

20/09/1999

Mastering English is crucial in the age of technology

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EVERY Malaysian who subscribes to reason and logic will share the view of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that learning the English language should not be made an issue when it is used to ensure the nation's development.

After chairing a dialogue with students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia recently, the Prime Minister said learning English does not make one less nationalistic.

On the contrary it could reinforce the spirit of nationalism.

Dr Mahathir's frank comments on English should be accepted by all Malaysians who want the nation to progress.

It should no longer be regarded as the language of the English people but as a universal language which it is to our advantage to know and master.

It is essential for the Government to adopt an open-minded approach towards any language which can contribute to Malaysia's progress while remaining firm on Bahasa Malaysia's position as the national language.

However, we must also accept that in this technological age, knowledge of one language is insufficient.

We learn and use English as it is an international language for science and technology, business and commerce.

We should strive to be bilingual or even multi-lingual now that most of us, particularly the younger generation, have mastered Bahasa Malaysia.

Malaysians may lose out in information and technology in the new millennium if they are not proficient in English.

This is because most computer software in the market is in English. Proficiency in the language is necessary not only to achieve the objectives of Vision 2020 but also to fulfil the aim of becoming a regional centre for education.

Special adviser to the Prime Minister Tan Sri Razali Ismail once said: "English must not be feared if you want to be in the thick of things rather than stuck on the fringe.

"At the beginning, this fear of English subsuming the national language could have been justified, but not after 40 years of independence."

I subscribe to Razali's views for the ability to learn and master English or Mandarin should be seen as a progressive move to improve our knowledge and expertise.

The fear of the English language, which many still regard as a legacy of British colonialism, is clearly misplaced.

More needs to be done to convince parents and students, particularly those in the rural areas, about the importance of learning the language.

The Government, I believe, has realised that many rural students, even university undergraduates, are deficient in English.

The use of English, its teaching and learning must be viewed from a macro level and in the local context, it should be taught and learnt for its utilitarian purpose.

We must ensure our schools, colleges and universities play a more active role in the learning and mastery of English.

English is also a vital tool in foreign affairs. Young diplomats must make an effort to master the language to be effective in negotiating treaties or agreements.

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