

Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP Motion Debate on Promoting the use of English in Hong Kong, 22 January 2003

Selina Chow:

Madam President, I have lost count of the number of times that I have spoken on the importance of the English language for Hong Kong. More often than not, these views have been triggered by the concern that I share with many that we are gradually losing one of our most valuable assets which has taken a long time to accumulate. Bilingualism is a legacy of our colonial past, a cultural advantage bestowed on us by our history, a symbol of the world city, and a capability that distinguishes us from other Chinese cities but that is subject to challenge arising from the awakening of blossoming economies like Shanghai and Singapore.

As far back as the early nineties, I have questioned the Government of the time what it would do to address the problem of falling standards of English, which was alerted by concerned citizens and groups of the time. I recall that the then Director of Education, Mr LI Yuet-ting, assured me categorically that the problem did not exist. Although I was absolutely convinced at the time that the concern was well justified, I did not have any data or statistics to prove my point. I still do not have any scientific proof to uphold the belief that the standard of English has indeed fallen. But I do have findings of some key surveys to indicate that the perception and belief of lowering standards are real and widespread.

According to the most recent annual business confidence survey conducted by the Better Hong Kong Foundation, 59% of the executives interviewed were dissatisfied with the standard of English spoken here. The 2002 British Chamber of Commerce Business Confidence Survey indicated that 69% of the interviewees were dissatisfied with the standard of English proficiency here. The Asian Intelligence Report asked foreign businessmen working in Asia to rank the performance of 12 economies in Asia. Hong Kong ranked number six, rated even below Taiwan and South Korea. Singapore ranked number one.

Madam President, the Liberal Party has always pressed for the maintenance of the use of English, and we firmly believe that this is necessary in order to cement Hong Kong's stature as a world-class city. For after all, what are the prerequisites of a world-class city if not the qualities to enable people, wherever they come from, to meet, congregate, do business or enjoy their leisure? Without the ability to communicate with one another in a universal language, our aspiration and claim to be the hub of Asia cannot be sustained.

Madam President, the recent publication of the consultation document by the Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong

Committee deserves another debate on the many issues that it has put to the public. However, for the purpose of this debate, I believe it is worth our while looking at one very important fundamental problem which might be the root cause of the fall in the standard of English here.

I am referring to students' attitude and motivation.

The Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR)'s survey conducted in March of 2002 indicated that according to students' own perception, less than 50% of our students were strongly motivated to learn Chinese and English. Based on teachers' perception, the proportion of students strongly motivated to learn Chinese and English drops to only 10%. If these findings are true reflection of the attitude, then we are in trouble. If the motivation is so low, then the effectiveness of all efforts taken by parties other than the students themselves would be very inefficient at best, and could come to naught at worst. The problem does require tackling at source.

The Liberal Party conducted a survey recently to gauge the preference of parents who could only have the best interests of their children at heart. We have interviewed 470 parents whose children are students. 81% of the interviewees say that they wish their children would learn English. However, half of them think that their children are not learning enough English in school. Mr Tommy CHEUNG will be speaking at length about the teaching of English in our schools. To that I would just like to add my own experience as a secondary school student which I would like to share with you all, and which I actually shared with our Secretary for Education as schoolmates.

At school, we had an English teacher who was feared and respected by all his students. It was not so much his mannerism or his temper that inspired fear. He was one of the most soft-spoken teachers one could ever find. It was his methodology. In short, he drilled into us a sense for the English language by having us do endless exercises on vocabulary, grammar, syntax and so on. That demanded discipline. It also required a great deal of work, hard work. But many of his students, like me, are thankful for his persistence. I can see now that there is no short-cut. We are not native English speakers, and we grow up in a Chinese-speaking environment. This is a fact. In order for our English to reach a standard and a level of correctness and mastery, it has to be taught, but taught interestingly, as a foreign language.

In our schools, the teachers are the key. If they can motivate students by adopting a lively and interesting approach, they would be leaving a lifelong legacy through the proud standard of their students' English. But teachers, it seems, have been reluctant to accept that they are the key, and that many of them need to improve their own standard of English as well as their ability to teach that language in order to adequately fulfil their role. I know I stand the risk of being accused of indiscretion and tactlessness. The trouble is our Government has been too tactful for far

too long to allow English language teaching to have slipped to today's standard. The SCOLAR has come up with recommendations that deserve a real, hard look.

Not only has the standard of English slipped in our schools. Our tertiary institutions are facing similar problems, since it is only logical that falling standards in schools would mean that entrants into our universities would be less proficient in their English. In recent years, I have noticed that hardly a letter that comes from university undergraduates, or even graduates, would be free of grammatical mistakes. It has been asserted that this downward spiral all began when the University of Hong Kong lowered its entry requirements for English in the 1980s.

We are pinning high hopes on Mr Arthur LI to come up with a comprehensive strategy to tackle this problem in our education system urgently.

One of the strongest motivation for anyone to learn a language must be the advantage one might gain in employment or business opportunities. Here, the requirement for different occupations is wide and varied. A shop assistant in a retail outlet that expects a large number of foreign visitors needs only a fairly narrow vocabulary that is relevant to the service or merchandise he supplies. A taxi driver, on the other hand, would need to know names of districts and streets. My point is that being a service economy, Hong Kong must ensure that the rank and file of service providers ought to communicate adequately in English.

The Workplace English Campaign has been introduced for this purpose. However, I understand that at present only \$34 million has been successfully applied for and paid out, and most applicants are employees rather than employers. I am concerned that the Government may not draw the right conclusion from this situation.

The simplistic view may be that such a fund is not necessary, as the response from the community is not enthusiastic. I submit that the problem is with the marketing of the Fund. When the campaign was first introduced, it had already been established that it is desirable for the Government to offer such assistance to upgrade English at the workplace. But like many government funding, once the funding has been approved, it has been left to the bureaucrats to determine its use. More often than not, the point is missed that subsidies to achieve a certain purpose and require efforts of the private sector, and in the case of Workplace English Campaign, the target audience consists of employers and employees, considerable marketing is necessary to ensure that the Fund achieves its original purpose. I therefore object to recent proposal to merge this funding with the Continuous Development Programme, as with such a merge the clear objective of improving the standard of English would be quite lost. Instead I believe the

Government should reassess how to ensure that more people can benefit from the campaign, and this means listening to its potential applicants and users in the community, and engaging people with marketing expertise to promote its value and availability.

English, like any language, is the expression of an entire culture. The English language is no longer the language of just one nation. Having been adopted for use as a common language by many countries around the world, it has taken on a cosmopolitan character of its own. That is probably why Lan Kwai Fong and Soho do not only attract English-speaking visitors. They are also among the must-visit spots for non-English speakers. Our city, distinguished by its fusion of East and West, must maintain our Western feel in order to stand out among all Chinese cities. It is therefore not enough simply to rely on the fact that it says in the Basic Law that English is recognized also as an official language. Neither is it enough to pay lip service to the importance of English when senior officials are not prepared to speak it or answer questions from the English media. The Government has to practise what it preaches by giving equal weight to the official languages. It has to learn from countries like Singapore and Canada. In Singapore, television programmes are carried in the four official languages. In Canada, all government documents are produced in English and French.

I have recently expressed disappointment that the Government did not use the opportunity of reviewing the television broadcasting licences to ensure that the licensees are required to carry English programming of a higher standard. I cannot understand why the recommendation that English programmes should have English subtitles has been adopted only for news programmes. For it is mainly feature films and series that would attract the largest number of viewers, and the Government should have insisted that these programmes should carry English subtitles. I also lament the loss of an opportunity at the review to obligate the teaching of the English language through either the production or the presentation of acquired programmes. I know that productions are costly, but acquired programmes are less so, and since the licensees would have to buy programmes from abroad anyway, there is no reason why they cannot buy some of the highly commended English teaching programmes from acclaimed producers such as the BBC. I think the opportunity is not yet lost. The Government can still use its time in the electronic media to achieve this purpose. In addition, I believe that the English service of the Radio Hong Kong should be revamped to fulfil a more effective and relevant role in the education and communication in English by reshaping itself into a service for a wider public consisting of not only expatriates but also those who are interested in the English language and culture.

Madam President, it is high time that the Government should have a co-ordinated and comprehensive umbrella policy for the promotion for the use of English, as it could involve more than just the Education and Manpower Bureau. For instance, my comments above on the use of the

mass media involve both the Commerce, Industry and Technology Bureau and the Education and Manpower Bureau, while government communication could involve all bureaux. Therefore I believe a task force within the Government under the chairmanship of the Chief Secretary for Administration is timely if we want results.

The Liberal Party has always tried to play our part. To begin with, we will be using more English for our speeches in this Council. Speaking of this Council, we have done some counting, and found that in the year 1982, 86% of our speeches were made in English. In the year 1992, this percentage has dropped to 28%. Last year, only 7% of our speeches were made in English. Is there not a clear message there?