

## Better English, please

By SANDHYA MENON and REBECCA RAJAENDRAM

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IN a competitive job market ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, getting hired is a challenge, especially for fresh graduates. English proficiency, bosses warn, can determine whether or not you land that coveted spot.

For years, the language proficiency of our graduates has been subject to public debate, with employers repeatedly stressing that it is a crucial factor in their selection of candidates.

Recently, Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman said it is necessary for employees to acquire English proficiency to advance their knowledge through continuous learning and to establish a better career path.

Those with good English language skills, he said, enjoy greater career benefits, including higher starting salaries, faster progression through job grades, better salary increases and more opportunities for global postings or assignments.

The 2021 MEF Salary Survey for Executives and Non-Executives, he noted, found that English proficiency is among the top five skills that employers look for when hiring. To bolster students' fluency in the language, several initiatives have been carried out by the Education Ministry. These included:

- 2003: Introducing the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) policy

The policy was introduced by then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who believed that Science and Mathematics should be taught in English.

- 2009: Introducing the Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening the English Language (MBMBI) policy

The focus of the MBMBI, which replaced the PPSMI policy, was to produce students who could master both Bahasa Malaysia and English well.

- 2016: Introducing the Dual Language Programme (DLP) The DLP allowed selected schools to teach Science and Mathematics in English. The programme kicked off in 132 primary schools and 245 secondary schools. In August 2020, Education Minister Datuk Dr Radzi Jidin said the number of schools offering the DLP had increased, with 2,291 schools – 737 primary schools and 1,554 secondary schools – offering it that year. This could be a positive indicator that at the school level, there is an interest to teach and learn in the language.

- 2019: Aligning national schools' English syllabus with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Under the CEFR, language proficiency is measured in relation to the four communicative skills on a scale starting with A1 and progressing to A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user).

- 2019: Allowing English option teachers to voluntarily sit for the CEFR readiness test to see where they stand in terms of language proficiency

- 2020: Introducing the Cambridge-based English Literature syllabus to secondary schools

- 2021: Revising the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) syllabus and test specifications to ensure it retains its position in testing language proficiency

The MUET syllabus and test specifications have been revised twice – the first in 2008, and the second last year to align the MUET with the CEFR. Only time will tell if the latest measures will mark an end to

the perennial problem of poor English proficiency among graduates as the first batch of students under the new CEFR-aligned syllabus embark on their tertiary education journey and enter the workforce in the coming years. — By SANDHYA MENON and REBECCA RAJAENDRAM

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## Mind your language

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Early exposure: SK Sg Penchala pupils reading English books at their school. – Filepic

BOSSSES are stressing the value and importance of the English language among fresh graduates as proficiency continues to decline.

The latest Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) Salary Survey for Executives and Non-Executives found that English proficiency – along with oral and written communication – is among the top five skills that employers look for when hiring, yet we have lost focus on the language, neglected it and allowed it

to deteriorate to the level it is now, Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim recently pointed out.

Employers, said Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president Dr Ramesh Nair, often rely on the English proficiency grades which jobseekers present when determining if candidates will be able to meet the communication demands at the workplace.

Unfortunately, he said, the complaint has been that the grades jobseekers present do not match their actual ability to communicate in the language.

“The problem lies in part in the way we have been teaching and assessing English proficiency in standardised exams.

“The measure of success for teachers at schools and even higher learning institutions has been the grades which their students attain.

“As a result, many end up teaching to the test,” he said, adding that students memorise formulaic responses to questions, often guided by prescribed answer schemes to test papers.

When certain skills such as listening and speaking are not assessed, they get neglected. As such, there is a need for English language teachers to focus on developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, he said, and to help students expand their vocabulary range through a variety of classroom activities.

Teachers need to be given access to the right resources and the right support so that they have time to focus on preparing good lessons.

Ramesh said the new curriculum in schools offers some hope as all four skills are assessed through school-based assessments to determine proficiency.

“The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)-aligned curriculum also allows for proficiency to be described in measurable terms, and the hope is that the needs of students who are not where they need to be are addressed promptly.

“Employers may benefit from familiarising themselves with the new scales used at schools and higher learning institutions so that we can all speak of proficiency in the same way.

“For example, not all jobs require candidates to be at the C1 (proficient user) or B2 (independent user) level on the CEFR scale.

“Perhaps job advertisements need to be more specific, rather than describe proficiency requirements as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’.

The move to align the national schools’ English language syllabus with the CEFR in 2019, said Universiti Malaya Education Faculty senior lecturer and teacher-trainer Dr Zuwati Hasim, will help students

improve as it sets a target benchmark for their proficiency level.

Learning a language, she added, requires intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

While there are many ways to improve one's English proficiency, she stressed the need for individuals to push themselves and to be in an environment that promotes the use of the language.

"Awareness of the importance of the language needs to be instilled in graduates.

"Malaysians have been exposed to the formal learning of English as a second language from their primary years right through their tertiary education.

"So in terms of learning exposure, there is no issue. What's important now is for them to practise the use of the language communicatively and in a real-world context," she said, adding that learning a new language can, however, be daunting and developing the courage and confidence to use the language could pose a challenge.

It is therefore crucial for graduates to be in a supportive environment, she said, stressing that there should be encouragement to develop the speakers' self-esteem.

Mistakes should be tolerated and corrected among early users of the English language in developing their self-esteem.

Belittling them will only hamper the learning process, she emphasised, stating that this should be the practice in an educational setting and in society.

"It must be highlighted that to go global, graduates have to be multilingual.

"But the ability to speak a language without the necessary work-related knowledge, ability, and skills will not help them either.

"Employers also have to play a significant role in upskilling their employees, be it in their language or communicative performance, or other related skills needed for their companies," she said, urging employers to provide opportunities for graduates to improve and simultaneously, provide a good career path.

Echoing Zuwati's views, Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Languages, Literacies and Translation dean Prof Dr Salasiah Che Lah said students should be encouraged to speak in a "safe" environment to boost their confidence.

They should also be given fun exercises and activities in English to show them that the language is not difficult to learn.

"Also, immersing them in the language and culture, such as exposing them to English films, songs, news and native speakers, may help to improve their proficiency and confidence.

“Unfortunately, in learning how to speak in English better, students and graduates tend to feel afraid of making mistakes. Lacking motivation to learn the language, they resort to directly translating words to find the meaning in their native language.” Students from non-English speaking families find it intimidating to speak in English in the presence of those from English speaking families, too, and they set very low targets for themselves because the minimum passing grade is C,” she shared.

One of the major problems students face when learning English, she shared, is that they feel it is a difficult language to learn and they get demotivated when they struggle with grammar and vocabulary.

Due to their low self-esteem, Prof Salasiah said they become very shy to interact or communicate in English with others who are proficient.

“Other deterring factors are the feeling of being judged for not having a good command of the language, and issues such as poor quality of teaching materials and large size of classrooms.”

She suggested four ways to help improve fluency in the language: align all English courses with the CEFR as it emphasises communicative language teaching; conduct enrichment classes beyond classroom hours; teach science and technical subjects in universities in English; and give students the option to do their assignments, presentations and exams in English.

“Students should be encouraged to practise and immerse themselves in English language activities and environments by watching the news and reading English materials to help them use the language in their daily lives.

“Conversing in English with friends who are also learning the language is another way to help them gain more confidence when speaking.” Additionally, noting down new words and phrases, and looking up the meaning and synonyms of words can improve their vocabulary.

“There are many fun activities students can engage in to practise learning the language,” she said, adding that it is important for students and graduates to be responsible for their learning.

Meanwhile, the government should look into making the English subject a compulsory pass at the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia level, she said, adding that if carefully planned, students will reap the benefits of the ruling.

She, however, warned that it should not be implemented on an ad hoc basis, as it is important to first build the students’ foundation in the language.