

Tuesday English News Report

*Is Hong Kong's path of **trilingualism** really **feasible**?*

Kelly Yang says more can be done to help Hong Kong children improve their English, if we accept costs to their Cantonese proficiency.

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The rise of mainland China's English proficiency and decline of Hong Kong's should come as no surprise. It's a matter of simple maths - two is fewer than three. Children on the mainland have two languages to master - Putonghua and English - while most Hong Kong kids have to know three different tongues - Putonghua, Cantonese and English.

Stroll through any local school and what do you hear? Cantonese. As Hong Kong people, we are fiercely proud of our **vibrant dialect** and do not want to give it up. Many say Cantonese is our last hope of keeping our city unique. Without it, we are at greater risk of becoming just another Chinese city.

Thus, for important cultural and deeply emotional reasons, our city **clings to** trilingualism. But this comes at a cost. It's rare to meet someone who can speak three languages perfectly.

What's much more common is for a person to have one dominant language and two secondary ones. For most local schoolchildren, the dominant language is Cantonese. That's because it's the **lingua franca** of the environment for most, whether it's in the playground, at home, or on the streets.

Mainland Chinese children, on the other hand, have Putonghua as their dominant language. And with the rest of their time and energy, they focus on learning English. As the number of after-school English learning centres rises, along with household spending on education, it should come as little surprise that their English proficiency has overtaken that of Hong Kong students.

If Hong Kong's top **priority** is to get children to be able to speak both Cantonese and Putonghua, then there's no problem. Nearly all our children can speak both dialects of Chinese, whereas most mainland children can speak only one. Hong Kong children can speak perfect Cantonese and their Putonghua is improving year after year.

However, if the priority is English, then we have a problem. We need to rethink the main language of instruction in local schools and, more importantly, how local schools teach English. The only way to **beef up** English is to have more English. English-medium instruction should be used for all subjects, aside from Chinese. Currently, only select local schools, many of them Direct Subsidy Scheme schools, do so; the rest still teach mostly in Cantonese.

More importantly, the way local schools teach English needs to change. Right now, students as young as six spend hours cramming for exams and then routinely **disregard** their new vocabulary as soon as the exam is over. The emphasis needs to shift to discussion- and project-based learning.

If these two things happen, expatriate families will start to send their children to local schools rather than put up with the **exorbitant** international school fees. This, in turn, will cause the language environment in the playgrounds of local schools to switch from Cantonese to English, thereby changing the dominant language.



School children in Zhejiang province learning English

1. What do you think?

2. Vocabulary

Fill in the blanks in the sentences below using words from the box.

trilingualism	feasible	stroll	vibrant
dialect	cling to	lingua franca	priority
beef up	disregard	exorbitant	

1. This word means possible. It's highly _____ that man will one day walk on the planet Mars.
2. The most important thing for him - his _____ - is his family.
3. If you _____ something, you ignore it and don't pay any more attention to it.
4. To hold onto something very tightly. Young children will always _____ their parents if they feel frightened.
5. When something is much too expensive we say the price is _____.
6. To _____ means to walk around in a relaxed manner.
7. Paris is a _____ city. It is full of life, colour and character.
8. If you do this, you make something or someone stronger. To be a better boxer he decided to go to the gym to _____.
9. _____ is also known as a "bridge language". It's a language that is used by people who don't speak the same language. For many years Latin was used in Europe to communicate. Now it is English.
10. _____ is the ability to speak 3 languages perfectly.