

The education of educationist Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad

'I loved English'

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Former education director-general (1985-1991) Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad reminisces about his primary school days and secondary education at Malacca High School.

Credited with transforming the country's Cambridge education system into

a local one, Abdul Rahman also directed the most broad-based review of Malaysia's entire education system which led to major changes.

An advocate of the importance of the English language, he introduced the national-level Tan Sri Datuk Wira Abdul

Rahman Arshad Debate Cup among secondary school students in the 1980s, now a prestigious annual event.

The 69-year-old, who still wears many hats, was made University College Sedaya International chancellor in February this year.



A LIFE-CHANGING event occurred when I was in Standard Four in a Malay school in Masjid Tanah, Malacca.

The Inspector of Schools, an Englishman, visited us and asked who amongst us wanted to go to an English school.

Being simple village children, we were silent because we were dumbfounded that an Englishman was asking us such a question.

When he left, a teacher took it upon himself to select pupils from "well-to-do" families, who were to undergo a written test to get into an English school. Being the youngest of four children of rubber tappers, I was left out. Undaunted, I went to see the headmaster to ask him if I could sit for the test.

When I walked home that day with my mother and told her the good news, she cried, asking me

where she and my father were to find the money to support me.

I told her that I merely wanted to experience the satisfaction of sitting for the test.

I did and emerged with the third highest score in the state, winning a scholarship to study at Malacca High School.

Then, another memorable event took place — successful candidates in that test were asked to sit for another examination on English, Malay and maths — the top-scorer would go to the elite Malay College Kuala Kangsar.

I tied with another boy for the top place, and we tied again when the both of us sat for another round of tests.

For a third try, the examiners decided to toss a coin — I chose heads and lost the chance to study in MCKK.

But I'm glad I lost because at Malacca High School, I gained a cosmopolitan outlook on life, and learnt and loved English. Once I learnt to communicate in the language, I found I could bluff my way through things!

Marvellous teachers were also a hallmark of the school, except for one or two who were the reason for my dislike of certain subjects — history, for example — till today.

I was mediocre in sport but was active in academic clubs such as the English and Malay debating societies, and was also captain of the hostel I boarded at.

I had many happy times at Malacca High School with my closest friends who were an Indian and two Chinese — we were like brothers and still are.

This is a fortnightly column.