

## d: It's your c

ish or lose out in job market, i

for Prof Ghani Dr Ghazali Jamon of  
sidelong Bahasa Malaysia when he  
gave a briefing which stressed on  
English as the way forward.

Dr Ghazali drew flak when he  
highlighted how English could  
enhance the students' employment  
prospects.

Speaking in reporters after launch-  
ing the Tertiary Institutions  
Entrepreneurship Programme at ILM  
yesterday, Ghazali said that public  
institutions of higher learning had  
been instructed to increase the  
number of credit hours in English,  
starting from the undergraduates'

first year in university.

"The aim is to help students  
improve their command of English,  
especially in communication skills.

"We did not want to burden stu-  
dents by making it compulsory if  
there is no pass the English paper  
that would delay the graduation  
of some students," he said.

During the launch, he announced  
that a National Higher Education  
Entrepreneurship Council would be  
set up to boost the entrepreneurship  
spirit among undergraduates  
through research and education.

On the call for loss to resign |

# Decline or rise in English proficiency in Malaysia?

Update (Dec 8, 2011): A modified form of this blog entry was published today in the New Straits Times newspaper.

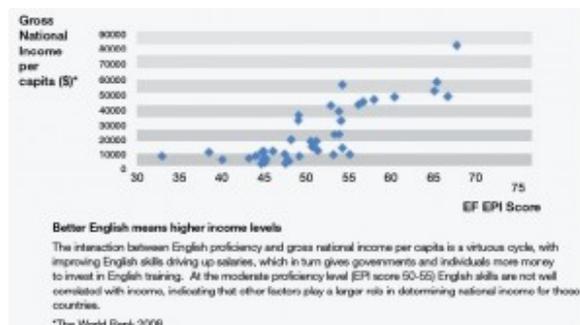
Few people would argue against the importance of English language today. It is the lingua franca in cyberspace and in international science, politics, business, and entertainment.



Standard of English proficiency in Malaysia, as evidenced by this rather famous house sign (photo from [english.com](http://www.english.com))

A study in 2011 by English First (EF) showed just how important English is to a country. This study was conducted on 44 countries (including Malaysia) where English was not their first or native language. The study found that English proficiency generally correlates (relates linearly) with a country's wealth and export-dependency. EF study suggests that when the people in a country become

increasingly more proficient in English, the wealthier the country becomes and the more the country could participate in international trade.



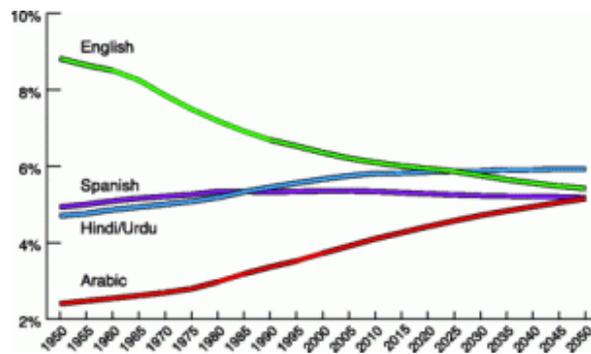
English proficiency correlates with a country's income (chart from EF report)

Surprisingly, Malaysia scored the highest in English proficiency in the Asia region. Unfortunately, Singapore could not be included in the final analysis due to the inadequate sample size from that country. Overall, Malaysia ranked ninth in English proficiency among the 44 countries!

Malaysia's high score is certainly surprising considering the much talked about decline of English proficiency among Malaysians and the issue of reverting to Malay from English language as a medium of instruction in schools. One complain about the EF study is the possibility of a large sampling error. English tests were carried out online by people who were interested in testing their English proficiency. Volunteers also tended to be younger than the average population age. Since the tests were all carried out online, I suspect this kind of tests would most probably attract more urbanites than the whole population.

Consequently, this possibility of biased representation of Malaysia's population by the urbanites may explain Malaysia's inflated high score in English.

However, I do not doubt the overall validity of EF study results. As stated earlier, English is an important global language. But back in 2004, David Graddol, in an opinion article in Science (Feb 27, 2004), delivers a startling news: English is in decline in the world. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people once believed in the indomitable embrace of English and that the entire world would eventually speak in English.



The changing percentage of the world's population speaking English (chart from sciencemag.org)

Graddol's study, however, shows that the population growth among speakers of languages other than English is increasingly 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 ten years. By 2050, it is estimated that only 5 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 predicts, Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi/Urdu, and Arabic would be equally ranked with English as the world language. Mandarin remains the native language by 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 U.S., Mandarin may likely be the new must-learn language. Together with China, countries such as Russia, Brazil, and India are expected to be in the top six largest economies in the world by 2050. In such a scenario, would English language remain as useful as today?

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

Consequently, I wonder if Malaysia is fighting a losing war in improving English proficiency among the people. Malaysia's neighboring countries, Philippines and Hong Kong, also witness an alarming decline in English proficiency. A recent official survey showed that nearly half of the 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 16-17 year olds could pass the English language exams.

In Malaysia, 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 a pariah because her friends thought it abnormal and queasy to have a Malay person speak English to another Malay.

Consequently, Malaysia’s problem with declining English proficiency is not unique. The fundamental problem in Malaysia is English would always remain a remote or foreign language, used only by the elite minorities or used only in official or international purposes. For most Malaysians, English is not an everyday language. A survey done in 2001 revealed that only less than 2 per cent (about 380,000 people) of Malaysia’s population spoke in English as their first language.

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

The current challenge for individual Malaysians is to be proficient not only in English but in several languages. Malaysia is quite unique in this case. Malaysians, made up of many races, can already speak in English, Mandarin, and Hindi - three languages identified to the major languages of the future.

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I like to end this blog entry by reporting a little survey I carried out throughout this month of November. I visited some shopping malls (some more than once) in the Klang Valley (Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur area) and took down the number of people speaking in English, Chinese, or Indian.

I like to make it clear this study of mine is in no way a scientific experiment. I was merely curious to determine the proportion of languages being spoken by urbanites in the Klang Valley. I chose shopping malls because there were enclosed areas and easier to collect my data in relative comforts than on the streets (too hot!).

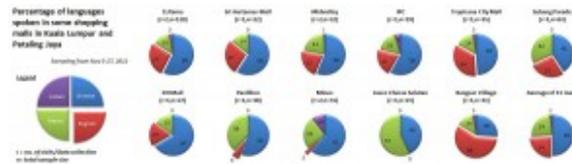
However, to reduce sources of errors in my data collection, I followed the following rules in my data collection:

1. I only counted the number of languages upon confirmation. It is tempting to assume Chinese or Malay people would be speaking in Chinese and Malay, respectively. I have to listen and confirm the language in which they are speaking.
2. I did not count people speaking in business transactions such as a customer talking to a cashier. I was interested in languages used only in conversations between families or friends.
3. I also did not count languages spoken involving any foreigners. I was interested only in Malaysians.
4. I avoided counting in places where certain races tend to aggregate. A Chinese Book Fair, for example, would attract the Chinese to the fair and taking down the languages spoken there would probably inflate the proportion of people speaking in Chinese.
5. Lastly, my data collection must be for at least one hour. This is to ensure that I cover the mall adequately.

Before I report my results, I like to make it clear that I only recorded down the language spoken by Malaysian shoppers. My results does not show their language proficiency or whether they can speak in other languages. For example, I may record a person speaking in Chinese to his friends, but this does not mean he cannot speak in English. He could well speak in English better than his Chinese (or not).

My little study assumes that a language I record is the preferred language of the people in a shopping group. Whether this assumption is true is one possible source of error. Consequently, you can take the results from this study as only a rough estimate of the proportion of languages spoken by Malaysian shoppers in the Klang Valley.

Okay, after a month of data collection, I covered 11 malls. On average, 50 per cent of Malaysia shoppers spoke in Chinese (Mandarin making up nearly 50 per cent of this total and Cantonese 47 per cent). 24 per cent of Malaysian shoppers spoke in Malay. Likewise, an equal amount spoke in English. Only 2 per cent of Malaysian shoppers spoke in Indian. In short, the majority of Malaysian shoppers spoke in Chinese and about one quarter Malaysian shoppers spoke in English.



### Proportion of languages spoken by Malaysian shoppers in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya

Nonetheless, the distribution of languages varied according to the mall. Malls, 1 Utama, Sri Hartamas, Midvalley, and IPC, showed similar proportion of languages with one another. Nearly 60 per cent of Malaysian shoppers spoke in Chinese and about one quarter to one fifth spoke in English in those four malls.

Being further away from the city center meant that malls such as Jusco Cheras Selatan and Mines had very few English-speaking Malaysian shoppers (in the case for Jusco, I did not find any English speaking shoppers). Surprisingly, however, Pavilion mall, being in the city center, had very few English-speaking shoppers too. This could be due to the small sample size (only 18), or could this be an indication of the people in the city center? From experience, my visits to other malls in the vicinity had few English-speaking shoppers too. A repeat of data collection at Pavilion is probably warranted.

The mall with the largest proportion of English-speaking shoppers is Bangsar Village. This area (Bangsar) is a well known area where wealthy and high socio-economic status people live. This is an area where a lot of expats live too. It is no surprise then to find most shoppers here speak in English. Remember that I did not include the language spoken by expats in my data collection. Unlike other malls, I recorded most Malays here speaking in English rather than in Malay.

At the end, I learn something from my own survey and gain a slightly deeper understanding on the situation of English in the world. English may be important now, but it may have to share its dominance with other languages in the near future.