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Learning English to acquire knowledge

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I WAS impressed with Mat Yasin Yunus's positive attitude towards learning of English in "Reading avidly can improve language", (NST, Jan 12).

He is absolutely right. Learning is an endless process in our lives. He further went on to say that without proper spoken English a person can still get his job done as long as he/she has the ability to understand technical books written in English.

But the solution is not so simple. What happens if an engineer deficient in English is required to clarify some technical problems on the phone with his foreign colleague in the US? Similarly, what if the general manager is an Englishman? Does he need an interpreter to communicate with him?

Poor communication ability could lead to disaster. What if an engineer cannot send the correct message to a technician in a helicopter trying to fix a problem on top of a high-rise building?

I am surprised that as a US graduate Yasin could still compromise with standards in terms of learning. We need people like him to come back to Malaysia to upgrade standards here, not compromise on them.

Bahasa Malaysia is the national language and nobody should overlook its importance. However, one should not allow nationalism to cloud the judgment.

If you had not realised the importance of English, first of all you wouldn't have decided to pursue your studies in US. After all, you could have still pursued your masters degree in a local university, couldn't you?

As Prime Minister Dr Mahathir once said some of our nationalists speak good English and succeeded in their careers, but the policy they supported deprived the younger generation of the opportunity to learn decent English.

Perhaps Yasin has fallen into the same category. He realised the importance of English, so he studied in the US. Unfortunately, the 36,000 local unemployed graduates were not as lucky.

Perhaps without the US certificate, he may not be what he is now. We have to bear in mind that only a negligible percentage of local students can afford to study in US to enhance their marketability. How about the majority?

Their English is so weak that they not only lack confidence but also self-esteem in competing.

Once I received a couple of applications from local graduates who were employed by the Government under the "temporary employment scheme for local graduates". One of the applicants said he had been working under the scheme for a few years, yet he couldn't get a proper job in the private sector.

One should be pragmatic when making comparisons. Regarding the phenomenal success of the Japanese and the Koreans despite their knowledge of English, it must be said that when the process began more than half a century ago, competition was negligible.

As an example, look at EON's performance. It has succeeded very well locally, but 20 years of production and research with Mitsubishi's assistance, have not brought it on par with foreign car manufacturers. In other words, we don't have the opportunity to learn from scratch.

Even with technology transfers from Japan we have to acquire extra

technology from different sources to be confident enough to face globalisation.

Can we depend on our publishers to translate whatever technical books available in English into Bahasa to enable our local graduates to accomplish the necessary tasks effectively?

Let me share a problem. One of my friends in Langkawi owned a new Opel car and there were some problems with the automatic gear box. A technician in Langkawi advised him to change the gear box. He sought advice from a technician in Kuala Lumpur who told him that the problem could be solved with some adjustments and sent the instructions printed in English over to him in Langkawi.

Unfortunately, the technician in Langkawi just couldn't understand the instructions printed in English and my friend had to send the car out of Langkawi to solve his problem. This is only one small aspect of how a person can be less efficient if he is not fluent in English.

Technologies change every now and then. Without a reasonable command of English, one just can't understand the manuals. And there are thousands of manuals written in English for plant, equipment, chemical usage, electrical functions, etc.

I feel Lt Kol (b) Fathol Zaman bin Bukhari had it right when he said there is "No short cut to mastering a language" (NST, Jan 18).

Learning a language, especially English should start as early as possible, preferably from Year One or kindergarden.

At present, the most efficient language for acquiring knowledge in our country is English.

As Malaysians we have to learn Bahasa Malaysia as our first language. But any human being is capable of achieving proficiency in at least three languages at the same time, so why don't we make ourselves better?