

Preserve Malaysia's linguistic diversity

August 20, 2024 @ 12:19am



A multilingual generation can foster greater understanding. FILE PIC

LETTERS: Twenty years ago, the younger generation were very proficient in their ethnic or other indigenous languages.

Today, Malaysian children, regardless of ethnicity, are increasingly speaking English or code-switching to English effortlessly.

What is sad is that our children are struggling to express themselves in their ethnic languages. Some might view this as a marker of progress.

However, as a linguist, this is concerning. A shift towards anglicisation is eroding our linguistic diversity that has always been a source of pride for a multilingual nation like Malaysia.

| MORE NEWS

- Sarawak won't bow to pressure over English emphasis, says deputy minister
- Tenom native launches project to preserve Sabah's indigenous languages
- Learning sign language helps deaf be seen
- Stress on Malay but be master of languages

Anglicisation refers to the process by which the English language, culture and norms increasingly dominate other languages and cultures, leading to a decline in the use and prominence of local languages. In this context, it's the rapid spread of the English language over ethnic ones.

It is understandable that parents, realising the value of the English language, will start preparing their children for English proficiency early.

The prevalence of English in technology and social media has led to a situation where children have little to no proper exposure to their ethnic languages.

In my research, I encountered a child whose parents opted to use English at home despite it not being their first language.

With the additional influence of media, I calculated that the child's exposure to his ethnic language (Bahasa Malaysia in this case) accounted for less than 10 per cent of daily interactions.

Even that 10 per cent was incidental exposure rather than deliberate engagement. When asked how the child would acquire proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia, the parents were hoping he might "pick up" the language from "outside", or simply leaving it to the environment.

What the parents failed to realise is that the child's environment too is now very much skewed towards English.

What we are witnessing now is English monolingualism (or, as I mentioned earlier, anglicisation), where English has become so dominant that it overshadows Malaysia's ethnic languages.

If we do not address this trend, we risk seeing English becoming the primary language of the nation while all other languages gradually fade away.

This is not an exaggeration – we have an example in our neighbouring country.

Thus, I would like to offer these suggestions to preserve our linguistic diversity:

PARENTS should dedicate half an hour daily to reading with their children in Bahasa Malay-sia, Mandarin, Tamil or other ethnic languages, or simply converse in their native language.

It will not only strengthen the bond with their children, but ensure that they grow up appreciating their ethnic heritage.

Language is acquired through exposure, and that exposure must be interactive and deliberate, not left to chance.

TEACHERS can encourage students to share stories and experiences in ethnic languages. This nurtures a multilingual environment and helps students develop pride in their linguistic roots and cultural identity.

IT'S common to hear about schools organising an English Day. The same must be done for other languages. Schools may organise events that promote the use of multiple languages, which will be a true celebration of multilingualism.

FOR policymakers, I suggest that educational policies consider making the learning of languages – Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil and English – mandatory throughout schooling.

Imagine the generation we could create if students learned these languages from ages 7 to 17. Studies have shown that the more multilingual people are, the more open-minded they become.

A multilingual generation can foster greater understanding, cultural appreciation and unity in our diverse society.

This is crucial to safeguard our Malaysian identity, maintaining the linguistic diversity that defines our nation.

DR RABIAH TUL ADAWIYAH MOHAMED SALLEH

Child language researcher,
Department of English Language and Literature,
International Islamic University Malaysia

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the New Straits Times

Keywords: [News](#), [Letters](#), [Malaysia](#), [Nst](#), [English](#), [Languages](#), [Malaysia News](#), [Proficient](#), [Linguistic Diversity](#)

| RELATED ARTICLES