

# **The provision of English enhancement at City University of Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

City University of Hong Kong is a tertiary level institution indirectly funded by the Hong Kong government. Although virtually all the undergraduate students do not speak English as a first language, officially all teaching is carried out in that language.

As the tertiary sector has expanded rapidly over the past decade the average level of competence in English language has fallen. The university has instituted a number of measures to combat this decline, resulting in a formal commitment at university level to have an exit examination, in which a defined increase in English language competence is required for the award of any degree.

This paper looks at the reasons for this decision and the process of consultation that took place.

Initially, the paper will consider bilingual education from a tertiary education perspective. It takes some of the theories of bilingual education as usually applied at primary and secondary level education and applies them to tertiary education. This is followed by an overview of the Hong Kong perspective; this will look at the specifics of the Hong Kong experience and the growing problems of falling language standards (both English and Chinese) and how it is affecting degree level teaching.

Then an overview of City University of Hong Kong (CityU) follows focussing on the specific problems at CityU, especially using the work of John Flowerdew et al in their evaluation of the way students learn in a bilingual environment. Finally, following a number of interviews with those involved in formulating CityU's response, the paper considers whether the solution is working and the implications for the university as a whole.

## **Introduction**

The provision of English language education in Hong Kong has been contentious for as long as it has been offered. The continuing debate between the benefits or otherwise of Chinese or English Medium of Instruction has been in progress for more than a century. The fact that there has been no clear

conclusion, either within government, the schools or the parents, has made the task of providing tertiary education to a 'mass market' of students difficult. To understand the problems caused by this indecision it is necessary to look at the main differences between the 'Western' and Chinese concepts of education, as discussed by Scollon and Scollon (1994) below.

Many educators at tertiary level have commented on the distinctive attitudes towards learning shown by students brought up in, what is sometimes called, the Confucian concept of education. As Deckert (1992: 101) comments: 'Throughout the ..course, students need many prompts to ponder and discover each his or her own distinct individuality. In encouraging that discovery, the instructor is undoubtedly advancing a Western emphasis that clashes with the upbringing of many learners, including that of a typical Chinese. However, part of the educative process that helps catapult a student into genuine academic exchange is learning who one is and what one's own special perspective might be arising from personal experience and strengths.'

Taking this concept one stage further, Scollon and Scollon (1994) quoted in Flowerdew and Miller (1995: 347) discuss the impact of Confucianism in general and on education in particular. The term Confucianism "is as rich in meaning for the educated East Asian as the term Judeo-Christian is for the educated Westerner, but just as the latter term can be used as a shorthand for a whole set of beliefs readily accessible to the average educated Westerner, so does the term Confucianism readily evoke a set of fundamental ideas and attitudes for East Asians". Encapsulating the differences in culture between the two schools, Flowerdew and Miller (ibid: 348) list those basic features of Confucianism which perhaps most noticeably contrast with Western values in the context of L2 lectures. [1]

In fact this culture difference permeates the debate at tertiary level, but seems to have been lost in the debate concerning primary and secondary education. However some researchers have considered the cultural aspects in great detail. As Flowerdew and Miller (ibid: 246) note, there are four primary dimensions of the notion of culture. These are

- a) *ethnic culture* - culturally based, social-psychological features which affect the behaviour of lecturers and students: b) *local culture* - the local setting with which students are familiar and which may be alien to foreign lecturers: c) *academic culture* - features of the lecture situation which require an understanding of the particular academic values, assumptions, roles, and so on of a given society; and d) *disciplinary culture* - the theories, concepts, norms, terms, and so on specific to a particular academic culture.

Flowerdew and Miller look at each of these aspects in some detail, as it relates to L2 lecture contexts.

However, when considering traditional Chinese education, Deckert (1992: 96) comments: “The institutions of education in China..... have opted for the transference of accumulated knowledge through the arduous routine of rote memorisation, so that each generation follows in the footsteps of the last” (quoted by Hsu, 1981:96). As Latourette (1941: 791) indicates, early education required pupils to memorise materials prior to a teacher’s effort to help pupils comprehend their meaning. “Consequently, when students reared in this tradition are confronted with tasks requiring critical analysis, individual interpretation, an original formulation, there is resistance.”

These basic cultural differences, which are in fact too varied and complex to look at in great detail in this paper, must be understood before any analysis of how the practice of teaching in general, and language teaching in particular, applies to the Hong Kong context, and the implications for tertiary teaching in general.

### The languages of education in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is fairly unique in that the language used in tertiary education is one that is not spoken by the vast majority of the population but which has a high proportion (18%) of the school population going onto university. In many other countries that use English at tertiary level, and which have a similar proportion of tertiary students, there is a large minority of the population where English is one of the languages in everyday use, e.g. Singapore and Philippines (India and the African countries that also use English at tertiary level have a very small proportion of students going on to tertiary education). Watkins et al (1991: 334), analysing the results of a survey of Hong Kong University students, state that the great majority reported that they came from families where the father (64.8%) and the mother (87.9%) had no more than a primary education, and that Cantonese was the normal language spoken at home (97.1%). However, just over a quarter of subjects indicated that a second language was at least ‘sometimes’ used in the home and that this was often English. This clearly affected the students’ confidence in using the language.[2]

To make matters worse, the use of a written language that differs from the spoken language also causes many problems, especially at early stages of learning. The gap between speech and writing is great for the speaker of Cantonese because the written form of the language is based upon a different version of the spoken language. As Tung (1990: 531) notes:

Modern written Chinese is actually based on the specific variety of Spoken Chinese, namely Mandarin or Putonghua, and therefore favours speakers of this form of

spoken Chinese and disfavours speakers of other varieties. Even if we suppose that he pronounces the characters in his own fashion and is spared the considerable task of learning how they are pronounced in Mandarin, a Cantonese speaker must still learn many additional things that are different from his way of speaking. These include, in addition to the classical borrowings, several points of grammar (different grammatical particles, for example, and the order indirect object-direct object in Mandarin versus direct-indirect in Cantonese) and a not inconsiderable number of vocabulary items (for instance, the personal pronouns).

Compounding the problem is the time taken to learn Chinese; the thousands of characters required to be only nominally literate are usually learnt by rote learning, which works against using more 'modern' forms of teaching. Bond (1991), quoted in Flowerdew and Miller (1995: 362), notes that the achievement of literacy by an individual in Chinese is truly a formidable task. Some 3,500 different characters need to be mastered before even a rudimentary understanding of a book or newspaper is possible. In order to achieve literacy, from kindergarten age, Chinese are subjected to lengthy classroom and homework assignments involving the intensive rote learning of characters. It is not surprising, as Flowerdew and Miller point out, (*ibid*) that, as a result of this training, Chinese students have highly developed memorisation skills, which carry over to other learning tasks in the primary and secondary school and which students expect to continue to use at the university level.

To make matters even worse, most parents want their children to be in English Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools, mainly in the mistaken belief that this will help them acquire good language skills which will open better employment prospects.

Lo (1995: 33) considers that since so much time is spent on understanding the language, the students' incentive for learning is smothered. Only the very bright or self-motivated students can afford to develop their own interests to continue studying references and outside books. The study by Kvan (1969), quoted in Lo (*ibid*), points out that the English reading comprehension ability of first year university students (the cream of the student population) was only comparable to the 12/13-year-old pupils in the U.K. or the U.S.A. . This suggests that the second language has hindered the 'bright' students from going even further in their academic pursuits.

This level of English comprehension wreaks havoc at tertiary level. As Lo (*ibid*) also considers:

In addition to the cognitive cost, the study conducted by Ripple et al.(1984) shows

also the affective costs of bilingual education in Hong Kong. The study explores the impact of language of instruction on divergent thinking, self-esteem, and locus of control in English-speaking expatriate and Hong Kong Chinese adolescents. It is found that the ability to produce original ideas seems inhibited when one is required to respond in a language other than one's mother tongue. Expatriate adolescents were significantly higher in self-esteem, internal locus of control and were more prepared to accept personal responsibility for negative outcomes than the Hong Kong Chinese adolescents.

Although not the main consideration of this paper, it is useful to look at the background to the languages used in the classroom in primary and secondary schools and the impact this has on the examination used to determine the entry requirements into university.

Lo (ibid) provides a comprehensive synopsis of the history of education in Hong Kong. Other than the impact this history has on the standard of English of students applying for university entrance, this heavily discussed area will not be repeated here. We need to consider only two aspects of this history before being able to appreciate the problem at tertiary level. We have already seen that most students leaving school in Hong Kong are not totally literate in Chinese, having to use a written character system that is based on Putonghua, not Cantonese. At the same time, Cantonese is very much a spoken language with little 'classic' literature of its own. Most books, newspapers and television programmes will emphasise the spoken and vernacular form of the language over the more classical, Putonghua based forms. On top of this, the low standard of English, both written and spoken, imposes extra strains, especially when most parents want their child to attend a EMI school.

This dichotomy expresses itself in many ways, most clearly in the classroom. As Lo (1995: 39) notes, Chinese is used a great deal in all lessons in the lower secondary forms of Anglo-Chinese secondary schools. Apart from the few prestigious schools where English is genuinely the medium of instruction in and also outside the classrooms, the 'teacher-talk' in the remaining Anglo-Chinese schools may range from 100% English to 99% Chinese (Tam, 1980; Johnson, 1984), depending on the practice of the school, the particular subject matter, the intention of the teacher and the competence of the students or the teacher in using English. Johnson (1983) found that of the total talking time recorded, 43% was in English, 48% in Cantonese and 9% in Cantonese with English words inserted.

This study of the bilingual switching strategies of secondary school teachers in Hong Kong classrooms found that English is consistently spoken by teachers in text-dependent, formal,

didactic contexts, while Cantonese is employed for text-independent, informal, and explanatory purposes. Thus, when teachers wish to elicit a response from the students, or to offer personal advice, they tend to speak Cantonese. As Tung (1990: 523) comments:

In contrast, when teachers wish to issue formal instructions, or to direct students' attention to important terms and statements pertinent to written work, they are more likely to resort to the use of English. Judging by the examples above of teachers' use of oral and written language, and considering that writing is almost always information-focused in Hong Kong classrooms, it seems justified to hypothesise that teachers in Hong Kong tend to select Cantonese, a spoken medium, to facilitate interaction with the students, and English spoken or written to focus on academic content.

Hayhoe, Director-designate, Hong Kong Institute of Education, notes the effects of this lack of fluency. "Young people should be able to talk about economics and political studies, geography and history in their own language first. It's ridiculous to have these young people on the bus speaking 'Chinglish' all the time because they don't know the concepts in geography and political science in Chinese, but they don't feel comfortable conversing in English. So they converse in Chinese with a huge number of English words used very loosely and imprecisely." (SCMP: 29.7.97: 17)

Professor Hayhoe is aware of the community's concern about a decline in the standards of English in Hong Kong, but warns against making cursory conclusions based on public examination results. "I don't really believe that standards have gone down. What has happened is that a larger part of the community aspires to become bilingual and this group, the larger group now, have less reinforcement at home. They come from homes where there's no English ever spoken, there's no English radio or television constantly available to them, there's very little English reading material around them."

Cummins (1979, 1980), quoted in Lo (1995: 40) found that home-school switching has no detrimental effect for most middle-class children from a majority language background, but those from minority language backgrounds and less favoured socioeconomic status will have poor academic achievement and an inadequate command of both their first and second languages. Although Chinese in Hong Kong is not the minority language, it does have a relatively lower social and economic status when compared to English. Besides the majority homes have parents who are not involved in their children's bilingual development as they do not know

the English language at all, as Lo (ibid: 19) demonstrates.

Hayhoe (ibid) also notes that Hong Kong is not unlike Canada, a bilingual country where fluency in both English and French is required for a career in government. Canada has developed French immersion schools for children from English speaking families. Those who send their children to these schools are mainly well-educated. "They can be sure that at home their children, would have excellent support for the development of English through the cultural context of the family. Then they immerse them in French in the schools and they have a competitive advantage when they graduate. Those who go to [French] immersion schools [in Canada] are like those who go to [the English-medium schools such as Heep Yun, St Paul, DGS and so on [in Hong Kong].

"Unfortunately, what has happened in Hong Kong is that even families who do not have adequate resources to help their children are also sending their children to English immersion schools, not all of which are well equipped to teach in the language. I think what they [Hong Kong parents] have to understand is that their children may actually be disadvantaged by a poor quality English medium school. But it's difficult for less educated parents to grasp that," Hayhoe says.

It is clear, therefore, that most school leavers, especially those expecting to go on to some form of tertiary education, are woefully unprepared for what awaits them. Clearly this places a burden on the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong that does not exist in most other developed economies. This is not to say that the government is not aware of the situation, or has done little about it. One attempt to correct things was to reorganise the examination taken by Form 7 students.

The Hong Kong Examinations Authority introduced the Use of English examination (UE) in 1989. The examination sets out to test candidates ability to; understand and interpret spoken English; write clear, concise and grammatical English; demonstrate both global and detailed understanding of a variety of written texts; and integrate reading, writing and study skills (HKEA, 1987: 2).

However, taking into account the problems outlined above, Byron et al (1993: 37) note that it is often argued, as they see it, erroneously, that as testing of students is mainly through the written medium, there is no problem per se. They suggest that this stance, however, ignores the intellectual and practical consequences of the deficiencies in students' abilities. A marked reluctance to engage in

debate and discussion during tutorials and seminars is not uncommon owing to the cultural factors.

Students may be unable or unwilling to pose questions or to pursue points they do not understand - to the detriment of their critical and analytical skills. While such reluctance is to the detriment of the students' performance in this university (HKU), staff are quite familiar with the problem.

When those students go abroad to study for further degrees, however, they may find themselves at a disadvantage in the cut and thrust of the more oral tradition in British, American and Commonwealth universities (Byron et al: 1993: 37)".

Thus even the latest attempt by the government to make the English language school leaving examination more relevant did not really address the needs of the tertiary institutions.

### Enhancement or remediation?

So, if, as seems likely, the UE examination is not a good indicator of students' abilities to understand and use English, it is clear that something has to be done at the tertiary level to compensate. The problems were recognised quite early on by the Education Department. They set up a Working Group in 1990 to make some recommendations concerning language enhancement methods, especially for those entering the tertiary sector. Their main recommendation was the setting up of 200 hour 'bridging' courses for those who were not of an adequate standard for university entrance.

As Lewkowicz (1990:4) points out in the HKU Language Centre's response to the Education Department's Report of the Working Group set up to Review Language Enhancement Measures in 1990,

A further point of concern is the length of time specified in the report as necessary to bring up Chinese-stream pupils to the required standard of English. The report assumes that within one year students can master sufficient language to handle an English-medium tertiary education. It may, however, take considerably longer for pupils to acquire sufficient English to use for academic purposes. In addition, the range of abilities in English may be such that some pupils would require less English tuition than others to survive in English-medium tertiary education. Therefore, the courses would have to be flexible in length and not of fixed duration.



According to Lewkowicz (ibid), the, then proposed, increase in first-year tertiary places to 15,000 by 1994 posed a danger to future standards of English and, by extension, he claimed, to the very status of English-medium tertiary education in Hong Kong. This would have repercussions beyond Hong Kong, as the credibility of degrees awarded in Hong Kong would be damaged and inevitably recognition removed.

The Education Department may claim this lies outside its sphere of influence, but in the end it is the government which controls the purse-strings. The Education Department must recognise the pervasive effect a decline in English standards in schools would have throughout the whole education system and beyond the shores of Hong Kong. (Lewkowicz, 1990:4)

One major point made by Lewkowicz was that 40-50% of examinees at HKCE are repeaters who have failed to attain the necessary standard to continue their education.

These students are already having to do an extra year and are clearly prepared to do so when necessary. (Lewkowicz; 1990:7)

Given the circumstances and pressures on the education system, it is clear that different institutions would arrive at different solutions. However, 'improving the learners' English' could imply in operational terms that the goal of an English enhancement programme should be to bring about gains on some acceptable measure of English language proficiency. This also suggests that such general improvement would be both necessary (or at least highly desirable) and clearly realisable within the timescale and circumstances of the programme.

In fact, one of the outcomes of the Department of Education's Working Party, referred to above, was the 200 hour intensive course given by the British Council each summer. This will be looked at in greater detail later. But one point needs to be addressed. If students, after 12 years of schooling, are still not competent in English to enter university, is the problem one of remediation or enhancement?

Allison (1992) maintains that the term "English enhancement" appears to be gaining currency, at least in Hong Kong, as a preferred descriptor for English language programmes in contexts where English is a second-language medium of higher education for the students being taught.

Johnson, (quoted in Allison 1992: 23), comments on the totally inappropriate use of the word

'remedial' in the context of Anglo-Chinese secondary schools in Hong Kong. This is because remedial teachers were evenly distributed amongst the schools, without reference to the very different student ability levels; thus remedial students in Band 1 schools would not have been remedial in Band 2 schools, and might well have been outstandingly proficient in Band 5 schools. As Johnson observes, "The only criterion which appears to be satisfied by the distribution of remedial post is administrative tidiness". Johnson (1986: 70)

Swales (1990) (quoted in Allison: 1992:16) neatly encapsulates the basic problem. He suggests that the remedial view of teaching programmes suggests that school leavers have nothing left to learn about how to use English, or indeed language, in academic and professional communication, except to the extent that secondary or high schools have failed to cover their own syllabuses. This expectation would seem highly doubtful even for native speakers and all the more so for students working in a second language.

Allison (1992: 16) considers that the belief that ESL courses in English-medium universities are and should be designed to ensure minimal curricular survival for a minority of linguistically disadvantaged or less able students, who encounter serious and persistent problems of a kind that normal students do not experience, or do not need assistance with, becomes untenable on grounds of student numbers. Then it may assume another form,

"in judgements that the mass of students are not up to some "proper standard" - a sorry state of affairs, that is obviously all the fault of the schools - and that students therefore still need remedial help. ....An obvious problem with a characterisation of students as "remedial" is that students themselves may feel stigmatised or may have a poor self-image, and so may well be resentful because they have been assigned to follow ESL courses.

Another common difficulty, according to Allison (ibid), is that "remedial" perceptions of ESL programmes and students may be accompanied by dismissive views, held and aired in disregard of facts, concerning the academic and professional standards of ESL teaching staff. This is especially likely in universities. He suggests that even sympathetic colleagues, who respect the contribution of ESL teachers, are often unclear about the nature and frequent intellectual challenge of English language teaching at tertiary level.

Prevailing views of "remedial" ESL programmes, students and teachers typically reflect on the

lack of status and influence of teaching units that are associated with ESL work.

“Such units - even though they may be called "centres" - typically occupy the periphery of university life, especially when it comes to wider curricular questions. Once a remedial brief has been accepted, such a state of affairs appears normal and right to many people, since remedial teaching, however laudable, is not what universities are for. ESL units may then find it difficult either to gain access to the more influential university committees or to undertake professional discussions on an equal footing with some (less supportive) academic departments.” (Allison, 1992: 16)

In programmes of restricted scope, such as content-based programmes at tertiary level, specific forms of achievement will need to be identified and measured if it is wished to establish that learning has taken place. 'Efficiency' in bringing about improvement in relation to one form of achievement (and also in assessing such improvement) will need to be offset against other potentially worthwhile uses of enhancement time when such programmes are evaluated in accountability terms.

If a limited time is available for such programmes, there can be real difficulties in reaching an agreement on teaching priorities, even, for example, the importance of spoken versus written English. Prioritising different goals in terms of perceived value and achievability may still lead to an outcome falling short of an ideal of overall improvement in English.

### The situation at CityU

In most tertiary institutions it is not only the formal English classes where language is learnt. Flowerdew and Miller's work at CityU highlights the amount of L2 language acquisition that goes on in normal lectures, especially those given by native English speakers. Unfortunately, as they point out:

None of the lecturers we interviewed demonstrated any familiarity with language learning theory or of the role that they might play in providing modified input and an opportunity for language development. This situation is unfortunate, because an awareness on the part of lecturers of their potential role in language enhancement would be likely to lead them to consider in what ways they might optimise this potential. (1996:127)

This would seem to indicate that some form of content-based language teaching would be the best

way of enhancing English competence.

Pennington, et al (1992) showed that students at CityU have little or no exposure to English at home. In Flowerdew and Miller's study (1996a: 27), the students attending the lectures would all have sat the UE examination. To gain entrance onto a course at tertiary level students must have gained at least a grade 'E'. A grade 'E' correlates to around 450 on the TOEFL test (Hogan and Chan, 1993). Generally, students admitted onto science courses have a grade 'D' (TOEFL 498-503) in their UE examination, while those on business related subjects or law will have a grade 'C' (TOEFL 530-540). Engineering students generally have a grade 'E'. As a point of comparison, most US universities have an entry level of around 550.

Flowerdew and Miller (1995: 358) showed that in the lectures they studied students were seen to engage in a high level of peer assistance, helping each other by explaining in Cantonese points their classmates were having difficulty with. Such peer assistance in lectures can reach such a level in the CityU lecture theatre that a number of lecturers, unaware of what was really going on, commented to us that they found their students inattentive and to chatter too much while they were lecturing. Flowerdew and Miller's observations, however, in general, seemed to indicate that this was not the case and that students were genuinely focusing on the subject matter of the lecture when they were talking to each other.

In disciplines such as electronic engineering, where there is an overwhelming preponderance of jargon, mixed code teaching is normal as there are no equivalent words in Cantonese; the English word has to be used. In mainland China there are Putonghua expressions for most of the latest engineering expressions but these do not normally translate easily into Cantonese.

As Flowerdew and Miller (1995: 368) point out, because CityU is oriented toward applied disciplines, they tend to be dynamic in terms of their development. One effect of a rapidly developing vocabulary is that Hong Kong students, who in secondary school have relied on glossing their English texts and handouts in Chinese, now have to adopt an alternative strategy, there being no Chinese equivalent with which to gloss the English term. They continue:

The importance of lectures vis a vis other learning media is thus enhanced, and the need to depend on the spoken medium as opposed to the written, increased. The effect of this situation on students is doubly hard because at school students are used to using an English text, but with a largely Cantonese commentary....Students are now faced with no set text to

refer to and a commentary only in English. This is to a large extent accounts for why departments provide their students with detailed lecture notes.

In fact CityU is at a double disadvantage when compared to most of the other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. This is because the below average A level achievement of students entering CityU is allied to the programmes being mainly in the applied disciplines, This has meant that CityU has had to develop its own ways to deal with the problem of language enhancement.

#### CityU's response

Originally, the Language Institute (LI) was set up to provide specialised courses for those students who had not achieved Grade D in the UE examinations. Initially this was on an individual basis, in the form of additional work. However by 1995 it became so common for the majority of students in a class to all be at Grade E, especially in engineering courses, that the English enhancement course became compulsory for all students, unless they were exempt.

The LI established a well provided for Language Centre, where students could pursue self study programmes. However, as will be seen later, this was not as well used as expected. The LI was staffed by full-time staff who enjoyed all the benefits and expectations of the other academics, an important consideration in terms of their commitment to the university. The overall effect of this was to apply pressure to the academic departments to lower the number of contact hours in the chosen discipline to allow time for English enhancement. Maybe some form of examination to show students' achievement in improving the English language skills would be worth considering?

In 1995, when the idea of an exit examination was proposed, opinions were divided. On the plus side it was agreed that an exit exam would demonstrate the quality assurance aspects to the community, as well as highlight certain proficiencies. It would also be well understood by the public and enhance the credibility - also employers would like it! At the same time the UGC and senior government administrators were also mooting the idea privately. The government's interest in the subject was highlighted at a dinner attended by the ex-Vice Chancellor, which had the Secretary for the Civil Service, The Secretary for Education and Manpower, the Financial Secretary as well as the UGC Chairman.

The case against the introduction of an exit examination was also well argued. What subjects would have to be given up in the curriculum to accommodate the new subjects required? At least 200 hours

of contact would be needed to raise the level of competence by one grade. Students are pragmatic and would give priority to those subjects that directly affect their graduation prospects. There was also an undercurrent of fear about what resources would be lost to the College if the proportion of time on the course were lowered. This fear was exacerbated by the fact that student numbers were now stable if not declining slightly. Resources were becoming tighter all round.

There was also scepticism about what benchmarks to use. Was the HKCEE the right examination to use? There were many queries over its validity in evaluating the competence in English for tertiary education.

What if a substantial number of students fail? How are they to be accommodated and taught? And what will be the extra costs in doing so?

Different sectors of the university responded in different ways. In particular, the College of Higher Vocational Studies (COL), the academic and administrative section of CityU that looks after the professional, usually sub-degree, courses, took a 'proactive' response to the situation, unlike the other faculties.

In an interview for this paper, Prof H K Wong, Principal of the College, said "In the College competency in English is very important. Use of English text books in Higher Diploma work and professional courses enhance employment prospects. Good English is especially good for first impressions when applying for a job: practical skills take longer to evaluate. There have been many complaints from employers about standards of English over the past few years. To emphasise our commitment to good standards of English, we have even put a section in college mission statement about language standards"..

The Academic Policy Committee of the university as well as Senate had set up working groups to consider the language problem. The College decided to start discussions in anticipation of a university wide debate. At the same time the College consulted their students. They were also ambivalent. An exit examination would pose an additional hurdle. This would provide an adverse effect on recruitment, especially as the other institutions were not considering such a step.

The Division of Language Studies (LS) in the College also objected. They did so on logistical grounds as well as the validity and lack of objectives of the proposals. As the university, and the College in particular, were teaching technical/professional based courses they considered it more important to strengthen the communications skills within those specialised sectors rather than in general.

Finally, the university stated that it would not provide additional funds for the project. That meant that resources would be taken from the academic departments.

So, at the beginning of 1996 the majority of staff were dissatisfied with the proposals; why should CityU be the first; shouldn't we wait for the others; shouldn't we wait for a reliable instrument for testing students in English for employment purposes?

The Vice Chancellor was trying to get a consensus view around the university, although he personally was 'for it'. However most of the Pro Vice Chancellors were not in favour, mainly due to the huge cost implications. The Language Institute (LI) was asked to provide more detailed costings.

In the interim the university management was trying to get LI to make greater use of self assessment packages, as there were pending budgetary problems. At the same time, the faculties were discussing the proposals. The Faculty of Science and Technology was strongly against - they considered that Grade E was good enough for entrance and had no problems. The Faculty of Law and Faculty of Humanities and Social Science needed a D or C grade.

However, two 'external' events overtook the discussions in the middle of 1996. The appointment of a new President (retitled from Vice Chancellor) meant that the introduction of a credit unit system was brought forward, as it was one of his pet schemes. This meant that credit bearing units could now be offered in English instead of these being 'embedded' into individual courses. At the same time the management had set up a Task Force on English Language. This approach was unique in that it applied industrial management concepts to language enhancement; an outside consultant with little academic but large industrial background was included. The aim was to bring industrial reengineering ideas to bear on English language problems. This was the first time that such a thing had happened at any university, so there was little, if any, experience or literature on the subject.

The Task Force met four times since June 1996. It decided to concentrate its deliberations on English enhancement in the first instance, noting that as 1997 drew near, motivation to learn Putonghua and students' exposure to Chinese writing would increase, while on the other hand students would need more stimulus and help to achieve English proficiency. The Task Force found that while Grade E in Use of English (UE) in HKALE or its equivalent and English Language (Syllabus B) in HKCEE or its equivalent can be accepted as satisfying the survival requirement for entry to degree and sub-degree studies, Grade D should be the threshold required of a reasonable performance at the university level. It contended that the University must strictly

enforce this minimum entry requirement. In addition, all students must attain a standard equivalent to a Grade D or above level before progressing, to Year 2. The purpose of concentrating the enhancement efforts in the first year is to enable students to benefit from university education as early as possible. Departments should have the autonomy to set entry requirements above Grade E and to require additional work for students enrolled on courses requiring a higher level English proficiency.

In November 1996 the President commissioned a Re-engineering Committee on First Year English Language Teaching to help identify the most cost-effective way to provide language enhancement courses to students, and to capitalise the efforts of the 3 departments involved in English teaching. The Re-engineering Committee was tasked with exploring innovative means, both inside and outside the classroom, to entice students to further improve their English language proficiency towards a Grade C level or above.

The Reengineering Committee agreed that the most effective way to enhance students' English is to compel students to use English in all academic work. Thus the policy of English being the medium of instruction should be re-confirmed and strictly enforced (Appendix 1 summarises the Reengineering Group's proposals). A question as to the language used by the teaching staff should be included in the teaching evaluation form, to enable the Heads of Departments to monitor the situation. Heads should be required to provide periodic statistics to the management and to propose ways to encourage staff and students to use English more frequently.

The outcome of all the proposals outlined above, is that over a period of 18 months, there was now broad consensus on what to do. In short, students will have to improve their English competence by one grade before they can graduate and the entrance requirements for each faculty will be different. The recommendations, as accepted by Senate were widely circulated and discussed amongst the faculty members concerned, especially after the management circulated a document to all staff outlining the strategy - Appendix 2.

Although there were some serious reservations concerning the proposals, most academic staff supported them in principle. In fact, the proposals have been referred to closely by all the other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and taken up by government. The need to improve students performance by one grade has now been accepted as formal government policy and must be implemented by all UGC funded institutions. (Chief Executive's Policy Statement, 9.10.97).



## Conclusions

Unfortunately this general consensus amongst staff hides a number of problems which are of concern to those involved in language teaching at the university. For example the Faculty of Science and Technology accepts students with a grade E, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science accepts those with a grade D, and the Faculty of Law accepts those with a grade C. The 'jump' from E to D is far 'easier' than the 'jump' from D to C, which is easier than the 'jump' from C to B. How is this to be dealt with in terms of assessment and allocation of student time?

There is also a question mark over part time evening (PTE) students. This is more serious in the College than elsewhere, although nearly 30% of all CityU students are studying in a part-time/evening mode. What if they took their English Language qualifications before the UE examination was begun - which is quite likely as most PTE students are mature.

But the main question hanging over the establishment of the English Enhancement Course (EEC) is the fact that it is closely based on the courses set up by the Department of Education/Hong Kong Examination Council for those needing to improve their grades for university entrance. The one run by the British Council is a good example of the problem. Each summer it takes in students from Chinese Medium of Instruction schools and puts them through a 180 hour course lasting 6 weeks. This is staffed by part time, casual teachers/tutors, most with little experience of Hong Kong. The objective is to enable those with Grade F in the UE examination to get at least a grade E. The pass rate for this course is only 25%.

According to Matthew Leung, Head of the Language Institute (LI) at the University, interviewed for this paper, such an intensive course may help verbal skills, but have little effect on others, such as writing. That can only come from being involved in a possibly less intensive course spread over a longer period of time.

In fact, according to Leung, the LI's involvement in the process has been an interesting experience.

“The use of an outside consultant, more familiar with business practices than academic ones, although useful, need for some form of objective measure was the main reason for the choice of a one grade increase in competence. However the choice of testing instrument leaves much to be desired. A clear reference to an valid external examination was required.

The use of instruments from a different environment was a danger. For example, most of the tests available from the 'west' are used to determine whether a student has reached a score high enough to be accepted for university- the UE examination is just such a test. However, the students involved with

Leung was also critical of the use of the use of tutors that will have no long term commitment of the university and/or the students. They will only be given one year contracts on a grade that is not an academic one. In fact, the salary grade is about the same as a secondary school teacher, but without the benefits, such as housing allowances etc. Citing the British Council results, Leung is not convinced this will work satisfactorily.

Flowerdew, also interviewed for this paper, thinks that in addition to the setting up of the EEC resources should be used to train academic staff how to teach in English to L2 students. This is especially true of those from EMI schools (which he says are really CMI schools in reality!). He cites the example of Canada where such training already exists. Flowerdew is also concerned at the structure of the EEC. It will have 50 tutors and only one manager. This also worries Leung of the LI. At the same time, the professed emphasis on English seems to contradict what is happening at the 'chalkface'. There are indications that some teaching staff have lowered their expectation about the students' language proficiency. Staff are increasingly pressurised to use Cantonese to conduct classes at the request of and for the benefit of the students. A Second Year part-time evening student, interviewed for this paper, recounted how she had repeatedly complained to the Course Leader about the use of Cantonese on her course (Higher Diploma in Social Studies). She found that there was little support for her complaints, either from other students in her class, or from the academics in charge of the course. A common retort to her questioning of the use of Cantonese was "If you want to study in English do and English language course!" A class survey showed that only 10% of the class was concerned about the problem. She stated that the notes and overhead slides were in English, that the students made notes in English, even though the lecturer was speaking Cantonese. In fact, so much time was spent in translating back and forth that there was no time for discussion. There is little pressure from students for change.

Concerns have also been expressed about the danger of teaching staff receiving low rating in student evaluation as a result of students' inability to comprehend in English. Therefore in interpreting the students' feedback, Heads of Department should be careful not to put those staff who use English in an unduly disadvantageous position. There is anecdotal evidence that this has happened in a number of departments, although no objective research has been carried out on the problem.

In conclusion, notwithstanding some major concerns that have still to be satisfactorily addressed, CityU has recognised the rather unique nature of Hong Kong and its problems with English language medium of instruction, especially on the competence of the majority of those entering the university. It has proposed formalising the enhancement of English as a necessary and compulsory part of gaining a qualification from the university, and has established a new English Enhancement Course within a new Language Enhancement Unit. This course will be credit bearing.

However the choice of using many tutors on temporary contracts has raised many queries as to the commitment of these staff to the university, the students and Hong Kong. The example of the British Council courses in this area is not a good one.

At the same time, making a one-grade enhancement compulsory for graduation also raises some interesting problems. First, what happens if the student fails? They must retake the course until they pass. If the British Council's record is repeated at CityU then the cost of getting just a one grade improvement could be great. The use of non-committed, relatively untrained and inexperienced tutors may be a false economy.

(Some pages are missing here including all references. These will be added at a later date when I can locate them!)

## **Appendix 1**

### **Executive Summary of the Language Re-engineering Group's recommendations to Senate**

The Language Re-engineering Group recommends that the University require all students to improve their English language competence during their studies at the University. This applies especially to those who only meet the minimum entry requirement. The University would provide the supporting programmes, measures and initiatives, in both formal and informal settings, to help the students improve.

The Group recommends that the University:

#### *Formal Teaching and Learning (pages 13-22)*

1. Ask individual departments to explore using finer grades of Use of English/public examinations for admission of students. (paragraphs 28-29)
2. Require students to achieve, before graduation, a level of English which is equivalent to one grade higher than the minimum entrance required specified for their. Exemption would be given to students enrolled in programmes which set a C as the minimum entry grade and the Diploma in Social Work. (paragraph.30)
3. Apply the English improvement requirement to full-time and part-time bachelor's degree and higher diploma students. (paragraphs 31-32)
4. Provide a formal English language enhancement course, which is non-credit bearing\*, to help students meet the improvement requirement. The course would have a modular structure comprising, five defined skill areas, to be offered in each semester/term. (paragraphs 33-37)
5. Develop an off-campus site, supported by the University, with residential facilities for organising various activities for students by Faculties/College, SAO, etc. This facility may function as an 'English Village' to support an 'Immersion experience' in the language, which would be part of the enhancement course. (Paragraphs 38-39)
6. Provide academic counsel to students for enrolment in the appropriate module(s) to improve

their weaker skill(s), to help students 'self-police' their study, and to avoid overloading, in a particular semester/term. (Paragraphs 40-42)

7. Offer multiple opportunities for students to improve the requisite skills during their time at the University. The assessment of each of the five modules would be offered at the end of each semester/term. (paragraph 43)

8. Measure the performance of students in the exit examinations with reference to the student's entry grade obtained in Use of English and develop the examinations with external moderation to ensure credibility. (paragraphs 44-45)

9. Establish the standard of English competency required of the students. (paragraph 46)

10. Devise some form of "certification of English language improvement" to validate the progress made in each module of study. (paragraph 47)

11. Require a minimum of six credit units of discipline-specific English language communication studies in a student's programme of study, with these courses to be more evenly throughout the curriculum. (paragraph 49)

12. Ensure that students receive tuition for some part of the enhancement course before taking the credit-bearing English language/communication courses, which should start no earlier than Semester B of Year 1. (paragraph 51)

13. Set up a committee comprising representatives from all the English teaching units to strengthen coordination and management of English (General language competency and discipline-specific communication skills) courses. (paragraph 52)

14. Designate some courses as 'English Assessed'. for which students would be assessed for both knowledge of the subject studies and language /communication competence. Language teachers would be affiliated to the subject department to facilitate this. (paragraphs 53-54)

15. Encourage more use of technological development in communication, such as e-mail and video conferencing, to enhance the learning experience for students. (paragraphs 55-57)

16. Affirm a clear policy on the medium of instruction and take proactive measures to implement the policy, e.g.. to identify 'English-medium' courses; to provide training, to staff who need to enhance their English skills for effective delivery of courses in English; and to recruit academic staff capable of conducting courses in English effectively. (paragraphs 58-60)

*Informal/Semi-structured Settings* (pages 22-27)

17. Instil an English-speaking culture at the University and build up a supportive environment in which there are ample opportunities for the use of English in academic and social interaction. The following initiatives and activities are proposed:

(a) A work-study programme to provide opportunities for students to work in settings that require use of English, (paragraphs 63-64)

(b) A language clinic to provide immediate help to individual students, (paragraph 65)

(c) A mentor programme enabling students to practice English and engendering closer staff-student interaction outside the classroom, (paragraphs 66-69)

(d) An English Club to organise activities that would arouse students' interest in learning and using English, (paragraphs 70-73)

(e) Showing English-language movies and English-language news broadcasts to build up the social environment for using English on campus, (paragraphs 75- 76)

(f) Encouraging more frequent use of the Internet for learning English, (paragraph 78)

(g) Providing support for overseas travel/study, (paragraphs 79-80)

(h) An English language festival to mark the start, of the English language enhancement course, (paragraph 22)

(i) Student orientation to highlight the importance of English in University education and future development. (paragraph 83)

*Management and Implementation (paragraphs 84-86)*

18. Establish a high level committee to oversee the development, implementation, review and continuous monitoring of English enhancement policy, initiatives and related activities. (paragraph 84)

19. Subject to the implementation and logistical details being worked out, apply the improvement requirement to the new intakes from 1997-98 and review the specific requirement in three years' time. (paragraph 85)

20. Offer the English language enhancement course from 1997-98, with the course being reviewed and monitored on an annual basis. (paragraph 85)

*Next Stage of the Project (page 27)*

21. Set up a planning implementation team to develop the implementation plan and timetable for the above recommended courses of action. (paragraph 87)

## **Appendix 2**

Letter sent to all academic and academic support staff by John Dockerill, VP, Planning and Information Services; 25 June 1997

### **Senate Approval**

As you may know, Senate at its meeting on 15 April, 1997 approved that students be required to achieve

before graduation, a level of English which is equivalent to one grade higher than the minimum English entrance requirement specified for their programme (with Grade C as a ceiling and exemption be given to students admitted to the Diploma of Social Work). To help the incoming students achieve the target level

of attainment, a new English Enhancement Course (EEC) will be offered from summer this year. The June

Senate endorsed the structure and curriculum of the EEC, noting that the detailed syllabuses were being

refined by a team of language experts drawn from all the English teaching units of the University and would be available by early July.

### **Students Involved**

The June Senate also agreed that the attainment requirement be applied to new full-time bachelor's degree

and higher diploma students from 1997-98 and applied to part-time students a year later. While the EEC should supersede the English Foundation Programme (EFP), the EFP will still be offered to continuing students who have not completed it. Special arrangement has been approved for new students of three programmes, namely BA (Hons) Teaching English as a Second Language, BA (Hons) English for Professional Communication and BA (Hons) Translation and Interpretation. Since these programmes include substantial elements in the curricula which improve English proficiency, students only need to submit themselves to assessment of the EEC no later than the end of Year 1, and attendance/completion of coursework of EEC would be optional.

### **English Enhancement Course**

Based on past student profile, it is anticipated that about 70% of the new students will need to fulfil the English attainment requirement and register in the EEC. As the Course affects the majority



your students, I am now presenting the details and key features of the EEC which may be of interest to you.

### *Types of Courses*

There will be three separate English enhancement courses corresponding to different cohorts of students required to achieve different levels of attainment:

\* degree and higher diploma students: Grade E to the equivalence of D in UE (Higher diploma

students required to improve from a Grade D to the equivalence of C in HKCEE will study this course as a Grade D in UE is equivalent to a C in HKCEE.),

\* degree students: Grade D to the equivalence of C in UE,

\* higher diploma students: Grade E to the equivalence of D in HKCEE

While the Course is specifically designed to improve students' English to target levels, it is also designed with an academic orientation to help students pursue University level studies. The assessment will therefore be specially designed and will not be a replication of UE.

### *Course Curriculum and Structure*

Each English Enhancement Course consists of 5 modules: Listening (30 hours), Speaking (40 hours), (40 hours), Writing (50 hours) and Academic Skills (40 hours), amounting to a total of 200 hours of contact teaching conducted in groups of 10 to 20 students. Students should take all 5 modules, each of which can be completed at different times during their period of study and there is no fixed order in which the modules should be taken. However, students would benefit more from the Academic Skills Module if they have completed at least one other module in the Course.

### *Earning of Course Credits and meeting the Exit Requirement*

The English Enhancement Course amounts to a nominal total of 6 credit units. The 6 credits are earned only when the whole Course is completed and completion of an individual module does not earn any portion of the 6 credit units. End-of-module examination will be held and students can attempt the examination of each module up to three times. Assessment is on a pass/fail basis. In other words, students must pass all modules in order to fulfil the attainment requirement.

### *Time of Taking the Enhancement Modules*

Notwithstanding that the modular structure of the Course gives students greater flexibility to self-pace their learning path, it would be in the best interests of the students to complete the course as early as possible, since having a better command of English early in their academic careers enables them to benefit more from the education offered by the University. This calls for a front-loading of English Enhancement Course, which may amount to roughly 5 or more contact hours per semester, to be completed preferably in the students' first year of study.

Programme planners are urged to take this into serious consideration in devising the curriculum schedule to help students enhance their English as early as possible.

### *Delivery and Management of EEC,*

As both students and teachers have to devote large number of contact hours to the new EEC, English enhancement will become a major activity in the students' study at the University. We estimated that about 40 new staff will be needed for about 30,000 hours of teaching and they will belong to a new English Language Centre to be charged with the task of English enhancement which includes both formal teaching and learning (the bulk of which is the EEC) and non-classroom based enhancement activities. The University is now recruiting the new staff for the modules to be offered from Semester A 1997-98 onwards. In the meantime, the EEC modules offered this summer (19 August - 5 September 97) will be organised with the help of the Language Institute.

I would like to mention, in passing, that Senate approved the basic structure of academic programmes

which stipulates that for all undergraduate programmes 6 credit units be earned in fulfilment of University language requirement. The EEC being credit-bearing (albeit not counted in the calculation of

the Graduation Grade Point Average) may be used to fulfil the University language requirement if

department/division so decides. Students who do not have to take the EEC, nevertheless, have to fulfil the 6 credit units of University language requirement and departments/divisions may advise such students how they can do so.

### **Communication with Students and Teachers**

As the English language attainment requirement applies to the incoming students, we have taken measures

to inform them at the preoffer stage. The information will also be included in the Student Handbook.

Students will receive greater details about the EEC when they are formally offered a place in the University.

Under the proposed arrangement for the EEC, students need to take greater responsibility in making

choices on the load they carry and on the best way to manage their progress. The first cohort of students

may encounter greater difficulty as they would be the first group to go through the new system. To help

them make sound choices, good information and good advice must be provided. Students should be given adequate academic counsel on their progress in EEC. It will also be important to keep you updated on the development of EEC and its likely impact on the students' study at the University.

We are also developing a range of voluntary English enhancement activities which may help increase

students' exposure to English and encourage them to make greater use of it as a means of communication.

We would like to invite you to contribute to this effort of building an English speaking environment on

campus.

The English enhancement programmes represent a major undertaking which call for your support and participation. We look forward to receiving your comments and support to the University's ambitious plan

to improve students' English.