Reading can boost students’ English

I have just read William Dyson’s A Little History of Science. Each of its 40 short chapters highlights an ancient or modern scientific discovery or theory and relates surprising and interesting stories of the scientists behind the discovery or theory. The author said: “With delightful illustrations and accessible style, this is a volume for young and old to treasure together.”

The contents of the book and its author’s commendation prompt me to reflect on the reading habit or engagement of our secondary and pre-university students.

How many of our students would read such books? It’s a common experience that if we walk into local bookshops, more so those outside of the Klang Valley, we will be met with volumes and volumes of examination revision books, past years’ examination questions and answers’ books, examination forecast papers and short and comprehensive notebooks.

These are the “books” most of our students “read and treasure”.

Some top students even make sure that they do not miss out on latest editions, from established publishers, of every examination syllabus’ study tablo.

Parents encourage their children and are prepared to spend.

Why waste time reading stuff that will neither appear in examinations nor help in scoring?

Studying to score in examinations is not the same as learning to acquire knowledge.

It is the latter that carries the true meaning of education.

How many of our students and teachers appreciate and practise an integral approach to learning? Put it simply and in the present context, it is to understand that there is history (arts) in science and science in history (arts).

The great ancient “scientists” were, in fact, highly-esteemed philosophers, thinkers, nature lovers, problem solvers, experimenters and investigators who laboured hard and long hours in laboratories in their search for knowledge frontiers.

Many were respected equally for their literary competency as well as their investigative prowess. They were the true scholars.

The opinion that a full-fledged pure science student need not have to know history (arts) is, therefore, ill-founded. The same can be said of the belief that full-fledged arts students need not have to dabble in the sciences.

Our secondary-school curriculum should be of a broader base right to Form Five rather than being streamlined into Science and Arts as early as in Form Four.

To build a knowledge society, we need to have a citizenry with an all-round education steeped in the arts and sciences.

How many secondary and pre-university students can comfortably read this book, given their weakening grasp of the English language?

Thus, the author desires that his book be accessible to the young and old.

And, he may be referring mainly to his United Kingdom and other foreign English-speaking students and their populace.

However, these secondary students will be the ones our secondary and pre-university students meet if they attend an overseas English-medium university later.

They need to be prepared now so that they can arrive at a level-playing field when they meet their foreign peers.

In addition, our colonial past makes our present links strongest with those parts of the world where STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects are taught in English.

Our students in schools and pre-universities must be proficient in English.

We must spare no effort to improve their English proficiency, encouraging them to read aptly and on a wide range of subjects in a good first stop.

Liong Kam Chong, Seremban, Negri Sembilan

Reading helps to improve one’s grasp of language.