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# We need the likes of Master Ismail

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**L**AST week, I lost Master Ismail Omar. He was the headmaster of my first school for almost two decades. Peserian Primary English School, as it was called, started in a religious school in Sarang Buaya in the district of Muar before it moved to its own compound in Semerah, half way between Muar and Batu Pahat.



"Master" was a term commonly used in those days to refer to anyone who taught English. They were of a different breed altogether and highly regarded by society. Master Ismail was a disciplinarian who terrorised us, making sure we behaved accordingly as students of an English school. He threatened to fine students who spoke any language other than English. I was mute for almost three months for I came in with only three words of English and a phrase to request a visit to the lavatory.

I am glad to have met him so early in my life. I am sure I echo the views of thousands of his students who went through "Master Ismail's system" — he made learning fun and schooling interesting, and English the most exciting subject in school. He drove us to excel in the language. Master Ismail's philosophy was "Learn, Read, Look, Speak, Recite and Enjoy". "You won't learn if you don't like English," he told us.

Back then, books were thinner and teachers were not too obsessed about completing the syllabus. There was less paperwork for teachers, too. And academic achievement was never measured by how many As a student got in his or her examination. It was simply a matter of passing or failing.

When I started schooling in 1960, many of the books used came from England. One was *Look and Learn* by R. Duncan published by Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited. It was interesting to look at the contents of the book. For Book Three, the first lesson was about "A Malay Hut". It started with the paragraph, "Malay people live in this house. We call it a hut. It is made of wood and atap. We get atap from Nipah palm".

Stereotyping was never an issue. Perhaps we were less divided back then and political correctness was almost unheard of. Many Muslim boys and girls went to missionary

schools and no one made a fuss when they sang gospel songs.

In *Look and Learn*, there were "revisions" after every three or four chapters. Some of the examples of the chapters are: "A Fisherman", "Rice", "A Carpenter", "Tinware", "Sports" and "Lanterns". Then there were the *Malayan Readers* and *The Oxford English Course for Malaya*. The latter was first printed in 1946 and the version I used in Standard Two was the "11th impression" published in 1956. Again, after every chapter there was a section on revision. There were verb exercises, sentence drills, verb drills, composition and such.

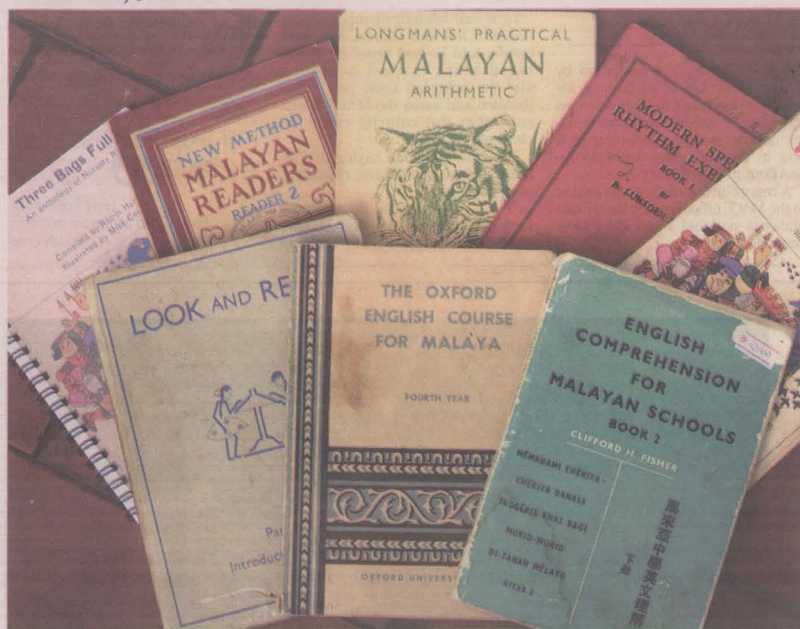
Master Ismail and the English teachers of his generation believed that learning any language demanded conversation. We were made to say words, phrases, sentences aloud or read out full paragraphs. Drama and nursery rhymes were used occasionally to express ourselves. We were made to compose short stories and read them in class as early as Standard Two.

To help us with our pronunciation, there was *Modern Speech and Rhythm Exercise* by B. Lumsden Milne, published in 1955. Speech drill was important for beginners to get the feel of the language and to pronounce the words correctly and with the right rhythm.

There were nursery rhymes to help us. *Three Bags Full: An Anthology of Nursery Rhymes* would come in handy. We were introduced to Shakespeare and other playwrights very early on.

You don't learn English in English class alone. Nature Study was what we know as Geography today. We started the class by writing our observation of the day, something like "Today is Monday. Today is a windy day", without fail almost every day. In short, all subjects were part of the entire curriculum to make a student understand and use the language confidently.

I am not saying those methods



Some of the textbooks used in primary schools in the 1960s.

were perfect, but it certainly helped students who had no background at all in the language. Those were the days when there was hardly a library in many schools. My first English book was *King Solomon's Mines*, which I found accidentally in a rubbish heap. When my teacher spoke incessantly about Shakespeare, I gathered the courage to ask him to lend me a book by the Bard. He gave me *Romeo and Juliet*, most of its words I could not understand. But I copied religiously every line and tried to understand every word. I did not even possess a dictionary back then.

Most of us learnt English the hard way in the 1960s. Master Ismail reminded us that the only way to survive in the world was to master the language. We soldiered on, learning one thing at a time, discovering the

incredible world of knowledge, fantasy and understanding of other people's cultures that was opened to us.

"Are teachers incompetent or school books unsuitable?" asked the *New Sunday Times* last week in its lead story on the sorry state of English among our students. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was reported as saying that his ministry would look at all angles to ascertain the real reasons for the decline. He found it perplexing that even after learning English for 13 years, students still could not obtain a good command of the language.

Something is terribly wrong with the teaching of English in our schools. We all know the standard of English among our people has deteriorated over the years. We have no

choice but to look at the entire curriculum and teaching methods. Learning another language is easier now. Our children are picking up Japanese and Korean by listening to songs and watching films and television serials.

Should we learn the ways of the old? Perhaps there are lessons to be learnt from books like *Look and Learn*, the *Malayan Readers* series, *The Oxford English Course* or *English Comprehension For Malayan Schools*. Perhaps we have to re-look at the books used today. Bring back fun in learning the language. Expose students to rhymes, poetry and drama to revitalise English classes. And retrain English teachers.

Let's create many "masters" like Master Ismail and his gang. We must replicate how the old masters taught the language.