

LETTERS

Send your letters to Letters Editor, New Straits Times, 31, Jalan Riong, 59100 Kuala Lumpur or email letters@nst.com.my (Tel: 03-20569411). A letter must have a writer's name, signature, home address, phone and MyKad numbers. It should ideally not be more than 500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit a letter for clarity and length.

EDUCATION

WAYS TO BOOST ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

WE refer to the discussion into arresting the declining standard of the English language in the country.

Some suggestions, such as reverting to English medium schools similar to the 1950s and 1960s, reintroducing the teaching of Science and Maths in English (PPSMI) policy, enhancing the Dual Language Programme (DLP) and hiring retired English teachers, have been made.

In comparison with the other stakeholders, we align our views with the language assessment perspective.

Globally, educational authorities have always considered examinations as a tool to achieve their goals. They have used them to hold teachers and students accountable for their behaviours in the classroom.

Such an approach is not entirely harmful. Upon taking a closer look, we may soon realise that the underlying goal behind such an approach is twofold; having the students pass the exam in the short-term and taking their language proficiency to a better level in the long-term. Unfortunately, it is the former that draws

most of our attention.

The findings of language assessment studies globally have empirically proven that using exams as a tool to achieve the intended goals works effectively together with other contextual factors such as:

Teachers – the kind of attitudes teachers have towards teaching and learning the language, their own language proficiency to effectively teach the language, the assessment system that they underwent while in schools, the number of years they have served and their level of commitment towards the profession.

Students – the kind of attitudes students have towards their language learning (positive/negative), their socio-economic background (rural/semi-urban/urban) and parental influence.

Education system – the efficacy of quality assurance by the ministry, frequency of, mode of and the quality of communication between the ministry and schools through state- and district-level departments.

Societal influence – the influence of publishers and private

tuition centres who value money over educational values (not all of them, of course) and the influence of cultures that value grades over meaningful learning.

These factors are interrelated in a complex manner, as evidenced in research studies conducted in countries like China.

Let us assume that the Education Ministry decides to revert to the English medium. Unless an effective overhaul of the entire education system – from transforming pre-service and in-service teacher training and attending to teaching materials to intensifying the quality assurance mechanism – has been properly studied and decided, the teaching and learning may only result in a status quo.

More importantly, having parents to agree to such a change can be a daunting task for the ministry. Although reverting to English medium schools may be a good idea, we fear that it may not be presently possible on practical grounds.

In relation to the government's move to introduce the PPSMI policy, which it did more than a decade ago to ensure that students were able to learn the



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state-of-the-art development of Science and Maths along with improving the language proficiency, the outcome would still be the same.

English is important, but we should be aware that it is a second language.

Therefore, we should be more reasonable, practical and systematic in our attempts to uplift the standard of it.

Low-stakes school-based assessment has been proven to help raise the language learning outcomes in developed countries. Countries like Finland and the United Kingdom did not achieve success overnight, but it took ages for them to learn from mistakes.

As it was recently introduced in Malaysia, we may have to study the extent to which it has been successful and address the areas in which weaknesses are found.

The DLP may address the declining standard of the language.

It has, however, been carried out on a voluntary basis.

It was reported early this year that less than three per cent of some 4.8 million primary and secondary students are participating in DLP. We have to find ways and means to have schools understand the benefits of DLP to accept it.

Another policy, i.e. making it compulsory for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia students to acquire at least a pass for English, was supposed to be carried out last year, but the idea had to be dropped. The government needs to reconsider this option, but the findings of language assessment studies earlier may have to be taken into account.

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