Boosting English language proficiency

DEPUTY Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Dr Mary Yap Kain Ching is confident Malaysia will improve its ranking in terms of English Language proficiency among non-native speakers in the world from next year.

Her optimism is based on the consecutive measures undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education to boost the level of English proficiency among students in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities throughout the country.

On top of it, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played a significant role in complementing the Government’s effort in that direction.

In the context of the Ministry of Higher Education, Dr Yap, who is Member of Parliament for Tawau, said one strategy in place is the Malaysia English Assessment (MEA) Programme which was launched in October 2007 by the Minister of Higher Education, Dato’ Sri Idris bin Jus bin Fuad.

This programme is aligned to the standards of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) and is implemented in collaboration with the Cambridge Malaysia Development Education Trust (CMDET).

“The programme sees a departure from the conventional way of assessing students in the mastery of English language. Students will be assessed formally through tests/examinations, and informally through interactive learning activities,” she explained.

According to Dr Yap, the implementation of MEA is supported by an ecosystem which sees the creation of a conducive environment for English. In November 2011, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) hosted the first English Language Carnival for the universities, Polytechnics and Community Colleges which was enjoyed by the students.

Additionally, students are also encouraged to learn English through MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). A massive open course is a free Web-based distance learning programme that is designed for the participation of large numbers of geographically dispersed students.

“A MOOC may be patterned on a college or university course,” she added. Most important of all, Dr Yap’s assertion is that students must take personal responsibility to learn the English language.

“One just can’t depend on the limited number of tutorials online and hope to be proficient in the language. This means extra effort must be undertaken by the students to master the language. It is essential to constantly practise the four skills of language learning, which are reading, writing, listening and speaking as often as they can possibly,” she advised, adding MEA incidentally focuses on these four fundamental skills.

Malaysia has been ranked 79th in English language proficiency among non-native speakers in the world, according to the most recent EF English Proficiency Index (EF stands for Education First). Malaysia is the second best in Asia, after Singapore which is ranked number five out of 80 countries. Malaysia is ranked under the “high” category while Singapore is ranked under the “very high” category.

She commended all the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other bodies in Sabah for taking up the noble initiative to help schools and students master the English language.

Most notable was the formation of the Sabah English Aspiration Society (SEAS) in July this year, spearheaded by Founding President Dr Zainab Kassim, an ex-pupil of SK Pengiran Jaya, Peming in Menggatal, who was a secondary school student when the King’s College Hospital in London, she and her team spent sleepless nights to get the English language teaching programme introduced in the next to the government primary school, off the ground three months later.

The idea of the MEA is that the English Corner will become a hub for English learning activities and skills training for students in the township area, “Dr Zainab was quoted as saying.

Dr Yap said it was heartening to note that elected representatives like Membakut Asy-Syakur Datuk Haji Mohd Ariff bin Dato’’h Abdullah and other politicians, government agencies, corporate bodies and private individuals have contributed towards the realisation of the English Corner at SK Pengiran Jaya.

“Undeniably, English is a global language. We can’t run away from it. I have been following with interest the English language-related projects undertaken by NGOs such as the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu (RCKK pearl), and Soroptimist International Kota Kinabalu (SIKK), among others,” she said.

“I have always maintained that education is a collective responsibility and not solely responsibility of the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Higher Education. It is most encouraging to see those who are willing to take the initiative to help by organising programmes or activities to make the learning of English for the students to be fun and meaningful,” she said in a statement emailed to Daily Express.

To improve the level of English proficiency among rural pupils, Project REAL (Rural Focus-English for All) has been implemented by the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu (first under Dato’ Noni Noni said and now under Dato’ Serai Saban Law as President) in collaboration with the State Education Department. The club’s endeavour was the setting up of the English Corner in six rural primary schools, furnishing each corner with 700 English books and distribution of English-Malay dictionaries to the pupils.

They are SK Kawang (Papar), SK St Edmund (Kota Belud), SK Yekan Kuala (Ta­ran), SK Pomotodon (Inqnam), SK Rampayan (co­mmunal) and SK Rampayan (com­munity).

Dr Yap said the move is aptly in tan­dem with the Education Ministry’s Highly Proficient Initiative (HPI) that was introduced to raise the English proficiency of students through increased exposure in schools.

“I understand that Rotary International District 3300 Governor, Datuk Lee Cheau Wan (who launched at least two of the English Corners) has assured of assistance from the Rotary movement to en­able the Rotary Club of Kota Kinabalu Pearl to set up the English Corner in many more rural schools in Sabah next year,” said Dr Yap. For the purpose, Lee had pushed for the club to apply for a global grant from Rotary International’s Rotary Foundation.

Earlier this year, State Education Direc­tor, Dato’ Serai Saban Law as President had said that the department was always looking forward to collaboration and bariat partnership with any private agency or non-governmental organisation (NGO) to contribute their expertise and capabilities towards enhancing stude­nts’ exposure to the English language for a better tomorrow.

Dr Yap is aware of the success of the year-long Soroptimist International Kota Kinabalu (SIKK)-SK Rampayan Eng­lish Reading Hunt Programme 2017, a pilot project initiated by SIKK with the co­operation of the State Education Department and the Ministry of Higher Educa­tion in six rural primary schools. The New Straits Times reported the programme had turned its focus to improving the English proficiency of students.

The English Language teachers of SK Rampayan with the assistance of Soroptimist International Kota Kinabalu (SIKK) were preparing the module to be used as a guideline for the expansion programme.

“I certainly hope that such enthusiasm in being English should prompt our students to become better in English so that in the year 2021, Malaysia will be one of the top five in the world and topless of English,” Dr Yap said.

She reiterated that such efforts were needed as English proficiency was crucial in the global professional marketability.

To recapitulate, in Prime Minister’s Department Dato’ Seri Abdul Rahman Dahlan had in April this year proposed that English-medium government schools be re-established in Sabah in an effort to improve the English Language proficiency of students in the State.

He said the re-establishment of English-medium government schools in Sabah was seen as a proactive measure to produce more human capital having mastered the universal language from an early age.

“Mastery of English is one way to be more productive and competitive. By mastering the language, Sabah will be able to ‘speed up’ pursuit of reducing the development gap between the State and those states in the Peninsula,” he was quoted as saying this after the launch of the Highly Immerasive Programme (HIP) at SK Rampayan in Kota Belud.

Among the first to support the pro­posal was Science, Technology and Inno­vation ( MOSTI) Minister Dato’ Seri Abdul Halip bin Madnun Bawar. He contended that even China which all this while has used its main language Mandarin has turned its focus to improving its English proficiency now, prompted by in­ternationalisation needs and interests as well as the need to master the Malaysian Univer­sity. He maintained that much of the knowledge and infor­mation available is in the English lan­guage.

Early this month, a historian said that restoring English-medium schools would help create an internationally qualified workforce.

Sometime in 2015, the Malaysia Youth Parliament had proposed that the go­vernment introduce the “English in Rural Areas” programme to boost rural second­ary school students’ proficiency in the English language. The government’s objec­tive of ensuring that each student would be proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English is contained in the National Education Blueprint (2013-2023).

The same year (2015), the Performance Management and Delivery Unit’s (Per­mada) English proficiency survey saw a whopping 90% of 150,000 respondents reporting in favour of improving the country’s stand­ard in the language.

On the flip side, many students in the STPM examination had failed to get into local universities because they could not pass the English Test (Muet). Muet is a compulsory test to set a benchmark for English among Malaysian students. Passing Muet is a passport for pursuit of a first-degree programme in local universities.