

**No one to blame but ourselves for bad English By Chok Suat Ling**  
**New Straits Times**  
**January 12, 2012**  
**By Chok Suat Ling**

**Is our grasp of the English language poor because we just don't read?**

A WEEK later, many are still tittering over and tweeting about mongoose fights and tight civets.

For those who are not connected to social networks, or have been away meditating in the forested hills beyond Kukuchina, these have nothing to do with the habits of animals in the wild. Rather, they were the many colourful descriptions of "Ethical Clothing" or etika berpakaian" in the Defence Ministry's website.

Netizens laughed till they cried when they saw some of the English translations -- pakaian yang menjolok mata was "clothes that poke eye", when it should be "revealing clothes".

Let's not even go into "mongoose fight made in Malaysia" and "tight Malay civet berbutang five".

The ministry took down its English translated version several hours after it went viral on Twitter and Facebook late last week. But it was too late, the damage has been done.

As expected, the incident provoked a debate about our deteriorating command of the English language. But we do not need blunders such as these to tell us the command of English among many Malaysians is degenerating. Ask most employers, and they will be more than willing to do so. So too, institutions of higher learning.

There are university professors who write like this: "I strongly agreed with all those concern because here at ..... we also have several researchers had invented several teaching aids."

A letter from a New Sunday Times reader talked at length about "child exploration". After puzzling over it for a few hours, and debating whether we should send it to Interpol or the CIA to be decoded, it dawned on us that the reader was not a paedophile but a strong advocate against child "exploitation".

Many have offered their views as to why our standard of English is going downhill faster than an obese man who had lost his balance. As many are completely bewildered over the current state of affairs.

Are teachers incompetent, or are there not enough of them? Are textbooks unsuitable, asked Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin recently.

Indeed, it's an absolute enigma.

Some claim the education system is to blame. Is that the reason, or are there other factors?

Is the grasp of the language poor these days because many Malaysians just don't read?

The last National Literacy Survey carried out in 2005 reported that Malaysians read an average of two books a year.

Last year, Information, Communication and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim

claimed that the number had gone up to an average of eight to 12 books per year.

However, he did not cite what study those figures were based on and experts have dismissed them as being too good to be true. They say this because that would make us the most well read people in the world.

The Japanese read 10 books a year, and so do the French. Americans read about five books a year, based on published statistics.

All we need to do to determine whether we are indeed such avid readers is to take a look around us. How many people read when in the LRT or bus?

But then again, holding a book upright in such cramped conditions may result in a slap in the face for attempted molest.

When was the last time you read a novel? Do you whip out a book instead of your iPhone, iPad, or BlackBerry when waiting for that tardy friend to arrive? Do you encourage your children to read? Do they read anything other than Facebook status updates?

Surveys have shown that the only things students and undergraduates read these days are textbooks and materials that would make them score in examinations.

The National Library has done its part to encourage Malaysians to read -- it appointed Datuk Michelle Yeoh and Datuk Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor Sheikh Mustapha as Reading Icons last year.

In the end, however, the onus shouldn't be on the education system (or a Bond girl or an astronaut) to get the younger generation to read. That responsibility lies with parents.

Buy your children books and give them the encouragement to read something with more depth than a Playstation's instruction manual. Lead by example.

When we can't change the direction of the wind, we have to adjust our sails.

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Source: <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnist/no-one-to-blame-but-ourselves-for-bad-english-1.31230>