生吞活剝  
sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1

The Chinese history curriculum and whether it should be made a separate and compulsory subject are debated in the Legislative Council recently.

Political aspects aside, a commentator pointed out that one problem with the way the subject has been taught in local schools was “生吞活剝” (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1).

“生” (sheng1) is “uncooked,” “not ripe,” “吞” (tun1) “to swallow,” “活” (huo3) “alive” and “剝” (bo1) “to shell,” “to skin,” “to peel.” Literally, “生吞活剝” (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1) is “to swallow uncooked and skin alive,” “to swallow whole.”

“生” (sheng1) is to eat something uncooked, which, itself, is not necessarily bad, as that is the very nature of sashimi – raw seafood – a delicacy that many people love. But that is not what the idiom means.

In the idiom, “生吞” (sheng1 tun1) means to gobble down food without chewing and without cooking. If you “生吞活剝” (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1), you won’t be able to digest the food properly.

The story behind the idiom is that of a person who had the habit of lifting lines from famous poets, strung them together and present them as his own, and he was said to have “生吞活剝” (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1) the works of others.

Figuratively, “生吞活剝” (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1) means to apply uncritically, which cannot be good for studying.

Rote learning has been criticized as an example of “生吞活剝” (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1) as asking students to “生吞” (sheng1 tun1) information does not mean they can digest and understand it.

Terms containing the character “活” (huo2) include:

- 活動 (huo2 dong4) – activities; mobile
- 活潑 (huo2 po1) – lively; vigorous
- 生活 (sheng1 huo2) – to live; livelihood
- 活化 (huo2 hua4) – to revitalize