

LCQ16: English proficiency of students

Following is a question by the Hon Starry Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (July 21):

Question:

An international language education institution conducted last year a survey on the English proficiency of adults around the world, the results of which showed that Hong Kong ranked the 33rd among the 100 countries and regions surveyed and the fifth in the Asia region. On the other hand, the Government has indicated that it is necessary for Hong Kong people to maintain excellent English proficiency in order to consolidate Hong Kong's status as a metropolis. Regarding the English proficiency of students, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it compared, in the past five years, the English proficiency of Hong Kong students with that of the students in other regions; if so, of the outcome; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether, in the past five years, it allocated additional resources to schools, strengthened training for teachers, assisted schools in enhancing the methods for teaching English, and implemented other measures, with a view to enhancing students' English proficiency; if so, of the details (including the expenditure involved); and

(3) whether it has evaluated the effectiveness of the various measures mentioned in (2); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

We reckon that the survey mentioned in the question is likely to be an English Proficiency Index test conducted by a commercial international language education institution. According to the information published online by the institution, the test-takers were those who were interested in learning English or keen to know his/her own English proficiency, and their participation was voluntary. Hence, the sampling of the test might not be comprehensive and could not represent the population of the entire region. Furthermore, as the test was administered only online, people who could not or did not use the Internet during the testing period were automatically excluded from the test. The median age of the test-takers was 26, and 20 per cent of the test-takers aged above 35. Therefore, the test did not reflect the English proficiency of students. In gist, the results of the Index test neither represented the English proficiency of students nor reliably reflected the English proficiency of the population of the participating regions. We should be cautious in interpreting the relevant figures and

ranking.

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Starry Lee is as follows:

(1) The Education Bureau (EDB) has been keeping track of the English proficiency of Hong Kong students through various channels, including large-scale assessments like the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examinations and the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA). Since the inaugural HKDSE Examinations in 2012, at least 77 per cent of students attained Level 2 or above in the English language subject, meeting the requirements for applications of civil service posts and sub-degree programmes. The percentage of students attaining Level 3 or above, i.e. meeting the minimum requirement for admission to local 4-year undergraduate university programmes, increased from 50.1 per cent in 2012 to 55 per cent in 2020. Furthermore, the TSA, which is administered to students upon their completion of Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 studies, provides objective, comprehensive and quality data. Concerning the basic competencies in the English language subject, primary and secondary students in Hong Kong performed steadily in the TSA in recent years. In the past few years (from 2014 to 2019), around 80 per cent of Primary 3 students attained the basic competencies in the English language subject every year. The relevant statistics for Primary 6 students also steadily reached 72 per cent; and that for Secondary 3 students stood at around 70 per cent every year. The above shows that students of the respective grades have sustained a steady performance all along. The EDB did not make comparisons on the English proficiency between local students and students in other regions.

(2) The EDB provides schools with recurrent resources every year and has implemented various measures with a view to enhancing the English proficiency of Hong Kong students. Furthermore, the Government set up the Language Fund (LF) in 1994 and injected a \$5 billion seed money to the LF in 2014 to provide a steady stream of funding to facilitate the long term strategic planning and development of language education. In 1996, the Government also established the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR), which has been advising the Government on language education issues in general as well as the use of the LF. Through the use of the LF, SCOLAR has complemented the efforts of the Government and other advisory bodies as well as stakeholders by funding and implementing various measures to assist the people in Hong Kong, particularly students and working adults, and enhance the Chinese and English proficiency of people in Hong Kong (including students).

Concerning the support to schools, since 2004, the Task Force on Language Support under the EDB has been providing school-based support services on English language to primary and secondary schools to enhance teachers' professional knowledge and their teaching skills. Moreover, in order to enhance the teaching of English language, the "Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme" has been implemented in public-sector secondary and primary schools. NETs collaborate with local English language teachers to bring diversified teaching strategies and methods/beliefs, their professional experience and cultural literacy to local English language classrooms to

enrich students' language learning experience and strengthen the English language learning environment. Also, in the 2017/18 school year, the EDB launched the "Grant Scheme on Promoting Effective English Language Learning in Primary Schools", which provides a one-off additional grant to primary schools to facilitate their development of school-based measures for further enhancing English language teaching.

Regarding the professional development of teachers, the EDB has continuously provided or commissioned universities and etc. to conduct professional development programmes for in-service teachers on the effective implementation of the English language curriculum and language across the curriculum. In addition, the "Scholarship for Prospective English Teachers" attracts individuals who are proficient in English to pursue relevant local bachelor degree programmes and/or teacher training programmes for the necessary qualifications to become English teachers upon graduation.

In order to arouse students' interest in learning English and to enhance their exposure to English language, the EDB has been organising or co-organising with different organisations various types of English language activities, such as English language video-making competitions; public speaking/debating competitions; and drama competitions, including the "English Sayings of Wisdom Creative Writing Competition" and "Poetry Remake Competition" held in the 2020/21 school year to promote language learning across the curriculum. The LF also sponsors various organisations to organise English language related activities in the community, such as theatre experiences and story-telling and writing workshops, so as to provide primary and secondary students with enjoyable English language learning experience and boost their confidence in using English.

Meanwhile, the EDB conducts on-going renewal of and optimises the curriculum. The EDB has reviewed the "CDC English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 6)" (the Guide) in 2017 and enriched the content by incorporating e-learning, information literacy, and reading/language across the curriculum in the Guide. The optimising measures of the Senior Secondary English language subject was also announced in April 2021.

In the past five years (i.e. from 2016-17 to 2020-21 financial years), the average total annual expenditure of the aforementioned support measures on English language education was about \$900 million.

(3) We conduct ongoing evaluations of the above-mentioned measures through various means, including curriculum development visits to and lesson observations in participating schools; inviting participants of the schemes to take part in questionnaire surveys and/or focus group interviews; holding quality assurance meetings with organisers of the schemes, and vetting the progress and final reports submitted by relevant organisations. All in all, positive feedback was received from schools/participants. They agreed that the schemes had helped teachers in devising teaching strategies that cater for the needs of their students so as to enhance students' English learning abilities and arouse their interest in learning English. As mentioned in

reply (1) above, students' results in the English language subject of the HKDSE Examinations were overall satisfactory and their performance in the TSA was also steady.

The EDB will continue implementing various measures to enhance English language education with a view to raising students' English proficiency.