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Feature-Exxon

ENGLISH THEME PARK TO HELP RURAL CHILDREN MASTER ENGLISH

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KUALA LUMPUR: Rural children normally lack the resources to excel in studies but some rural students in Terengganu have been lucky enough to have access to computer games, the Internet, latest story books and other things considered luxuries to them.

All these "luxuries" that can help enhance their knowledge have been made available for their use at the newly-established English Theme Park (ETP) located at the Teachers Resource Centre (TRC) in Kemaman on part of the land belonging to Sekolah Kebangsaan Kemasek.

Funded by ExxonMobil, which handles offshore oil production, the ETP project is a collaboration between the Terengganu State Education Resource Centre (TSERC) and the Kemaman District Education Department's TRC. The park is scheduled to be officially launched on June 22.

According to TSERC principal assistant director Nurhizan Abdul Manab, the idea of building the theme park came from an earlier project aimed at improving the performance in examinations by schools in east coast states.

Noting that the overall performance of rural schools depends very much on the results of the English language, the ETP project thus focuses on this subject, which is also in line with the government's efforts to boost the use of English in schools.

IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out from time to time, including at a recent Workers' Day gathering here, Malaysians need to be conversant in the language, otherwise, the country's competitiveness will be under serious threat.

And that is not good news especially when the government is gearing towards making the country a developed nation by 2020 or making the country a centre of excellence in education.

Urging everyone to learn the language now, Dr Mahathir said that the country cannot wait 15 or 16 years for the students to join the workforce before they are proficient in English as the country's present global roles have changed tremendously.

Hence, teachers in the state who have embarked much earlier on projects to enhance the mastery of the language can take pride for being ahead in this venture.

Says Nurhizan: "Since English has been the "killer subject" in most schools in the district, our goal is to create an interest among students and teachers to love the language and make teaching and learning English fun by using a different approach."

A media team visited the park recently to have a first look at what is in store for the children, and see the seriousness of the teachers there to churn out scholars for the future.

MAGNITUDE OF ACTIVITIES

Although the park does not have all the adrenaline-pumping rides to thrill visitors, its own unique attractions are already a hit among students who have had the chance to try out the facilities.

Its Giant Mushroom, Vocabulary Shack and Graffiti Wall, which are placed close to one another, provides fun outdoor activities.

Nurhizan says the park works on a particular theme that will be changed on a regular basis. Since its first and current theme is "animal", the

whole place is decorated in the chosen theme and so are the activities by the children, which focus on similar subject matter.

Students entering the Giant Mushroom can have a feel of a safari adventure with its creatively decorated interior and convincing props. The built-in speakers that emanate different animal sounds enable students to identify the different types of animals.

After the "adventure" inside the Giant Mushroom, students can choose to go to the Vocabulary Shack and come up with as many animal words they can think of or, they can proceed to the Graffiti Wall to participate in mind mapping games.

PILOT PROJECT

Nurhizan says the ETP is a pilot project targeted at 15 primary and five secondary schools in the surrounding area.

"This project will serve as a launching pad for other districts to emulate," she says, adding that the project exposes students to a magnitude of activities specifically designed to enhance their knowledge and mastery of English.

To come up with this concept, the ETP team visited other English projects in Thailand and Singapore to get ideas and the expert views come from the British Council, she adds.

ETP counsellors, comprising teachers themselves, not only run the centre but offer visiting teachers alternative teaching techniques and learning resources to create a different environment for students in their respective schools.

The interior decorations and murals which are done by the teachers there have created a cosy and friendly atmosphere that make everyone feels at home.

The indoor facilities at ETP include a leisure reading corner, games corner, audio corner, PC island and TV/video lounge area. While the computer games are highly interactive and are linked to a network where students can have access to the Internet, the audio corner is equipped with easy-to-learn tapes. Some of the computer games have, in fact, been downloaded by the teachers themselves to suit local students.

INDOOR FAVOURITES

The Big Book area is one of the indoor favourites among the children as these oversized books that contain huge colourful pictures and fonts make them easy to read.

Some of the teachers involved in the selection of books have even gone a step further by taking the extra effort to prepare comprehensive questions and answers and attach them to the Big Books which children enjoy doing.

"The park creates an environment where students will not shy away from learning English," says teacher Siamala Krishnan of Sekolah Kebangsaan Rantau Petronas. Siamala is among those select the books to be purchased together with a panel of teachers in the district.

Year Five students Shahril Shafiq from SK Meraga Beris and Muhammad Nazirul from SK Seri Bandi who have had a go at the audio facilities say they love coming to the ETP as learning facilities are aplenty.

"Both of us will choose a storybook that comes with a tape for us to listen and learn the correct pronunciation of words. After that both of us will try to practise saying the words together and sometimes create a small conversation in English using the vocabulary we have picked up from the book. It's strange sometimes talking in English but fun," admits Shahril.

ETP'S SECOND PHASE

In a briefing to the media, Nurhizan reveals that the present theme park is the completed phase of the project. Proposals are underway to acquire more land in the area to develop phase two which promises a bigger theme park with more attractions, including a mini theatre.

ETP is not the only project currently sponsored by ExxonMobil in Terengganu. Its other English language projects are The Terengganu English Information and Resource Centre (TERIC), English Mobile Resource Unit and the Redang Educational Development for Higher Achievement (REDHA).

ExxonMobil public affairs manager Mokhtar Daud says that in Malaysia, ExxonMobil has a long-standing tradition of investing in the community and the English language projects are to complement the Malaysian government's aspiration to improve the standard of English in the country.

"Each year, the company contributes close to RM2 million to community service organisations and projects in locations where we have facilities to improve the quality of life of our neighbours and their communities," he says.

TERIC is an English sanctuary and reference centre located at the Terengganu State Education Resource Centre in Marang. It provides teachers with valuable teaching resources and training to upgrade the quality of English teachers through its clinic/tutoring/forums and donut sessions.

Launched in 2000, Redha is a project in collaboration with TSERC and the Kuala Terengganu District Education Department. Jointly funded by the Education Ministry and ExxonMobil, Redha was mooted to arrest the declining passing rate of English in the UPSR examinations and the overall UPSR results among pupils of SK Pulau Redang, the only school on the island.

Headmaster Joni Mohamad says among the steps taken are relocating the school to its present site where it is closer to the village settlement; giving additional classes and holiday classes to students sitting for UPSR exams and meeting with the Parent Teacher Association.

Joni says with the implementation of the Redha project, his charges have shown great improvement in their studies, scoring almost 60 per cent UPSR passes within two years of the project.

The new school, which opened earlier this year, is equipped with a computer and audio-visual room and library-cum-exhibition hall -- a far cry from the single wooden block of classes. The new school also has a four-storey teachers' quarters.

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