

Throwing good money after bad

Hong Kong English language reform

A careful look at recent figures produced by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) reveals what is likely the dominant driving force behind Hong Kong's current policy with regard to universal primary and secondary school English language education. In 2001 Hong Kongers earned approximately US\$8.2 billion in tourist revenue; this comes to about HK\$9741 per resident. In contrast, the Hong Kong government spends about HK\$720 on pre-primary, primary, and secondary school English language teachers' fees per citizen every year. This is a return on assets of about 13 to 1, a pretty good profit, if low-level English language competence is the only asset one looks at.

In the same WTO report one also learns, however, that Hong Kong is earning about 20% less per tourist than the average East Asian economy. Hong Kong is out-performed not only by Singapore, but also by Japan and South Korea. This phenomenon strongly suggests that something other than universal English language education makes or breaks a tourist economy in East Asia.

According to the Hong Kong 2001 Census Report only about 3.2% of all Hong Kong residents utilize English as their usual language of communication. This shows clearly that the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong residents use English only as a tool for information collection and transfer -- not as a medium of communication. This latter distinction is paramount to the debate over universal second language education. As a tool English is only used when it becomes necessary; otherwise, it lies dormant until called upon. Language is not a tool that one can easily set aside, however, with little fear of obsolescence. Language must be used regularly, or it is soon forgotten.

The obvious question with regard to the universal language requirement is how many residents use what they learned in school sufficiently enough, so as not to forget it. As a tourist industry lubricant, the English language must always be there when it is needed; otherwise, there is no point in having learned it in the first place.

Besides students, and of course tourists, the three primary consumers of English language are government, business, and universities. Theoretical evidence already shows that these latter three receive far more English language input than they deserve for the price they are paying. What is worse, they are clamoring for more and blaming Hong Kong primary and secondary schools for not providing them with better quality!

So what has the government decided to do about it? Rather than forcing itself, business, and universities to pay their own way, they are seeking to spend even more with an already very troubled budget! Aside from the current economic downturn, education in Hong Kong commands a full 17% of the government's purse, but as a fraction of GDP it is but a mere 2.9%. Compared

with Hong Kong's principal trade partners only the mainland spends fewer dollars on education as a proportion of GDP! Further comparison shows that Hong Kong's western counterparts, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, contribute 4.8, 5.3, and 5.4 percent, respectively, of their yearly national incomes on education. Though Japan, South Korea, and Singapore all contribute less, their children receive a better educational allowance than their Hong Kong counterparts.

Alas, resolving Hong Kong's current language crisis cannot be solved by throwing good money after bad. This can only worsen an already cash-strapped educational system. What is required is a major overhaul of the way existing money is now spent. Rather than trying to raise incrementally everyone's linguistic competence above an already abysmally low minimum standard, the government should focus on the true needs of Hong Kong society and develop appropriate channels to satisfy them. In the end less money would be spent for better quality.

By the way, it is just as unfair to demand that everyone learn English in order to succeed, as it is to deny anyone who finds the English language troublesome to learn (about 60% of all Hong Kong primary and secondary students according to a recent survey conducted by Hong Kong's Standing Committee for Language Education and Research) the opportunity of success under the current system. Then too, how many of the 13 million tourists that visit Hong Kong each year ever make it to Mong Kok or Shatin -- or for that matter, any other Hong Kong location whose principle source of revenue is not the tourist dollar? How much Hong Kong talent goes to waste because it has no aptitude for a second language and little very real opportunity to ever use or acquire it?

On 28 February the public consultation on language education reform closed, now it is the government's turn to take action. Let us hope that it does more for its people than that which the Education and Manpower Bureau appears ready to recommend.

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