Positive steps to master English

Cody Lee Hau-ying was over the moon when she learnt her article would be published in the South China Morning Post's student newspaper. It was her first taste of what it's like to be a journalist.

As an animal lover, she had written a story about a cat cafe, a place she had heard about from a friend.

"I was so surprised because I never thought it would be published," said 13-year-old Lee, a student at HHCKLA Buddhist Leung Chik Wai College who, before this, seldom wrote in English.

What initially inspired her was the chance to take part in the "Be a little journalist" course her school introduced last September. This was one of several activities designed to increase interest in using English and improve all-round proficiency.

"English is really important in our society," said Mong Kin-yau, chairperson of the school's English panel. "Since we are a school that uses Chinese as our medium of instruction, we really wanted to create an English speaking environment for our students.

With eight years of teaching experience, Mong has a good sense of what works and what doesn't when it comes to igniting interest. And he felt sure the time was right to make some changes.

"You need to make the students feel that learning English is something fun," he said. "They won't suddenly get interested, so I wanted to do something new to help them. The starting point was to create a playful and inspiring environment to learn in."

The first step was to revamp the activity room by bringing in examples and illustrations of English culture. The room was decorated with a British-style telephone booth and mailbox, as well as posters showing scenic sights in the United Kingdom.

"These new decorations made the room different from other classrooms and meant we enjoyed learning English," said 15-year-old Ryan Tsim Yan-ho.

The next step was to improve students' overall fluency and comprehension in reading, writing and speech. This saw the launch of another two activities – participation in newspaper competitions and regular English-speaking days, which were designed to engage the students in interactive and practical ways.

For instance, taking the mobile game Pokemon Go as a point of reference, Mong designed "English Gotcha", an activity where students have to search for different monsters, which are "cosplayed" by teachers who speak in English.

"In the past, we only had the chance to speak English during lessons or when chatting with foreigners," said Tsim, who added that having opportunities to practice is very important.

And it is not only the students who benefit.

"I was a Chinese teacher before I became a principal, so no one had ever heard me speaking in English," said Wong Sau-yi, the school's current principal. "But, as I tell the students, practice makes perfect. So I have practiced diligently and gave a speech during the morning assembly on one of our English-speaking days."

That example has inspired others, even the school janitors who are encouraged to say at least "good morning" to students, teachers and visitors.

For the coming term, there are plans to extend these initiatives and promote wider reading with the launch of a "Bookaholics Academy".

"If students are better at English, it can really change their lives," Mong said. "Even if they don't need to use it in the workplace, it will still be useful in daily life."

Angel Woo

English Drama

Gotta Catch Them All!

Keen Participation

1C Li Chi Kin
2B Li Cheuk Nam
3B Cheung Man Hei
4A Chow Chun Kit
4A Tsim Yan Ho