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Extra lessons for trainee English teachers to bridge degree gap

Postgrad diploma course to include 216 hours of language instruction from Jan

By Maria Almenoar

TRAINEE English teachers will undergo extra language training to bridge the gap between those who have degrees in English and those who do not.

This recommendation came from a 36-member committee set up in September last year by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to review English teaching in schools.

The committee found that employers were calling for the level of English communication among even the top-performing school-leavers to be substantially improved.

Generally, it was found that teachers who teach English as their first subject graduated in subjects that require a high level of proficiency in the language.

However, less than half of all English teachers in secondary schools actually studied English language or English literature at university.

And since the majority of primary school teachers are trained to teach English along with mathematics and science, regardless of their educational background, they have not been able to focus fully on their language skills.

Studies have shown that teachers who majored in English or literature have a firmer and more confident grasp of the language, the MOE said.

Said the head of department for English at Fairfield Methodist Primary, Mr Leonard Chua: 'In terms of their knowledge of the subject, teachers with such a background are more assured of the rules and conventions of the language and can draw on their educational experience when teaching.'

So, from January next year, trainee teachers in the one-year postgraduate diploma in education will undergo 216 extra hours of training on the technicalities of the language and how to teach it.

This will be on top of their current study load at the National Institute of Education.

Areas covered include language proficiency, grammar instruction and language development.

Only those with strong university backgrounds in English will be exempt from some modules.

MOE is also looking into allowing primary school teachers to specialise in two rather than three subjects, allowing teachers to delve deeper into each subject, including English.

Besides enhancing training and development, MOE is also focusing on how it recruits and deploys teachers.

Of the additional 10 teachers promised to all schools by 2010, two will teach English language.

By that time, every primary school will also have a specialist English language teacher to help come up with innovative teaching methods.

As for the much-publicised plan to recruit 'native speakers' to teach English here, MOE said it has already hired 10 from Britain after placing advertisements in overseas newspapers earlier this year.

Said Minister of State (Education) Lui Tuck Yew: 'At the end of the day, the conclusion is that we do need more qualified English teachers.'

'Teacher recruitment is important to us and growing that pool of potential people to be recruited as teachers in the future is also something that we have to work on,' said Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui.

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