

20 April 1988

A question of priorities

I CONTRIBUTED an article to the *Sunday Morning Post* in January 24 last year, which concluded by saying: "To date, we have no objective available public data by which to measure the comparative English language attainment of Hongkong students from year to year, or even from decade to decade."

No one has publicly disputed this statement and private reactions I have received have all been favourable.

Although, then, there is no objective public evidence of any decline, many institutions and individuals express the wish that the English standards of those with whom they come into contact — and this includes, but is by no means limited to, students — were higher.

Unfortunately, it seems clear that it is not an improvement in their standard of English that most Hongkong students want. What they do want are the benefits which a knowledge of English can bring.

Is it possible that some students seek to obtain these benefits by eroding the system which requires a particular standard of English, rather than by working to achieve the standard of English required by the system?

Some institutions of higher education and major employers do, it seems, actually want a higher standard of English in those whom they accept.

But, it seems to me, neither type of institution wants it *enough*. They do not want a higher standard of English in those they employ, *more* than they want their operation to be viable. They do not want a higher standard of English in those they admit to their educational programs *more* than they want to keep up their student numbers.

In other words, institutions of higher education and major employers do not want a higher standard of English in those they accept, sufficiently to create the conditions within which Hongkong students will seek to meet these desires.

For institutions of higher education, the most basic

CONVENTIONAL wisdom says that the standard of English of Hongkong students is declining. English expert Dr GILLIAN WORKMAN says the issue is not that simple.

necessary condition is agreement on a common English language standard which all will require for entry to their programs.

Similar agreement — this is a more complicated task, because of the varieties of both entry-levels and positions — is required by major employers.

Then, all institutions in each category must agree to present a united front, and not accept applicants who do not meet the new, agreed, standards.

Only if students are convinced that a higher standard of English really is required, and only then, will students redirect their efforts and work to achieve a higher standard of English.

I do not believe that a sufficient majority of institutions in Hongkong want improved standards of English to such an extent that they are willing to give the co-operative managerial input which this scenario implies.

Without this majority commitment a united stand on the standard of English of entrants cannot be achieved. And if this is not achieved, no improvements in the standard of English of entrants is likely.

The conclusion must be that — if Hongkong continues to operate as a society in the way it is doing now — there will continue to be dissatisfaction with the standard of English of local applicants for and participants in further study or employment.

In-service training by employers and post-acceptance remedial courses by educational institutions face a similar problem.

If students are not penalised as a consequence of failure to reach an acceptable standard of English after acceptance for higher study, they will not care much whether they reach that standard or not.

If employees are promoted or confirmed in their position, whether or not they reach a standard of English

desired by their employers, they also will not care much whether they reach that standard.

But institutions of higher learning and major employers within the public sector — this may not be true of the private sector — are not able to give top priority to their desire for a higher English standard sufficiently to create and stand by the necessary sanctions.

Reasons for this include pressure from students and employees, and pressure from staff within the institutions themselves, who favour other priorities.

'The experience of the past can assist in the evaluation of appropriate strategies for present and future action.'

Given this view that present attitudes and present circumstances indicate the likelihood of continuing dissatisfaction with the standard of English, it seems necessary to look at the problem from another angle.

In the case of businesses, there are measures which could be taken. First, by using or developing technology to take more of the load, they could reduce the need for personnel with English language skills.

Cash dispenser systems, to give a simple example, reduce the number of customer-contact hours required from bank tellers.

Personal word-processing capability, backed-up by continued training, would reduce the need for assistance needed by government officials.

There is a strong case to be made that, in societies where a second language is heavily used, the new communication technologies

should be embraced in a more creative fashion than has been the case in Hongkong.

The problems discussed above suggest divisions within Hongkong society and the proposed solutions (which could be interpreted as leading to a reduction of available jobs) may bring increased divisiveness.

Hongkong society would clearly have the wrong priorities if it could really advocate measures which risk social conflict, in order to improve English language skills.

The situation thus seems incapable of improvement. Not only do Hongkong institutions not give high priority to English language standards sufficiently highly; but, if social divisiveness is the price to be paid, most people will surely feel that Hongkong institutions ought not to give higher English Language standards the priority necessary for these standards to be attained.

Possibly, schemes like the Expatriate English Language Teacher's Scheme and activities such as those recently being promoted by the group of concerned businessmen — which are perceived as innovative — may be means of achieving such a change in attitude without provoking social conflict.

However, for such schemes to have the necessary radical effect, it is clear that a sustained, systematic, co-operative, well-funded and long-term approach must be adopted.

Additionally, within businesses, cash incentives for English language excellence — in the context of sufficient provision for the acquisition of this excellence — might also have an important impact.

Having said this, there would need to be considerable care that the standard needed to receive such an award was not subject to downward pressure from employees.

Generally speaking, the

public discussion of English language standards by non-professionals is taking place with far too little reference to the practical realities of priorities, motivations, attitudes, administrative difficulty and human complexity.

Far too little reference is made to facts. Ill-founded assertions are continually made. A strenuous attempt needs to be made to divorce ourselves from the natural condition of seeing things from the perspective of our own viewpoint.

Common sense, based on even a little knowledge, would, I believe, lead most people to agree with this assessment.

There is a further area where common sense is not enough. This is in relation to the need for knowledge of the historical development by which the present situation has been reached.

It is important to know how the present situation has come into existence. Only with this knowledge, can false conclusions as to cause and effect be avoided. The experience of the past can also assist in the evaluation of appropriate strategies for present and future action.

To date, no substantial body of work has been published in this area.

In a few years time, however, when current work on the historical origins of today's educational system is published, we could be in a position to see the current problem with more likelihood of constructing a productive solution.

It is likely, however, that we shall find evidence that those who identify the basic problem as the use of the English language as a medium of instruction, arguing that all would be solved with a change to Chinese medium instruction, are not addressing the real issue; which seems rather to be a lack of interest in education, and an interest instead in the benefits that the qualifications brought by the machinery of education bring.

Dr Workman works as a lecturer in English at the Hongkong Baptist College.