

All-round concerted efforts needed

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: Many approaches can be taken to improve results, not least making the language relevant to students

ROZANA SANI
rsani@npt.com.my

To say students in Malaysian schools are severely challenged where English proficiency is concerned may sound like a sweeping statement but data prove otherwise.

In the 2013 English Lab under the Government Transformation Programme conducted by the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) of the Prime Minister's Department, 1,191 secondary schools were identified with Sijil Pelajaran (SPM) Malaysia English failure rates exceeding 23 per cent. The failure rate was particularly acute in the states of Sabah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah.

PEMANDU also cited that English is students' weakest core subject in national assessments: 25 per cent of candidates failing at Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah, 23 per cent at Penilaian Menengah Rendah (now called Form Three Assessment - PT3), and 22 per cent at SPM. The same report highlighted that Malaysian students perform poorly in international English examinations with 50 per cent of candidates failing the 1119 paper.

Tengku Azian Shahrman, director of education and SRI (strategic reform initiative) human capital development at PEMANDU,

revealed the statistics during a discussion with stakeholders on ways to improve English language proficiency in schools. The event was hosted by Deputy Education Minister P. Kamalanathan in Putrajaya earlier this month.

"The poor performance continues from one level to the next in schools and comes to a head at the tertiary level. Sixty-two per cent of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) examination candidates achieve only Bands 1 and 2, placing them under the categories of 'limited user' and 'very limited user' of English.

"And their inability to use the language effectively is reflected by the fact that 48 per cent of employers reject students due to poor English," she said.

Data from the Malaysian Examination Board showed an almost consistent failure rate for English in the SPM exams since 2011. In 2011, 23.2 per cent failed the subject, 22.9 per cent in 2012, 20.0 per cent in 2013 and 22.7 per cent in 2014. These statistics, among others, and the fact that 450,000 candidates sit the SPM annually led to the postponement of making English a compulsory pass subject in the examination next year, as announced in August.

Malaysian Examination Board director Datin Nawal Salleh said the implication of English as a compulsory pass in SPM in the



Nur Yasmin Khairani Zakaria

present situation is serious.

"If we impose the requirement, the number of students who don't qualify for SPM certificates will be too high — an estimate of 25 per cent failure in English based on the exam board simulation. We cannot disadvantage them — students, who get good credit in other subjects but fail in English, cannot get their SPM certificate to continue their studies. The repeat exam for SPM only takes place in June with results in August. So, let's say a candidate fails his English paper in 2016 and has a re-sit in June. He will be denied the opportunity to further his studies which will be delayed for a year."

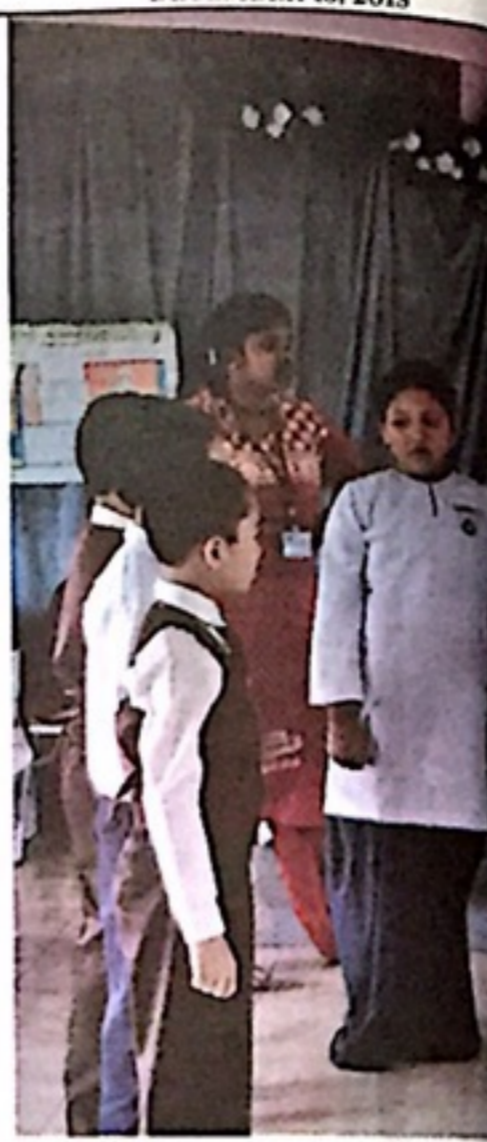
ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

But why is the English language proficiency at such dismal levels in schools?

Nur Yasmin Khairani Zakaria, 23, the Tun Abdul Razak Award recipient at the 43rd convocation of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), believes it has much to do with the relevance of the language to students.

Identifying herself as a village girl who grew up in Bandar Muadzam Shah in Pahang, Nur Yasmin Khairani — who graduated with an honours Bachelor's degree in Education TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) (Distinction) and a CGPA of 3.71 — said that English was mostly foreign to her until she was introduced to public speaking in Primary Year 4 despite the fact that her parents are teachers. "When I was in primary school at Bandar Muadzam Shah, my friends and I regarded English as alien. In general, we had only 40 minutes of contact with English teachers in class daily which revolved around written exercises and activities which were partially conducted in Bahasa Malaysia.

"We had absolutely no need for the language outside those hours as everyone around us spoke Bahasa Melayu. Unlike Kuala Lumpur, where kids will have the opportunity to speak the language when they go



to fast food outlets, watch movies or go to shopping malls, children in towns such as Bandar Muadzam Shah at that time did not have such exposure. At school-level, reading and writing were rote-based and had little meaning even if one is good at it, and I had no confidence in my ability to speak the language," she said.

This changed when Nur Yasmin represented her school in public speaking at the district level. "My English teacher, Ms Janet, made me memorise the text and practise day in, day out for the competition. I got through round one of the competition but crashed out at round two, which involved impromptu speech. But that experience fired up my interest in English — I discovered that I had it in me to speak and interact in English — and this was further fortified when I represented the school yet again during Years Five and Six."

During her secondary school years at SMK Muadzam Shah, Nur Yasmin observed that students especially warmed up to friendly teachers. "My love for English blossomed under the tutelage of Puan Hashimah Hashim who graduated from the United Kingdom. We were fascinated with her tales of student days abroad and her passionate discussion of literary works.

"And there were more group work and project-based activities in secondary school. It was most memorable when our school reached the state level English Drama Competition where we performed the English musical version of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*."

Based on her experience, Nur Yasmin said learning English needs to be contextualised and made fun. And teachers must strike a chord with students to engage them in the lessons.

She is pursuing a two-year Master's degree course in TESL and working as a research assistant at the university's consultancy unit. As part of her Master's programme, she is developing a teaching-



Activities such as this group presentation at SK Sri Subang Bestari make English more engaging.



Tengku Azian Shahrman

learning module targeted at school students with low English Language proficiency.

Dr Elsie Chin, chief executive officer of English Language courses provider Cambridge English For Life, said students need materials which are stimulating and make them want to be actively involved in the learning process.

"English, it must be remembered, is a tool, and not a separate stand-alone subject. Teachers should adopt a much more cooperative approach to language learning, where students are encouraged to help each other, and where the teacher facilitates, allowing students to be much more active. Teachers also need to share ideas, materials and approaches among themselves," she said.

But she acknowledged that this could be easier said than done. She added that despite huge budgetary allocations for perceived equity issues, particularly regarding the urban-rural divide, those in the rural areas continue to be linguistically deprived — not only in English, but arguably in their mother tongue too.

"The drift of the population from rural areas into large cities in the

past two decades has compounded this issue. Many urban classes have extremely wide ranges of English linguistic ability. In classes at some urban schools, students may range from bordering on native speaker competency to linguistically illiterate in the English language.

"Inevitably, the teacher resorts to aiming for the middle ground to ensure that as many as possible get through the national exams. The result, of course, is that the better students are bored while the weaker ones are unable to cope and get left behind."

Added to this is the fact that many English teachers are themselves weak in the language. Lack of confidence and specific methodological skills demanded for large mixed ability classes. "While some English teachers, in both rural and urban schools, are of an excellent calibre, many are struggling to cope. Teacher training colleges typically accept students who have been unable to gain admittance to universities or higher tertiary institutions. They can hardly be attracted by the salary or career prospects, both of which are considerably lower than in other professions in this country. In some countries, including a neighbouring one, the best calibre of school leavers is recruited to teacher training."

She added: "Poor language proficiency affects the teaching and learning of the target language, so ITEs emphasise enhancing trainee teachers' proficiency, especially spoken English, in terms of accuracy, fluency and pronunciation even though they have already attained a minimum A in English."

Immersion, another important language learning principle, must not be overlooked, said Yong. "Where the opportunity to learn the language in its country of origin is limited, the teacher training curriculum must provide enough practice in the four skills — reading, writing, listening, speaking — in particular the latter."

Yong stressed that teachers in the country do not have to sound native-like or have a native-like command of the language to teach well. "What is most important is adequate teaching skills that cover a repertoire of teaching techniques, methodologies, routines and procedures for

Since the early 1980s, the Teacher Education Division has adopted

some internationally recognised criteria to raise the quality of student intakes into teacher education. In 2013, potential candidates for the Foundation Course in the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) programme who sought entry into Institutes of Teacher Education (ITEs) had to obtain at least seven As in the SPM and an A in English.

Daphne Yong, a senior lecturer at one of the ITEs, said: "The teacher's language proficiency has an impact on her role as a 'model language user' and her efficacy as a language teacher as the range of creative strategies will be limited by her lack of language skills to direct learning. Moreover, she will not be able to provide rich language input to facilitate successful language acquisition among her students for lack of vocabulary and language skills. Consequently, it affects her self-esteem and ability to inspire confidence and motivation in her students to learn."

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classroom events, for example, starting a lesson, introducing and explaining a task, making transitions from one task to another, checking students' understanding, giving correct feedback and teaching at an appropriate level of difficulty."

PREPARATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Nurliana Oon Abdullah, a School Improvement Specialist Coach for English (Secondary) at the Petaling Perdana District Education Office, is of the opinion that it takes effort among members of society — parents, neighbours and teachers of other subjects — to use the language more frequently to give students more practice and raise their English proficiency level.

Nurliana said there are many factors contributing to the fact that students can barely read English.

"They do not have the chance to read and speak English at home. The society they live in barely uses the language. Many families do not have enough reading material. Even though they have games in English, they do not read. Libraries and book fairs play a big role in promoting reading. Media such as television and the Internet can promote reading," she said.

The ideal target in terms of language competency is to be able to converse in the language, added Nurliana. "Grammatical inaccuracy should not be ridiculed as that will only deter progress. Many of those who speak well often cannot tolerate grammatical errors which is rather destructive in any effort to learn the language. There is the fear of being embarrassed."

Nurliana believes there are many approaches that can be taken to improve results but nothing can be achieved without planning, patience, preparation and partnership. For example, there are many schools with high English language proficiency which can be engaged to help lower performing schools. "Create a partnership among students. Students learn better with those in the same age group."

The use of the Internet and other media can improve students' proficiency. Teachers can also search for materials as well as research into innovative approaches. However, Nurliana noted, lack of time and facilities are a barrier.

"Students are not taught to discipline themselves on the use of gadgets. Therefore, schools are left with computer labs that are not really functioning and have slow connectivity. Teachers are too bogged down with work to have time to plan and prepare. This is where training is essential. School Improvement Specialist Coaches are officers appointed to coach teachers in schools. It is hoped that they can impart skills to the teachers and guide them in preparing better lessons and better students."

Schools administrators should create a conducive learning environment to upgrade the use of English. "They should lead by example by speaking more, putting up messages, posters and materials, making announcements — all in English — and allocate funds for English language programmes."



"If we impose the compulsory pass in SPM English, the number of students who don't qualify for SPM certificates will be too high."

Nawal Salleh,
Malaysian Examination Board
director

SPM English Results 2011-2014



SOURCE: MALAYSIAN EXAMINATION BOARD