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Fear not English, for Romli's here!

Sheridan Mahavera

IN the final instalment of a two-parter on efforts to help needy pupils, SHERIDAN MAHAVERA talks to an educator whose goal is to infuse rural youngsters with the confidence to learn English so they can better understand the subject in school.

INSTEAD of enjoying a quiet, rustic life, a retired Universiti Sains Malaysia official is doing his bit to serve his society. "Even if I'm drawing a pension, I'm still living off taxpayers' money. So I feel that I must give back (to society), in my own small way," says Romli Abu Bakar, 60, a former deputy registrar at USM.

By "small way", he means teaching English to poor children in his village.

Eight years ago, Romli took it upon himself to give disadvantaged children in Kampung Bujang, Merbok, Kedah a basic grounding in English to supplement their lessons at school.

Today, Romli describes his efforts as not so much as teaching them English, but teaching them not to fear the language.

"I believe that is what former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad wanted Malays to learn, that we should not fear what is foreign but to learn from foreigners, and work hard so that we can one day become masters."

The free English classes that Romli conducts at his home for about 200 children in Kampung Bujang reflect this, as the most basic elements of the language are dissected for the pupils.

"We start with something as simple as the phrase a man with a pen. Then we explain why there is an `a' before the man and the pen," says Romli.

Starting in 1996, with his own money and some donations from USM, Romli had converted his house into a tuition centre for needy pupils. He built simple sheds complete with tables and chairs, using recycled wood and zinc. Initially, there were only 11 pupils.

Old English textbooks donated by USM lecturers are used for study material.

Morning classes for Year One to Year Four pupils start at 7.45am and end at 11am, while those in Year Five and Six start their sessions at 3.30pm.

English for secondary school students is divided into basic and intermediate, considering that student proficiency does not correlate to their official designated levels.

"There are Form Five students who only know Form One English, while you get Form One students who speak and write at Form Five level. So students are put in classes based on the level of proficiency, rather than based on their form levels," says Romli, who has several years of experience teaching young learners English in the days before pursuing his studies in rural development at USM.

The goal, according to Romli, is to infuse rural children with the confidence to learn English so they can better understand the subject in school.

The method, which Romli describes as the "old school" approach, is aimed at making the language - seen as intimidating to rural youngsters who only see it being used on television - familiar to them.

Urban students, Romli contends, learn English faster as they are more exposed to it because their parents may use it at home. This makes it easier for them to follow the English lessons taught in schools.

"Rural parents do not know how to speak English. As a result, their children find it difficult to follow what is being taught in class, as the lessons and subject are alien to them," he says.

This unfamiliarity causes them to shy away from participating in class, says Romli, adding: "When they mispronounce a word or make a silly mistake and get laughed at, there goes all their interest in learning English."

To simplify the learning process, Bahasa Malaysia is used to explain complex concepts or words.

As an example, Romli, who handles the English classes single-handedly, says children are given a short passage or sentence to read and understand. Definitions for difficult words are provided for in Bahasa Malaysia.

"Some pupils do not even know how to look up a word in the dictionary and this can hamper their interest. Even if they looked it up, they might have problems understanding the definition," he says.

The pupils are then asked to create their own sentences in oral and written exercises, while grammatical rules are pointed out as they go along.

"The classes function as a kind of support system to supplement what they learn in school. It is to make the formal lessons in school easier to understand," he adds.

In school, teachers do not have the time to delve into the basics and there is pressure to finish the syllabus on time.

Aside from English, Romli, with the help of former pupils from his first batch in 1996, also conducts classes for Mathematics.

However, Romli says, English is being given more attention as the Mathematics classes are tuned to helping students achieve higher marks in the subject.

Apart from the classes, Romli's house has been turned into a guidance centre of sorts, where he has invited some of his friends from USM to give motivational lectures not only to pupils and students, but to their parents as well.

Parents are given tips on good parenting skills while the children are motivated to do well in the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR).

USM, he says, has been instrumental in helping him put together the tuition centre, whose surroundings are enhanced by the presence of two fish ponds to rear catfish (keli) and telapia, and a nursery for landscape plants - a passion Romli acquired as a young boy.

USM Vice-Chancellor Professor Datuk Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, Romli adds, has funded some of the building materials for the centre's structures.

"The centre is a place where parents can come together and discuss their children's educational problems," says Romli.

Sales from the fish reared in the ponds and plants from the nursery are used to fund the centre.

"We also want to encourage the kampung folk to initiate these projects themselves in the land surrounding their homes, so that they can also earn supplementary income.

"They can sell the fish and use water from the ponds to fertilise their vegetable plots. With this, they save the money they earn from working in the factories for their children's books," he says.

The larger objective of Romli's teaching project is to bridge the intellectual gap between the university and the village.

"Rural folk see universities as something alien. The first thing that pops into their minds is money or how do they pay for their children's tuition.

"By showing the fruits of intellectual labour such as integrated farming, they can see its benefits," he says.

Also, the integrated farming project will make use of the many fertile plots in the Lembah Bujang area which are mostly left idle.

One of Romli's neighbours has implemented the fish farm project so well, that he now sells catfish fry to Grik and Sik.

Twice-a-year motivational camps are also held and they are such a hit that Romli now plans to hold a special programme for mothers to teach them proper nutrition and parenting skills.

Romli's wife, Hasnah Said, also teaches Mathematics to learners from Year One to Form Three.

Being an ex-teacher, she understands how tough it is to study when you are poor.

Romli plans to expand the centre's small library and is trying to get USM to donate its old computers for his pupils and students to use.

"If I were to just do this on my pension, then it would not be enough. There are five people who were instrumental in helping me set up the centre. And I would like to thank them."

Besides Dzulkifli, they are Professor Datuk Amir Awang, Zuffra Pharmacy owner Zubir Sheikh Ahmad, USM lecturer Dr Mustapha Kassim and Penang businessman Yusof Ahmad.

The flood which hit Kedah in October last year brought some good luck when State Communications, Information, Multimedia and Volunteer Organisations chairman Rosnah Majid visited the centre and expressed an interest in helping out.

Zubir from Zuffra Pharmacy has expressed a keen interest in setting up a fund for poor children by offering them loans and scholarships for tertiary education.

Such a plan, Romli says, is one of his ultimate goals.

"I would like to see it realised, even if it happens after I am not around," he says.

In the meantime, Romli will continue with whatever little he has to teach the children of Kampung Bujang not to fear English.