NEW STRAITS TIMES

NST Leader: Examining our English

December 8, 2023 @ 12:09am



Five Klang Valley schools will start the DLP for Year One pupils beginning next year's session, though the programme has been ongoing sporadically since 2015 in certain schools. NSTP FILE PIC, FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSE ONLY

Never underestimate the determination of dedicated parents to scrounge what's best for their children's education.

In embracing the spirit of the Education Act 1996, that pupils are to be educated according to their parents' wishes, they successfully harangued a dawdling Education Ministry to officially re-enlist the Dual Language Programme (DLP), which compels Maths and Science to be taught in English.

Five Klang Valley schools will start the DLP for Year One pupils beginning next year's session, though the programme has been ongoing sporadically since 2015 in certain schools. If not for these parents' tenacity, the DLP would have died an unnatural death from pre-meditation, ignorance and apathy.

Peninsular Malaysia schools have a bull-headed wrestling match with English proficiency. Officially, the majority of peninsula educators and parents have this misconception that the DLP will debase Bahasa Malaysia's sanctity, despite its ironclad position and sovereignty as the national language embedded in the Federal Constitution.

There's simply no way Bahasa Malaysia would ever be diminished. Even pro-English parents would defend Bahasa Malaysia's inviolability to the death.

Yet, English thrives in a "paradox" of Malaysian pop culture: social media influencers, political punditry and talking heads primarily communicate in Bahasa Malaysia, but they consistently fail to complete a sentence without molesting and commandeering choice English words and phrases.

For that given lapse and to fill this void in their coping mechanism, English words, not Mandarin or Tamil, are wondrously conveyed. This stew of "Manglish" communication is pervasive and yet, English, as an official medium in schools, is a "shadowy" construct, never to be fully embraced.

It's a no-brainer that to excel globally, our future employees and entrepreneurs must be well-versed in English to pursue high-value jobs or business opportunities.

But here's the unofficial reason why teaching Maths and Science in English is never a priority: it has been dishonoured as a highly-charged political contention.

Tireless advocates like the Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia impeccably perceive English as the crucial gateway to valuable and practical global knowledge. But here's the rub: what is impeccable does not necessarily translate into political prudence.

It is why our educators, especially our political masters, continue to "dumb down" English adaptation under the guise of nationalism and Bahasa Malaysia's righteousness. For what reason? Simple.

The more our children properly learn to read, converse, write and comprehend English, especially on important universal and progressive matters, the more questions they will ask and the more challenges they will exert to the establishment.

That won't do, especially in the cynical game of narrow electoral margins. It is also why certain political parties stall the rise of a new, more intellectual generation, and despite their corruption and extremism, unconscionably extract more popular support.

The need to arrest the slide of our English proficiency is urgent, though we are said to be among Asia's top in aptitude. But in reality and in its current run, there are doubts.