

# IMPROVING OURSELVES

By AP Dr Widad Othman

**H**appy New Year! May the year be better, brighter and more prosperous for you.

By now, I am sure most of you are aware that English will be the language used for teaching and learning in OUM, with the exception of the Teacher Education Division programmes, from this month onwards.

Looking back at our country's education scenario, English as a medium of instruction is nothing new. Academicians in public universities are encouraged to conduct lectures in English, although many are reluctant to do so ... at least in my former workplace!

There is a group which is very adamant about using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium for teaching and learning. The group preaches about the virtues of Bahasa Malaysia and how it symbolises nationalism. On the other extreme is a very English-speaking group which professes to speak perfect English. Then there is another group which speaks Malaysianised English, mixing English with Bahasa Malaysia.

Which group do you belong to? Personally, I think many of us are comfortable to be in the last group. I am too. Even though I spent most of my learning years in English, later during my teaching years, I had to be a chameleon, switching between English and Bahasa Malaysia. During my years teaching in a public university, I was instructed to lecture in English. Although my notes were in English, to assist students, I used both languages when teaching. Most of my students were very apprehensive upon seeing notes written in English. The very familiar "*Speaking lah kita dalam kelas ni ...*" comments would be heard during the first lecture.

Dear tutors, I am sure some of you applaud the switch from Bahasa Malaysia to English while some others are very apprehensive. You may be worried about your own ability or that of your students. If you are fluent in English, your worry will be your students, not you since you already possess the confidence to teach in English.

But for tutors lacking a good command of English, extra effort is required. I have been told that the difficulty in teaching in English does not involve the notes as you can read what have been prepared. The problem lies in giving explanations and engaging in simple conversations or small talk such as saying things like, "Let's start the

class today with ...," "Do you have any questions?" etc. I even have friends who lamented, "*Macam mana nak buat kelakar dalam kelas dalam BI? Susahlah ...*"

My dear friends, do not despair. There is no such thing as *tak boleh!* Here are some tips:

- Assess your command of the English vocabulary. Many of us already possess a substantial command of simple English words. However, the existing vocabulary must be enriched. The easiest way is to read an English newspaper every day. From the paper, pick 10 or more new words, find out what they mean and how to use them. Imagine, within 7 days, you will have learnt 70 new words!
- Start your conversations in English with simple sentences and phrases even if you have to start at the level of "You Jane, Me Tarzan" English. It is still an effort to speak English. Slowly but surely you will learn to make more phrases and simple sentences. You can make the sentences in Bahasa Malaysia and have friends who are good in English to assist you in translating them into English.
- Be confident! Do not worry or be embarrassed about your pronunciation or broken sentences. The *malu lah* attitude is the major culprit as to why many of us are unwilling to speak in English. Remember, as long as people can understand your English, you are on the right track. No one is perfect anyway.
- Use the 4Ds – This refers to the BM-English, English-BM, BM-BM and English-English dictionaries. You have the choice, just remember these 4Ds are there to lend a helping hand.

Dear tutors, I sincerely hope these tips will be of some use in conducting the coming tutorials. Anyway, just keep in mind that we are in the world of lifelong learning and we always learn something new every day of our lives.

I am glad to have been given the opportunity to share my thoughts with you in this issue of TCX. I would like to end by wishing you in advance a very happy and prosperous Chinese New Year. **TCX**

*AP Dr Widad Othman is the Dean of the Faculty of Education and Languages.*