

14 JAN 2001

Sabah-English (News Focus)

POOR ENGLISH AMONG SABAHANS REVERSIBLE?

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, Jan 14 (Bernama) -- A second year student of a local university with difficulty composing a 40-word and error-free paragraph in English thinks he has an easy way out of the problem.

When told to brush up his English for better edge over his peers when they enter the job market, his reply was: "I don't think that's a big problem. Definitely there are jobs that do not require proficiency in English."

Obviously he had yet to meet Economics graduate Roni, 25, from Kiulu about 50km from here, who, despite the paper qualification had spent months after months virtually knocking on the door of one agency after another in search of employment.

And each time, he was tossed back to the street when the potential employees found out his inability to communicate in English.

"I've applied for umpteen jobs and attended umpteen interviews. And each time when asked to prove my mastery of English, I was not able to do it," said Roni who requested for his name not to be printed in full.

So was also the agony with his last interview for a job as a journalist with a national Malay newspaper after having forked out just enough money to travel across the South China Sea to Kuala Lumpur to attend it.

"I suspect I had failed miserably in the English translation test...who would have thought of the English test in a job interview with a Bahasa newspaper," he said, shaking his head.

Roni is a living example and victim in a society that switched from an English-medium education system to that of a Bahasa Malaysia one.

Poor command of English especially among Sabah's Bumiputera students and those from the interior is best illustrated in a popular local yarn about a well-intentioned man inviting his Caucasian friend to his home in English: "Easy-easy, come to my house, I will ask my wife to cook you."

This is of course a literal translation of the Malay phrase, "senang-senang, datanglah ke rumah, bolehlah saya suruh isteri saya masak untuk awak".

News reports of poor English among present day undergraduates and students sparked off a public polemic recently which inevitably questioned whether the country's prevalent approach to the teaching of English could sustain and prepare Malaysians for the future, especially for Knowledge-economy (k-economy).

Many believed that for the country to face challenges in an increasingly globalised world, it was imperative to have an English-proficient population.

While some blamed the poor mastery of English to insufficient emphasis on the teaching of the language in the education system, the bitter detractors even attributed it to "a mistake of history" committed when the country's education system switched the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia.

The switch which occurred in Peninsular Malaysia at the end of the 70s failed to provide appropriate opportunities for students to master English, the detractors claimed.

If indeed it was a mistake of history, then in Sabah, it was only committed much later.

For instance, when the Malay medium Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) examination first replaced the English medium Higher School

Certificate (HSC) in the Peninsula towards the end of the 70's, the HSC continued to exist in Sabah until 1981.

Despite the STPM being in force in Sabah for almost 20 years, many of the products of the "old system" of English education are still servicing the state's public sector thus providing a good mix of people conversant in English and Bahasa Malaysia.

Arguably, neighbouring state Sarawak, still has a huge number of people with good command of English because the state switched to Bahasa Malaysia medium only towards the end of the 80's.

The apparent lack of English-proficient Malaysians caught the attention Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently who acknowledged that having the ability to speak and explain things in English served him well during meetings with world leaders and at world forums.

Underlining the importance of the mastery of English, Dr Mahathir said: "More and more we have to deal with other countries and we can't go to other countries and speak our own language because nobody is going to learn our language to understand us."

-- BERNAMA

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