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## English: Let's be pragmatic

**M**INISTER of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew has said that his English Language Review Committee will focus on the following key areas: the English syllabus and the way it is taught in schools; teacher training and development; and community support for learning the language. The committee

will release its recommendations in October, so Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui gave only a broad outline of the approach it would take. But judging from the tenor of his remarks, we are glad that the Ministry of Education is not about to propose radical reforms, based on some sweeping pedagogical theory. That is always the temptation when it comes to language teaching, for it is a subject that tends to generate rather passionate emotions.

Consider the recent debate on the state of English in Singapore. The only way to improving standards, some have argued, is to drill students in grammar. Not so, others have countered. Just have students read the classics of English literature and all would be well. There was also a vigorous debate on whether Singapore should import "native" English teachers. Some have argued that that would jack up standards, while others have bristled at the suggestion. Minister Lui's attitude on this and other questions was exemplary. "What we need in our schools is more good teachers," he said. "I don't particularly care where they come from. They can be retired teachers who can be enticed back to teach, or from overseas." Or to mangle somewhat a famous saying of Deng Xiaoping's: It doesn't matter if the teacher is white, yellow, brown or purple, so long as he or she helps pupils catch grammatical English mice.

It would be helpful if a similar pragmatic attitude were adopted towards all aspects of language teaching. A one-size-fits-all approach cannot work, as students come from vastly different linguistic backgrounds. For example, half of this year's Primary 1 students are from homes where English is not the main language. Obviously, the syllabus for this group cannot be the same as it is for students who come from English-speaking homes. Schools should be encouraged to experiment to meet different needs — the pilot programme to encourage reading that the minister described being a case in point. And they should be encouraged to be realistic and flexible in their approaches, eschewing theory in favour of pragmatic programmes.