

# BULLETIN

# Academia



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By: Prof Madya Ismail Hassan

## Reading, & Writing, Counting

It is a routine to drive my youngest son to school every morning at 6:30. At this hour the sun is not even up yet. His school is just five minutes away so why leave at such an ungodly hour? I really don't know but it has always been that way. He likes to be in school early and after doing the same thing repeatedly over the years, it becomes routine. I suppose it is just like everything else that I do repeatedly like brushing my teeth; after some time, it becomes routine.

When I was schooling eons ago, it was also my routine to go to school early. But back in my day leaving for school before sunrise was necessary or else I'd be late. Unlike my son, I didn't enjoy the convenience of having my father driving me to school; I had to take the public bus. Having left school decades ago, I wonder if school today is the same as it was when I learned my reading, writing, and counting.

I don't really know what and how I learned in school and I can't recall when I can read, write, and count. When I was in Standard One I did a lot of counting all the way to 100 and then counting backwards from 100 to zero. What good that exercise was is still much a mystery to me. My teachers would also frequently ask my friends and me to sit on the floor in front of the class and one by one we stood up and read words she wrote on the blackboard. Yes, the blackboard was actually black, not the green-colored ones. Those who cannot read were required to remain standing until the class session was over. Needless to say I had to stand quite a lot until it became a routine.

Singing while sitting on the floor was common too. I sang many English songs that I don't quite understand so I simply committed them to memory. Twinkle-twinkle Little Star was one of my favorites but I didn't even know what twinkle was until very much later. And we had Jack and Jill who went up the hill to fetch a pail of water and I wondered why in the world would someone be named Jack or Jill? It didn't sound Malay, or Chinese, or Indian. And why must they go up the hill to fetch a pail of water? Don't they have running water at home? There were many questions in my small mind but I never ask my bespectacled, stern-looking teacher. I simply sang every song without fully understanding its meaning. So singing without understanding became a routine as well.

I cannot remember singing any Malay songs and I don't remember learning anything in Malay except for Bahasa Melayu and Agama Islam. I went to an English school so everything was in English; even the headmistress had an English name: Mrs. A.P Richards. I never knew what the A.P. stood for but when I was in Standard 2 I came to know that she was not an English lady but an Indian. She was a huge woman (from the perspective of a small boy) and she was probably the one who instilled fear in me of all school headmasters, headmistresses, and principals everywhere. And because all through my schooling years I was repeatedly given similar stern-looking, child-eating headmasters and headmistresses, fearing them became a routine.

It was in school that I learned to obey the bell. The bell was rung on four special times every day to signal the beginning of the school day, the beginning of recess, the end of recess, and the end of the school day. The bell wasn't electric but it was like the one used by the ice-cream sellers. But it was much larger and sounded coarser than the more melodious bells of the ice-cream sellers. The bell was hung on one of the crossbeams near the school office. There was a long rope attached to the hammering mechanism that would be swung several times to strike the bell. The rope was long enough for an adult but short enough to prevent the more mischievous amongst us from trying to swing it. Needless to say, we were all conditioned by the sound of the bell and everyone knew what to do when it rang. It reminds me of Ivan Pavlov's many experiments on Classical Conditioning.

Recess was a time looked forward by everyone. We would go to the tuck shop (that's what we called



school canteens back then) to get some greasy food and a glass of lime juice. Then we just horsed around the school compound until the bell rang again. Outside the school compound hawkers sold ice creams and whatnot. We were forbidden to buy from them but the more daring kids did anyway. It wasn't at all difficult because they were just on the other side of the chain-link school fence. I, being the obedient type, never dare to buy anything. I didn't have much money to spend anyway.

I had mixed feelings about Physical Education although it was always fun to go outside. Affectionately known as PE, it was simply exercise time. Our teacher would take us outside to the badminton court and we would do some silly exercise like jumping or running on the spot or just walking in circles. I didn't quite understand the need for all those sweat-producing activities but I suppose they were to keep us healthy. Sometimes the teacher just threw in a ball and asked us to chase and kick it around without any clear objectives; well maybe she had some noble goals but to me she merely wanted us to suffer under the hot morning sun. The running around was actually fun until I had to get into class again and learn. With sweats trickling down my face and turning my shirt soaking wet, you can possibly imagine the discomfort. But I didn't complain; no one did, and classes went on until the much awaited fourth bell. The moment that bell rang everyone sprang into life and those sad and dull faces suddenly lighted up again. It was time to go home. So school life naturally became a routine.

As a pupil, I'd say I was a well-behaved one, but I was extremely ordinary. I didn't stand out and my teachers considered me average as was usually written on my report card. Behavior: Average. Academic Performance: Average. Athletic Ability: Average. Overall: Satisfactory. And so I learned that being average was satisfactory and so I remained average throughout my school years thus confirming the theory of self-fulfilling prophecy of Robert K. Merton.

I was quiet, rather timid, and shy; the type that would usually stay out of trouble. So I seldom get my school uniform dirty and that pleased my mother. I wore white "starched" shirt and black short pants with white shoes and socks. Everyone dressed that way too so I didn't really feel special or different. I didn't feel inferior or superior; and I guess everyone else was just like me. Everyone looked identical and we also did identical things, including walking to and from school. Only a few rode bicycles and even fewer came by car or bus. So walking was the thing then; we walked everywhere all the time. So eventually being ordinary became a routine.

Going to school was simply a routine activity. I was never told what to learn, nor was I concerned about my learning. But I guess I must have learned plenty because if I didn't, how is it possible that I can read, write, and count? I suppose between the bells I did learn my alphabets and numbers; also possibly learned other things through some magical efforts of my teachers.



*Ismail Hassan*

Why we are complaining so much about the school system today escapes me. We complain pupils aren't learning, teachers aren't teaching, and schools aren't performing. We complain there's too much homework, too few social interactions, and too many after school activities. We complain school bags are too heavy, discipline too light, and food at the canteen too greasy. We complain about almost everything. I suppose when we repeatedly complain, it becomes a routine too.

Back in my day our parents never complain about anything. They simply sent us to school at aged 7 and expected to see us again at 17. They never care if we have tons of homework or none at all, they never bother if our school bags were full of books or packed with rocks, and they never care if the food we consumed was full of calories or filled with vitamins. If our teachers disciplined us, we prayed our parents never know about it or else we get more spanking at home. And no matter how we hated our teachers, we respected them because we know they were the ones who taught us to read, write, and count. Without them, how could I have memorized Twinkle-twinkle, Little Star?

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star!  
How I wonder what you are,  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.*

*When the glorious sun is set,  
When the grass with dew is wet,  
Then you show your little light,  
Twinkle, twinkle all the night.*

*In the dark-blue sky you keep,  
And often through my curtains peep,  
For you never shut your eye,  
Till the sun is in the sky.*

*As your bright and tiny spark  
Guides the traveller in the dark,  
Though I know not what you are,  
Twinkle, twinkle, little star!*

I hope my son, already in school when it is still dark learns his reading, writing, and counting. I just hope his teachers will not write satisfactory in his report card even if he is indeed just average. I don't want him to grow up routinely thinking he is ordinary like me. After all, everyone is a little star "like a diamond and the sky", "as your bright and tiny spark, guide the traveller in the dark."



## SALAM PERPISAHAN BUAT TEMAN-TEMAN SEPERJUANGAN

Shamsiah Ismail

Alhamdulillah, dipanjatkan syukur ke hadrat Ilahi, kerana telah memberi saya peluang bersama-sama sahabat handai untuk mencurahkan bakti kepada anak bangsa di UiTM ini. Bermula dari ITM Jalan Othman, Petaling Jaya, ke ITM Cawangan Kelantan kemudian ke ITM/UiTM Shah Alam dan akhirnya ke UiTM Cawangan Terengganu. Perbezaan prasarana, persekitaran dan situasi tempat bertugas telah banyak memberi pengalaman bermakna buat saya.

Allhamdulillah sekali lagi, kerana semuanya meninggalkan kenangan manis dalam hidup sepanjang 25 tahun perkhidmatan, untuk saya simpan sebagai memori hingga ke akhir hayat saya. Semua kenangan-kenangan sebegini tidak akan saya perolehi lagi selepas ini.

Saya akan menamatkan perkhidmatan (persaraan pilihan) mulai 1 Okt. 2013 ini dan akan bercuti mulai 22 Sept. 2013 (Ahad) bagi menghabiskan baki cuti yang ada. Dikesempatan ini saya memohon maaf dari sahabat handai dan semua yang mengenali diri saya secara langsung atau tidak seandainya sepanjang persahabatan ini ada yang terasa hati dan terluka perasaan dan segala macam ter..... tanpa saya sedari, pohon maafkan saya. Tidak akan saya perincikan satu persatu nama kawan-kawan kerana bagi saya semua sama dan semuanya memberi seribu satu kenangan untuk saya simpan.

Akhir kata salam buat semua dan teruskan perkhidmatan kawan-kawan dengan rasa penuh syukur demi anak bangsa kita.

**TERIMA KASIH BUAT SEMUA. PANJANG UMUR KITA JUMPA LAGI.**



# Tak Cekap Mat Salleh

*Warm, pretty, friendly.* My early imaginations of Malaysia could just as easily have described Mary Poppins. But this is what I thought when I signed up two years ago to be an English teacher in Malaysia; that I would be in a warm, pretty place with friendly, simple locals who feast daily on abundant, fresh fruits. I thought I would enter classes and teach grammar. I thought everyone I encountered in school and on the street would be eager to learn the language.

Now that I have lived in Dungun for nine months I realize my preconceptions weren't all wrong. Okay, to be fair, Malaysia is more "blistering hot" than "warm." But overall, Malaysians are proud of their country and they desire to share Malaysian culture with me. Where there are English speakers, either as a result of the education system or of personal interest, they want to practice English and will enthusiastically talk about anything. But, particularly in Terengganu, not everyone is excited about the presence of a language other than Bahasa. More than once, my attempt at conversation has been met with scorn. I have been told "Tak cekap mat salleh" both by students and people on the street enough times to memorize the phrase.

Contrary to what you might think, I'm not offended by it. In a town traditionally sustained by family life and religion, I can understand why English may not be desirable. No doubt, English is a vehicle: it can lead its learners to better jobs, bigger houses, more benefits. But these perks represent a definite change from what Terengganu



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has always been: a fisherman's state brimming with kampungs, a unique dialect, and traditional food. While English can provide an escape from destitution and poverty, what is its value in a place that is simple but not hurting?

Throughout my time here, a number of young friends have earnestly told me that they don't want to leave their home state, even for better-paying jobs in KL. Similarly, many of my students profess their "full-time mothers" to be their role models (in America, stay-at-home mothers with multiple children are often seen as "oppressed"). When people have great pride in their heritage, and when they're content with their lives, it seems only right that they should greet an agent of change with reluctance.

If nothing else, living here has taught me that Malaysia does some things right. In the hyper-conservative world of Terengganu, social ethics are clean, if not tamer than in the West. Human dignity is the center of society. Even the fanciest gadgets get put down for a moment with God. While prayer cannot be mandatory in the States -and perhaps rightly so-it might not hurt us to punctuate our daily lives with reflection, secular or otherwise. As hookup culture gains momentum in America, a little modesty might do us some good. When contrasted with the Western world's love of modernization, Terengganu's deep respect for tradition looks beautiful.

Is this an elaborate excuse for my students' laziness? Is it appropriate for me, as an English teacher, to share these thoughts at all? Of course I believe that English can positively impact my students' lives. Much of Malaysia agrees: the country is currently caught in between modernization and extant rich roots, with English propelling it forward. I did not, however, anticipate to doubt the importance of my own discipline. While the power of English is undeniable, the antiquity of Terengganu is also valuable. In this state where success is defined differently than in the native English-speaking world, it is tempting to doubt that all progress is positive.



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