

“Youth empowerment is something to be practised genuinely and at all times. It should not be something seasonal, to be promoted when an election is near or because some individuals champion it.”

“We are emerging from a period when companies, under pressure to meet shareholder expectations, favoured profitability and growth, even if it meant taking undue risks and losing public confidence.”

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FORUM EDITOR | AZAM ARIS

One must embrace English to master it

There is no doubt that the standard of English in Malaysia has fallen badly over the last few decades. And this is true for all Malaysian communities, even the Eurasians.

It is a generational phenomenon made all the more poignant because Malaysians started out having an enviably good command of the language. One has merely to read the parliamentary Hansard from the 1960s to realise how well most Malaysian politicians of any ethnic background could debate in English.

Now, as the wish to reverse the trend becomes palpable even among single-language nationalists who must see that Malaysia does not and cannot develop in a language vacuum, cries for a higher stature to be given to English are being widely heard again.

Even Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin had recently expressed surprise at how bad Malaysian students are in English.

Sadly though, the ambitions remain low, and the issue has been reduced to whether or not English should be used for teaching science and mathematics. Not only is the focus fixed on an extremely narrow functional command of the language, the fact that most new knowledge is clothed in English — as are most cutting-edge global debates — is not taken into account either.

Learning any language well requires some degree



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BY OOI KEE BENG

of immersion. This means the learner has to jump into water that is deeper than he can handle at the time. Learning a language by systematically concentrating on a narrow field like mathematics is not likely to foster confidence in the use of that language. It is in effect a kind of state-sanctioned dumbing down.

The ambition to dumb down for the sake of the masses/the race/the reader/the student/the voter is no doubt ubiquitous today, and that is certainly the case in politics, in the mass media and in schools. And this is done in any language.

Any dumbing down that becomes habitual and enduring should be recognised for its sinister intents, but in schools, dumbing down becomes disastrous. Many explanations for the fall in the standard of English blame the frighteningly low standard of English that teachers have.

The blind cannot possibly help the young to see. Reports state that recently, as many as 70% of 60,000 teachers performed poorly in their English Language Cambridge Placement Test. That is shocking to the point of being debilitating. How does one heal a body that is off-kilter to such a degree?

Learning a language is very much like learning to know a city. The only way to feel at home in a new city is to criss-cross it often, and experience it in as many different ways as possible and from as many different angles as possible. One must

perceive it in time and in space.

And so, learning a language is to approach it as literature. Now, this need not happen at the cost of the national language, or one's mother tongue. Multilingualism is, after all, the necessary skill for all in the future.

It is a bad mistake to consider English merely as a tool meant for specific purposes. It should be as a new pool of water is to a fish. There is only immersion. There is only an embracing of it and an acceptance of its promise. To master a language is to have come to the point where one not only thinks new thoughts with it, one is also able to joke in it and yes, write original poetry with it.

For Malaysian youths to regain lost ground, the issue is not whether or not the sciences and mathematics should be taught in English — that is quite beside the point. The system has to embrace the language as a fact of modern life, and adopt it in school curricula as literature.

Over the last few decades, it must have been quite a tough and expensive undertaking for a country like Malaysia to keep its young unskilled in English, given the country's colonial background and given how internationally connected the economy is to the rest of the world.

Now, English is the language of Asean, let us not forget that. Without it, we will have a hard time com-

Managing Malaysia's education crisis

The Malaysian government should look to civil society for support in strengthening the nation's education system.

Evidence can be seen in the 2014 Unesco Global Monitoring Report on teaching and learning. According to this report, there is an ongoing global education crisis that is costing governments US\$129 billion a year.

For Malaysia, which has consistently allocated a very large proportion of its national budget to education, this finding is worrying. Results from recent assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), confirm that Malaysia remains stuck at the bottom third of the international league table of schools.

Malaysia's performance in TIMSS had slipped to below the international average in mathematics as well as science by 2011. In PISA 2009 and 2012, Malaysia ranked in the bottom third of 74 participating countries.

A comparison of PISA scores suggests that the average Malaysian 15-year-old would take at least three years of extra schooling to catch up with his peers from high-performing East Asian economies such as Singapore and South Korea. Poor results, despite high government spending, indicate that return on educational investment in Malaysia is not as high as expected.

The government has responded positively to the emerging evidence by launching the Education Blueprint. Malaysia aims to move into the top third of countries in PISA and TIMSS in 15 years. But developing the right institutional framework to assess progress in learning is essential if Malaysia is to



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BY
M NIAZ ASADULLAH

overcome the ongoing educational crisis.

Assessments like PISA and TIMSS are undertaken only at certain time intervals and they assess a single group of students. In the case of TIMSS, Malaysia participates only with older students. And only a small number of schools take part in the assessment exercise.

For these reasons, knowledge of Malaysia's performance in PISA and TIMSS, while extremely useful, is not adequate to guide the national reform agenda. Overall, the factors causing low levels of student learning remain poorly understood.

The Unesco report, therefore, emphasises that national assessments of the level of learning are indispensable for informing and guiding policy to reverse the decline in student learning. Yet, there is a lack of effective mechanisms that allow policymakers and school managers in Malaysia to assess school performance and measure student achievements on a regular basis. Current mechanisms do not allow for systematic examination of progress in learning across different cohorts of students.

Every year, children throughout Malaysia participate in examinations at the end of their schooling cycle, such as primary, lower secondary and Forms Five and Six. But the public examination system is not the same as a national assessment system. It is hard to ascertain from exam pass rates whether students are attaining minimum competency in key areas of learning. Unsurprisingly, published national examination records appear to show absolute improvement in grades over time in English, mathematics and science while TIMSS and PISA data suggest the opposite.

We do not know how much a Malaysian child learns

(against what is expected) after one full year in school. The true extent and nature of the country's education crisis remains unknown. It is likely to be very severe if schools participating in PISA and TIMSS are the country's best.

In this context, Malaysia should not hesitate to learn from the experiences of other developing countries. The Unesco report highlights the case of Brazil where a national assessment system has been used creatively to inform educational policymaking and planning.

In India, the government has partnered with a national non-governmental organisation, Pratham, which publishes a very detailed Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) to help the government independently monitor progress in learning outcomes.

Pratham works in collaboration with academics in India and abroad to ensure that the data collected is analysed correctly to generate policy-relevant insights. Inspired by the Indian model, Pakistan has also introduced a similar citizen-led initiative to generate reliable evidence on the schooling and learning status of children.

According to the Unesco report, ASER's findings contributed to India's 12th five-year plan (2012-2017), helping to place emphasis on basic learning as an explicit objective of primary education, and on the need for regular learning assessments to make sure quality goals are met. Pratham has also used ASER results to influence education policy and practice at the state level. In Rajasthan, for example, ASER results have led the state government to focus on improving instruction in early grades.

Clearly, government action is not the only route

“Tying salaries and bonuses to merit, rather than annual across-the-board bonuses and fixed compensation, will make the civil service more attractive.”

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“The world’s commercial banks directly influence public debt, public policy, inflation, job creation and economic inequality.”

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municating with our Southeast Asian neighbours. And if Malaysia continues being bad in English, its citizens will not be able to express themselves as well in international contexts and certainly not as well as people from, say, India or the Philippines, do.

Another development that Malaysians should be aware of is how quickly Asians from countries with little or no connection to English are learning to speak the language. In Vietnam and Cambodia, English is favoured before any other foreign language, including French. And people there are boldly overcoming difficulties that Malaysians did not have to start with.

In Myanmar, regret is endlessly being voiced over how the country has allowed its command of English to drop so abysmally in recent decades. And for what?

China is another interesting case. After decades of political battles back and forth, what has developed is that common citizens now know that they must master Chinese alongside English. And young Chinese are learning to speak it relatively well.

Thinking that Malaysians of the future can manage well and excel internationally without their command of English being radically raised is a deceitful ambition. ■

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to an effective assessment system for informing national policy. Civil society organisations in Malaysia can also play an important role. Civil society needs to bring important issues to the government’s attention as well as get local communities to voice their demands for quality education.

This can help parents obtain valuable information about the usefulness of schooling and the quality of locally provided education. This will help the poor improve their choices when deciding on their children’s education.

At the same time, a repository of longitudinal records on students and schools should be created and made available to academics for independent and complex analysis of the relationship between learning outcomes and education inputs.

Without a reliable evidence base, social debates on education issues can neither have a meaningful policy impact nor lead to the development of a mechanism that can aid choices of poor households.

Alongside state-sponsored initiatives, the government should actively encourage wider participation in the evaluation process. Partnership between the state and local research bodies should not only complement the government’s own efforts to improve educational governance. It could also go a long way towards creating a more inclusive and sustainable approach to educational development. ■

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Europe’s misguided investment mania

The mantra in Brussels and throughout Europe nowadays is that investment holds the key to economic recovery. The linchpin of the new European Commission’s economic strategy is its recently unveiled plan to increase investment by €315 billion (RM1.37 trillion) over the next three years. But the commission’s proposal is misguided, both in terms of its emphasis on investment and its proposed financing structure.

The commission’s plan, the signature initiative of President Jean-Claude Juncker at the start of his term, comes as no surprise. With the eurozone stuck in a seemingly never-ending recession, the idea that growth-enhancing investment is crucial for a sustainable recovery has become deeply entrenched in public discourse. The underlying assumption is that more investment is always better, because it increases the capital stock and thus output.

This is not necessarily the case in Europe at the moment. European Union authorities (and many others) argue that Europe — particularly the eurozone — suffers from an “investment gap”. The smoking gun is supposedly the €400 billion annual shortfall relative to 2007.

But the comparison is misleading, because 2007 was the peak of a credit bubble that led to a lot of wasteful investment. The commission recognises this in its supporting documentation for the Juncker package, in which it argues that the pre-credit boom years should be used as the benchmark for desirable investment levels today. According to that measure, the investment gap is only half as large.

Unfortunately, even the pre-boom years are not a good guide for today’s European economy, because something fundamental has changed more quickly than is typically recognised: Europe’s demographic trends.

The eurozone’s working-age population had been growing until 2005, but it will fall from 2015 onwards. Given that productivity has not been picking up, fewer workers mean significantly lower potential growth rates. And a lower growth rate implies that less investment is needed to maintain the capital/output ratio.

If the eurozone maintained its investment rate at the level of the pre-boom years, there would soon be much more capital relative to the size of the economy. One might be tempted to say: so what? More capital is always good.

An ever-increasing capital stock relative to output, however, means ever-lower returns on capital and thus ever more non-performing loans in the banking sector over time. Given the weak state of Europe’s banking system, accumulating too much capital is not a luxury that the EU can afford.

Even setting aside the question of whether more is always better, what can the Juncker plan do to have a positive short-run impact on aggregate investment?



Euro-
nomics

BY DANIEL GROS

Academic research on the determinants of investment has generally concluded that the key variable is growth (or expectations of growth), and that interest rates play at most a secondary role. One immediate implication of this, of course, is that monetary policy is unlikely to have a strong impact on investment.

Indeed, the market signal is clear: at present, there is no shortage of funding available in most of the EU. The countries on the eurozone periphery, where credit might still be scarce, account for less than one-quarter of Europe’s economy. So a lack of funding is not the reason that investment remains weak.

The Juncker plan is supposed to unlock, with €21 billion in EU funding, projects worth 15 times as much (€315 billion). That sounds far-fetched. Europe’s banking system already has more than €1 trillion in capital. The addition of €21 billion, in the form of guarantees from the EU budget, is unlikely to have a significant impact on banks’ willingness to finance investment.

The Juncker plan targets, in particular, infrastructure projects, which are often riskier than other investments. But these risks usually are not financial; they reflect potential political and regulatory barriers at the national level. These problems cannot be solved by a guarantee from the EU budget (which in any case could not be larger than 1/15th of the value of the project).

The reason why there still is no good interconnection between the Spanish and French power grids is not a lack of financing, but the unwillingness of monopolies on both sides of the border to open their markets. Many rail and road projects are also proceeding slowly, owing to local opposition, not a lack of financing. These are the real barriers to infrastructure investment in Europe. Large European companies can easily obtain financing at near-zero interest rates.

Calling for more investment is superficially always attractive. But there are fundamental reasons to believe that the eurozone’s investment rate will remain permanently depressed. The often-invoked investment gap is mostly a result of wishful thinking, and the remaining barriers to investment have little to do with a lack of financing.

Economic performance in the US and the UK holds an important lesson for the eurozone. Both economies’ recoveries have been driven largely by a pickup in consumption on the back of stronger household balance sheets, especially in the US. The revival of investment has followed the resumption of consumption growth. If European policymakers are serious about economic recovery, they should focus on consumption, not investment. — *Project Syndicate* ■

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