

How to improve English and Putonghua standards in Hong Kong

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'The standard of English is down, it's up.' So the subject goes wittering on year after year. We aim to be a world city: our wise men keep telling us that without English we can never stake that claim.

It is amazing to me that, in the midst of this debate, it is the British Council that is making the most effort in reaching out to the call from our upwardly mobile aspirants to improve their English with 45,000 students on the books. To be sure, we have our native English-speaking teachers in schools but why, if we aspire to be a world city, don't we make more effort to improve our English?

Perhaps there is a lingering feeling that for the government to be seen to be doing so smacks of colonialism. English, while it is associated historically with England, is a global language. Here is an opportunity missed by the government to bring Hong Kong up to its wished-for position as a global city. It would be easy to remedy this and not very costly, perhaps even self-financing. I suggest we set up English learning cells in each of our population centres so that instead of letting another opportunity slip from our hands we have a reality check and take action.

I further suggest we do the same with Putonghua.

Putonghua does not just happen. It requires time spent learning how to speak it well.

Here, then, are two simple ways - one to go global the other to get closer to our sisters and brothers on the mainland; both will bring great rewards. We should stop the hand-wringing.