

12 and 13 March 2009 (Thursday and Friday)

**Consultation Forums on Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction
for Secondary Schools**

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Catch the Chance and Stride to Success

Preamble

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to be here to share with you my thoughts on fine-tuning the medium of instruction (MOI) for secondary schools. I would also like to take this opportunity to hear your opinions so as to understand the views of different parties on the fine-tuning arrangements.

Objective of Fine-tuning

2. You will probably ask, “Why do we need to fine-tune the MOI arrangements for secondary schools?” Over the last decade, there has been proven success of the learning effectiveness of students under our mother-tongue teaching policy. Schools have also mastered the knowledge of how to maximise the benefits of the suitable MOI to facilitate the learning of content subjects. It is now the right time for us, on the basis of mother-tongue teaching, to move forward and provide schools with room for development so that they can exercise their professional discretion on the MOI and adopt a student-centred approach to teaching.

3. On the other hand, more importantly, Hong Kong is not only an Asian international city but also a global financial centre. To maintain and strengthen this role, we must equip our students with high proficiency in both Chinese and English in order to rise to the challenges of the 21st century brought about by societal changes. Fine-tuning the MOI for secondary schools will undoubtedly increase students’ exposure to English in classroom at junior secondary levels. At the same time, we should enable our students to learn English well at primary levels to achieve a combined effect through the two-pronged approach.

Details of Fine-tuning

4. So, what is fine-tuning? Our MOI policy is mainly premised on the “Report

on Review of Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools and Secondary School Places Allocation” (MOI & SSPA Report) published by the Education Commission (EC) in 2005. Our policy objective is to “uphold mother-tongue teaching and enhance proficiency in Chinese and English”. Thus, we do not intend to overturn the current policy on mother-tongue teaching but rather, we want to provide schools with room for professional discretion on this basis through fine-tuning. Moreover, we appreciate that parents and the community at large may be concerned about whether individual schools would make excessive use of the room for development allowed under the fine-tuning arrangements without giving thorough consideration to the student ability and the circumstances in schools, thus undermining the learning effectiveness of students. In this connection, we propose that the fine-tuning arrangements be implemented in an orderly manner with some conditions, bearing in mind the following six crucial factors:

- (a) Any arrangement made must be in the best interest of students.
- (b) The policy objective of “upholding mother-tongue teaching and enhancing proficiency in Chinese and English” should be adhered to.
- (c) To cater for student diversity and learning effectiveness, we should uphold the basic criteria of “student ability”, “teacher capability” and “support measures for schools” for adopting English as the medium of instruction (EMI) at junior secondary levels as recommended by the EC in its “MOI & SSPA Report”.
- (d) Schools are in the best position to keep track of students’ learning progress and teach according to diverse abilities. Accordingly, schools meeting the above three criteria should be allowed to determine their professional school-based MOI arrangements.
- (e) Schools must maintain high transparency in their school-based MOI policy so that parents are well-informed of the MOI arrangement for each subject and have their right to know protected.
- (f) Upon the implementation of the fine-tuning arrangements, the Education Bureau (EDB) will monitor students’ learning effectiveness under the current “School Development and Accountability” (SDA) framework.

Diversified MOI arrangements

5. Under the fine-tuning arrangements, we will adopt a six-year planning cycle based on schools’ Secondary 1 (S1) intake data in the Secondary School Places

Allocation exercise over the previous two years to facilitate schools to formulate school-based MOI arrangements upon S1 admission with regard to the learning progress and needs of their new entrants. Schools may determine the suitable modes of MOI arrangements with reference to the abilities, interest and expectations of students (such as the desire to learn daily conversational English, practical workplace English or academic English), as well as circumstances of schools (including students' learning effectiveness, teachers' capability, school's language policy, other support measures, etc.)

6. According to the fine-tuning arrangements, all schools are allowed to teach primarily in mother tongue and conduct English-medium extended learning activities (ELA) up to 25% of the total lesson time¹.

7. Besides, with the prime concern of students' learning effectiveness, schools may adopt EMI to teach some key learning areas or subjects up to 25% of the total lesson time¹ according to the readiness and capabilities of teachers and other support measures. This is referred to as the "by subject" arrangement.

8. Apart from the basic options mentioned above, in accordance with the principle of student-centredness and teaching according to students' aptitudes, if schools have admitted a critical mass of students capable of learning in mother tongue and English, they will have more options in using mother tongue or English to teach non-language subjects.

9. To sum up, schools can have diversified MOI arrangements at junior secondary levels. This will provide each and every junior secondary student with different degrees of English learning opportunities, facilitating their smooth transition to EMI teaching at senior secondary and post-secondary education and preparing them for career development in future. Parents will then no longer judge a school merely by its MOI when making their choices of schools. Instead, they will consider more thoroughly whether the schools' ethos, characteristics, facilities and support measures will suit their children's abilities and interest to facilitate their all-round development.

Reduction of Labelling Effect

10. Recently, some people have repeated their concern about the possible labelling

¹ This refers to the percentage of time for ELA with reference to the total lesson time which excludes the lesson time for the English Language subject.

effect of the fine-tuning arrangements in schools. So, please let me respond here. As a matter of fact, the fine-tuning proposal allows schools to adopt EMI teaching in different classes and subjects. In other words, the choice and number of subjects taught in EMI may vary between classes within individual schools as well as among schools. Even for schools meeting the criteria for EMI teaching, they will still have to make reference to their own circumstances to put in place the suitable MOI arrangements in a flexible manner. As to classes adopting mother-tongue teaching, they are also encouraged to conduct ELA in different modes to enhance English learning. As a result, there would be diversified MOI arrangements across the school sector, and any simple labelling would gradually be reduced.

11. I have to emphasise that MOI is a teaching strategy in essence. Even for schools meeting the prescribed criteria for fine-tuning, they will still have to teach according to the abilities, interest and expectations of their students as before. If schools pursue EMI-dominant teaching without considering the essence of MOI, they are putting the cart before the horse. They should not present an account of their school-based MOI arrangements only by giving rough figures or general names of the classes they are allowed to operate. Neither should these be used as student recruitment slogans, which may lead to unhealthy competition.

12. I hope that in making choices of schools, parents will understand that the mode of learning all subjects through English may not suit all students. Using the number of EMI subjects as the only yardstick to compare different schools while ignoring their uniqueness, strategies and philosophy is by no means a way to choose the right schools for our children.

Support and Supervision

13. During my meeting with different stakeholders, I learned of their expectations and concern about the monitoring mechanism under the fine-tuning arrangements: some worried that over-rigid supervision would limit room for professional discretion by schools while others feared that over-loose supervision would make it difficult to weed out untrue claims or would even jeopardise teaching outcomes and students' benefits. I understand that the community in general calls for an effective monitoring mechanism. However, we need to strike a balance between the following: to avoid unnecessary increase in schools' and teachers' workload on the one hand, and to properly address parents' concern over school selection and learning effectiveness on the other hand.

14. In order to maintain high transparency in the school-based MOI policy of

schools, whereby parents are well-informed of the MOI arrangement for each subject and have their right to know protected, secondary schools are required to report their MOI arrangements to the EDB. Also, for parents' easy reference, all schools are required to provide information on the subjects offered and the MOI arrangement for each subject in a standard template provided in the Secondary School Profiles.

15. Schools must specify in which subjects “English is used as MOI” or “Chinese is used as MOI”, and among the latter, which subjects will be “complemented by ELA”. If different MOIs are adopted for different groups of students, it is necessary to state clearly which subjects will “use either Chinese or English as MOI by class or by group”.

16. We hope to simplify and standardise the information released in a table form for parents to better understand the MOI arrangement for each subject and each class level. Schools are also required to describe in detail their whole-school language policy in the Secondary School Profiles under “School Characteristics - Learning & Teaching Plan”.

17. Besides ensuring transparency, we will monitor students' learning effectiveness upon implementation of the fine-tuning arrangements in schools under the current SDA framework. Schools are required to explain to the stakeholders the justifications for their policy decisions and recommendations on major developments (e.g. formulation of school-based language policy, changes of MOI in line with school-based policy, etc.), and to facilitate the stakeholders of the school to take part in decision-making as far as possible. Moreover, schools are required to review the effectiveness of their MOI through a self-evaluation mechanism of “Planning – Implementation – Evaluation”, and present the findings in school reports. Meanwhile, the EDB will conduct external assessment and focused inspection on schools under established mechanisms to review their work and effectiveness, give suggestions for improvement and accentuate accountability.

18. To ensure learning effectiveness, we will provide relevant guiding principles to help schools decide whether and how they will adopt the “by subject” arrangement. We will arrange professional dialogues for schools based on the above-mentioned information they have submitted to see if they need to modify their plans.

19. We will provide support and organise workshops for schools to develop a more effective school-based MOI policy and maintain a coherent and holistic curriculum in line with their overall learning and teaching objectives when determining

the MOI at junior secondary levels. We will also conduct a large-scale study inviting about 200 schools to participate. Support will be provided for them to develop the teaching materials and evaluation model for ELA so as to disseminate good practices to other schools. We will share with schools effective teaching practices and exemplars pending the findings of the study. We also plan to hold sharing sessions at a half-yearly interval for schools to exchange their experience. In addition to supervision, we aim to foster school development with the support of a variety of services. In order to optimise the fine-tuning arrangements, we will also deploy resources to provide training programmes for serving subject teachers of secondary schools and make supply teachers available. The total expenditure incurred is about \$640 million.

Improvement of English Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools

20. To enhance the English proficiency of students, we have to start from the basics.

21. Years of good efforts by our primary schools have proven to be fruitful with a rising trend in our students' learning effectiveness. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006, the Chinese reading literacy of Hong Kong Primary 4 (P4) students ranked the second in the world. Based on the PIRLS, the University of Hong Kong proceeded with the Study of Chinese and English Reading Literacy. It was found that 24% of P4 students involved in the study reached the same English reading level of those using English as their mother tongue. The result represented a significant improvement when compared with the same study in 2004 (i.e. 8%).

22. We will consider further measures, as appropriate, to enhance English teaching in primary schools. For example, we will provide teachers with professional training, enhance school-based support, set up a network of volunteers to conduct English activities in schools with students, and co-ordinate and strengthen efforts of individual schools currently made under different platforms. The total expenditure incurred is about \$310 million. To attract those who aspire to join the teaching profession, we plan to establish a scholarship, which will incur a recurrent cost of about \$14 million per annum.

Conclusion

23. During the discussion on fine-tuning, all stakeholders in the education sector

(including parents, teachers and students of primary and secondary schools, members of the public as well as professional bodies) have expressed much concern over the MOI arrangements and given a lot of valuable suggestions for us to be more responsive to the concerns of different stakeholders in policy-making. During the process, I deeply realise that MOI is a controversial issue. Different parties have different demands, some are unanimous while others are incompatible. In the course of considering the fine-tuning arrangements, we have to consider things from two perspectives. First, “from a macro perspective”, we have to, in addressing different demands, adhere to the education principles whereby the learning interests of all students are the prime concern. Second, “from a micro perspective”, we hope to cater for, respond to and balance the demands of different stakeholders with prudence as far as possible.

24. Here I would like to call upon every parent and member of the public, at this moment of change, to put faith in the professional discretion of schools, and give our next generation more support by encouraging them to embrace with an open heart the changes brought about by the fine-tuning and to brave the challenges ahead because only with such determination can they catch the chance and stride to success”.

Education Bureau

March 2009