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Get the teachers prepared first

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE education in Malaysia is again the focus of attention. Even as the government is considering whether Mathematics and Science should continue to be taught in English, the Education Minister was reported to be considering making English Literature a subject at the primary school level.

There is already much concern about how Maths and Science teachers are coping with teaching in English, and now there's another surprise for primary school teachers.

I strongly advocate the teaching of literature. I am glad that we have a literature component in the language paper at both the primary and secondary school levels. Teachers seem to be getting comfortable with the idea of teaching literary texts in the classroom.

However, we have not seen

any findings from research conducted by the Education Ministry on the implementation of the literature programmes at the primary and secondary school levels.

There has been some piecemeal research done by university academics and graduate students which seems to suggest that teachers generally feel less threatened to teach literature now.

They seem to have become comfortable teaching the prescribed texts and are preparing students based on the present examination format. I dread to think how they will react when the next cycle of texts is announced and should there be any changes in the examination format.

I am sceptical about the call to make literature a subject in the primary school curriculum. There are many complaints about our students be-

ing overburdened at school.

Do they need yet another subject? I don't think so. The crux of our concern is the students' proficiency in the English language. To help our students improve, I think we need to look at English-language teachers and English-language teaching.

Although it would be wrong to blame teachers as the cause of the poor standard of English, I believe they have to shoulder most of the blame. First, we need to consider the proficiency of English language teachers themselves.

There is no denying that we have many teachers who are competent in the English language. However, there are many teachers who need to improve their standard of English. There are teachers who have neither the competence nor the confidence to teach English.

Over the years, to meet the need for English-language teachers, we have had to lower standards and accept people into the profession who were not equipped to teach the language.

We need to work with these teachers. If we want our English-language programmes to succeed, we need teachers who can speak, read and write well in English.

There are many English-language teachers who are not trained to be English teachers. These teachers lack pedagogical skills and often have low language proficiency, too.

The effectiveness and the ability of numerous English-language teachers who have been produced through "conversion" programmes have to be researched. How effective are 1-year programmes that attempt to produce English-

language teachers? With already so many challenges with teachers that we produce in our four-year programmes, one can only imagine what these quick-fix teachers will face.

Introducing literature as a subject in primary schools, I believe, will only cause more problems than raise the standard of English among our students. Let us improve the existing literature component in the language programme.

Let us give more time to reading appropriate materials in the language classroom. More importantly, let's have teachers who are truly competent and proficient in the English language.

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