



A new chapter in teaching mother tongue

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SINGAPORE - Instead of describing a picture, a student would be asked to start a conversation in his mother tongue after watching a video clip of an everyday scenario. And rather than putting pen to paper, he could use the computer to reply to an email as part of an examination.

This is a simple snapshot of the way examinations will change but it goes to the heart of the new Mother Tongue Language (MTL) curriculum coming onstream in the next few years.

Technology, interactivity and a shift in home language backgrounds underpin the swath of recommendations announced yesterday by the MTL Review Committee.

Primary school pupils, for instance, will start using video stimuli in their oral exams at the Primary School Leaving Examination from 2017. For pupils taking Higher MTL in secondary schools, oral assessment will be incorporated into their O-Level Exam from 2016.

The aim is for pupils to see how language skills apply to real-life scenarios.

Said Director-General of Education Ho Peng, who headed the review committee: "This will keep Mother Tongue languages alive and encourage fluency outside the classroom."

After a year-long deliberation, it suggested four areas of change to the MTL curriculum. \$45 million will be set aside to support some of these efforts (Amended at 5:50 PM Jan 19, 2011).

Other than new exam formats, the curriculum will feature elements such as songs or drama as well as a heavier use of info-communication technologies.

To cater for this, curriculum content will be reduced at various levels, for example, by 10 per cent at Primary Three and Four.

The changes mean that instead of targetting certain learning outcomes, teachers will look at different proficiency descriptions of language use to gauge the achievements of their pupils.

And with greater diversity of learning abilities, more options are also being introduced. Specifically for Chinese Language, there will be a new subject at selected junior colleges from 2015: Chinese Linguistics and Translation.

For pupils weaker in MTL, greater emphasis will be placed on developing communication skills.

The recommendations come six years after the last round of changes allowed more pupils to take the MTL "B" syllabus in secondary school to cope with their difficulties in learning MTL.

At a press conference yesterday, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen also set the latest changes in context: The dynamic shift of MTL usage in homes has led to different starting points for pupils entering an education system in which the bilingual policy remains a corner stone.

Dr Ng said: "Lessons must be more engaging and interactive, so that students can see direct relevance of what they're learning."

Teachers whom MediaCorp spoke to acknowledged that the predominant use of English Language at home has made it more challenging to sustain students' interest in MTL. The pervasiveness of technology has also placed the onus on MTL teachers to make lessons more engaging.

Dunman High School head of department (Chinese Language) Yeong Chan Kong is confident that teachers can instead leverage on technology: "By showing young learners that the language is alive and applicable to real situations, this will pique students' interest and keep them curious about it."

Singapore Tamil Teachers Union president S Samikannu agreed that exam formats should be re-aligned as the curriculum is updated, but stressed that teachers still need to balance between interactivity and written skills.

To allow teachers to have more time to plan lessons creatively by tapping on technology, he suggested that the ministry relook the distribution of teachers' duties.

Parent Ong Bee Chin, who has a son in Primary One, understands how hard it is for her son to pick up Mandarin, which he finds boring. She applauded the use of computers vis-a-vis rote learning.

The Cabinet has approved MOE's plan to implement the recommendations.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in an email correspondence to Dr Ng, said: "We must help every student to attain as high a proficiency in MTL as he or she is capable of with reasonable effort."

URL <http://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC110119-0000260/A-new-chapter-in-teaching-mother-tongue>

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