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Description	Education Minister Ng Eng Hen urges schools to focus on getting students to speak well so that they better express themselves. The two languages each student takes up in school should be taught better – starting with the English Language then moving on to Mother Tongue.		

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Focus on oral skills

Bilingual policy stays, but methods of teaching English, mother tongues to change in emphasis

By Amelia Tan



Students will be required to speak up more in class through show-and-tell, role play, debates and storytelling. -- ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

THE teaching of languages in schools is up for a major revamp, with the focus shifting to getting students to speak well.

For both English and the mother tongues, the new measure of success will be how well students can express themselves and communicate with punch - and this goes beyond scoring a good grade on their report cards.

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This was the challenge Education Minister Ng Eng Hen lobbed at teachers on Thursday when he made speaking well a key thrust of his speech at his ministry's annual work plan seminar.

The schools' bilingual policy will stay in the light of the demands of a more globalised world, he said, but added that the two languages each child takes up in school must now be taught better. Starting with English, then moving on to the mother tongues, he made clear that the standard of English here had fallen.

'While most teachers are proud of our standards in, say, maths and science, we are less enamoured of our standard of English. This is a sensitive subject, and I raise it not to demoralise teachers and students, but to signal that we should begin concerted efforts to raise the standard of English.'

Students will be required to speak up more in class through show-and-tell, role play, debates and storytelling. A programme encouraging public speaking during English lessons, started this year for all Primary 1 pupils, will be extended to other primary levels by 2014.

Called Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (Stellar), it uses storybooks instead of textbooks to teach pupils English; teachers read aloud with their pupils, and then, for example, get them to act out scenes.

To help teachers learn and share teaching strategies to build confident speakers of English in the context of the complex language environment here, the English Language Institute of Singapore (Elis) will be set up.

In the long term, Elis - a recommendation of the Education Ministry's English Language Task Force - can cater to teachers in the region and beyond, making Singapore Asia's English teaching hub.

Turning to the mother tongue languages, Dr Ng noted that a 'seismic shift' in the language environment here in the past 25 years has seen steadily more children come from homes where English is the main language. The upshot of this: Students now have less exposure to their mother tongues.

The teaching methods here also need to change, to put more stress on oral skills and reading taught in a fun way so that they build a lasting appreciation for the mother tongues and a willingness to go on using them.