

English Lessons

Donald Frazier Contributor

Eastern Exposure. Asian business, for the rest of the world.

Follow

Jun 20, 2012, 05:57pm EDT

Updated Aug 15, 2013, 02:44pm EDT

This article is more than 10 years old.



This story appears on the cover of *Forbes Asia*, July 2012 issue.

Why Vincent Tan stepped down from the corporate suite, and his focus on a critical mission: to help Malaysians speak the language of the global economy.

It was near freezing in Chicago, much colder than any monsoon he had ever felt. A stiff breeze off the Great Lakes worked its way through his new coat. But the cocky young businessman forged ahead. He needed to close a deal with one of the world’s biggest companies, and barging in on them by surprise might work.

It turns out Tan didn’t have to worry. **McDonald’s** loved him. Later on, so did **Wendy’s**, **Papa John’s Pizza**, **7-Eleven**, **Krispy Kreme**, **Starbucks** and other global chains, which laid the foundation for a property, gambling and retail empire that has made him one of the richest men in Malaysia. On that day in 1980 he thanked his confidence, his ability and his raw nerve. But he especially thanked his mastery of the English language.

In February Tan stepped back from an active role at his **Berjaya Group** with a title of non-executive chairman, a fortune of \$1.2 billion and time to spend on new pursuits. Now he’s taking on one of the most ambitious, far-reaching projects of his life: to make sure that more young Malaysians speak far better English than they do today.

It’s all part of a high-profile announcement he made early last year that he would donate half his wealth to charity. This year on his birthday he turned over Berjaya’s reins to his son Robin and said he would now devote himself to philanthropy, taking on this task while a still-young 60.

A prolific donor over the past 20 years, Tan could have chosen any number of causes. But now, meeting with a reporter high above his Berjaya Times Square indoor theme park in Kuala Lumpur, he leads off with the one that’s most important to him. “English is critical to our economy and our people,” he says. “It’s become bigger than just a few nations. It’s the language of the global economy.

“We have to make sure our young people are able to take their place in this new world. And that requires fluency in English.”

Everyone from government ministers to longtime expats agrees: The use of English, once the pride of this former British colony, has badly deteriorated. It appears to be the only country in the Commonwealth where English usage has declined, to judge by a check of various members. And the economy has suffered from it: “University graduates can’t survive a job interview, so multinationals are leery of doing business here,” says Wong Chun-Wai, editor of English-language newspaper **The Star**. Tan, he says, is just about the only business leader to speak out.

Malaysia’s deputy minister of education, **Saifuddin Abdullah**, is also doing so. “We launched a program in 2003 to teach mathematics and science in all 10,000 schools nationwide, using English,” he says. “But because half the teachers were not able to teach well in English, the program was scrapped in 2009.” The lack of English has broad consequences: “Among senior Malaysian diplomats, former and current, there is worry that we are lagging behind in international lobbying forums because our diplomats tend to shy away from the interactions due to weakness in English,” he says.

Advancing the use of English is only one of many projects Tan champions, often through his **Better Malaysia Foundation**. They include schools for the disadvantaged; medical research; senior citizen centers; public clinics; sports teams; organ transplants; vocational training; stroke rehabilitation; meals for shut-ins; relief for victims of famine, flood, earthquakes and war; and celebrations of Ramadan, Chinese New Year and Deepavali. Sometimes he makes on-the-spot donations to people who just write him on their own because they have a dream.

Like many benefactors, Tan also seeks out special causes that might build the society he envisions from the ground up. A school for stateless children teaches confidence and social skills as well as academics (“It’s what they will need to make their way in the world”). An entirely Malaysian theater troupe brings Chinese musical theater to schools and out-of-the-way towns (“It’s the arts that open our minds”). A lavishly produced version of the classic Princess Wen Cheng has gone overseas and been met with acclaim in Taipei and Beijing and will be in Xian later this month.

But it’s the language initiative that has propelled Tan onto the front lines of a long-simmering culture war. Dissatisfaction with the level of English spoken in Malaysia has come to a boil, and every day a newspaper headline spotlights another aspect of the problem. Well-to-do parents enroll their children in costly international schools—mostly clustered around Kuala Lumpur—to learn English, making up more than 40% of their enrollment. Will this increase social inequality? Students in rural areas are more likely to fail when taught in English—how will they catch up?

It’s not just business and professional jobs that require English, says Tan. Much of the information people need for work in all kinds of jobs these days originates in English, and he believes that the long-term solution lies in educating the least likely to learn it on their own.

He learned this the hard way, running restaurants, hotels and resorts whose workers often spoke little English but needed to read instructional manuals and communicate with guests and co-workers from all over the world. Productivity suffered, he says, as managers initially tried to teach remedial English—but soon gave up and started hiring foreigners instead.

English was an official language until 1971 but standards started sliding, Tan and others say, as soon as Malaysia removed English as the language of instruction in public schools in 1978. A generation of teachers did not learn it, but the extent of the problem didn’t become clear until the last few years, when recent graduates entered the marketplace. “How can you expect people to learn English properly,” he says, “when not even their teachers can speak it?”

Complicating this, national policies give preference to hiring Malays for public-sector jobs over Indians and Chinese, who are far more likely to speak fluent English and predominate in the business community. For ethnic Malays, or **bumiputra**, government employment became a safe haven for those who could not compete in English; Malaysia now has the highest number of government workers relative to its population among major Asian countries, says the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development**.

So far Tan’s campaign has taken two forms. He funds the operations of an innovative immersion program, schools where instruction and everything else is conducted in English. The **SOLS 24x7** schools, named after the founders’ Science of Life method of teaching, are in community centers in outlying areas, including one in Borneo. They have graduated 800 students since 2007; the vast majority did not speak any English when they enrolled.

And his campaign is trying to recruit others. The outspoken Tan may be the most prominent businessman in the country besides **Tony Fernandes**, founder of AirAsia, so he commands a big bullhorn. According to the people around him, he uses it on his peers in all sorts of business and social situations, demanding to know how they can tolerate losing ground to other Asian countries.

They may be listening. “Malaysia has a lot of hidden strengths,” says Dash Dhakshinamoorthy, head of **Startup Malaysia**. “We have a good intellectual property climate, political stability and an attractive cost structure. The English issue is just holding us back, and it doesn’t need to be.”

Tan will not be a full-time philanthropist—he still has outside businesses to oversee, including his Cardiff, Wales **Premier League** football team. Last year his donations totaled at least \$22 million, including ones made through his private companies, but much of his charity is undocumented. Now he’s building up his Better Malaysia Foundation, hiring staff and appointing a board.

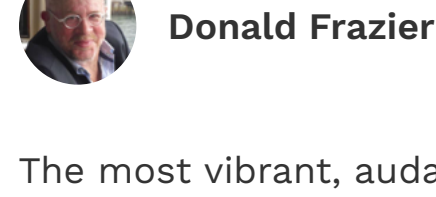
He had said last year that he would sign on to the **Giving Pledge**, a campaign led by billionaires **Warren Buffett** and **Bill Gates** calling on rich people to promise to give most of their wealth to charity. But he hasn’t formally taken the pledge, and now says he doesn’t plan to. Noting that the pledge was originally aimed at Americans, he was hoping to kick off a similar program in Malaysia but found few takers. If he does end up signing the Buffett/Gates pledge, he would be the first person in Asia to do so. “It’s something I don’t need to formalize,” he says. “I’ve always been approachable.”

Samantha Tan would agree. A 27-year-old actress studying in England last year, Tan (no relation) had become the first Malaysian accepted into an acting program taught by New York’s prestigious **Actors’ Studio Drama School**. “It was a total shot in the dark,” she says of her decision to contact Tan. “I just wrote a letter—nothing complicated. I just told the truth.”

Her plea for help in paying the school’s tuition struck a chord. A lifelong fan of the theater, Vincent Tan feels that acting could help Malaysians understand the expressive capacity of the English language and use it more freely. His reply was brief: “Tell us how you plan to contribute.”

She told him her plans to continue her training until she knows enough about acting and her own abilities, and then find a way to give back to Malaysia. “That seems to be all they need to know for now,” she says.

Click here for the full list of Asia's Heroes of Philanthropy



Follow

The most vibrant, audacious markets in the world are in East Asia; Eastern Exposure takes a new look at what they’re doing... **Read More**