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A smoother path to English

ARE you ready to take Maths and Science in English? You'd better be. The subjects will be taught in English to all primary and secondary students beginning next year. This is what the Education Ministry has proposed on the advice of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

And you can stop sighing! It's for your own good, really.

Ask your friends in uni and they'll tell you the doubly-hard time they're experiencing now, having to cope with not just the subject but also learning from scratch all the Science and Maths terms in English.

Translation work is definitely time consuming especially when you're in an institute of higher learning.

It's a tedious process, but necessary because most of the reference books and information on the Internet is in English. Moreover, you also need to know that thousands of jobs cannot be filled because university graduates are so weak in English.

Besides, which multinational company would want to employ a programmer who only knows how to explain in Bahasa Malaysia? How can that person relay what he has learnt to his colleagues, some of whom could be foreigners?

There are no two ways about this. We have to switch to English if we want to be competitive. And there is no better time to start than now!

Basically, this step is about preparing you for an easier university life and more... Now does that sound appealing? Toil now and you can reap a beautiful harvest later!

But, of course, with every new step we take, there will be niggling problems, initially.

To make the transition from Bahasa Malaysia to English easier for you, the Ministry has set up a special committee and made a few suggestions.

They include having special classes for teachers and students - especially those in the rural areas - to improve language proficiency. Guidebooks for teachers will also be introduced.

Teaching aids that include software programmes on CD-ROMs for those who will be taking the UPSR, PMR and SPM exams next year will also be introduced, while trainees at teacher-training colleges will learn how to teach the subjects in English.

Youthquake got students as well as parents and teachers to tell us how else we can make the transition more friendly.

WHAT FOURTH FORMERS SAY:

"This is a good move but in the first few years of its implementation, exam questions for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia should be in both English and Malay. This is because we are currently studying the subjects in Bahasa Malaysia.

"It would also be helpful if students were allowed to use dictionaries during exams during this transition period.

"And since dictionaries will be used by all students next year, I hope the relevant parties can help lighten our burden by subsidising them, or at least giving us a good student/discount price.

"This is also to ensure that students would, after some time, be able to use proper English in their essays, and not need to resort to rojak or broken English.

"Still, I think you cannot penalise students for using broken English during the transition period for these subjects.

"Science and Maths teachers are also not used to teaching in English, so they too need to attend special courses to improve their language skills."
- Tang Yin Hui, 16, Sungai Petani

"I can't say I'm not worried. But it's best to start before the next term begins, so we can catch up during the year-end school holidays.

"Introducing CD-ROMs as a teaching tool is a great idea. I'd be more motivated to study because it is something new. Eventually, the other subjects should be taught in English too." - Ang Pik Geok, 16, Petaling Jaya.

"Oh dear... this is the first time I'm hearing about this. We have so little time!

"The exams are just over a year away, and there isn't much time to prepare for them. I think it would be better to start from Form One, and then slowly change over the years. It would help the teachers cope." - Liyana Dalila Mohd Nasir, 16, Shah Alam

"The Education Ministry can help us cope with the change by shortening our syllabus, for instance.

"That way there is less ground to cover, and we can concentrate on learning the terminology in English. There's so much to learn in Chemistry alone!" - Saravanan Kumar, 16, Petaling Jaya.

"For the past four years, we have been studying in Bahasa Melayu. Switching to English in less than a year would be quite a challenge.

"If the Education Ministry can release the new Maths and Science reference books into the market soon, then we can catch up before the new academic year begins. What is important is we master the basic terminology first." - Chong Hui Syn, 15, Kuala Lumpur

WHAT SECOND FORMERS SAY:

"Things would be much easier if there were extra classes for us to learn English to cope with the change. Some students need extra help, or they're going to be in trouble.

"Perhaps it is also a good idea if we were given exam options - to do it in either English or Bahasa Melayu.

"My teachers spoke about it briefly to us; they were telling us that we'd better buck up in our English so we don't get left behind." - Syed Danial Syed Ahmad, 14, Kelana Jaya

"This change will be good. I've talked about it with my friends and we all agree on this. The only concern we have will be one of adjustment. Though many of us come from English-speaking homes, we have learnt everything in school, from Standard One, in Malay.

"It's not going to be too much of a problem once we get used to it though. Plus, learning these subjects in English will definitely be helpful once we get to college.

"The schools should definitely make an effort to make things easier for those who are not proficient in English, so they can keep up with the rest of the students." - Dionne Loong, 14, Petaling Jaya

"Perhaps the schools should run extra activities in English to increase the proficiency level among the students. These activities must be fun too - puzzles, competitions - to promote interest." - Adlyss Aldelya, 14, Petaling Jaya

WHAT TEACHERS SAY:

"It will be good if for the next few years, the major exams could come in two languages, so students have the option to answer either in Malay or English. This might give the weak students a chance at the exams.

"I think language is not the issue though. Many people, including me, were educated in Malay-medium schools, but fared very well overseas at university. It's all in the attitude.

"Teachers try very hard to ensure their students are motivated to learn

at all times." - Mrs Z, Form 4 and 5 maths teacher, secondary school in Klang

"Teaching Maths and Science in English is a good idea. After all, we need to remember that for most courses in colleges and universities, the reference books are in English.

"Parents should also be supportive of their children. Even if they don't speak English at home, they should help out by maybe subscribing to an English newspaper, or even magazines, to expose their kids to the language more.

"I studied in an English-medium school, but my parents did not know how to speak the language. And now I'm teaching in Bahasa Malaysia. It just shows that language is not really a barrier when your attitude and motivation are set right." - Mrs J, Form 5 science teacher, residential school in Kuantan

"To improve the quality of English among our students, we should also focus on the daily English lessons in our schools.

"While Science and Maths are important, they don't really teach you about grammar and sentence structure and conversational language. That's where the English lessons come in." - Mrs H, Form 5 chemistry teacher, boys' school in Petaling Jaya

"If our students really want to improve their English, they should read a lot more. Science and Maths only deal with terminologies and formulas, and not grammar and form. Improvement in English comes with more reading. "In fact, they should teach History in English, because at least the students will have to read more, and actually understand and synthesise the information for assignments and exams." - Mrs S, Form 3 maths and computer teacher, secondary school in Hulu Langat

"I don't think many teachers are fluent in English, and measures should be taken to make them improve. Even the teachers need to familiarise themselves with the English language.

"My main problem is that in class we may need to translate English into Malay or vice versa for the message to get across to the students. This is a waste of time. Therefore, translated textbooks really help.

"Also, more computer software as teaching aids may be good too. What we need is to have more computers in schools." - Mrs N, maths teacher, boys' school in KL

"I think it's a good move because compared to other countries in the region, we're lagging behind. But it's too drastic a measure; we need time as teachers to familiarise ourselves with the new system. If the Government wants an English-medium system by January next year, they must first ensure that we are ready for it.

"The main problem is that students may not be able to cope with it. Chinese and Indian students may face less of an obstacle, but the Malay students may have a real struggle. Even we teachers who were educated in university in English may have trouble after so many years of teaching and conversing in Malay.

"The biggest question is this: if we who are living in an urban area find it difficult, how can students and teachers in rural areas with less exposure to English cope?" - Mr H, science and biology teacher, a boys' school in KL

"I get undergraduate students coming up to me to me complaining that they do not understand my lectures because they are conducted in English, even though English is the medium of instruction where I teach.

"When I set essay questions, students tend to copy chunks of text from various references (which I have already read!), and put them together like a jigsaw puzzle, rather than attempt to understand and rewrite what they understand in their own words.

"These are probably the same people who tell me they want to go abroad to study!

"I know of colleagues who graduated from abroad and they can't even string grammatically correct sentences. During my student days in UK, some even resorted to plagiarising everytime they had an assignment.

"I applaud the idea that Maths and Science subjects are to be taught in English. When you are younger, you tend to get things more quickly and retain this. But I do hope that other subjects like Economics, History and Commerce also be taught in English because it helps students master the language better.

"Perhaps to ease the transition, present the exams in dual language for the first five years. Make students answer in English, but state the question in both languages." - University lecturer in Accounting

PARENTS SAY:

"When my children ask for my help in Maths, I always end up confused because they use the Malay terms which I am not familiar with. I grew up learning the subject in English.

"Now that Maths and Science are going to be taught in English, it will make it easier for me to teach her at home.

"Since most of the technical terms used in Maths and Science are not available in dictionaries, it would help if students are provided with reference books for the subjects, which are subsidised by the Government.

"I welcome the Ministry's proposal for teachers to attend special courses, because many teachers whom I have met cannot speak the language well. What's important is to stress the importance of proper English, and not Manglish in classes." - Chandra Brathavan, father of three, Kuala Lumpur

"I believe many parents would start sending their kids to good English-medium kindergartens.

"Therefore, kindergartens should also be encouraged to get children to use simple maths terms or speak in English.

"Parents should also start talking to their children in English and introduce simple maths terms so that children get used to them - that's what I do at home, because my son will be in Year One next year.

"The Ministry has introduced a pictorial dictionary for primary schoolchildren, but it doesn't include Maths and Science terminologies. Therefore, another reference book for Maths should be made available too." - Wan Norzita Wan Samsudin, mother of three, Petaling Jaya

"As the Ministry is in the process of translating the Maths and Science textbooks, I hope the Malay terminologies which students have been used to all these years are retained for easier reference.

"To help them learn English, there is no other way than to have extr classes. Parents can also help by providing their children more English reading material including newspapers." - Koid Siew Kean, mother of four, Penang

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