

# Minding our language

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It used to be easy for Malaysian students in Britain to get a part-time job or internship there.

An Engineering lecturer at a local public university who only wants to be known as Mar recalls how it was back then.

"Mention you are Malaysian and you will get one foot in the door. I remember one manager saying, 'Ah, we like Malaysians. They can speak English well, have no problem understanding instructions, not like other foreign students.'

"In fact, we spoke better English than most Europeans. But, of course, that was in the 1980s."

It was a different story when she went back to the UK to do her post-graduate studies in the late 1990s, she says.

"My thesis supervisor kept moaning about how the new batch of Malaysian students could not write or speak English well. He kept asking me what happened."

The declining standard of English among the young in Malaysia has been well documented. For many years, many concerned stakeholders – from employers, educationists and linguists to parents – have voiced their concern.

However, with English being an important language of knowledge and global competition now, the need to arrest this decline has never been more urgent.

Recently, even former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad returned to the English soapbox, urging young Malaysians to master the language if they did not want to be left behind.

## Steady decline

According to former Human Resource Minister Tan Sri Dr Fong Chan Onn, the decline in English among the young has been happening for more than two decades.

He relates his experience as an external examiner for Utar for Economics and Accountancy.

"In the 1980s, the standard of English in most of the answer scripts was still good but in the 1990s, there was a marked decline, so much so the examiners agreed to only assess the facts and leave the writing style and grammar alone. If they had marked the language as well, many of the students would have had low marks."

While the declining standard of English in the country can mainly be attributed to policies that have not emphasised it in the education system, what is surprising is the lack of interest among the young to master the language, notes Dr Fong.

"Students need to realise that when they go out into the world, English is important and unless they brush up their skills, they will lock themselves from a big source of information and the latest developments in knowledge."

Recently, the Higher Education Ministry's plans to increase the number of credit hours in English on campus were met with opposition from some students.

At Universiti Malaya, a group of students even called vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ghauth Jasmon a traitor for pushing for English and sent him a memorandum demanding for

Proficiency in English is vital in today's world and Malaysia needs to arrest the decline urgently if it wants to remain competitive.



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SHAMSUDDIN BARDAN,  
MEF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



an apology and his resignation.

During his tenure as minister, says Dr Fong, the main complaint from employers was the standard of English among graduates.

This is confirmed by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF).

"The communication problem among school leavers, especially in English – either in oral communication or writing – is the biggest grouse among employers," says MEF executive director Shamsuddin Bardan.

Various surveys on graduates' employability have found that

English is their main weakness: many cannot speak or write proper English (Higher Education Ministry Survey 2008; World Bank Report 2005 on Malaysia Firm Competitiveness, Investment Climate and Growth among others).

This, he believes, is one reason they have difficulty getting jobs in the private sector.

Highlighting the Salary Survey for Executives 2010, which showed good communication skills as the main attribute sought by employers (68%), Shamsuddin says employers preferred to hire staff who could communicate well in English as glo-

balisation has changed the current nature of jobs.

Today's workers have to deal with foreign companies and clients from all over the world, where the main language of communication is English.

"Today, we are not just talking about being proficient. Work demands have changed; you need to sell your company's products.

"In the old days, if you didn't want to talk so much, you could take courses like engineering. You just needed to do your work without talking to people. Now, even if you become an engineer, you will need to talk to clients and normally the common language is English," he adds.

Shamsuddin describes students who oppose the use of English as being in denial.

"They refuse to see the importance of being proficient in the language. Instead of embracing it, they are saying it is not important."

Malcolm Poole, director of multinational recruitment agency MRI Network Sdn Bhd, says a large firm or multinational is definitely more likely to hire an individual with better English communication and written skills.

"Employers look for talented people who can grow with the company, so business-level English becomes not just a preference, it makes it a must-have," Poole explains.

With English being widely used by the business community both in Malaysia and internationally, it is important for Malaysian workers to master the language, notes Melissa Norman, managing director of Kelly Services (M) Sdn Bhd, one of the top headhunter agencies in the country.

She highlights the Kelly Global Workforce Index survey released in 2010, which also revealed communication skills as one of the top five most desired skills within the corporate sector.

The ability to converse adeptly in English has become a valued asset in today's world, reinforcing the importance of mastering English, stresses Norman.

But, she laments, "In today's labour market, waning communication skills are among some of the unspoken concerns among employers."

The agency has found that an average of six out of 10 Malaysian graduates could not communicate effectively in English during interviews, she says.

"We have encountered many graduates who cannot speak or write proper English. Many are not able to transfer their academic knowledge or articulate their thoughts during interviews due to poor command of English and this has cost them jobs in the corporate sector."

Graduates here also commonly make gross grammatical errors in their resumes, and some even use text messaging slang in their job applications, Norman adds.

## The price of ignorance

Someone who knows too well the language problems among the younger workforce is Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) president Tan Sri Mustafa Mansur.

"In manufacturing, proficiency in English may not be as important as for someone working in the legal or financial field but we still need people who can communicate well because sometimes we need to send people out to negotiate deals and get contracts signed. If they cannot communicate well in English, we will lose out," says Mustafa.

Unfortunately, many of the younger workers are not able to conduct a simple conversation in English, he laments.

"This leads to them having low confidence in using the language so they don't get involved in the discussions during meetings because they are afraid to talk."

It makes them appear as "not as intelligent as they might be", adds Dr Fong.

"Local employers complain that when our graduates attend interviews, meetings or conferences, they cannot put across their ideas, so they are made to look less smart when actually, knowledge-wise, they are comparable to any graduate from the rest of the world."

Lacking in communication skills is no longer acceptable in today's world, Shamsuddin stresses.

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# A global rat race where English is a must

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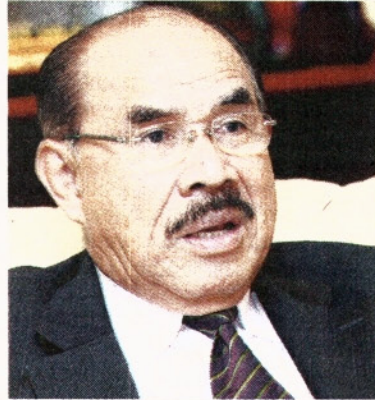
"Basically, before the advent of the Internet and ICT, we (business community) communicated by letter. It took some time, so those who were not proficient in the language could ask someone who was more fluent to write their letters and notes."

Now, correspondence is immediate, direct and fast. "So, you need to be proficient. If you cannot communicate in English, then possibly it will be some time before you can get a reply out and you will lose out in today's world."

It is also essential for young workers to keep up with the latest developments in knowledge especially in science and technology, and unless they know another foreign language – Mandarin, German, or Japanese for example – the young need to know English, adds Shamsuddin.

"English is the language of knowledge as well as of the Internet. There is translation but it will take some time and before they can reach the targeted audience, the knowledge would have changed."

More importantly, he adds, when



**Mustafa:** 'Many of the younger workers are not able to conduct a simple conversation in English.'

employers recruit someone, they expect the new employee to hit the ground running and contribute straight away.

"They cannot afford to hire someone who is not able to communicate well. It is costly."

### Across the board

While the worry is over graduates and undergraduates, says FMM past president Tan Sri Yong Poh Kon, there is an even bigger



**Dr Fong:** 'We are even losing out to our neighbours who seem to have improved their level of English in the last decade.'

group that needs to be addressed.

"We need to be reminded that the vast majority of school leavers who are not equipped with a satisfactory level of competency in English enter the labour market and are mainly absorbed into the services, manufacturing and public sector, including as teachers of our young in schools."

Yong, who is also co-chair of Pemudah (Special Taskforce to Facilitate Business), reminds that effective communication is crucial



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not only in the corporate and business world but also in the government sector.

Long a moot point, particularly for those in the diplomatic circle, the opening of borders due to the advent of technology means that more and more public sector workers need to interact as global citizens.

We need civil servants who can articulate Malaysia's stand on issues internationally, including conducting negotiations on

important agreements such as trade agreements, says Yong.

"Civil servants today do not only need to interact with overseas customers, visiting experts or delegations but must also attend overseas conferences, seminars as well as trade and technical fairs, all of which are in English.

"Their low proficiency in English has affected Malaysia's ability to compete in global markets as well as a destination for investment," argues Yong.

Mustafa agrees, saying: "We are losing out in the global arena. We definitely need more good communicators who can negotiate for better trade deals and investments. As it is, our global competitiveness is low."

More worrying, says Dr Fong, is we are even losing out to our neighbours who seem to have improved their level of English in the last decade.

"Our representatives used to be first choice to head committees at international events. But I have noticed that at many international events I attended, representatives from Thailand, Indonesia and China are beating us as they speak better English."