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Never too late for English

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"I FELT so ashamed because I was not fluent in English. I didn't dare speak to people who could speak the language. It was very difficult for me as I wanted to expand my business and could not explain it to them."

That was how Datuk Kong Hon Kong felt six years ago. At that time, he had successfully set up NV Multi Corporation Bhd, the country's first private bereavement services company.

Aware that his inadequacy in English was hindering efforts to expand his business, Kong then hired a bilingual (Chinese and English) tutor to help him. And for six months, he spent about an hour every day learning to read, write and speak English.

In addition, he would read any English newspapers and magazines, and made the effort to jot down key words to look up the meanings in a dictionary and increase his vocabulary.

And the effort paid off as now Kong is proud to say that he understands English better and is more confident of speaking it, particularly when he has meetings with foreigners.

His decision to take up English lessons, at 42, is a fine example of his belief that there shouldn't be an excuse not to learn something even late in life."

Born to rubber tapper parents in Kuala Lipis, he only had basic knowledge of the language. Naturally, he was sent to a Chinese school where he completed his secondary education.

After he left school, he moved to Kuala Lumpur and worked in his brother's sundry goods wholesale shop before starting his own credit company in 1980. Unfortunately, he had to wind down the business in 1984 due to the economic slowdown.

Then in 1985, after facing difficulties when arranging his father-in-law's funeral, he got an idea to set up a company providing integrated bereavement services.

After much hard work, he finally got NV Multi Corporation up and running in 1990. Now listed on the main board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, the company is a market leader in the relatively untapped bereavement care industry in Malaysia.

He applied the same determination and perseverance in establishing NV Multi Corporation as when he wanted to get a better command of the English language.

"Even when I started the credit company, I found that English had become more and more important as a communication tool. But at that time it was difficult for me to find the time to learn it as I was busy.

"But when I set up NV Multi Corporation, I realised that I needed to improve my English. As I was Chinese educated I couldn't speak English at all and I was ashamed of it.

"Another reason was that I wanted to expand the business. At that time, I realised that I was losing out on business opportunities as I didn't want to get too close to other businessmen who could speak English."

Admitting that it was difficult for him at first, he said it is never too late to learn as language is an asset for life. And as English is a global language, it is vital for everybody to have a good command of it.

"I think people of all ages should pick up the language. A good command of English will certainly help in securing employment or in business.

"We should not make excuses which prevent us from learning new things at

any stage of our lives. Perseverance is the key when you want to achieve something and this includes learning English. We have to overcome our fear of making mistakes as it is part of the learning process.'

He said everyone should be inspired by our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's effort in emphasising the importance of learning English.

"With his good command of the language, he brings Malaysia into the limelight as he has the opportunity to present his ideas at international meetings and forums to other world leaders."

He said when he had better grasp of the language, he began to use English daily, and even in company meetings and business dealings.

"It has really helped me in expanding my business and friends. Previously, I have only Chinese speaking friends but now I have more English-speaking friends.

"I have visitors from the US, Australia and Canada who are involved in the bereavement business and I no longer feel ashamed to talk to them. It also gives me an opportunity to exchange ideas about the business.

"Now my business is getting stronger and I have plans to expand the company. I hope to make NV Multi Corporation into the biggest bereavement company in Asia."

He continues to improve his English: "It does not matter if the pronunciation is wrong or if I do not understand some of the words.

"To me the most important thing is to read, write and speak more, and look up words I do not know. It is good to practise every day and eventually you will get better. Practice makes perfect."

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