

# Job seekers with A in SPM English but can't speak a word of it

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Employers have complained that many university graduates have a poor command of the English language. – The Malaysian Insider file pic, June 26, 2014.

Employers are becoming increasingly dismayed by Malaysian "generation Y" job seekers who generally have a poor command of the English language and lack communication skills, are too spoiled to handle stress, and in a hurry to climb the corporate ladder yet indifferent to the need for experience.

These Gen Y recruits, when compared with previous generations, are also less impressed with job benefits such as medical insurance and bonuses, preferring instead immediate cash rewards for performance, surveys among employers and trade groups have revealed.

This damning indictment of today's 20-something job-seekers' attitudes is in large part due to an education policy in previous years that de-emphasised the importance of the English language, said a school education group.

In fact, Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) believes that these policies have created a “lost generation” of young adults whose command of the English language is weaker than previous generations and who will miss the changes in schools that will benefit future generations.

Malaysian Employers Federation secretary Datuk Shamsudin Bardan said that a survey a few years ago among its members found that 60% of them identified low English proficiency as the main problem with young recruits.

While a similar survey in September last year by online recruitment agency JobStreet.com found that 55% of senior managers and companies who took part said that poor command of the English language was the main reason for unemployment among undergraduates.

School graduates might have SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) English grades of A and B but could not even hold a conversation in English, Shamsudin said.

“Which is why we were excited when the government decided to teach mathematics and science in English (PPSMI), as we felt this could boost their command of English.

“Unfortunately it was cancelled after seven years when we should have allowed it to continue for 14 to 15 years to see the results.

“The inability to converse and understand English (among young school leavers) is a constant complaint among our members,” said Shamsudin. The MEF has 4,800 direct members and 21 affiliated trade associations.

It is the largest grouping of employers who collectively employ two-thirds of the 2.2 million people in the formal private sector.

Christopher Raj of the Association of Hotel Employers said that out of 10 job applicants in the hospitality sector, eight or nine could not speak English.

“The problem is bad not only among school leavers but also graduates from our local universities. You ask them in English and they answer in Bahasa Malaysia.

“Private college graduates tend to be better,” said Raj, who is also a council member of MEF.

As immigration laws do not allow hotels to hire English-proficient personnel to man front-line positions where English is critical, major hotels have had to invest in English-language courses for their new employees.

The courses are designed to build confidence in trainees for restaurant and counter staff to

converse in the language, Raj said.

PAGE chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said the secondary aim of PPSMI was to provide more opportunities to students to practise English – a crucial step in increasing proficiency.

Its first aim was to help science-oriented students make the transition to university and colleges where almost all science texts are in English.

“Proficiency in any language is about practising. PPSMI created more opportunities for students to practise,” said Noor Azimah. PAGE has campaigned for the government to allow schools to continue the policy.

The government discontinued PPSMI in 2011, seven years after it was implemented in primary and secondary schools. The reason given was that it resulted in only a marginal increase in English proficiency among students.

However, Noor Azimah said a study showed that in mathematics and science examinations, where students were given a choice of whether to answer in English or Bahasa Malaysia, more than 90% of Tamil primary school students answered in English.

In national schools, the same studies showed that 60% of students chose to answer in English than in Bahasa Malaysia.

As if weak English was not enough, employers such as Raj complained that young job seekers in their 20s don’t seem able to handle stress well or work themselves up from the bottom.

“Graduates these days come from colleges and immediately want to become managers, without even any experience. You can’t scold them and they can’t handle stress,” said Raj, who has spent 33 years in the hotel business.

MEF’s Shamsuddin says that recruits in their 20s, the so-called generation Y, are “restless” compared with their elders.

“They have their eyes on the now instead of the future. They are less attracted to benefits such as annual bonuses, medical benefits, retirement.

“In fact, they want annual bonuses portioned out on a monthly basis,” he said.

“I think it is because of the business environment these days. Companies have to be fast-moving to compete so it shapes employee attitudes.” – June 26, 2014.