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Suhaimi-English (Interview)

MAKE THE MASTERING OF ENGLISH A NATIONAL AGENDA, SAYS GPMS

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 22 (Bernama) -- The 400,000-strong Federation of Peninsular Malaysia Malay Students (GPMS), the oldest such organisation in the country, wants the mastering of the English language among students be made a national agenda.

To achieve this, its President Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim reiterated the GPMS' call for the revival of English-medium schools from the pre-school level to provide a strong foundation for students to master the language.

Suhaimi said what is needed at present is the political will from the national leadership and the people to correct what he calls a "mistake of history."

In an interview specifically on the English language with Bernama here, he said the mistake of history had caused the national education system to fail to provide appropriate opportunities to students to master a language that is a language of knowledge particularly in the field of business and information technology at global level.

He urged all groups to adopt a rational and not an emotional attitude and not blindly label any effort to enhance the use of English in the country as unpatriotic and non-nationalistic.

He said he had travelled all over the country and met students and parents who were generally disappointed with the present situation. English even though so vital as a language of knowledge has been sidelined by the education system because the country does not have enough English language teachers, particularly in the rural areas.

Apart from students, the 52-year-old GPMS membership also includes teachers, lecturers and youths from various professions.

"As most of the Malay students are from the rural areas, a large number of them is weak in English. This situation should be corrected and not just be made into an Education Ministry effort but a national agenda," said Suhaimi who in the interview expressed frank, bold and firm views.

"If this is not done earnestly from now on, I very much fear that Malaysia now led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will not probably become a country of excellence at the global level in the future," he said.

Suhaimi said the excellence of Dr Mahathir himself as a recognised statesman, is a strong proof of the importance of English.

"Dr Mahathir has been very eloquent at international forums with his constructive and sharp views. Can he do this if he is weak in English?"

"However by mastering English, is Dr Mahathir less patriotic, less nationalistic or less Malay. Certainly not," said Suhaimi.

The country need not again start a debate on the importance of English but should mobilise all efforts to correct the weakness in the present education system "which does not teach the language properly."

Following is the text of the interview:

Quesiton: A recent GPMS survey showed that the majority of respondents wanted English-medium schools to be revived in this country. Can you explain this?.

Answer: The survey did not include a random opinion poll which clearly showed a general awareness of the importance of English. I undertook a nationwide programme to meet parents, school principals, teachers and students who frequently complained about the shortage of English language teachers in the rural areas.

It is public knowledge that students in the rural areas have been at the losing end because of the problem of English language teachers. From

this it can be seen that English has indeed become a matter of concern to them, become a priority among the people particularly parents in the rural areas, who want their children to master English.

I will be bold enough to guarantee that if we hold a national referendum, all the parents will want their children to master English. Based on this awareness, the GPMS is putting across this to the public and also to the Education Ministry and it is now up to the ministry to take the necessary measures to meet the public demand.

Q: Can this be done only by the ministry or be made a national agenda?

A: Yes, this is not just up to the ministry but should be made a national agenda for the entire world is waking up to this reality. You just name the country, they are doing the same. This should be a national agenda and should be viewed as an important agenda. This is a question about the future of Malaysians. There are two sides to this, the first is the question of language and the second the question of the Malaysian race.

If we look at the question of language, then we have to ask if it can guarantee a strong race.....its present scenario...we have to see whether our language has reached the stage where it can become a language of technology, a language of knowledge and a language at international level.

Q: In this matter, people always talk about Japan which has become so developed using its own language. What is your view?

A: We cannot compare with Japan which did not embrace the English language yet they have succeeded. The Japanese are advanced in technology, the economy, science and in all fields. That is Japan and it is because of this the international community is beginning to learn Japanese for they have proved that they are strong and advanced. But at present, we still fail to develop Bahasa Malaysia as a language of knowledge, even as a language of knowledge it is only used in this country -- this is a reality we have to accept.

Even in our country, there are two mainstream views. In the private sector the use of English is quite high compared to the public sector. This is the same in the public institutions of higher learning (IPTA) and the private institutions of higher learning (IPTS). In the IPTA, Bahasa Malaysia is used fully while in the IPTS, English is used. The majority in the IPTS are non-Malays and in the IPTA the majority are Malay students. The private sector still gives priority to students' ability or capacity in English. Hence in this present situation, competition is tight. Mastering English is a bonus, an additional credit to those seeking jobs. Certainly the private sector will be more inclined to accept graduates from the IPTS. This is realistic because they can communicate in English.

Q: What is the situation like with the mushrooming of the public institutions of higher learning in the country?

A: Now with some 11 public institutions of higher learning nation-wide with an intake of 60,000 annually, do we just focus on on the public sector, do graduates from these institutions hope only to get jobs in the public sector?. Naturally they don't have a choice but to also seek employment in the private sector. At the private universities they on their part compete with thousands of students who are already exposed to English. I don't deny that public universities do teach English but because the students are not as good in the language as in the private universities, this poses a new challenge to those in the public unversities, of course this is new challenge to the government, that is the quality of students at private universities is better than at public universities.

The fact is that students enrolling into the public universities are the cream from the schools. But it is not realisitc to expct them to hope

only for the public sector to provide jobs.

I also don't deny that there are students in public universities who are able to master English, but the number is small, because the students know how to read English books, understand another person who speaks English but when it comes to speaking the language themselves, they can't because they are not trained to do so at the public universities.

Compared with students at private universities, not only they understand but because they are trained to communicate in the language by through interaction with non-Malay students and non-Malay lecturers from overseas. They are exposed at the early stage. What I said earlier does not mean that we take drastic measures, I don't mean we set up English-stream schools without taking into account the preparations in terms of teachers, infrastructure and other facilities. We cannot say we are looking backwards.

Q: There are people who say that by taking this step, it as if we don't understand our history.

A: Actually, I say we should learn from history. We should take what is good from history. If not, what's the point of learning history. It is because we understand history that we know English is important, and we can take Dr Mahathir as an example.

Dr Mahathir started learning English from the early stage and went to the university in Singapore. Is he weak in Bahasa Malaysia, no. Is he less patriotic or less nationalistic. He is strong in Bahasa Malaysia, he has strong Malay feelings. So are some other leaders who studied abroad.

Q: As leader of a big student organisation, you are in a good position to know the feelings as a whole of Malay students towards the present education system that does not give priority to mastering English.

A: You can ask Malay-medium students who are frustrated with the system. I blame the system. If not for this system, students in the rural areas especially would have been exposed to learning English at the primary school level, and expose extensively to the language.

I dare say that even secondary school students are learning English from teachers, many of whom could hardly speak good English, plus the lack of such teachers. This is especially glaring in the rural areas, this is the plight of the rural students. So it is with this awareness that we should put our act together to address this problem, this mistake of the past, so that it won't happen again.

It also means that we cannot say Bahasa Malaysia is not important, We should not get emotional, we should be rational about something which is a reality of life. We also must not be hypocritical about this.

Q: What about students who are sent abroad?

A: Our students who are affected by this change of policy that led to the abolition of English as the medium of instruction...although they study overseas, by and large, they still don't speak good English because they were not trained in English from the early stage. It's different with students from the families of the elite class who are traditionally better off in the language as they were exposed to English.

If I don't care about the fate of the Malays, I would just say...okay, let's go on with this present national education policy. It is because I care about the future of the Malays, and thinking of what I and thousands of other students from the rural areas went through.

Q: But why is that non-Malay students who go to the same education system seem to be better in English while the Malays are weak?

A: We can't depend on the system. We have to take our own initiative to try to master English under the present circumstances. This was what I did at the university when I really had to slog to learn the language. We have to depend on ourselves.

Back to the question of Malays being generally weak in English, this is because most of them come from rural schools where you could hardly find English teachers. The reason is that the national education system itself in the first place produces students who are weak in the language. So it is inter-related and this goes on and on over the years. It is impossible, for instance, for a teacher to teach his students how to read the Koran if his students don't understand him, and his students too, could not impart the same knowledge down the line. So is English, if we go on with the existing system where English is "forgotten" and the language is not given the importance that it deserves as was the situation in the past, how are we to produce good English teachers? Those who are good in the language have also retired from service.

What is happening now is that English language teachers concentrate only on teaching the language per se, while in the past because English was the medium of instruction for all subjects, the teachers could teach multiple subjects. But if teachers only specialise in teaching English, we will face a shortage of teachers because those who retire could not impart their knowledge to the following generations.

Q: So how could this problem possibly be overcome?

A: The problem is a serious one. At teachers' colleges, I have met English language tutors who don't communicate in English, this is the source of the problem.

We need teachers who can teach multiple subjects in English but under our present system we narrow things down to using English only to teach the language and even this we don't seem to have enough. We need to broaden the scope of teaching. Now our scope is too narrow and it is difficult for us to impart knowledge.

Apart from this, the size of English language teachers is getting smaller compared with the past, now it is contracting.

Now English language teachers can't teach science, mathematics, because these subjects are taught in Bahasa Malaysia. And English language teachers mostly shun the rural areas because they are very much in demand in the urban areas by the private sector, including as newscasters for the broadcasting stations.

We have to take a smart approach, for example, just like the period before independence and after independence, why did students excel in English?. We learn from this part of our history and it does not mean that we would do like what the colonial government did, we make adjustments according to prevailing circumstances.

Q: Perhaps through the concept of Vision School that is being introduced now?

A: The Vision School probably is an important module or mechanism that could help to realise this. Vision Schools must teach subjects such as science, technical subjects, mathematics, computer in English as well. At the same time, there is a need to beef up the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia but we must be firm in putting English in its proper place.

There ought to be a comprehensive plan to produce English language teachers, if we need to spend more money, we should do it to send students overseas to become good English teachers like in the past.

At the SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) level, even if students obtained only Grade 3 or Grade 4 but if they excel in English, they could be trained as English teachers, and be sent to the rural schools.

Q: But, even in the urban areas, can we say that the standard of English teachers is satisfactory?

A: The root to this problem is that those teaching English do not communicate in English. English is made a subject in class but is not practised. It must begin from the kindergarten stage. Here I would like to propose that the Education Ministry take over all kindergartens with the help also of the Rural Development Ministry and other related agencies.

Six-year olds should be made compulsory to enrol in kindergartens and here English must be taught so that when they enter primary school, they already have some exposure to the language. This is crucial.

Q: Is this one of the reasons why thousands of Malay parents are sending their children to national-type Chinese schools?

A: Yes, nowadays many Malay parents are bent on sending their children to Chinese-medium schools for here we have three languages. National-type Chinese schools are becoming increasingly strong. There they can learn Mandarin, English and also Bahasa Malaysia.

I am afraid that if the present education system which does not give priority to English is continued, and if students can't avail themselves to master the language, the present situation of neglect will go on. Malaysia will also not be able to produce leaders of the calibre of Dr Mahathir.

My call does not betray my own language. I am most thankful to leaders who want the people to master the English language. What is happening now is a mistake of history, where English was sidelined by past political leaders who were too emotional in wanting the Malays to study in Malay medium schools.

What happened was the children of the elite and aristocrats, including the royalty, were sent to English-medium schools such as the International School, and schools in London and so on. Is this not a form of colonialism?.

This reality has dawned on us with the open skies policy, globalisation, borderless world with the explosion of information technology. Knowledge can be acquired fast if we understand, and are skilled in the English language, particularly with the advent of the Internet. If we were to translate information technology into our own language, even before we complete the translation, the knowledge will become obsolete. This is the reality.

Q: But we cannot blame our students on this.

A: Under no circumstance can I blame our present students. I also cannot blame the present government officers or politicians who cannot master English. They have been the victims of the present education policy from the days of their childhood. Their parents were influenced not to send their children to English-medium schools.

Do not blame them as they study under the system. They are the victims of this system. It is only because they are aware of the importance of the language or at their own initiative that they study the English Language. Be they government officers, community leaders or anyone, all of them ...on their own initiative and if they have the money.

Moreover students in the rural areas told methis is our fate....we are disappointed....we have to accept it. Nevertheless we are grateful to our parents for sending us to school. We are also thankful for the facilities but we blame the system.

-- BERNAMA

AU AU AAM