

# Boosting English language proficiency

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**Mary Chin**

DEPUTY Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Dr Mary Yap Kain Ching is confident Malaysia will improve its ranking in terms of English Language proficiency among non-native speakers in the world from next year.

Her optimism is based on the constructive measures undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education to boost the level of English proficiency among students in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities throughout the country.

On top of it, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played a significant role in complementing the Government's effort in that direction.

In the context of the Ministry of Higher Education, Dr Yap, who is Member of Parliament for Tawau, said one strategy in place is the Malaysia English Assessment (MEA) Programme which was launched in October 2017 by the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Idris bin Jusoh.

This programme is aligned to the standards of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) and is implemented in collaboration with the Cambridge Malaysia Development Education Trust (CMDDET).

"The programme sees a departure from the conventional way of assessing students in the mastery of English language. Students will be assessed formally through tests/examinations, and informally through interactive learning activities," she explained.

According to Dr Yap, the implementation of MEA is supported by an ecosystem which sees the creation of a conducive learning environment for English. In November 2017, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) hosted the first English Language Carnival for the universities, Polytechnics and Community Colleges which was enjoyed by the students.

Additionally, students are also encouraged to learn English through MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). A massive open online course is a free Web-based distance learning programme that is designed for the participation of large numbers of geographically dispersed stu-



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The Year That Was

dents. "A MOOC may be patterned on a college or university course," she added.

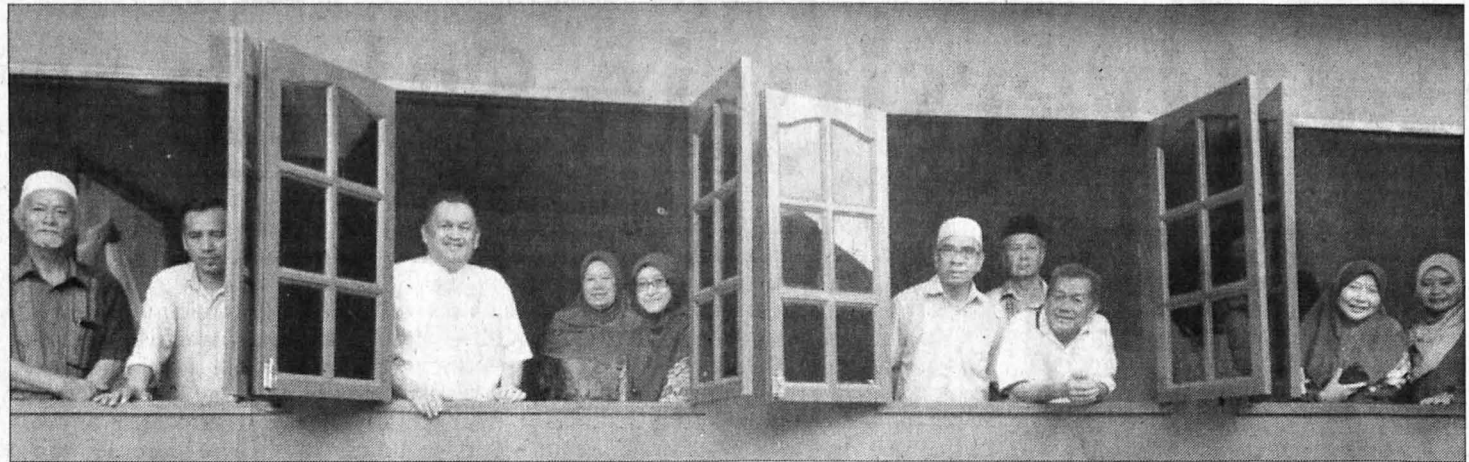
Most important of all, Dr Yap's assertion is that students must take personal responsibility to learn the English language.

"One just can't depend on the limited number of tutorials alone and hope to be proficient in the language. This means extra effort must be undertaken by the students to master the language. It is essential to constantly practise the four skills of language learning, which are reading, writing, listening and speaking as often as they can possibly," she advised, adding MEA incidentally focuses on these four fundamental skills.

Malaysia has been ranked 13th in English language proficiency among non-native speakers in the world, according to the latest EF English Proficiency Index. (EF stands for Education First). Malaysia is the second best in Asia, after Singapore which is ranked number five out of 80 countries. Malaysia is ranked under the "high" category while Singapore is ranked under the "very high" category.

She commended all the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other bodies in Sabah for taking up the noble initiative to help schools and students master the English language.

Most notable was the formation of the Sabah English Aspiration Society (SEAS) in July this year, spearheaded by Founding



Opening of English Corner at Kg Pimping, Membakut...third from left is Datuk Mohd Arifin while Dr Zainab is fifth from left.

President Dr Zainab Kassim, an ex-pupil of SK Pengiran Jaya, Pimping in Membakut. Now a neonatologist at King's College Hospital in London, she and her team spent sleepless nights to get the English Corner (housed in a refurbished building next to the government primary school) off the ground three months later.

"It is the aspiration of SEAS that the English Corner will become a hub for English learning activities and skills training for students in the Beaufort area," Dr Zainab was quoted as saying.

Dr Yap said it was heartening to note that elected representatives like Membakut Assemblyman Datuk Hj Mohd Arifin, other politicians, government agencies, corporate bodies and private individuals have contributed towards the realisation of the English Corner at SK Pengiran Jaya.

"Undeniably, English is a global language. We can't run away from it. I have been following with interest the English language-related projects undertaken by NGOs such as the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu Pearl (RCKK Pearl), and Soroptimist International Kota Kinabalu (SIKK), among other organisations.

"I have always maintained that education is a collective responsibility and not the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Higher Education. It is most encouraging to see those organisations rising to the occasion to help by organising programmes or activities to make the learning of English for the students fun and meaningful," she said in a statement emailed to *Daily Express*.

To improve the level of English proficiency among rural pupils, Project REAL (Rural Focus-English for All) has been implemented by the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu Pearl (first under Datuk Noni Said and now under Datuk Suzannah Liaw as President) in collaboration with the State Education Department. The club's endeavour saw the setting up of the English Corner in six rural primary schools, furnishing each Corner with 700 English books and distribution of English-Malay dictionaries to the pupils.

They are SK Kawang (Papar), SK St Edmund (Kota Belud), SK Pekan Kiulu (Tuaran), SK Pomotodon (Inanam), SK Mandalipau (Papar) and SK Rugading (Tuaran).

Dr Yap said the move is aptly in tandem with the Education Ministry's Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) that was introduced to raise the English proficiency of students through increased exposure in schools.

"I understand that Rotary International District 3310 Governor, Datuk Lee Chuen Wan (who launched at least two of the English Corners) has assured of assistance from the Rotary movement to enable the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu Pearl to set up the English Corner in many more rural schools in Sabah next year," said Dr Yap. For the purpose, Lee had pushed for the club to apply for a global grant from Rotary International's Rotary Foundation.

Earlier this year, State Education Director, Datuk Hjh Maimunah Hj Suhaibul had said that the department was always looking forward to collaboration and smart partnership with any private agency or non-governmental organisation (NGO) to contribute their expertise and capabilities towards enhancing students' exposure to the English language for a better tomorrow.

And Dr Yap is aware of the success of the year-long Soroptimist International Kota Kinabalu (SIKK)-SK Rampayan Eng-



Datuk Noni Said (centre) and her team at the launching of Project Real at SK St Edmund, Kota Belud.

lish Reading Hunt Programme 2017, a pilot project initiated by SIKK with the cooperation of the State Education Department and Sabah State Library to raise English Language proficiency among the school children. Reading activities were incorporated into the regular English lessons for the year. The third and final Hunt was held in November this year.

The Project Committee was made up of SIKK (comprising Organising Chairperson Hanaa Wong Abdullah, Immediate Past President & Adviser Audrey Fung, current President Vilina Passon John and Committee Members Francine Rajah, Yanti Abbas, Ophelia Domingo and Marilyn Chong); and SK Rampayan (comprising SK Rampayan Headmistress Masnah Bidin and five English Language teachers).

The impactful programme has inspired the Financial Industry Collective Outreach (FINCO) to consider expanding it to 14 schools in seven districts in Sabah next year (2018).

The English Language teachers of SK Rampayan with the assistance of Soroptimist International Kota Kinabalu (SIKK) were preparing the module to be used as a guideline for the expansion programme.

"I certainly hope that such enthusiasm in helping our students to be proficient in English will sustain towards creating an ecosystem that encourages the effective use and usage of the language which in turn will impact positively on the employability of the students when they graduate from the higher institutions of learning," said Dr Yap.

The Deputy Minister of Higher Education was also happy to note that earlier this year, Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) Student Representative Council had initiated the "Say it in English" campaign to promote the use of English at the university. It aims to make Tuesdays English speaking days all over the campus, for both students and academic staff. In fact, as part of the campaign, an English Club has been running activities and games at the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PKLL), apart from singing and movies in English.

Last year, Chief Minister Tan Sri Musa Aman officiated at the launching of Tuesday as English Day for all schools in Sabah to encourage our generation of students to communicate in English.

Meanwhile, Dr Yap congratulated Institut Sinaran (private pre-university institution) for having taken the initiative to set up an English Language Lab facility in view of the growing importance of English language as a requirement for national and

global professional marketability.

To recapitulate, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman Dahlan had in April this year proposed that English-medium government schools be re-established in Sabah in an effort to improve the English language proficiency of students in the State.

He said the re-establishment of English-medium government schools in Sabah was seen as a proactive measure to produce more human capital having mastered the universal language from an early age.

"Mastery of English is one way to be more productive and competitive. By mastering the language, Sabah will be able to 'speed up' pursuit of reducing the development gap between the State and those states in the Peninsula," he was quoted as saying this after the launch of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) at SK Tempasuk 1 in Kota Belud.

Among the first to support the proposal was Science, Technology and Innovation (Mosti) Minister Datuk Seri Wilfred Madius Tangau. He contended that even China which all this while has been using its main language - Mandarin - has turned its focus to improving its English proficiency now, prompted by internationalisation needs and interests as well as to mastering technology, given that much of the knowledge and information available is in the English language.

Early this month, a historian said that restoring English-medium schools would help create an internationally qualified workforce.

Sometime in 2015, the Malaysia Youth Parliament had proposed that the government introduce the "English in Rural Areas" programme to boost rural secondary school students' proficiency in the English language. The government's objective of ensuring that each student would be proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English is contained in the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025).

The same year (2015), the Performance Management and Delivery Unit's (Pemandu) English proficiency survey saw a whopping 90pc of 190,000 respondents in favour of improving the country's standard in the language.

It was also reported that many top students in the STPM examination had failed to get into local universities because they fared badly in the Malaysian University English Test (Muet). Muet is a compulsory test to set a benchmark for English among Malaysian students. Passing Muet is a passport for pursuit of a first-degree programme in local universities.