students were told from the very start what the basic requirements would be, while ethnic minorities and non-Chinese speaking returnees have been kept in the dark, left unable to figure out how their NSS curriculum would be constructed.

Hong Kong is a prosperous and well-organised city. It's time that its citizens and their most treasured possessions, their children, were treated with respect.

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