

Poor English: Is it students' Destiny or their own Deficiency?

7S Mak Mei Wing, Esther

In the past, because Hong Kong was a British Colony, English was given weight in the curriculum of secondary schools. Utilizing English to communicate fluently was an easy task for many students. However, today, many local business people, particularly those who work closely with foreign companies, observe that the standard of spoken English of Hong Kong's secondary school graduates is declining. Many of them find answering telephone calls or carrying out simple conversations in English difficult. This undoubtedly brings a negative impact on enterprises, which must spend more money on training their employees.

The causes of failing English are many. Firstly, the reform in the educational system over the last decade has been the main reason. The introduction of mother-tongue teaching lowers the English level of CMI pupils who often draw the line at speaking English loudly because, compared with their counterparts from elite schools, they are much weaker in English. Secondly, ICQ or MSN, are gaining popularity among young people. Following the local culture of Hong Kong, where things are quite fast, teens always type in short forms and abbreviations for the purposes of convenience and time-saving. Sadly, it meanwhile discourages them to take care of grammatical mistakes and the vitality of complete sentences. An ironic new word, "Chinglish", the combination of "English" and "Chinese", has been created of late to remind people not to mix up these two totally different languages. Thirdly, due to the handover of sovereignty of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong has become a trilingual city instead of a bilingual one. Proportionately, sometimes

English's usage is neglected. What is more, huge class sizes makes teachers omit the needs of some students with poor English.

Some experts point their finger at students themselves, who do not work hard enough to learn English. The responsibility actually falls on the government. Surely, it is never too late to fix up. Secondary schools are recommended to introduce some self-learning software, establish an English corner for pupils to discuss things interactively and employ a NET to improve students' oral ability. The administration ought to implement small class teaching in a bid to raise the quality of lessons. Furthermore, school-based assessment should be set up from time to time to monitor the progress of students. Also, mother-tongue teaching has proved to be a failure. For the sake of our future pillars, the government must think twice before adopting any educational strategy now.