



# FINE TUNING OR A FINE MESS?

by Edith Liu and Victor Chan

At an afternoon class, a teacher is struggling to teach English vocabulary to a group of confused and barely-responsive students. This is not a language class, it is mathematics and this is a scene being repeated across secondary schools in Hong Kong thanks to the government's "fine-tuning policy" of the Medium of Instruction (MOI) in Hong Kong's classrooms.

The move, which became effective in September will give schools more

flexibility in deciding which language they will teach in, in which classes, and for which students. It is a response to complaints by parents and employers over a supposed decline in English language competence after the government pushed most schools to teach in Cantonese.

That policy had been implemented after decades of research, consultants' reports, debate and soul-searching in the community. It was based on the principle that teaching students in

their mother tongue should enhance learning. But the measure has always been controversial, especially as certain schools were allowed to continue using English as their medium of instruction (EMI schools), which gave them more prestige.

Under "fine-tuning" at least 15 Chinese secondary schools will shift to teaching wholly in English this academic year, according to the Education Bureau. Others are shifting to teaching more and more non-language subjects in English.

Po On Commercial Association Wong Siu Ching Secondary School is one of the schools that welcomes the "upgrade" under the fine-tuning. "The policy has become an opportunity to let schools with up-to-par English standards transform into EMI," says Principal Chung Fat-shing.



Principal Chung Fat-shing of the Po On Commercial Association Wong Siu Ching Secondary School. The school welcomes the "upgrade" under the fine-tuning.

Chung has always been against the division of schools into English and Chinese categories under the old policy. "I've always emphasized it is bad to make such a clear cut, each school has its own circumstances," says Chung.

He believes that as schools have followed different paths of development, have different resources and differ in the quality of their students, they should have the right to pick their MOI according to their own circumstances.

Not all schools are thrilled about the chance to enhance their reputation by teaching in English. At Shun Tak Fraternal Association Tam Pak Yu College, the administration found itself in a dilemma.

Principal Ho Ki-to recalls that when the school had the choice to pick between teaching in English or Chinese in 1998, the school board went for Chinese.

Ho says the results of using mother-tongue teaching have been positive and the school has been publicly commended by a former and the current Secretary for Education.

**"But parents and the Board of Directors believe that only English teaching can meet the market needs. What can I do?"**

Twelve years after that decision, the school now faces another difficult choice. "It is now very hard to be a principal. I personally think that mother-tongue teaching can help students learn," says Ho, "But parents and the board of directors believe that only English teaching can meet the market needs. What can I do?"

After much contemplation, the school has finally agreed to "advance" itself under the fine-tuning by switching to English.

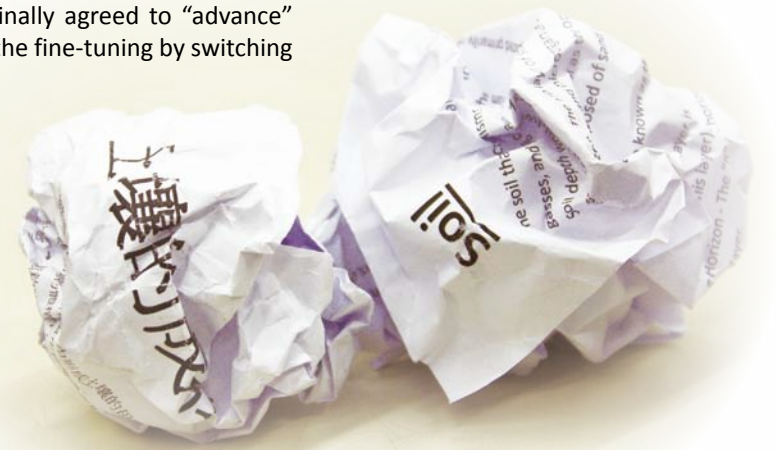
Despite the best intentions of educators, the perception that there is a market need for schools teaching in English is very strong.

Katherine Chow Lok-yiu, a first-year student at SKH Bishop Baker Secondary School says, "It is very important to be proficient in English living in this society. It may help you get a better job for instance."

Her school is one of those that will switch to English teaching and Katherine welcomes the move. "When I work in the future, I will have to use a lot more English. So it is better if I learn more English now. People don't like CMI (schools using Chinese as medium of instruction)."



Gary Ng Wai-hung, a form one student says he took medium of instruction into consideration when choosing schools.



“

## We certainly hope our children can become proficient in both Chinese and English, but are they able to live up to our lofty goals? ”

Her classmate, Gary Ng Wai-hung says he had taken the fine-tuning into account when choosing his junior secondary school. “I can adapt to the English learning environment at senior secondary level easily if I am taught in English now,” he says.

Yet Gary also acknowledges that students’ often respond more enthusiastically to classes taught in Chinese than those taught in English. He says students may find it difficult to express their opinions in English.

“Some of my classmates think the lesson is very exciting when the teacher speaks in Chinese. When teachers teach in English, students tend to be silent and passive as they may not understand,” he says.

Much of the controversy over the fine-tuning policy lies in the fact that schools do not want to be labelled, even though the policy is supposed to remove the labelling effect by eliminating the division between CMI schools and EMI schools.

Principal Ho of Tam Pak Yu College says the labelling effect is even stronger than before. “Now it is internalized,” he says. Some classes will be labelled as the “English class” while others will be called the “Chinese class”.

The Hong Kong Institute of Education Professor Li Chor-shing says the preference for English is based

on people’s perceptions of future career success and social mobility.

“This is a very pragmatic phenomenon. Parents are very concerned about schools’ arrangement of the English and Chinese classes. They think being admitted to the English class is like being above others.”



Tse thinks that parents should not apply for English secondary schools blindly.

But while many parents have these concerns, not all of them translate them into placing their children in EMI schools.

Tse Chi-man’s daughter is studying in form one. He has been preparing her for the future by enrolling her on English activity groups and plans to send her overseas during summer

vacations so she can be exposed to more English language.

But Tse thinks parents should not enroll their children in English teaching schools blindly. He knew that his daughter would not be able to study in an exclusively English learning environment. So he chose a school which mainly uses Chinese as the MOI.

Leticia Lau Lee See-yin, the chairperson of the Yau-Tsim-Mong Federation of Parent-Teacher Associations, agrees with Tse that parents should not put too much pressure on their children.

She points out that parents of some primary five or primary six students have already enrolled their children in intensive tutorial schools. “We certainly hope our children can become proficient in both Chinese and English,” Lau says, “But are they able to live up to our lofty goals?”

Lau also warns that parents have to pay heed to their children’s emotional wellbeing. She cites the case of a form one student who leapt to his death on his first week at school. It was believed that the pressure of having to learn in English was one of the factors that led to the suicide.

It is not just students who suffer from the pressure. Research carried out by The University of Hong Kong and the Teachers’ Association found there

have been eight cases of suicide among teachers since 2008, six of which were thought to be related to work pressure.

In order to adapt to the fine-tuning and help students make the transition from Chinese to English, schools are introducing more English-learning schemes like form one English tutorials and mentorship programs. This has increased teachers’ workload as well as students’.

Wong Wing-nga teaches form one mathematics and integrated science at the Shun Tak Fraternal Association Tam Pak Yu College. She told *Varsity* that teaching mathematics is not easy.

“When it comes to mathematics terms like ‘above’ and ‘lower’, I have to translate the meanings of the English terms to the students,” says Wong, “Sometimes the students feel like they are having English lessons instead.”

Wong needs to spend more time on class preparation and holding vocabulary-learning activities for those form one students who are scared of English.

“I think the students know how to calculate the answer. It’s just they do not really understand the question in English, which makes them lose marks,” Wong says.

Yet their students’ poor academic performance can put a teacher’s job at risk. Wong, who is employed on contract-basis, says, “I cannot worry too much at this stage. I just want to try my very best to help my students.”

Professor Li Chor-shing, chairman of the Language Policy Committee of Hong Kong Institute of Education, says there was a case of a teacher who used both Chinese and English in an English teaching lesson and was discovered by the principal. The teacher was asked to “demonstrate” English teaching in front of the principal and the students. “The teacher burst into tears when telling me about the experience,” Li says.

Principal Wong Lik-hak of the SKH Bishop Baker Secondary School, realizes the burden placed on his teachers brought about by fine-tuning. He is taking up the teaching himself to alleviate their load.

“I involve myself in the English teaching for the bottom 30 students in form one. I teach them basic grammar and hopefully they can better adapt to the English learning environment,” says Wong.

Principal Ho Ki-to of the Shun Tak Fraternal Association Tam Pak Yu College, also thinks that teachers will be exhausted under the new fine-tuning policy.

“Some teachers have to teach more than 10 classes. They have to prepare a lot before class, for example, they may need to prepare bilingual notes and assignments. They will be very tired.”

Ho says the fine-tuning has not solved the fundamental problem of the medium of instruction in Hong Kong’s classrooms.

“The MOI used to be a mess, and it will still be a mess,” he says.



Principal Ho “upgraded” his school under the pressure of market needs. However, he thinks mother-tongue teaching helps students learn better.