

# *The Hong Kong Primary English Syllabus and its Relevance for English Learning in a Context of Compulsory Schooling*

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*The last official English Language syllabus for primary schools in Hong Kong was published in 1981. This syllabus aimed to promote a more communicative approach to the teaching of English at the primary level, and did not concern itself with problems that arose as a result of the implementation of compulsory education in 1978. Since the early nineties, the quality of compulsory schooling in Hong Kong has caught the attention of the general public and the education sector, and there have been studies showing that some pupils begin to show serious problems in learning English from Primary Four. The current syllabus for Primary English was published in 1997, nineteen years after the introduction of compulsory schooling in Hong Kong. This paper reports an analysis of the current Primary English syllabus, with special reference to its relevance for compulsory schooling. This analysis is based on a framework specially developed for analyzing compulsory school curricula. The paper concludes with a discussion of two issues which are*

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*deemed crucial to the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language within a context of compulsory schooling.*

*Key words: second language curriculum; English language teaching; compulsory education*

## **Introduction**

A curriculum has to be responsive to the needs of the learners. In the case of Hong Kong, one of the challenges facing the school curriculum as a result of the introduction of nine-year compulsory education in 1978 has been how to deal with the problems that have arisen from the switch from selective schooling to compulsory education (Morris, 1995; Wong, 1997). A review of the implementation of nine-year compulsory education in Hong Kong (Wong, Lee, Ni, Hau, Hui, Hon, & Tsui, 1996) has found that school-children begin to experience chronic learning problems in as early as Primary Three, especially in English and Mathematics. The review concludes that since the introduction of compulsory education in Hong Kong in 1978, “no concerted effort has been put forward by education policy planners, curriculum designers, institutes of teacher education and teachers into the development of nine-year compulsory education” (p. vii).

Among the subjects in the school curriculum, English (as a foreign language) has been causing the greatest concern since 1978. An analysis by Wong et al. (1996) of students’ performance on the English paper of the Hong Kong Attainment Test reveals that, at the end of nine years of compulsory schooling, the poorest performing students (i.e., the “bottom” 20%) have hardly any functional English reading competency and can hardly write a sensible short paragraph in English. Some students are beginning to show serious problems in learning English in Primary Four, and many students’ self-concept in learning English drops further and further as they are almost automatically promoted to higher grade levels. In fact, students in this study

rated English as the most difficult among all school subjects (p. 5.19).

Biggs (1998) characterizes the situation regarding the learning of English in Hong Kong as follows:

Students want to know English, which is good, but feel forced to learn it, which is not good. Secondary students, even those with all the right intrinsic, growth-supporting and self-enhancing reasons, know they should make good use of a large number of strategies for second language learning, but they don't; neither do tertiary students, few take steps to improve their English although they see the need to do so. However, the "stick", extrinsic motivation, leads to poor competence. (p. 419)

In the run-up to 1 July, 1997, when Hong Kong would cease to be a British colony, some social critics had suggested that the impending departure of British rule might have been undermining schoolchildren's motivation to learn English and as a result led to the decline in English standards. However, a study by Lai (1996) of students' attitudes towards the learning of English indicated that 81% of students felt that English should remain to be one of the two official languages after the handover (the other being Chinese), even though 41% claimed that they did not particularly like the English language. When asked their reasons for learning English, 26% thought English would be important to their future career, and 36% pointed to the fact that English is an international language. Lai compared these figures with those obtained from two previous surveys, and found that students' instrumental motivation to learn English had not dropped. It is alarming, nevertheless, that the proportion of students who admitted that they learnt English only because it is a compulsory school subject rose from 17% in 1980 to 27% in Lai's 1996 study.

It can be seen then that the learning of English in the school system in Hong Kong is full of paradoxes. English has been a compulsory subject for many years. Until two decades ago, this had not presented a major problem when, like the situation in most British colonies (McClelland, 1991), school-

ing in Hong Kong was relatively elitist. The introduction of compulsory education in 1978 meant that every student, whatever their disposition, interest, and ability, had to learn English for nine years from Primary One to Secondary Three. Since then, standards in English among schoolchildren have allegedly been falling, much to the discontent of the general public, tertiary institutions, and businessmen. Some have feared that the return to Chinese sovereignty might further reduce students' motivation to learn English. Research has indicated, however, that English is still perceived to be important. But the motivation to learn English is mainly instrumental, and indeed quite a few students are simply putting up with English as a school subject. For unmotivated primary schoolchildren, this endurance involves sitting through passively nine English periods of thirty-five minutes each per week.

The current English syllabus for primary schools was issued by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in October, 1997 (Curriculum Development Council, 1997). This syllabus, hereinafter referred to as the current primary English syllabus, was published nineteen years after the introduction of compulsory education in Hong Kong. Most of the problems relating to the implementation of compulsory school have surfaced (Board of Education, 1997). It would, therefore, be worthwhile to analyse whether this syllabus has sufficiently considered the characteristics and needs of English learning in a context of compulsory schooling.

The paper is in three parts. The first part outlines the process of curriculum development for English as a school subject in Hong Kong. This outline will help put the importance of the primary English syllabus for classroom teaching in perspective. The second part reports an analysis of the relevance of the syllabus for English teaching in a context of compulsory schooling. The last part discusses two issues, equity and learner differences, which are crucial to English learning within such a context.

## **English in the Hong Kong School Curriculum**

### **Curriculum Development in Hong Kong**

Curriculum decision making in Hong Kong has been characterized as “centralized and highly bureaucratic” (Morris, 1995, p. 92). Curriculum policies are initiated or influenced by advisory bodies such as the Education Commission, the Board of Education and the Curriculum Development Council (CDC). Members of these bodies are appointed by the Hong Kong Government and they comprise representatives from Government education authorities, scholars from tertiary institutions, schoolteachers, and members of the business sector.

The Curriculum Development Council, which is the advisory body charged with policy and decision making as regards the school curriculum, is a free standing committee whose members are appointed, formerly by the Governor of Hong Kong, and presently by the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The Curriculum Development Council advises the government on curriculum policy and development. The actual design and implementation of curriculum is carried out by officers in the Curriculum Development Institute and the Advisory Inspectorate within the Education Department of the Hong Kong Government.

Within the Curriculum Development Council, there are two subject committees for each subject – one for the secondary curriculum (i.e., Secondary 1 to 5) and the other for the primary curriculum (i.e., Primary 1 to 6). Thus, for English Language, there are a primary English subject committee and a secondary English subject committee. Each committee is made up of ex officio members from the Education Department and the Hong Kong Examinations Authority, and appointed members from tertiary institutions and schools. The subject committee gives advice on the revision of the curriculum of the subject concerned. The text of each subject curriculum is embodied in a document referred to as the “syllabus” of the subject. Thus, the

curriculum document for English Language for primary schools is called "Syllabuses for Primary Schools: English". All subject syllabuses are prepared by the Education Department, but officially published by the Curriculum Development Council, and are available for sale as Government publications.

### **The Official Curriculum and Classroom Teaching**

In Hong Kong, the official curriculum has a strong influence on students' learning in the classroom. After a new or a revised subject syllabus is issued, commercial publishers are invited to produce textbooks according to the published syllabus. Textbook drafts produced by publishers are then reviewed by officers of the Education Department. Final versions of textbooks approved by the Education Department are then placed in a "Recommended List" which is then issued to schools. The laws in Hong Kong related to the provision of schooling stipulate that only officially issued syllabuses and officially approved textbooks may be adopted by schools (see Morris, 1995, p. 92).

The textbook can become a strong influence on classroom learning (Apple, 1988; Venezky, 1992). In Hong Kong, due to large class sizes (35 in a primary classroom and 40 in a secondary classroom) and teachers' heavy teaching load (about 35 periods in a six-day cycle), the textbook often becomes the dominant learning resource. In the case of English Language, a recent survey by Lee, Sze and Shek (1998) of primary English Language teachers' use of textbooks found that teachers in Hong Kong generally follow the textbook very closely. Thus, through ensuring that textbooks follow the official syllabus and requiring schools to adopt only officially approved textbooks, the official syllabus can influence classroom teaching and learning to a rather great extent.

### **Developments in the Official English Language Curriculum in the Last Two Decades**

The first syllabus for English Language for primary schools that gave a thorough treatment to content as well as methodology was published in 1973 (Education Department, 1973). This syllabus followed a structural approach to English language teaching (ELT). Because of the rapid developments of communicative language teaching since the mid-seventies (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), the primary English syllabus was soon revised, resulting in the 1981 revised syllabus (Curriculum Development Committee, 1981). The 1981 curriculum departed drastically from the 1973 version both in content and in teaching methods, and it advocated a communicative approach to ELT (Evans, 1996; Falvey, 1991).

Indeed, attempts to improve English learning in the primary classroom in Hong Kong have tended to focus on methodological efficacy (e.g., Chan & Lau, 1989; Chau & Chung, 1987; Cheung, 1997; Clark, Scarino, & Brownell, 1994; Gibbons & Tongue, 1982; Hirvela & Law, 1991; Ho, 1981; Man, 1997). A working party set up by the Education Commission in 1994 to review language teaching and learning in Hong Kong also attributed problems in English teaching and learning to methodological inadequacies:

While the pedagogical aims of the syllabus (i.e., the 1981 primary syllabus) are sound, it has not proved easy to implement these aims in every classroom. Some schools make great effort to implement the syllabus aims, through classroom teaching and extra-curricular activities. But many other schools have still not fully embraced the communicative approach, preferring to concentrate on the formal features of the language at the expense of encouraging students to use the language. (Education Commission, 1994, p. 25)

A major curriculum innovation began in the early nineties, spearheaded by the subject primary English. This innovation, referred to today as the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC), attempted to realize certain common features in the three core primary school subjects Chinese, English, and mathematics. Briefly, TOC requires consideration and selection of pro-

gressive learning targets and objectives for four key stages of learning (spanning Primary 1 to Secondary 5), and development of other curricular elements including contents, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment, in the direction of the learning targets (Education Department, 1994). Much of the early innovation in TOC involved the subject English (Clark, Scarino & Brownell, 1994; Curriculum Development Council, 1994), which was used as a model for the other two core subjects, Chinese and mathematics. Hence, although the official primary English Language syllabus in the early nineties remained the same, a lot of changes were taking place during this period in English Language lessons in the primary school. (For evaluative studies of TOC, see Education Department, 1999; Morris et al., 1996).

### **The Current Primary English Curriculum**

The current English syllabus for primary schools was published in October, 1997 (Curriculum Development Council, 1997). This syllabus has incorporated most of the curriculum features of TOC English that have been officially announced (Curriculum Development Council, 1994, 1995). The principal characteristics of this syllabus include:

- Learning objectives are stated as Knowledge Dimension targets, Interpersonal Dimension targets, and Experience Dimension targets.
- Learning objectives are recycled in successive Key Stages.
- Task-based learning.
- Assessment of student learning should be task-based and target-oriented.

As far as this paper is concerned, what is noteworthy about the current primary English syllabus is that it was issued nineteen years after the introduction of compulsory schooling in Hong Kong, and sixteen years after its predecessor version. One crucial question is whether the current version is able to cater to the needs of English language learning within a compulsory schooling context.

## **English Language Teaching in a Compulsory Schooling Context**

The above has provided a sketch of English language teaching in the Hong Kong primary school. To sum up, English is a compulsory subject, but there has been continual discontent with the standards achieved by pupils, and the education authorities have been looking to ELT methodological innovations for ideas to improve the situation, evidenced by the rigorous promulgation of the communicative approach in the early eighties, and the even more vehement promotion of task-based learning under the the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) in the early nineties. At the same time, some writers have pointed out that TOC, on which the current primary English curriculum is based, has been modelled on the UK National Curriculum (Lee & Dimmock, 1998; O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 1998). The writers of this paper, however, contend that effective learning of English as a foreign language in a context of compulsory schooling requires first and foremost that the English curriculum satisfy certain attributes of curriculum for compulsory schooling, and that mere application or fine-tuning of foreign language teaching methodology is not enough (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Holliday, 1994).

On this premise, we carried out an in-depth analysis of the current primary English syllabus in Hong Kong, with special attention to its relevance for compulsory schooling. This analysis is reported in the next section.

## **The Analysis**

### **The Document**

Although there are many conceptions of curriculum (Posner, 1995), this analysis is focused on the official syllabus document for the primary English curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 1997). It has to be noted that although this document has the title of a syllabus, it actually comprises suggestions on content, methodology, organisation for teaching, etc.

## **The Purpose**

The purpose of the analysis was to examine critically whether the current primary English syllabus has considered the needs of English language learning within a compulsory schooling context.

## **The Framework for Analysis**

Although writers of curriculum agree that any curriculum will be influenced by myriads of social, economic, and cultural factors (Elmore & Sykes, 1992; Skilbeck, 1991), there is a dearth of literature that specifically compares curriculum within a selective schooling system and curriculum within a universal/compulsory schooling system.

A first framework for comparing selective curricula and universal/compulsory curricula along nine dimensions was proposed by Wong, one of the authors of this paper, in 1993. A revised version of that framework was used in a large-scale survey (Wong et al., 1996) that probed the judgements of secondary and primary schoolteachers, Government curriculum development officials, and members of the Curriculum Development Council as regards the extent to which sixteen subject syllabuses met the attributes of curricula for universal education. Wong continued to improve on the framework by inviting comments from world-renowned scholars in curriculum. Based on their suggestions, Wong has arrived at a framework for comparing compulsory curriculum and selective curriculum, entitled “nature of the curriculum and instructional design of selective schooling vs nine-year universal and compulsory schooling” (see Appendix 1). This revised framework, which was used in the present analysis, compares compulsory curriculum and selective curriculum along ten dimensions:

1. curriculum aims
2. principles for the selection of contents and activities for learning
3. principles of organizing contents and activities of learning
4. pace of learning
5. means of learning
6. space or setting for learning

7. class structure and student organisation
8. learning process: (a) teacher/student relationship; (b) student/student relationship
9. evaluation of performance in learning
10. characteristics of curriculum design.

### **The Procedure**

Four people took part in the analysis of the current primary English syllabus. Of the four, two were experienced primary schoolteachers of English. The other two were the authors, who work in a university school of education. One specializes in curriculum studies, while the other in ELT methodology. The steps followed broadly conformed to the procedure of curriculum analysis outlined by Ariav (1991). The four of us started with an initial discussion on the framework (Appendix 1) to ensure that we shared the same understanding of the concepts contained therein. Then, each of us embarked on a global reading of the syllabus to obtain a general impression of the applicability of the framework for analysing the syllabus. After that, we met again and compared our conceptions of each dimension in the framework, with a view to obtaining a common understanding of what the dimensions meant before we went about the next step of detailed analysis. At this meeting, we also exchanged *prima facie* evidence we had located in the syllabus that suggested that the syllabus had taken into consideration an aspect of English learning within a compulsory schooling context. Then, each of us continued on our own to conduct a closer examination of the syllabus, based on our agreed understanding of the framework and the *prima facie* evidence. Finally, we met again to share and discuss our observations.

### **The Findings**

This section reports our findings. It is organised into ten sub-sections, which correspond to the ten dimensions of the framework. Each section sets out our judgment, and the evidence we obtained from the syllabus. The page and section numbers refer to those in the syllabus document.

1. *Curriculum aims: Are these diversified, including but not limited to affective, vocational, high-level cognitive aims (e.g., ability in comprehension, analysis, integration, application)?*

The aims of the English syllabus are diversified in that the stated aims include the following (Section 1.2):

- to use English to acquire knowledge;
- to use English to communicate experience;
- to learn about other cultures;
- to use English for pleasure;
- to use English for study;
- to use English for work.

The stated Subject Target for English is:

- to develop an ever-improving capability to use English;
- to think and communicate;
- to acquire, develop and apply knowledge;
- to respond and give expressions to experience. (p. 11)

Thus, the English syllabus covers a variety of aims, including affective, vocational, and high-level cognitive ones.

2. *Do the principles for the selection of contents and activities of learning (a) relate to curriculum aims; (b) concentrate on the present stage of learning; (c) try to cater for the differences in learners' characteristics; (d) constitute meaningful learning; and (e) try to take care of all the factors that have implications for student learning?*

- (a) The three categories of dimension targets, namely, Interpersonal Dimension targets, Knowledge Dimension targets, and Experience Dimension targets, make up the Subject Target for English. The task-based learning approach advocated by the syllabus requires that language learning tasks be developed with targets from the three

dimensions in mind. This mechanism ensures that the selection of contents and activities of learning will contribute to the dimension targets, and therefore ultimately, the subject target.

- (b) The entire English curriculum for schools is divided into four Key Stages, with Key Stage 1 covering lower primary levels, Key Stage 2 covering upper primary levels, Key Stage 3 covering lower secondary levels, and Key Stage 4 covering upper secondary levels. The dimension targets remain the same throughout the four Key Stages, but with each successive Key Stage, they become more complex and demanding. Each Key Stage is an independent stage of learning. It is also a preparation for the next stage of learning.
- (c) Section 3.6 of the syllabus highlights the importance of attending to learner differences. Two main approaches are suggested: curriculum tailoring, and adjustment in classroom pedagogy.
- (d) At the curriculum design level, the organization of curriculum objectives into three dimension targets ensures that English language learning is carried out for meaningful purposes.  
At the classroom pedagogy level, the task-based approach to language learning will also help ensure meaningful learning.
- (e) Factors that have implications for student learning have been taken into account. There are guidelines on such factors as making use of resources, assignments and assessment, time allocation, using textbooks, planning for teaching, etc. (See especially Sections 3.8 and 4.5 of the syllabus.)

3. *Do the principles of organizing contents and activities of learning (a) focus on the characteristics of learners, social changes and needs, and opinion of experts (but not aiming at training individual students to become subject experts) as design foundations; and (b) adopt a holistic approach, a combination of subject and integrated design?*

- (a) The contents of the syllabus are not organized on the basis of the structure of English as a discipline of study, that is, with discrete

items of syntax, phonetics and phonology, and semantics, etc., forming the contents. The “contents” of the syllabus (Sections 2.3), such as forms and functions, vocabulary, skills and strategies, are not to be taught for their own sake. Instead, they prepare students for the completion of learning tasks.

- (b) The relationship of the English syllabus to the other subjects in the primary curriculum is not obvious. English is treated as a separate subject in the curriculum. While this is due to the overall approach to curriculum renewal in Hong Kong which compartmentalizes the primary curriculum into “subjects”, some sort of integration may still be explored, such as by exploiting the content knowledge in the other subject syllabuses.

4. *Is the pace of learning diversified and flexible? Does the syllabus attend to differences in the learning pace of individual students?*

Pace of learning is not prescribed. There are suggestions for providing more challenging activities for more able learners and trimming down the curriculum content to assist lower-ability students, and advice on handling learners who have little or no prior experience of learning English, such as those who have just arrived from mainland China (Sections 3.6).

5. *Does the syllabus encourage the use of other means such as modern technology and social resources, on top of the textbook, as means of learning?*

Section 5.4 encourages teachers to use the textbook judiciously, and offers advice for adapting the textbook. Also, there is reference to the utilization of social resources. Section 3.2.5 encourages the use of project work: “It may take learners out of the classroom and involve them in the collection of data through interviews and library work” (p. 53).

6. *Does the syllabus emphasize learning in and out of the classroom? Is there concern for the effect of the classroom environment, atmosphere and school culture?*

Section 3.5 explains in detail how to create a language environment in the primary school. The syllabus advocates the use of English in the English lesson, enriching English language learning through extra-curricular activities (Section 3.5.2) and language games (Section 3.5.3), and creating pleasurable enjoyable language learning through the use of songs, rhymes and poems (Section 3.5.5).

7. *Does the syllabus advise using students' ability in English as a criterion for streaming/grouping?*

Section 3.6.3 suggests different ways of classroom organization, e.g., ability grouping; mixed ability grouping; and grouping by size. Section 3.6.4 provides advice on how to handle more able learners, learners of below average ability, learners with no prior experience in English, and learners who will use English as the medium of instruction. Overall, the emphasis is on grouping students according to their needs and abilities.

8. *Does the syllabus (a) emphasize students' initiative in learning; and (b) advocate a combination of collaboration and competition between students?*

A major emphasis of the current English syllabus which was absent in its predecessor (Curriculum Development Committee, 1981) is learner independence. The syllabus stresses that "it is important for learners to develop, as early as possible, a sense of responsibility which will motivate them to be active in their learning with sustained effort. In other words, learners are encouraged to take charge of their own learning" (p. 80).

It then goes on to offer advice on how to produce self-access materials for young learners. The syllabus further advocates developing the following skills among primary students: library skills (section 3.4.2), reference skills (section 3.4.3), and information skills (section 3.4.4).

As regards the balance between collaboration and competition, there is no special emphasis on collaboration, but under task-based learning advo-

cated by the current English syllabus, most task activities will be done in pairs or groups, and thus require collaboration.

9. *Does the evaluation of student learning (a) adopt criterion-referenced principles; (b) use formative assessment as well as summative assessment; and (c) relate to curriculum aims?*

Another major feature of the current English syllabus is its detailed discussion of assessment. Section 4.2 sets out a detailed scheme for assessing student learning, which comprises the following major characteristics:

- There should be formative assessment as well as summative assessment.
- Assessment should be criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced.
- There should be systematic recording of individual pupils' progress.
- Assessment should relate to the learning targets.

10. *Does the overall design include all the key curriculum characteristics, e.g., 1 to 9 above?*

The current English syllabus is not only a specification of content topics. Rather, it offers comprehensive guidelines on various aspects of English language teaching and learning in the primary school, including planning for teaching, classroom methodology, assessment, resources, and dealing with individual differences.

## **Learning English as a Compulsory School Subject: A Discussion**

The above analysis has suggested that the current Primary English syllabus has given some attention to the needs of English language learning within a compulsory schooling context. In this regard, while the mainstream literature on second language curriculum design is pre-occupied with the application of insights from linguistics and theories of second language acquisition (e.g., Brown, 1995; Yalden, 1987), the current primary English syllabus is an exemplar effort in second language curriculum design for a mass schooling system. However, we need to continue to examine critically our

rationales for imposing English on our schoolchildren. We should not settle for the vague assumption that every school child will need English one day, or that English is “good” for them, and so we have the right to subject every schoolchild to a minimum of nine years of English learning. At the same time, we must make sure that the imposition of English on schoolchildren does not lead to “failures” of our own making. We, the authors of this paper, assert that this critical reflection will need to address two central issues: the issue of equity and the issue of individual differences and motivation.

### **The Issue of Equity**

A major goal in the provision of compulsory education is equal educational opportunity for all schoolchildren. Here, educational opportunity is not to be confined to the provision of school places only, but should also consist of providing the socially disadvantaged with educational experience and learning opportunity that do not discriminate against them. Although there are no overt discriminatory policies against the socially deprived, a few scholars have pointed out that the compulsory schooling as it is practised in Hong Kong is far from being equitable (e.g., Mak, 1992; Postiglione, 1992). Tsang (1997) has reviewed the development of compulsory education in Hong Kong at institutional and structural levels, with special reference to the provision of fair and equitable schooling for those who are socially disadvantaged. Tsang’s review shows that the policies implemented in the last twenty years have actually shifted Hong Kong’s orientation to schooling from “exclusionary elitism” to “segregated elitism”.

Within English language learning, how may students’ social backgrounds affect their educational opportunity? A large-scale survey by Siu, Tsang, Siu, and Hung (1995) of the relationship between socio-economic status and bilingual proficiency among secondary school students in Hong Kong found that students’ achievement in English Language significantly correlates with their socio-economic status (SES), with SES represented by parents’ education, income, and occupation. This correlation is especially strong at the Secondary One level.

At the instructional level, a study by Yu (1995) suggested that middle-class students may perform better in English than their working-class counterparts under the officially adopted communicative approach, since middle-class children have more exposure to the communicative use of English in their daily lives.

It follows that on top of curriculum renewal, extra resources should be invested into teaching English to the socially deprived, to make up for their lack of social capital. For example, extra resources should be provided for schools which take in large numbers of children from working-class families or newly-arrived children.

### **The Issue of Individual Differences and Learner Motivation**

A survey by Lee (1996) on primary teachers' perspectives on ELT indicated that the greatest difficulty faced by teachers is pupils' lack of motivation and interest to learn English. Wong (1997), however, emphasizes that rather than attributing poor academic achievements categorically to low levels of motivation and foundation, individual differences and learning motivation are problems that educators need to address in a system of compulsory education.

The current primary English syllabus has recognized the need to cater for learner differences (Section 3.6). The solutions suggested include curriculum tailoring, grading tasks on the basis of difficulty, and giving extra support to less able students and extra challenge to more able ones. Although initial work on learning styles and learning strategies in second language learning (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Wendon, 1991) has not matured to the point where different curricula and teaching methodologies can be matched with learners having different learning styles, instructional strategies for dealing with different learning styles have already begin to appear in the ELT literature (e.g., Prodromou, 1992; Tice, 1997). The question is how these ideas and strategies can be integrated into the regular scheme of work, or put into practice in real classroom settings. At the same time, in the mainstream educational literature, certain approaches to adaptive teaching

(Glasner, 1972), such as mastery learning (Guskey, 1987), cooperative learning (Slavin, 1990), and individualized instruction, should help solve the question of individual differences.

Closely associated with the question of individual differences is how to develop students' motivation to learn. Under compulsory schooling, we cannot solely rely on the extrinsic motivator of passing examinations, as we once did under elitist schooling. The primary English syllabus has manifested some of the measures suggested by Stipek (1996) that are conducive to the enhancement of intrinsic motivation, such as criterion-referenced assessment of learning, the grading of learning tasks, training in study skills, and an emphasis on learner-centredness. Once again, it is worth studying how mastery learning and cooperative learning may be applied to the English curriculum in an attempt to increase students' intrinsic motivation in learning English.

## **Conclusion**

Morris has cited the People's Republic of China as the main political influence on the Hong Kong school curriculum (1995, p. 126). Some people have feared that the handover of sovereignty to China might lead to lowered motivation to learn English among schoolchildren. However, as has been pointed out by Lee and Dimmock (1998), "the inherent pragmatic, utilitarian and elitist nature of Hong Kong society coupled with the international outlook of its economy will ensure that the English language retains its status as cultural capital beyond 1997" (p. 25). It is unlikely that English will lose its importance in the near future, but what worries educators is: As English continues to be a compulsory subject in our post-colonial era, how can we enhance the quality of English teaching and learning in the school classroom? This paper has looked at the current Hong Kong primary English curriculum, which is a major influence on English learning in the classroom.

Although there is consensus among curriculum writers that what is stated in an official curriculum document may not be the same as what is experi-

enced by learners in the classroom, in the case of Hong Kong the official syllabus plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning experience through the government's legislation on the provision of schooling.

This analysis has indicated that the current primary English syllabus is beginning to pay attention to some of the needs of students who are required to receive 315 minutes of English language instruction a week. This paper argues, however, that in order to tackle the issues of equity, learner differences and motivation, more government effort beyond curriculum renewal is needed.

Finally, the conclusion reached in this analysis has been shaped by the procedure used, as well as the characterization of the compulsory curriculum adopted. The authors are aware that, in the words of Posner (1995, p. 273), "curriculum analysis represents an interpretation of a curriculum; as in literary criticism, there is more than one valid interpretation". It may be noted, for example, that although various schemes of curriculum analysis have been proposed (Ariav, 1986), none has been specially concerned with compulsory curricula.

This discussion may therefore be further advanced with (1) the further development of the methodology of curriculum analysis, (2) the introduction of different philosophical perspectives on compulsory education, and (3) a critical re-examination of the purpose of a foreign language as a subject within a compulsory schooling system (Bartlett, 1990). In the case of English in Hong Kong, this re-examination entails asking a fundamental question: Why are we forcing every schoolchild to study English (as opposed to, say, a subject called "life skills"), for nine years? This critical appraisal may imply that, rather than revising the primary subject syllabuses one at a time, we should revamp the entire primary school curriculum with the needs of compulsory education as foundational considerations.

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## Appendix

Nature of Curriculum and Instructional Design under Selective Schooling and Compulsory Schooling

Curriculum Commonplaces	Selective Schooling	Compulsory Schooling
1. Curriculum aims	Emphasize transmission and recall of knowledge	diversified, including but not limited to affective, vocational, high-level cognitive aims
2. Principles for the selection of contents and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. partly related or unrelated to curriculum aims</li> <li>b. designed for next-stage learning (e.g., from primary to secondary; from junior to senior secondary)</li> <li>c. neglect learner differences</li> <li>d. learning not meaningful to all students</li> <li>e. examination oriented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. related to curriculum aims</li> <li>b. designed for present-stage learning</li> <li>c. cater for learner characteristics</li> <li>d. meaningful learning</li> <li>e. consider all factors that have implications for student learning</li> </ul>
3. Principles of organizing contents and activities of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. focus only on knowledge structures of a discipline as organizing principles</li> <li>b. subject-oriented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. focus on characteristics of learners, social changes and needs, and opinions of experts as design foundations, integrated approach as principles</li> <li>b. holistic design, a combination of subject and integrated design</li> </ul>
4. Pace of learning	Uniform and inflexible; little attention to individual differences in learning pace	Diversified and flexible; attention to individual differences in learning pace
5. Means of learning	Use of textbooks as the main learning tool	Apart from textbooks, other means such as modern technology and social resources are used
6. Space or setting for learning	Classroom-based	Learning inside and outside the classroom; attention to effect of classroom environment, atmosphere and school culture

7. Class structure and student organization	a. age used as a measure for student grouping b. emphasis on segregation	a. students' standards used as a measure for grouping students b. emphasis on integration
8. Learning process a. teacher/student relationship b. student/student relationship	a. not alert to students' initiative b. emphasis on competition	a. emphasis on students' initiative b. combination of collaboration and competition
9. Evaluation of performance of learning	a. rank ordering of students by scores and norm-referenced tests b. summative tests only c. partly related or unrelated to curriculum aims	a. criterion-referenced tests to see whether students can meet the criteria b. a combination of summative and formative tests c. related to curriculum aims
10. Characteristics of curriculum design	Focus on learning contents, neglect other key characteristics	Include all curriculum key characteristics, e.g., 1 to 9 of the above characteristics