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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: Lingua franca in decline

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FEW people would argue against the importance of the English language today. However, David Graddol, in an opinion article in Science (Feb 27, 2004), delivered startling news: the English language is in decline around the world.

Graddol's study showed that the population growth among speakers of languages other than English is increasing more rapidly than speakers of English as their first language.

In 1950, for example, nearly nine per cent of the world's population spoke in English as their first language. But this proportion of English speakers is declining at a rate of about 0.4 per cent for every 10 years.

By 2050, it is estimated that only five per cent of the world's population would be speaking in English as their first language.

In contrast, Spanish, Hindi/Urdu and Arabic languages see an increase every year in the number of speakers in the world. By 2050, Graddol predicted, Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi/Urdu and Arabic would be equally ranked with English among world languages.

Mandarin remains the native language for more than a billion people in the world. China's population is about one-sixth of the world's population and when China's economy overshadows that of the United States, Mandarin may be the new must-learn language.

Together with China, countries such as Russia, Brazil, and India are expected to be among the top six largest economies in the world by 2050. In such a scenario, would the English language remain as useful or as dominant as today?

The decline of one language and the rise of another is not unprecedented. Latin, for example, was the language of science before it was gradually replaced by English.

I wonder if Malaysia is fighting a losing war in improving English proficiency among the citizens? Malaysia's neighbouring countries, the Philippines and Hong Kong are also witnessing a large decline in English proficiency.

A recent official survey showed that nearly half of Filipino high school graduates could not speak English at all. And although Hong Kong high school students study English for several hours a day, only slightly more than half of the 16 to 17-year-olds could pass the English language exams. And despite billions in yen spent by the government, the Japanese still speak very little English.

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The fundamental problem in Malaysia is not the lack of English-speaking teachers or the teaching methods. The problem is that English would always remain an aloof and remote language to most Malaysians, used only by the elite minorities or used only for international or some official purposes.

For most Malay-sians, English is not an everyday language. A survey done in 2001 revealed that less than two per cent (about 380,000 people) of Malaysia's population spoke in English as their first language. There is unfortunately a stigma attached to some people speaking in English. A Chinese who speaks in English is sometimes called a "banana" -- he or she may look yellow on the outside but is actually white inside.

I once had a Malay research student who was brave enough to speak in English to her Malay friends. For that, she was treated as an outcast because her friends thought it abnormal and they felt uncomfortable to have a Malay person speaking in English to another Malay.

So, unless Malaysians can somehow have a mindset change to internalise English as a language spoken by all races and used, at least partially, in everyday life, Malaysia would continue to see a fall in English proficiency no matter what and no matter how much the government tries to promote its use.

That English is in decline and other languages are on the rise may actually augur well for Malaysia. Malaysians, made up of many races, can already speak in English, Mandarin and to a lesser degree, Hindi -- three of the five languages identified to be the major languages of the future.

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