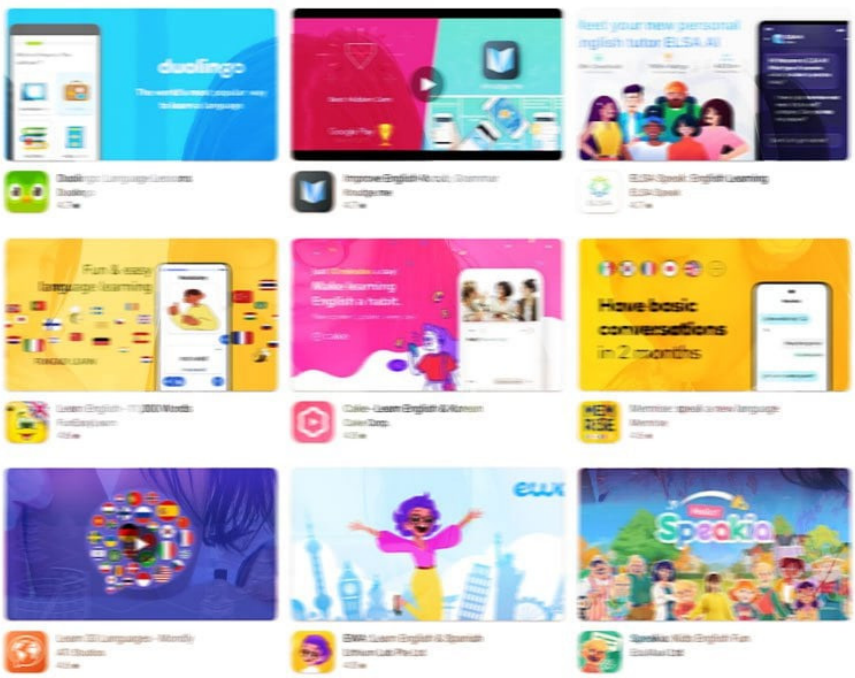
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# Take advantage of apps that boost English proficiency

By Yong Soo Heong - February 10, 2024 @ 1:25am




*NSTP FILE PIC, FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSE ONLY.*

It was not too long ago when we used to snigger at the English language proficiency of some of our neighbours where the language of instruction in school wasn't English.

But over the years, we have joined the ranks of those with a poor grasp of English, often touted as the language for global discourse.

The problem in Malaysia is not just skin-deep but far more serious when you have people who put up signs, whether unknowingly or otherwise, like "Due to unforeseen circumcision, the restaurant is closed today"!

It was either the chef had forgotten about his appointment with the Tok Mudim or it was just a case of poor grasp of the language.

It's heartening that the Education Ministry has woken up to the fact that a lot needs to be done to fix the problem.

It has to be a comprehensive fix, not just scratching at the surface with initiatives with fancy-sounding names like Highly Immersive Programmes or English Language Enhancement in Schools Programme for "hotspot" schools.

One also has to have the right tools and instructors to initiate the turnaround, as many of our English teachers are not up to the mark because of changes in the education system and even teaching methodologies.

And, obstacles like cultural attitudes towards the frequent use of English in everyday settings or lack of immersive English language exposure, where people who try to improve their proficiency are frowned upon by their peers.

Recently, an initiative to get the young to be on track to improving their English was undertaken by Keith Thong, who runs several stores selling tertiary-level books.

He decided to bring in several easy-to-use interactive applications from the United Kingdom to augment teaching platforms, including apps that develop creativity and literacy skills, especially for non-native English speakers, and to "reinvent reading and the way we see books among the young".

Sigbjorn Dugal, a Norwegian based in the UK, has an app that aims to arrest falling literacy levels across the world by unlocking the reading potential of young people.

He had wanted to give his children the opportunity to read more books but was surprised at how inaccessible children's books were online.

He started a company to change the world of reading and help children discover that reading can be a source of pleasure.

Another Malaysian passionate about improving English language proficiency is Tam Hao Jin, who started a company to make reading materials easily accessible, enjoyable and affordable online, and can be reached by parents in cities or remote areas so that their children could have world-class reading content on their devices.

Tam, who was laughed at when young because of his poor vocabulary from lack of good reading materials, now enlightens parents on the versatility of smartphones with parent-friendly applications in tactile and digital learning that can empower them to be their child's first teacher.

Many children entering school still have language difficulties.

As such, apps that provide early identification, intervention, feedback and subsequent enrichment for children are now available to teachers and parents to track their progress in real-time in reading, pronunciation and grammar.

Dr Aslam Khan of the Malaysian Association for Education, hopes that officials in charge of education would be open to the latest teaching aids to flatten the learning curve.

He says the apps are available and it is just a matter of assessing what's suitable for use and roll them out quickly.

There's no denying the importance of English, be it in business, academia, science or diplomacy. It's an economic imperative.

If we're serious about raising the level of English proficiency in Malaysia, one should apply the Malay proverb: "*Genggam bara api biar sampai jadi arang*".

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* **The writer is a former Bernama chief executive officer and editor-in-chief**