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The great English debate - to be or not to be?

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THE trade union movement, particularly the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), has been following with keen interest "The Great English Debate" on the perceived advantages, or otherwise, of reviving English-medium schools in the country.

For the past two to three weeks, the local print media have carried exhaustive information and lively discussions on the pros and cons of the proposal, mooted by none other than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself.

There can be no doubt in anybody's mind that Bahasa Malaysia-medium schools, which were introduced in the early seventies, have served the National Education Policy well by strengthening the position of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language of the country and streamlining it with the provisions of the Federal Constitution.

These schools also complemented and supplemented the objectives of the New Economic Policy (NEP) by successfully enhancing national integration - a rather difficult task in a plural society like ours.

Though these initiatives are laudable in themselves, it should be carefully noted that they have a time dimension.

The schools were introduced at a time when the entire nation was nursing itself back to health after the May 13 riots of 1969, with the Government, led by the then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, fully in control of the key socio-economic sectors.

Economic restructuring, eradication of poverty, national solidarity and social stability were the key objectives of the NEP, and Bahasa Malaysia-medium schools served as the master key that opened all these doors.

Malaysia, after 45 years of independent nationhood, is now at the crossroads.

The process of globalisation, which effectively took root when Malaysia endorsed the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Declaration in 1996, is now here to stay.

Notwithstanding any major developments in the international socio-political arena, I personally see very little possibility for Malaysia and its South-East Asian neighbours reverting to status quo with the State fully in command of the national economy.

Structural adjustment and privatization, which are currently in process in South-East Asia have largely transferred these powers to the enterprises, with the State acting as a facilitator, being more involved in licensing and enforcement, and less in resource-directing and policy-making.

This turn of events, often referred to as "a major paradigm shift", is irreversible.

The Internet era has firmly established English as the lingua franca of business, science, technology and research. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has been developed almost wholly in English, and those who wish to be ICT-savvy have little choice but to master English.

Even industrialised countries like France, Germany, Japan and South Korea, which previously took pride in their national language education systems, are now introducing English in their schools, colleges and universities to effectively tap the vast opportunities of the global market.

China, the newest member of the WTO, is also busy organising English

language courses for its students, public sector officials and workers to benefit from the global market-place and thereby promote foreign investment, tourism and other services.

The Prime Minister has, in his foreword to the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) - which forms part of the Third Outline Perspective Plan (2001-2010) or National Vision Policy - stated clearly that "Efforts will be undertaken to develop an efficient and responsive education and training system to meet the demand for a labour force that is knowledgeable, highly skilled and equipped with positive values."

Malaysians will have to be increasingly competitive to survive in a borderless economic environment brought about by globalisation, and to achieve this, they will need to acquire employable skills such as information and communications technology (ICT).

Quite obviously, the English language is merely a tool to meet this objective, and certainly not the end. Bahasa Malaysia, as the national language, will continue playing its pivotal role of promoting national integration, with Mandarin and Tamil supplementing these efforts.

There is no need for any discomfiture, discomfort or dissatisfaction within any community or group that the position of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language could be threatened by the revival of English-medium education, which is merely a means to acquire knowledge and skills, and not an end in itself.

Most text books, journals, research materials and instruction manuals are published in English worldwide, and translating them to Bahasa Malaysia will take years, if not decades.

Without adequate English language proficiency, our workers will be left behind in the "technology rat race".

They will, however, be able to lay claim for a bigger share of the cheese at the end of the race if they are empowered with the right skills, experience and expertise made possible by the English language.

It is foreseeable that the very nature of the national employment scenario will change significantly in the coming years, with knowledge-driven industries gradually replacing those that are production-driven.

The trade union movement sincerely hopes that employers, in their haste to increase profits, do not neglect human resource development.

Employers, instead of finding the easy way out by employing contract workers, should show greater responsibility by sponsoring their workers for in-service training courses.

They could also utilise the reimbursable funds available with the Human Resource Development Corp and ensure that they play a meaningful role in their employees' career development.

There can be no wisdom without knowledge, and there can be no knowledge without learning.

The views expressed in this article are the writer's own

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