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Teacher, teach thyself first

For better English, learn phonetics, grammar

I AM not surprised to read Ms Liu I-Chun's letter on common errors in English (TODAY, April 26).

Such errors in pronunciation and usage stem from the Ministry of Education's (MOE) lack of focus in its education policies. When I was in school, grammar was drummed into us rigorously.

But when my children were in school in the 80s and 90s, the formal teaching of grammar was dropped.

The MOE felt this could be acquired by "incidental learning" – whatever that means – forgetting that in every subject, the basics must be mastered first.

So, instead of ensuring that children learn to spell correctly, speak and write good English and pronounce their words properly, the emphasis is on cramming them with as much knowledge as possible.

They are made to run before they can even walk.

The correct use of the dictionary and its pronunciation key was, and still is, not emphasised.

Teachers are supposed to have learnt phonetics during their training, but listening to them speak belies that. They are the products of the system.

The damage is compounded because the children will not speak

well if the teachers do not speak well.

Worse still, with a heavy syllabus, large classes and many other duties, teachers cannot find time to allow the children to practise speaking in front of the class and correct them.

The Speak Good English Movement can, at best, repair some of the damage caused over the years because only those who are truly interested in the language will take the trouble to find out more and improve their standards.

The majority will be satisfied as long as they can, more or less, make others understand them.

The only way to correct the deteriorating standards in spoken and written English is for the MOE to get its priorities right.

Teachers should be made to attend refresher courses on phonetics, while the teaching of grammar, pronunciation and other basics of the subject should be made compulsory in primary and secondary schools.

Only by such teaching and the regular exposure of the children to speaking practices can we hope to improve the standard of spoken and written English.

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