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Malaysia's new realism towards English

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A SLIP of the tongue (in any language) is a boo-boo which raises eyebrows and often leads to embarrassment as well. Of course, a written mistake is more devastating than the oral gaffe.

President George W. Bush is prone to making oral mistakes. They have even led to a new term being coined, the "Bush-ism". In the latest of these, he inadvertently called Taiwan a "country". China has from the beginning of Communist rule in 1949 considered Taiwan part of its territory, waiting to be reunited with the mainland by force if necessary.

However, students of Bushisms should not read anything into the apparent slip of his tongue which is becoming more frequent, and English is his mother tongue. He attended both Yale and Harvard, America's top Ivy League universities.

Imagine the challenge faced by non-native speakers. English can and does bring tears as well as pleasure.

I am delighted that the Government is no longer gripped by the politics of language chauvinism. It has wisely decided to give more importance to the teaching of English after a generation of benign neglect. I have fought a long battle for this because I know as you do that English is the language of global interaction, it is the language of knowledge.

We have paid a heavy price for long years of indifference to the world's lingua franca. As the New Straits Times editorial stated on Monday, nursing the language should not be narrowly linked to nationalistic concerns. No one wants to make English the national or official language. The paramount position of Malay shall always remain entrenched.

Depriving our children of proficiency in English has already set us back not inconsiderably, and will handicap future generations even more. Yet only four decades ago, it was normal for educated Malaysians to have a good command of English. Indeed, we were envied by our neighbours.

When I was learning English at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) between 1948 and 1954, my teachers - both local and expatriate - taught the subject the right way.

They threatened and cajoled and used, "No good job awaiting you", and "You will never go to England" to scare us into studying. They were supportive and to this day, I have never been ashamed to ask questions.

Asking questions is a great way to learn. I know, then and now, that a good command of English will enhance anyone's future.

The standard of English has deteriorated rather spectacularly because what was supposed to be a bilingual education somehow became mono-lingual.

Malaysia tops Asian nations when it comes to spending money on education (4.5 per cent of the GDP in 1999). We even surpass Singapore where English reigns supreme. Only Israel supercedes us. It spends 9 per cent of its GDP (gross domestic product), Singapore 3.6 and Indonesia 1.4.

But when it comes to performance in Mathematics and Science, according to a study, Singapore leads in the former and we rank one place higher than the US! In Science, Taiwan is top scorer, and we are one step behind the Americans but well ahead of Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Malaysians must acquire English language skills fast if they want to become an information technology (IT) and knowledge-based society.

Human capital is the function of education, and we must put more money into it while continually stressing the quality of our schools. We must make our people hungry for knowledge, and the English language, to make us

marketable even overseas.

The Arabs, the Chinese and the Europeans are studying English with a vengeance. Among the Europeans, English has replaced French as the second language, the shift taking place in the middle of the 1990s.

Globalisation and the development of English as the language of the Internet continues the trend, which infuriates the French no end. It does seem as if it's the beginning of the end for French as the dominant working language in the European Union. In the Babel that is Brussels, I am told, French is being heard less and less these days, and perhaps there will be even less of it in future.

I believe the Government's decision to re-emphasise the importance of English will get the solid backing of the people except, and it is quite natural, for those die-hard nationalists and Malay specialists.

If learning and re-learning the language of our previous rulers is post-Merdeka imperialism, I am afraid this is not so, which is one reason why I support it vigorously.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has not become less Malay or Malaysian because he speaks and writes good English, or Lee Kuan Yew less Chinese. Lee speaks and writes the language better than most American and British politicians though he wears a Chinese face.

Over time, the colonialism we loathed has disappeared. English has become even more important than before. Development in knowledge is articulated in English, and not mastering it is to deny ourselves a bigger canvas, education, encounter with humanity and life of inquiry and questioning.

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