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A wrong impression, perhaps

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THE newspapers were plastered recently with the issue of Malaysian students overseas not being conversant in English. It seems that several students failed to converse effectively in English when they met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Being an ex-overseas student, I have to admit that there are students overseas who fit the bill quite aptly but perhaps there is another element to this that has been overlooked. It involves the fine distinction between the Malay words segan and takut.

Having once taught some students on their way overseas, I realised that many of the students I taught found the TOEFL and IELTS tests daunting - and for some impossible without the few months of preparation. They came to the academy where I taught sometimes barely able to construct a coherent sentence in English. My former colleagues and I spent nearly a quarter of a year gearing them up for the tests through intensive coaching in the language. We met with a great number of successes but there really was not that much we could do in the short time allocated to us. However, by the time they had to sit for the tests, they had the necessary knowledge to pass.

But language is more than knowledge. It is a skill one has to acquire through use to be able to wield it with confidence. It is this confidence that we often failed to impart. Students who fail to gain the confidence required are not restricted to the Malays, but here I shall only be talking about the Malays because segan and takut are Malay words.

In Malay, segan is closely related to shyness. It is a shyness to do something because it might show up one's shortcomings, or simply because one is facing someone of greater authority - thus the shyness is a sign of great respect for the person.

Authority is a great thing in the Malay psyche. From a very young age, we are taught to be respectful to our elders and people of authority. It is only natural for the students to feel a great deal of segan when facing our Prime Minister because with the exception perhaps of royalty, we do not get anyone with greater authority than the Prime Minister.

Imagine that you have an adequate command of English but with a confidence level that leaves a great deal to be desired. You can use the language when speaking to your peers, and perhaps your teachers, but when you are sitting in front of the Prime Minister, it is a different kettle of fish. I can only imagine the pressure these students were under. It is easier to modulate your speech and thoughts to the need to be polite and respectful when speaking in Malay because it is after all your mother tongue but when asked to do it in English, the language on which your hold is, at best, tentative, all that you have acquired in crash courses like the one I taught would dissipate exceedingly rapidly, I guess.

On top of that there is the segan element. I was not there but I guess the gathering was sizeable. There you were in front of your peers and trying to formulate English sentences, answering question from the man whom you only read about in the papers and see on TV. This is the man to whom even your village imam would feel segan. I am happy to note there were no reported cases of hysteria or wet garments.

Then there is the takut element. Literally, it means fear but there are many kinds of fear. Like many other people, the Malays have a great fear of doing something wrong, especially in front of others. When in a

situation such as this, the takut is not only real, it is probably inevitable. Perhaps the two greatest takut are the fear of sounding rude or being disrespectful and the fear of blurting out something you should not say.

A student overseas is sometimes privy to information Malaysian Student Department (MSD) officers do not wish someone in authority back home to know. What if you blurted out that in the last three years you have been there, you have never seen an MSD officer coming to visit your university?

A friend once worked as a waiter at one of those establishments the officers repeatedly warned us not to go where he saw certain officers doing the very thing students were told not to indulge in. If this friend was placed in the position mentioned above, his takut would be very real indeed because after the interview the Prime Minister would return to Kuala Lumpur but the officer would still be there.

At the university where I was, we sometimes had officers visiting us but the visit would be very short unless they were accompanying high-ranking officials from home who wanted to meet students for some reason. If not, they would show up, spend an hour or so, if not less, ranting and raving about the things we should not do or "scolding" us for evils they think we get up to. Then it is off to the nearest tourist attraction. If we had problems, then we often had to solve them ourselves. If we complained to the visiting officials, then things would only get worse.

For these students the takut is real. Some may fear the officers but for many of us the takut is because if we complained, the officers would only make it harder for us to do what we were supposed to do - study. Moreover, if memory serves me right, some of these officers themselves spoke marginally passable English.

However, it is only fair to say that there were a few respectable and genuinely good officers in the MSD. But as the Malay saying goes "seekor kerbau membawa lumpur, habis terpalit sekandang" - one water buffalo comes in muddy, the whole pen gets smeared.

Perhaps we need longer intensive English courses before we send students overseas?

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