



Contradicttheory
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The great book divide

Malaysians are now voracious readers it seems. Yet, we cannot translate that into success on the world stage. Why not, wonders our columnist.



Seed of greatness? It's heartening to see children reading – but how do we translate a voracious reading habit into success on the world stage?

Star 23/12/12 MS3.

For a more recent example, just look at the chaos a recent book sale caused, with eager Malaysians ploughing through the books on offer, resulting in hundreds of books unceremoniously dumped in heaps around the hall (tinyurl.com/bvdwxdv).

Surely a nation that loves reading this much should be full of households with shelves brimming with books.

In fact, if it is true Malaysians read up to a dozen books a year, then a family of four should add to their shelves on the order of about 40 books a year, resulting in a collection of about 500 books after 10 and a bit

from Malay to other languages.

I believe there is a divide in the country between those who buy and keep books in the home as a resource for all in it, and those who understand the value of books but are unable to build up a collection. Either they cannot afford it – or, dare I say it, there are not enough books on the market they think are worth buying.

I believe this divide is drawn sharply between families fluent in English and those that are not.

And I believe this translates into a divide in education, so that the few fortunate enough to have access to “many resources” are above average performers on the world stage, while the others get left behind. Those that jump the gap are the lucky ones; the others are left behind.

The solution for this is not straightforward. Even the promise of technology and the rising number of e-book readers are not the panacea they first seem. For example, although it is convenient to carry and access for an individual, e-books are not easily shared between people, nor can they conveniently grab the eye as you walk past the bookshelf, catching attention and rewarding curiosity.

Data for Malaysia are much harder to come by (as always), but what scraps we get seem to indicate that there is much work left to be done. How else can we explain how a nation with seemingly voracious reading habits cannot translate it into success on the world stage?

of English proficiency (a credit of C6) in the 1119 paper (tinyurl.com/bpgae6h).

In fact, if you're only fluent in Malay, the number of books easily available to you is drastically reduced. There are significant numbers of original works in the form of teenage novellas, political studies and religious texts, but translations of other works are not easy to come by.

Even the website for Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia (Institute for Translation and Malaysian Books) only has about 600 books, and some of them are translations

■ *Logic is the antithesis of emotion but mathematician-turned-scriptwriter Dzofof Azmi's theory is that people need both to make sense of life's vagaries and contradictions.*

Sikora, J., Treiman, D.J., 2010, *Family Scholarly Culture And Educational Success: Evidence From 27 Nations, Research In Social Stratification And Mobility*, 28(2), 171-197; tinyurl.com/ccnderu.)

Specifically, the authors write that "Growing up in a home with 500 books would propel a child 3.2 years further in education, on average, than would growing up in an otherwise similar home with few or no books".

So the question that needs to be asked next is whether Malaysia has a reading culture? Are Malaysian homes filled to the brim with books, treasure troves of knowledge waiting to be perused by eager young minds?

The Ministry of Higher Education has stated that a study in 2010 showed that Malaysians read about a book a month on average (tinyurl.com/bu8xbhm), and the National Library sets the number between eight and 12 a year (tinyurl.com/btzbloh).

If this number is correct, then it is very high, comparable to those in developed nations. For example, those in United States and Britain read between six and 12 books a year (tinyurl.com/c9hh67v and tinyurl.com/cftmfnf).

tion of about 500 books after 12 and a bit years.

And yet, the TIMSS study does not reflect this. It is not clear why so few households can meet the criteria of having "many resources". Perhaps the TIMSS sample was flawed. Perhaps the study the Ministry of Higher Education was referring to had a different definition of "book".

I think I may have an idea. Fewer than an estimated 10% of the books on offer at that book sale were in Bahasa Malaysia. Already that should indicate to you which segment of the population would be going to that particular event.

There are significant numbers of Malaysians who are not fluent in English, as highlighted at a recent forum on English Proficiency organised by *The Star*. The *Malaysian Economic Monitor* published by the World Bank states that nearly half of Malaysian employers surveyed complained about poor English proficiency. Unsurprising, given one in four of those taking the SPM fail English – a number suspiciously close to the number of those who have "few resources".

Even among those who pass the SPM, two-thirds of them failed to meet the basics