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English (News Analysis)

CABINET MAKES LANDMARK DECISION ON ENGLISH

By AZMAN UJANG

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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 28 (Bernama) -- If there's any good news amid all the grim reports about the disastrous collapse of a condominium, highways and floods which hit the country in the past weeks, it's the announcement yesterday that the teaching of technical subjects in universities will switch from Bahasa Malaysia to English as soon as possible.

The Cabinet decision announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is nothing short of a landmark, if not the most important change of policy to have emerged for a long time.

Bringing back English to teach subjects like engineering, medicine and science has been a contentious issue in Malaysia which gradually switched to the national language as the medium of instruction under the National Education Policy. The switch was complete in 1980 when Malay became the medium of instruction up to the university level.

One of the most obvious effects of the policy of phasing out English as the medium of instruction from 1971 was the radical drop in the standard of English among Malaysian students.

This has become a national concern for so many years but all steps to arrest the decline do not appear to be as successful as desired. This is mainly due to English being made just a subject in the school system and one which is not compulsory for students to pass in order to pass their examinations, as was the case in the previous system.--more

▼28/12/16-38MST

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English 2 Kuala Lumpur (News Analysis).

Explaining the rationale of the move Dr Mahathir said: " We cannot let the efficiency and capability of our people to be lower than those in other countries." The use of English to teach technical subjects is inevitable if Malaysia is to remain competitive.

One of the key problems in the present system is that while lectures and tutorials in universities are in Malay, most of the reference books used are in English.

Thus a poor command of English will also place students at a great disadvantage in acquiring knowledge in technical subjects.

Added to this is the equally acute problem of lack of expertise to translate technical books into Malay. It is therefore much more convenient and pragmatic to master English.

The translation aspect is one thing, but even if there are enough translators, those acquiring knowledge through translated books would always be at a disadvantage because the process of translation is time-consuming.--more

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English 3 Kuala Lumpur (News Analysis)

Apart from the practical and pragmatic reason for switching back to English for the teaching of technical subjects, it also makes sense to use English for subjects related to business because English is by far the most important language in the business world.

Even the Japanese who are always very proud of their own language are now learning and mastering English to get going in the highly competitive corporate world.

"Even advanced countries like Japan are feeling the disadvantage of not mastering English," former University of Malaya Vice-Chancellor Dr Syed Hussein Alatas told Bernama today in praising the Cabinet decision.

"In fact English is no more the language of the English but also the language of the Muslim world as well," he said.

For the increasingly competitive job market created by Malaysia's economic boom, English is the factor that gives one job-seeker an edge over another. In other words, the job seeker with a command of English in Malaysia stands a better chance of landing the job compared with the one who does not.--more

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English 4 Kuala Lumpur (News Analysis)

This is why many graduates who do not master the language are still jobless. It is not a question of unemployed graduates but unemployable graduates.

The unfortunate thing about any efforts by the the country's education planners to give English greater emphasis over the years is that it often ends up as a political issue.

Those who would question such a move would usually harp on English being a colonial language and would raise the issue of national identity and sovereignty. This is unfortunate because in such a debate and rhetoric, the question of English as an international language and as an important tool to acquire knowledge is often downplayed and sometimes, totally ignored.

Anyone of the 30,000 or so Malaysian students who are studying abroad can also testify that a poor command in English is a big handicap. Millions upon millions have been spent just to enable them to brush up the language before they are sent overseas.

The rate of failures is also high among Malaysian students who do not master the language in foreign universities.--more

▼28/12/17-08MST

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English 5 Kuala Lumpur (News Analysis)

A survey conducted among Malaysian students in the United States a few years ago showed that over 90 percent of them were studying in universities ranked from No.26 downwards. Only hardly a small number were accepted into the elite universities.

The Cabinet decision is also to be highly lauded as current moves by the government to reform the education system with a view to upgrading the quality of education would not get far if English continues to be neglected.

Bumiputera students, particularly the Malays, are generally weaker in English compared to the non-Malays who seem to have a natural liking to study English and have a better command of the language although they go through the same national education system as do the Malays.

If they do not want to continue to be at a disadvantage, Malay students should pull up their socks and erase their generally shy attitude towards speaking English, to begin with.

The use of English in Malaysia should also be depoliticised if the country is to achieve the high standards required to become an industrialised nation by the year 2020.--more

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(CORRECTED REPETITION)

English 6 (last) Kuala Lumpur (News Analysis)

The Cabinet has taken a bold decision which will go a long way towards putting quality and excellence back into the education system.

There has been too much talk of Malaysian universities now producing mediocre graduates.

The question of the national language being downgraded as a result of this move does not arise whatsoever.

As Dr Mahathir puts it: "Once we have become a successful race, our language will gain respect and become successful too." -- Bernama

▼28/12/18-13MST