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Sabah teacher wins award for improving English, communication skills of rural students

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In her younger days, Sydney Engelbert avidly watched English cartoons to not only entertain herself but also comprehend the dialogues, using them as a tool for learning the English language. - Courtesy pic

KENINGAU: In her younger days, Sydney Engelbert avidly watched English cartoons to not only entertain herself but also comprehend the dialogues, using them as a tool for learning the English language.

Now, turning 30, Sydney is teaching English at Keningau Vocational College (KVC), located in a rural area in Keningau, about 109 kilometres south of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

In just five short years since joining KVC as a teacher, she is already proving to be a dedicated educator, even garnering international recognition for her contributions.

Sydney, a Kadazandusun from Kampung Kiawayan in Tambunan, was recently named winner of the 2024 Cambridge Dedicated Teacher Awards (CDTA) for the Southeast Asia and Pacific Region, along with eight others representing their respective regions around the world.

Sydney won the regional award in recognition of her creditable efforts in enriching her students' learning experience through an online exchange programme she started in 2022with several vocational schools in Malaysia, the Philippines, Cambodia and Indonesia.

The judges were impressed with her commitment to cross-cultural collaboration, which helped to develop the English language and communication skills of her students who live in a remote district (Keningau) and rarely get to venture out.

Organised by Cambridge University Press and Assessment (a part of the University of Cambridge in England and a world leader in assessment, education, research and academic publishing), CDTA is a global competition where the public – students, parents or other teachers – can nominate a primary or secondary school teacher for the award in recognition of their exemplary services or contributions.

The nine regional winners are picked by a select panel of judges while the public will vote for the overall winner of CDTA. The overall winner of the 2024 CDTA has yet to be announced.

According to the Cambridge University Press and Assessment website, the 2024 CDTA received nearly 15,000 nominations.

EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

On the online exchange programme she started in 2022, Sydney said the idea for the initiative came about after she realised many of her students had become disinterested in their studies after experiencing "burnout" due to having to undergo home-based online classes in 2020 and 2021 following the COVID-19 pandemic.

"For them, it (home-based learning) was just not the same (as face-to-face learning in school)," she said.

The young teacher then collaborated with Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) VOCTECH to initiate an online exchange programme where students could get to experience a new learning environment by participating in classes conducted by teachers in other parts of Malaysia and the Philippines, Cambodia and Indonesia.

SEAMEO VOCTECH is the Regional Centre for Vocational and Technical Training that was established by SEAMEO in 1990.

The first edition of the three-month exchange programme kicked off in 2022. Sydney said 112 students from the four countries, including 45 from KVC, participated in it.

"In 2023, the number (of participants in the online exchange programme) increased to 252 with 70 of them from KVC," she told Bernama here recently.

Sydney said the exchange programme has enabled her students to not only improve their command of English but also their communication skills, cultural competence and knowledge about topics beyond their standard curriculum.

"It complements classroom teaching," she said, adding, "They (her students at KVC) not only get to meet new people but also learn new things and subjects outside their own courses."

She said the exchange programme is still ongoing and hoped "we can take it a step further by conducting it physically in the future".

READING HABIT

As for her approach to enhancing her students' proficiency in English, Sydney said she helps to instil the reading habit in her students by incorporating elements of arts and literature in her lessons since most of them are visual learners and natural artists.

"For instance, as part of my lessons, I would ask my students to pick an English storybook from the library and draw a mini-comic based on their favourite scene from the book to share with the class," she said.

She recalled when she was in primary school, she became interested in learning English due to her teachers' fascinating teaching methods.

Sydney, who also speaks Bahasa Melayu and her native Kadazandusun language fluently, said she was inspired to become a teacher by her parents who are both in the teaching profession (her father retired in 2022). Some of her uncles, aunties and cousins are also teachers.

Sydney, whose favourite pastime is reading especially books authored by Mitch Albom and Hanya Yanagihara, added she plans to introduce and conduct more international programmes for her students and teachers to get involved in.

"This will be a good learning experience for my students and an opportunity for them to venture out globally," she said. – BERNAMA