

How much English do you really speak?

At last Monday's assembly I spoke about the importance of thinking before you speak. I also stressed the importance of words and explained why they need to be chosen carefully. This morning I would like to raise with you the importance of English and why you need to take full advantage of your time at an English Medium of Instruction (EMI) school.

We have just sung hymn number 125 "Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing". As is the case at each assembly, I'm pleased to say that most of you sang the hymn. There are some of you who forget, on occasions, to bring the hymn book to assembly and as a result spend an awkward few minutes trying to look at the classmates' copy. There are also some who open the hymn book to the prescribed page only to occupy the next few minutes staring into space with little attempt to make eye contact with the words on the page in front of you.

You might be interested to know that there were 114 words in this morning's hymn. If you had sung each line and verse of the hymn then you would have already spoken 114 words in English today. In the case of those attending the first assembly that feat had been achieved by 8.35am whereas for those in the second assembly this accomplishment arrived at 9.10am. Of course, such use of English does not cease at the completion of the morning hymn. There will be 103 words in today's prayer, 64 words in the Lord's Prayer and a further 26 words in The Grace. By the time you leave the Hall this morning each of you should have taken the opportunity to sing and speak 307 words in English.

Over the course of a year approximately fifteen weeks are set aside for assemblies before the Hall is turned over to school and public examinations. As is our custom, there are four assemblies per week or a total of sixty assemblies per year. Assuming that this morning's hymn and prayer were of average length and with the Lord's Prayer and The Grace being of a fixed number of words you will have spoken approximately 18,500 words in English between the start of the school year in September and the Final Assembly. During your six years at SPC this amounts to more than 110,000 words.

One hundred and ten thousand words over six years is not an insignificant number. Indeed, many novels in the Library are of this length. In the case of undergraduate students at the University of Hong Kong, 110,000 words is the equivalent of ten comprehensive research essays. It is also the average length of a PhD thesis. Why

is such data relevant? Indeed, why is it important that you to think seriously about your commitment to English at school?

A reason that is often given by parents as justification for sending their sons or daughters to International Schools in Hong Kong is that such schools offer an English rich environment where English is not only used in the classroom but heard across the school throughout the day. You are very fortunate to have been selected to attend an EMI school where English is used in the classroom and in many other settings. Yet do you take full advantage of what has been placed before you?

It would be an extremely interesting exercise if we were to randomly select a small number of you and see how much English is actually spoken during a normal school day. Although your classes are conducted in English I would suggest that much of that spoken English is used by the teachers and not the students. Our lessons are not long and it would be very difficult for every student to ask or answer questions or to participate in discussions. I would also suggest that students who are secure in their use of English might talk more in class than those who do not have the same level of confidence.

How much English do you really speak during the course of a school day? Is it possible that after leaving this assembly you will not use English again until you return to this hall tomorrow morning? Is it feasible that you go an entire week or even a month without having uttered a single word in English?

Being at an EMI schools affords you many opportunities. A number of the teachers are English native speakers and all classes, with the exception of Chinese lessons, are conducted in English. This means that you have six years in which to master the English language. Unfortunately, it will be significantly more difficult for you to achieve that command of the English language should you delay until university or later in life.

I ask each of you to think carefully about what I have said this morning and I encourage you to leave this assembly with a renewed determination to focus on improving your spoken English. The ability to communicate fluently in English will be essential if you are to take your place on the global stage. You have a wonderful opportunity during your time at SPC to master the English language. Do not waste that chance.

J.R. Kennard