

Net gains

Philip Yeung believes native-speaking English teachers will be at their most effective in raising students' language ability if they are given more support and training, and cultural exchange is encouraged

The native-speaking English teacher (NET) scheme has been a part of our local public school system for the past 15 years. It has grown into a HK\$710 million, 900-strong operation, complete with its own mini-bureaucracy. Despite the trappings of a fully fledged scheme, it has within it pockets of immaturity. Periodically, there are rumblings of complaint from both sides. Sweep these differences under the rug, and the programme may never live up to its promise.

The scheme was born of a desire to give our public schools a more English-rich environment. That is the narrower goal. The wider perspective is that we need fresh thinking in our system. Ideally, native English teachers can function as change agents. But change is a bridge too far if catalysts are few and far between. Native English teachers used to have to split their time between several schools. Now each school has its own. But having one teacher per school, offering a single 35-minute English lesson per week, is like trying to douse a wild fire with a bucket of water. As the Cantonese saying goes, "you can't clap with one hand"; a single teacher can't produce the desired ripple effect. Acting alone, and subject to the vagaries of the system, the teacher's style is seriously cramped.

The figure of HK\$710 million sounds like a lot of money, but spread so thinly, it tapers into a half-measure. At-risk schools need more than just a token foreign teacher. They deserve a critical mass, especially if they have cut their teeth on transforming students from challenged backgrounds.

Our education system is splintered. We have a full spectrum of schools, from the private to the public, and everything in between. Sadly, there is little traffic between them. Each school, whatever its pigeonhole, tends to do its own thing. They regard other schools either with apathy or a mild competitive antipathy.

If there is little inter-school co-operation, there is even less inter-system relationship. That is why the new chief executive of the English Schools Foundation, Belinda Greer, comes to us like a breath of fresh air. For the first time, the ESF's head is reaching out to local schools by offering to share its proven pedagogy and best practices. The government should take her up on the offer, with native English teachers perhaps being the go-between.

In return, it should rescind its decision

to phase out the ESF subsidy, which may price out many mid-level expatriates attracted to this global city. With this partnership, the ESF would no longer be just another self-absorbed international school system. Native English teachers could also participate in the 80 professional development activities for ESF teachers. Together, they might just create public education's "perfect storm", and a partnership unique in world education.

To induct new entrants, there should be less focus on the mundane mechanics of "living in Hong Kong", such as how to



To deliver the scheme's promise, NETs need to get English into students' bloodstream

open a bank account, and more on understanding what makes local teachers tick. The yawning cultural gap between locals and foreigners cannot be ignored. Both should leave their own comfort zone and befriend the other. Bear in mind that local teachers who don't appear forthcoming may only be shy or linguistically challenged. For the 15 per cent attrition rate to drop, native English teachers should be encouraged to embrace their local colleagues, if not the local culture.

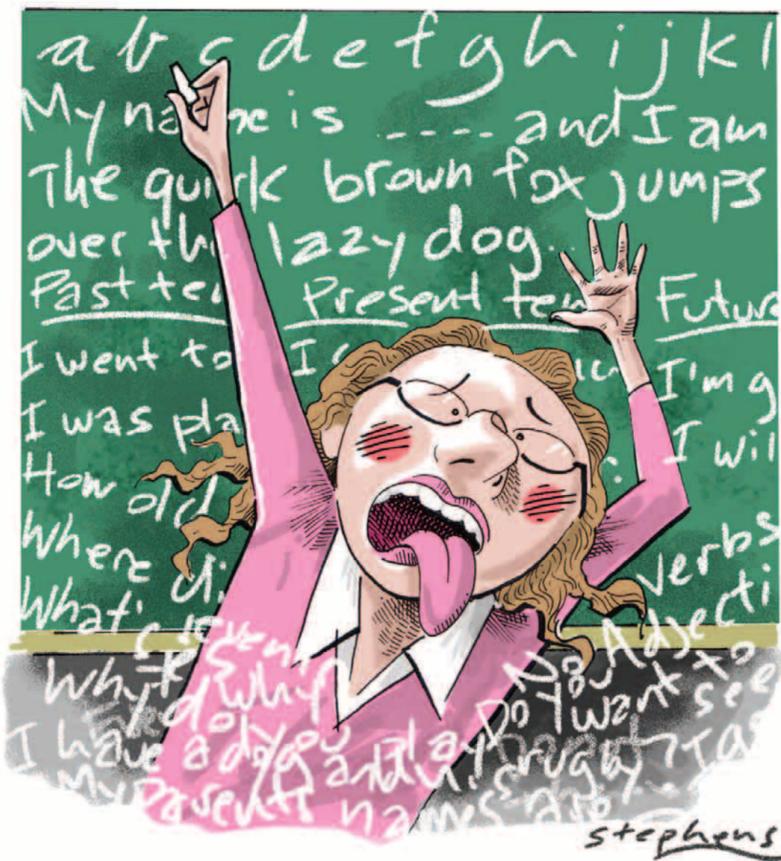
Typically, local principals accuse NETs of avoiding paperwork, including correcting exercises. Coming from educational systems with an anti-clerical tradition, the teachers' logic is that people don't become teachers in order to be clerks.

Meanwhile, poor local teachers spend about one-third of their time doing paperwork and writing reports that nobody reads. But native English teachers must face the fact that, in this exam-driven environment, correcting exercises is a necessary evil. Granted, a school system where paperwork proliferates is a system that has

veered from education's true purpose. Native English teachers' greater challenge is to help students cross the cultural divide. Language education is never just about language alone, for language is a carrier of culture. The local curriculum is almost devoid of cultural content through reading, the strong suit of these teachers.

Trawling the internet with students for stories or articles that are entertaining or educational, or for lyrics of English folk songs, and sharing English-language movies with students, are all part of teaching them to grow an English tongue, if not an English heart. To deliver the scheme's promise, native-speaking English teachers need to get English into the students' bloodstream. Its practitioners must exploit their art and ancillary resources to the full.

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Respect due

Su-Mei Thompson and **Lisa Moore** say complaints about revealing stewardesses' uniforms point to a common service-industry problem

Cathay Pacific's Flight Attendants Union captured the headlines this week when it complained that flight attendants' uniforms are too revealing and encourage sexual harassment. This is a cause for concern. It throws up much larger themes relating to sexist stereotyping and unfair work practices in the service industry as a whole, which have persisted despite the enactment of anti-discrimination laws in many parts of the world.

Historically, employment eligibility criteria for flight attendants included strict height, age and weight requirements, mandatory appointments with appearance counsellors and a requirement to stay single. While these restrictions have been gradually removed – at least on paper – since the late 1980s, the image of flight attendants as nubile beings available to meet passengers' every need, particularly in business or first class, has endured.

In recent times, Britney Spears' highly revealing stewardess costume and performance in the music video for her hit song *Toxic*, Aeroflot's 2011 calendar featuring female flight attendants in the nude, and Qingdao University's flight attendant beauty pageant have only reinforced the objectification of female flight attendants and a permissive attitude towards these women.

All this may go some way to explaining why over a quarter of respondents who took part in a recent survey of Hong Kong flight attendants by the Equal Opportunities Commission said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment.

The current focus on the flight industry is but one small part of a much more serious problem. There are numerous examples where women are required to dress provocatively – consider skimpily dressed auto show models draped over new cars or bikini-clad beer saleswomen at sporting fixtures.

It is high time we replaced these dated stereotypes with images that are a more worthy reflection of the many professional women working in the service sector. It is probably time the "Singapore Girl" went into retirement. Becoming a flight attendant involves rigorous training and getting through highly competitive selection procedures. At Cathay Pacific, only 800 out of 11,000 applicants actually made it last year to become cabin crew members, and they must take examinations to renew their licences yearly.

Airlines need to think about rebranding in a way that highlights this level of professionalism and more comprehensively embraces the diversity existing within the industry.

For example, Cathay's recent "People. They Make An Airline" campaign helps to dispel the image of female flight attendants as good-time girls and emphasises their individuality and professionalism. In addition, Dragonair and Cathay both consult staff in the design of uniforms.

More cross-industry exchange of best practices in this regard is needed if concerted change is to happen. While rethinking uniforms is an important part of this, businesses, the media and other stakeholders need to be vigilant about promoting campaigns, practices and behaviour that work to reverse entrenched harmful stereotypes.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO and Lisa Moore is research & advocacy manager at The Women's Foundation. This article is part of a monthly series on gender issues developed in collaboration with the foundation

Occupy Central leaders should reinstate screened-out reform plans for public vote

The movement "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" is meant to exert maximum pressure on the authorities for meaningful electoral reform, but all it has achieved so far is to further divide the shaky alliance of the pan-democratic camp.

About 2,500 Occupy supporters took part in its third "deliberation day" this week. These die-hard supporters should be applauded for their persistence and noble cause. The participants were asked to vote on 15 reform options handpicked by the Occupy organisers and considered compatible with international standards for a fair and just election. Their three most popular choices will be put to a vote by the general public on June 22.

The most preferred option will be used as a test against the official reform package, expected to be tabled in the Legislative Council for enactment by the end of the year. Should the government proposal fail to live up to their expectations, the Occupy organisers will host another referendum to determine whether to activate their much talked-about plan to paralyse the financial district.

This protracted procedure has been mocked by all sides as the antithesis of what Occupy aspired to achieve. The movement was launched primarily to prevent any attempt by the authorities to screen out certain pro-democracy activists from being nominated as candidates for the chief executive election in 2017.

Ironically, the Occupy leaders have shown the world that they,

Albert Cheng says a movement that rejects the vetting of candidates for 2017 election should not be similarly denying the people a true choice



too, can be arbitrary. What Occupy did this week was let 2,500 supporters deny the public their right to choose from the complete range of reform options by screening out what they deemed undesirable.

This in effect proved, to the chagrin of other democrats, that some sort of vetting procedure is indispensable.

The exercise is supposed to be a show of strength, but it is becoming a show of a lack of it

The respectable Occupy trio – the Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, law professor Benny Tai Yiu-ting and sociologist Chan Kin-man – have painted themselves into a corner. Given the lack of choice, members of the public are less likely to take part in the online referendum next month. Of the 3.5 million registered voters in Hong Kong, 1.6 million cast their ballots for five seats in the district council functional constituency in the Legco poll in 2012. It will be a major embarrassment to the Occupy organisers if, say, less than

200,000, or 6 per cent of the electorate, take part in their June referendum.

The exercise is supposed to be a show of strength, but it is becoming a show of a lack of it. At this rate, the movement will lose momentum even before its leaders can decide when to "occupy".

The only way out is for them to admit they violated their own democratic principles and apologise to pan-democratic-camp sympathisers. The moderate reform options, which do not entail "public nomination" of candidates, must be reinstated for the informal referendum. These include those championed by former chief secretary Anson Chan Fang On-sang, legislator Ronny Tong Ka-wah and an alliance of 18 academics.

Unlike those three selected by Occupy supporters, these proposals provide a "middle ground" for compromise with the pro-establishment camp. As Chan pointed out, the outcome of the deliberation day excluded those who would like to head off a collision with Beijing.

This middle-of-the-road principle might well turn out to be an unacceptable solution. One way to find out is to let members of the public express their preference on June 22.

Instead of forging a consensus within their ranks, the deliberation day has widened the rifts. Chan branded

the student leaders and "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung radicals. Leung and his group reacted by burning photos of Chan, dismissing her proposal as a "phantom of democracy".

Meanwhile, Professor Joseph Cheng Yu-shek of the Alliance for True Democracy has denounced Leung's League of Social Democrats for failing to back the so-called three-track option in the deliberation poll as promised. The scene has become such a mess it borders on the comical.

The pursuit of true democracy through mass mobilisation is not an academic exercise that one can copy from the textbooks. Its success hinges on timing and operational details. Every move must be aimed at broadening one's support base.

Opinion surveys have indicated that, instead of gaining in popularity, support for Occupy Central has been steadily declining. One young man told Voice of America, after taking part in the latest deliberations, that "Occupy Central was described as a ballistic missile, but I am afraid it is turning into a dud". Before the Occupy bomb can inflict any damage on the authorities, it has already blown the united front of the pro-democratic groups to smithereens.

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Enduring values of the EU cannot be taken for granted

Vincent Piket says, post 2008, the union is stronger and healthier

On May 9, 1950, in the wake of the second world war, Robert Schuman, the then foreign minister of France, called for the unification of Europe in order to make war on the continent impossible and to spread peace and prosperity globally. Schuman's declaration drew a positive response from five other European countries, including Germany, France's erstwhile foe.

This kicked off Europe's gradual integration. And May 9 came to be called Europe Day – the day to celebrate how the European Union overcame age-old differences to shape a common future.

Around the globe, whether in Cairo or Kiev, people want what we have in the EU: personal rights and freedoms, democratic governance, rule of law and a decent living. Events in Ukraine show we cannot take these values for granted.

In today's Europe, we see that democracy is a constant work in progress; we share a responsibility to safeguard and nurture it. And we will stand by those who call for it.

The EU created a common foreign policy to ensure our voice is heard. In the face of big problems such as fragile states, pandemics, energy security, climate change and migration, we are more effective together than individually. Through the work of the European External Action Service, led by Catherine Ashton, we promote EU values and interests around the world, with human rights as a silver thread.

The EU also plays an

important role in regional security issues. Ashton leads the talks of the "EU3 plus 3" (Germany, France and Britain as well as the US, China and Russia) with Iran. These talks resulted in an interim agreement on Iran's nuclear programme last November – a crucial step towards de-escalating an emerging crisis.

Take also the Horn of Africa, where, thanks to a combination of political dialogue with the government of Somalia, our naval mission Atalanta, and

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targeted aid, piracy has been reduced by 95 per cent. Today, the young men who used to man pirate ships are going to school.

This is a special year for the EU. Ten years ago, 10 new members joined our union; eight were previously behind the Iron Curtain. The 2004 enlargement thus marked the end of decades of division on our continent. Since then, three more members have joined: a testimony to the continuing attraction of the EU.

This year is also special for European citizens. From May 22-25, they will vote in the

elections for the European Parliament; a parliament whose say has become decisive in most areas.

For sure, boosting growth and job creation will remain at the top of our agenda. We have exited the financial crisis and confidence has returned to our markets. Translating economic confidence into jobs and rising income will take time.

One thing stands: the EU union is stronger now than in 2008 when the financial crisis hit. The many analysts who predicted the EU's and/or the euro's demise were wrong. The EU is better equipped for its task now than before. For those who have never lived inside the EU, it is hard to realise how strong the interdependencies are. Such interdependencies create a common destiny, a common future and solidarity – by nurturing the differences and diversity.

Sixty-four years ago, Schuman called for the set-up of what today is the EU. But he always understood this as a union in diversity. "Unity in diversity" is now the motto of the EU, a key ingredient of its growing strength at home and abroad.

In 2014, the world commemorates one century after the outbreak of the first world war. The EU, which was the crucible of both world wars, is today striving to achieve peace and prosperity through trade, investment and deeper people-to-people exchanges.

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