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Read, write and speak to master English

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GEORGE Orwell said in 1954 - the year I got a pass in English and a credit in English literature in the Cambridge School Certificate examination - that the English language was in a bad way and there was little the English could do about it.

Despite that, English remains the lingua franca of the world.

The English (or rather the British) are still complaining about what George Orwell stated 46 years ago. The issue has been and will always be a concern to everyone, even to us.

In our case, the problem is to emphasise to all Malaysians, that though English is no longer the language during colonial times when good command of it was a necessity, it remains true that proficiency in the language is crucial to success in whatever they do. Even the Chinese, Japanese, Russians, Vietnamese, Thais, Indonesians and Arabs are all studying English with a vengeance.

I am stating this openly and clearly: never has this nation and Bumiputeras in particular needed to invest more in acquiring knowledge via the English language, and hopefully through it, our collective imagination will be enhanced.

There are no gains without pains; diligence is the mother of good luck. Therefore, the Government, teachers, employers and parents who appear to be talking non-stop about the fast declining standard of English among Malaysians, even among graduates, have to do something brave, drastic and post-haste to arrest what is even obvious to ordinarily ordinary persons. I won't say English is dying here, but is it the kind of English we want to be taught to our grandchildren?

As an editorial in The New Straits Times last Thursday stated, everyone bemoans the fact the standard of English has declined but what are we doing about it? I will now say, unequivocally, that short of a fast-track effort to arrest it our international edge over our neighbours will soon be eroded, and do not be altogether surprised if what Prime Minister Datuk Ser Dr Mahathir Mohamad aspires to achieve for the country - the status of a developed nation by 2020 - would not be attained.

It is shocking, as it is shameful that, according to a study, about 70 per cent of pupils in levels four to six primary schools have difficulty in stringing together a grammatically correct sentence. Poorly qualified teachers is one thing. The problem is compounded by the reality of the environment at home and play, inadequate time given for English lessons, crowded classrooms and the majority of pupils coming from pre-schools which do not use English as the medium of instruction.

The result of all these factors is that except for the privileged children who constantly use English at home, the rest suffer as they are not exposed to the foreign tongue. It is no exaggeration that even graduates lack the ability to draft a simple letter in idiomatic English and some can't even comprehend a straightforward instruction.

Employers are lamenting and some editors are really crying over this. This is the harsh state of affairs and until we are courageous enough to accept this and do something quickly, I suggest we refrain from being too overly ambitious to be this and that.

English is the language of the knowledge-based economy. Our educational policy (without undermining the status of the National Language and national syllabus) must be a bit flexible. Otherwise it is difficult for

us to pursue and attain our international aims and national agenda. No way can a monolingual civil service and private sector deliver them.

What perplexes me is that despite there being no opposition to the teaching of English within Umno and even PAS (as long as it does not sideline Bahasa Malaysia) why is the Government rather tardy and even ambivalent about English?

A dozen years ago I spoke in Parliament about the Government's irresolution on the subject. The then Education Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, invited me to talk about it over lunch. He told me of the plan to enhance the teaching of English and to re-introduce English literature in the English syllabus. Obviously, it was not enough, if indeed what he said to me has been implemented.

Dr Mahathir, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and many others went to English medium schools, yet their mother tongue has not suffered. So wherein lies the problem?

A changed and changing environment in the learning and teaching of English in our country causes the poor and deteriorating standard of English. In Singapore, a Chinese majority city-state where Mandarin is promoted, English has not suffered as much, although the Singapore Government is trying to curb the spread of the phenomenon known as "Singlish", because it is a compulsory first language. English is also a sine qua non, I believe, to merit the School Certificate, just as it was when I was in school. I never got my School Certificate though I passed English and obtained a credit in literature because I failed in one of the other two obligatory subjects, mathematics and science.

Cambridge and Harvard notwithstanding, I keep reading, speaking and writing in English. I do the same in Malay: I did not attend school until I was nine and in my first year at MCKK (1948) I learned grammar, dictation, multiplication tables, Koranic verses and poetry by rote. You must pass them, otherwise you would first be demoted before being asked to leave school. The fear of being humiliated made lazy bones like me work just to keep my place.

Let us encourage people to read, write and talk in English until they attain some semblance of skills to do effective business at the United Nations, in the Euro markets, Shanghai and Tokyo. I would like to reiterate that none who has acquired considerable command of English has lost proficiency in the mother tongue. The examples are too numerous - the late Tun Mohamad Suffian, Tan Sri Ahmad Ibrahim and Tun Razak. Among the living: Dr Mahathir, Tun Daim, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and hundreds of others. One or two are trying to acquire working knowledge of third and even fourth languages.

I wrote in my diary yesterday that there are between 60,000 and 65,000 Bumiputera students attending Chinese-medium schools. Why? I know the reason but that will be the subject of another article. I will not be surprised, and I think it is a good sign, the Bumiputeras will soon scramble for places in good schools.

English is the language of Shakespeare, Johnson, Milton, Shelly, Sheridan but it is also the language of George Bernard Shaw, V.S. Naipul, Joseph Conrad, Edward Said, Lee Kuan Yew, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Nehru, Sukarno, Vikram Seth, Rehman Rashid, Munir Majid, Noordin Sopiee and many others.

English literature has enthralled and entertained readers of all ages in foreign lands. It still does even after more than half century after the sun set on the British Empire and it will continue to do so. Malaysians must continue to master it like the Singaporean Chinese, Chinese Chinese, the Indonesians and the Thais are doing. To begin with make sure your

children read widely, write and speak it all the time. No other way exists if we want to enhance our international competitiveness. English, for the moment, lies outside the depth of Malaysian society because it is not in the Malaysian foundation; but it must be brought into it. Only then, when it exists in the right environment, can it develop.

If someone from Kok Lanas has no fear of English, there is no good reason for other Malaysians to express reservations and resentment about the language.

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