

The mentality that HK sorely needs as world city

Ho Lok-sang says if we know our limitations, strive to overcome them, there will be hope for city’s better tomorrow. If we refuse to do so, prospects will be grim

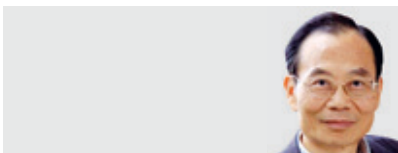
Last week a clip of a press interview with a student leader went viral. The student leader’s broken English was most depressing. He could hardly finish a single sentence in English and had to supplement his broken English with Cantonese and ask his friends for help to translate Chinese words into English. One wonders how his English could be this bad, given that he must have studied English for at least 12 years. I recall that a university student union president also could not effectively communicate in English at a press conference.

One reason why the English of Hong Kong students is so bad became apparent when the results of the “benchmark test” (formally, the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers) for teachers intending to teach English were released. They showed that a mere 50.2 percent passed the written test, 78.3 percent passed the listening test, while 62.3 percent passed the spoken English test.

The saving grace is that teachers are supposed to have reached Level 3 proficiency in the test before they can teach English. If they fail, they will not be allowed to teach English. But I discovered that exemptions from this requirement are given to those who hold “a relevant degree plus relevant teacher training”.

One wonders how good “proficiency at level 3” is, and how good those exempted really are. But the fact is that today we are witnessing students in University Grants Committee-funded universities with substandard English. This shows that the system is failing us.

This is a serious problem, because English proficiency is fundamental to the competitiveness of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a world city and a global financial center. We should not be complacent about being “third in Asia” in its IELTS score, after Malaysia and the Philippines (2018 data). Singaporeans are known to be head and shoulders above Hong Kong people, and Singapore does not show up in the ranking. Hong Kong’s 2018 IELTS score is higher than the mainland’s 5.78 and Taiwan’s 6.1, Hong Kong’s benchmark must be other



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world cities and other leading global financial centers.

I am more worried about some Hong Kong people’s arrogance and conceit than with our standard of English. If we know our limitations and strive to overcome them, there will be hope for a better tomorrow. But if we refuse to admit our limitations, to work hard, and to face competition, then the prospects for Hong Kong will be grim.

It is nice for our youngsters to shoot for the stars and dream big. In the last few years, I have seen many youngsters in Hong Kong talk big but act small. They talk about democracy; they talk about fighting for a better Hong Kong; they talk about justice; they talk about human rights. But have they done the homework to understand what democracy is, what justice means? Have they the open mind and the humility required to find out how such countries as the United Kingdom and Japan rose to preeminence in the 19th century, and how the United States rose to surpass the UK in the 20th century?

How the US stole technology from Nazi Germany (“Operation Paperclip” involved more than 1,600 German scientists, engineers, and technicians being taken from Germany to the US after World War II); how the US cheated the natives who lived in the Marshall Islands and tested atomic and hydrogen bombs multiple times there; how America engineered multiple regime changes in different countries? It is perfectly fine for them to look at modern China’s errors and blunders. But they should also open their eyes to how modern China learned from its mistakes, and how it eventually succeeded in producing the starkest economic miracle in human history, eradicating poverty for 850 million people in 40 years according to the World Bank. We must remember China was about as poor as India in 1950.

One of the common complaints among employers in interviews I have conducted in recent years was the attitude of their young employees. The trait that they valued the most was a willingness to work hard and the initiative to learn. While many complained about a lack of language proficiency, most were more concerned about whether youngsters had the courage to face challenges and if they had the humility to learn.

I do not intend to downplay some of our youngsters’ achievements. I recall how pleasantly surprised I was when one of my students used to come to my office and easily spent an hour discussing philosophy, politics, and various social issues in English. He spoke particularly good English. He told me he came from a local school but had worked hard using the electronic equipment that was available in the market to improve his pronunciation. After graduating from Lingnan University, he got offers from the law schools of both the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His example shows that if one is keen to learn English, one should have no problem in acquiring proficiency. The fact that even many teachers are below par shows that too many people in Hong Kong just will not make the effort to learn. That is sad.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

TO THE POINT

STAFF WRITER

‘Political neutrality’ a basic requisite for public servants

In defense of the new guidelines calling for the dismissal of public servants charged with taking part in “unlawful public activities targeting specific or general policies, and/or decisions of the government during their probation period”, Secretary for the Civil Service Patrick Nip Tak-ken rebutted on Sunday and Monday criticism that such a dismissal would violate the presumption of innocence.

With no solid arguments to bank on, critics have latched onto the common law principle of “presumption of innocence”. But to the fair-minded, those who peddle this argument in resisting the new guidelines issued recently by the Civil Service Bureau to various government department heads through an internal memo are merely playing tricks with the concept, or resorting to sophistry.

It is common knowledge that the bar for public servants is much higher than “no criminal record”. The government has strict requirements on the conduct of civil servants, as the Code of Civil Service stipulates, of which “impartiality” and “political neutrality” are most relevant in this case.

The principle of impartiality requires that “civil servants shall carry out their duties and responsibilities in accordance with the policies and decisions of the Government of the day and in a way that is fair, just and equitable”. It is doubtful that

anyone using normal logic could imagine how a public servant could fulfill this obligation when he or she is opposed to the government’s policies or decisions.

The principle of political neutrality, meanwhile, requires that “civil servants shall serve the Chief Executive and the Government of the day with total loyalty and to the best of their ability, no matter what their own political beliefs are”. It is not only nonsense but sophistry to argue that a civil servant can reconcile the intrinsic conflict between his or her “total loyalty” to the chief executive and opposing the CE and the government’s policies or decisions.

Anyone who has any doubt about the principles of impartiality and political neutrality should have a good look at a court case last year in Australia, in which an Immigration Department officer was fired for criticizing the Australian government’s immigration policy on Twitter under a pseudonym. The dismissed civil servant appealed her case all the way up to the High Court in Australia, and the highest court eventually made a landmark ruling that the officer was lawfully fired, and there was no breach of the constitution.

If critics of the new guidelines really respect common law principles as they claimed, they should stop yapping about their nonsense arguments.

Johnson Kong and Leonie Kelly-Farley

Aligning with green catalog a way for HKSAR to thrive

The problem of “greenwashing” — making misleading claims about a product’s environmental impact — has long been discussed in the green bond market. After all, determining whether a bond is “green” is not easy, and there have been attempts internationally to define qualifying criteria for such bonds.

The People’s Bank of China, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the China Securities and Regulatory Commission recently jointly published the consultation draft of the Green Bond Endorsed Project Catalogue (2020), which defines what qualifies as green projects for green bonds. The new catalog contains noteworthy revisions from the 2015 version.

Firstly, clean coals and other coal-related investments have been removed from the eligibility list, which has been praised widely both at home and abroad. For a long time, the main discrepancy between Chinese and international standards for green bonds lay on clean coal, which was previously defined as green on the Chinese mainland. The new catalog thus brings China into closer alignment with international standards.

Significant changes have also been made regarding the depth and scope of the green definition. The 2020 catalog expands the scope of eligible green projects, including hydrogen power, carbon capture and storage, and a new category of green services. Furthermore, it has added various technical details on renewable energy efficiency with more stringent requirements to encourage greener outcomes, such as raising the minimum conversion efficiency standard of solar panels to 17 percent from 15.5 percent.

The new catalog represents the convergence of green bond standards within the Chinese mainland. While dual standards had been applied in the jurisdiction, the 2020 catalog provides a unified standard of green bonds, allowing investors to better assess green projects based on a common standard.

As of 2019, green bonds issued by mainland institutions accounted for 79 percent of Hong Kong’s total issuances. Meanwhile, 81 percent of the green bonds issued in the city were denominated in US dollars. This highlights Hong Kong’s role as a bridge between the Chinese mainland and the international capital market, and the need for the city to align its green bond standard closely with developments on the mainland, including the latest catalog, as well as internationally.

Currently, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government follows the standards laid out in the Green Finance Certification Scheme from the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency. However, with the development of international standards, especially with the ongoing alignment between the Chinese mainland’s and the EU’s “green taxonomy”, it is time for Hong Kong to con-

sider embracing international standards, and to reflect on the city’s role in standard developments. Other than being merely the taker, Hong Kong should consider bringing its own unique insights, for instance its substantial experience in green buildings, into the international discussion on standard setting.

The 2020 catalog represents a connection between green finance and green economy, as it indicates key areas toward which policymakers hope to steer capital. Taking a look back at Hong Kong, what are the green industries in the city we are supporting with green finance?

According to Climate Bonds Initiative, among the green bonds issued locally in 2019, some 61 percent of the capital raised was used on low-carbon buildings. This reflects that Hong Kong’s green bonds and green industries are highly concentrated within the building sector. In the long run, this will affect the diversity of the local green bond market, making it hard to meet green investors’ demand for sector diversification.

Fortunately, in this year’s budget the SAR government has allocated HK\$200 million (\$26 million) to support the development or application of green technologies, which is a positive first step toward diversification. In the policy direction of reindustrialization, the government should be more proactive in promoting the development, as well as diversification, of Hong Kong’s green industries and financial market.

Apart from green bonds, social, sustainability and transition bonds are also growing in the global market. The Hong Kong government could consider supporting the growth of these products, so as to further diversify the sustainable finance market. By introducing a wider credit spectrum and expanding the use of proceeds, these products will help meet growing investor demand and enhance yield and sector diversification for investors.

The Hong Kong SAR government signed the Green Bond Pledge in 2019, whereby it committed to making capital projects resilient and low-carbon in line with the Paris Agreement, as well as financing low-carbon transition through green bonds. The newly established Green and Sustainable Finance Cross-Agency Steering Group aims, among other goals, to work with fellow regulators on developing a green taxonomy and relevant standards for the market. It should do so in a way that reconciles the city’s own needs for sustainable development and the need to align with standards like the 2020 catalog, such that Hong Kong can thrive as an international, sustainable finance hub.

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Rush to the finish line!



A boy wearing a face mask runs on a track at a shopping mall in Tseung Kwan O, with his hands outstretched like a pair of wings on his back. RAYMOND CHAN / CHINA DAILY