

Sign language everyone can share

Success of BIM hinges on skilled teachers

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PETALING JAYA: Teaching Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) in schools will ensure better inclusivity, but what is more important is having the right people for the job.

Only those who understand BIM and possess the skills and knowledge are able to teach the language, says Mohamad Sazali Shaari, the executive director of Malaysian Federation of the Deaf.

Mohamad Sazali feels that only those who are competent and were capable of understanding BIM could teach the language.

He added that only deaf people were allowed to teach the language, according to the World Federation of the Deaf.

"BIM is a language of its own with proper syntax and structures," he said, adding that one would need to have a decent command and understanding of the language in order to teach.

The government, Mohamad

Sazali said, should look into preparing teachers and school managements to be a part of the effort.

He said his organisation was willing to work with the Education Ministry.

"We welcome the effort by the government to promote sign language and allow us to be integrated into society where everyone can interact without barriers."

National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) secretary-general Fouzi Singon said the initiative was a meaningful step towards recognising persons with disabilities, particularly the community which uses sign language.

"The ministry's intention is clear, which is to nurture a future generation that is not only able to communicate, but also one which demonstrates empathy and appreciation for diversity within society.

"As the demand for learning sign language grows, it will naturally lead to the creation of structured and professional positions

for such teachers. This is a positive development for the national education ecosystem."

However, he said the implementation must be carried out prudently, without any coercion or emotional pressure on teachers.

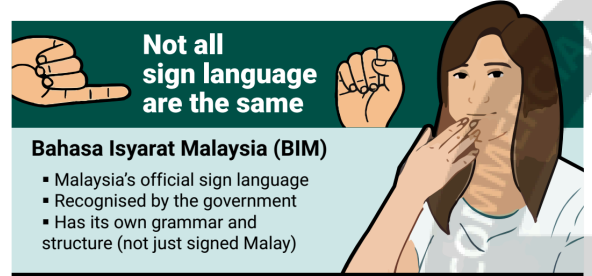
He said the approach to cultivating familiarity with sign language should be similar to teaching basic English that enables communication with foreigners.

"This will ensure sign language users do not feel awkward or hesitant to interact, but instead feel accepted and included.

"While this effort will take time, it is crucial that we begin now in order to build a more inclusive and compassionate future."

Deputy Education Minister Wong Kah Woh told the Dewan Negara on March 9 that students would learn BIM as an additional language under the 2027 school curriculum.

Wong said this would strengthen inclusive practices and awareness among children about per-



Not all sign language are the same

Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM)

- Malaysia's official sign language
- Recognised by the government
- Has its own grammar and structure (not just signed Malay)

Why not everyone uses BIM

- Different education backgrounds**
 - Some learned home signs or informal gestures
 - Some were not exposed to formal sign language
- Different systems in schools**
 - Some were taught Manually Coded Malay (KTBM) instead of BIM
 - KTBM follows spoken Malay structure, unlike BIM
- Family communication styles**
 - Some rely on lip-reading, writing, or gestures
 - Not all families use or know BIM
- Language exposure**
 - Some learn other sign languages (e.g. international systems), especially those exposed through media or NGOs

Common Misconception

X "All deaf people understand the same sign language"

Fact: Sign languages differ by country, education, and exposure

Source: Various TheStargraphics

sons with disabilities. The initiative complements the efforts of the ministry since 2011 in providing the Communicative

Sign Language subject and Basic Education for Individuals with Visual Impairment in primary schools.

Hand gestures convey meaning, not just words

PETALING JAYA: Tan Lee Bee is someone everyone sees but no one hears.

She is a household name, gracing our television screens during prime time news with her rendition of the day's stories in sign language.

But she is more than a news reader. She has dedicated decades of her life teaching sign language to the deaf.

The 65-year-old has taught at schools, hospitals and even interpreted religious sermons at houses of worship. She was also the first court sign language interpreter.

Tan learned the language to be able to communicate with her sister who is deaf.

To her, the Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) belongs to the deaf community, and rightfully, they should be the one teaching the language.

BIM, she says, is not something that can simply be taught in classrooms. While BIM has similarities to the American sign language, it is also very localised.

"BIM is not sentences. Suppose you want to ask: 'what is your name?'. You don't sign, what is your name? You sign, name you, you know, that's all.

"Or awak sudah makan (have you eaten) becomes makan sudah," she explains while demonstrating the use of BIM.

"I may be saying you're beautiful, but my facial expression doesn't show that you're beautiful. That means you're not beautiful (to them).

"It is not only the sign, it has to come together with facial expression and body language."



Speaking volumes: Participants at a workshop in this file photo learning sign language at the Johor Baru Tunku Mahkota Ismail Youth Centre. (Inset) Tan has dedicated decades teaching and interpreting sign language.

The language also involves acting and lip reading.

She explains that she would act out scenes to explain a word.

For example, the word pulih (heal) and pemulihan (rehabilitation) would require a sequential explanation to put the word into context.

Tan says it is extremely important to integrate with the community to be accepted by them.

"You have to mix with the deaf. It takes many years to be able to

master the BIM, not one year. I have been working with the deaf for 46 years.

"The deaf community throughout the world have the same culture. It doesn't matter if they are Africans, Arabs, Chinese. They will not accept any normal people to come into their community unless you can sign like them, behave like them."

Tan explained that education is a challenge for many who are born deaf and whose command

of common languages is not strong. Hence, it requires specific methods to explain words to them.

Despite spending decades teaching sign language, Tan feels she has yet to reach 100% when it comes to mastering the language.

Asked to comment on the government's plans to introduce BIM as part of the school curriculum, she says it is a good idea but the government needs to think it through.

"Do you have enough manpower to do it? Secondly, are teachers competent enough to teach?" she said.

"You need to have the orientation, the hand shape, the movement. Once the orientation is wrong, the whole sign is wrong. The meaning changes.

"The hand shape also has to be correct," she says, adding that it will be better if the teachers teaching BIM are from the community.