

PM: Important to master English

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia has taken the pragmatic approach in adopting English as the language to teach Mathematics and Science while continuing the use of the mother tongue to preserve the country's identity.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said there some people who were "language nationalists" who wanted their mother tongue used exclusively even when it impeded the gaining of knowledge.

"Malaysia decided that Science and Mathematics would be taught in English because it is impossible to translate all the words into our language.

"Translating a technical paper requires three qualifications - the person must be fluent in English and Malay, as well as conversant with the subject.

"You need someone highly qualified to do that job and we just don't have this. We cannot be using up valuable human resources just to do translation," he said in his reply during a question and answer session at the First East Asia Congress yesterday.

He was asked whether East Asian countries, in forming a grouping, would adopt a common education concept.

Dr Mahathir said in the world today, people must know at least two languages, namely their mother tongue and probably English.

"We must master it because that is the way to knowledge," he said, adding that in the olden days, people who wanted to learn medicine needed to learn Arabic as the Arabs were then the pioneers in the field. The Europeans also had to learn Arabic in order to gain access to Greek philosophy as it was translated into Arabic.

"But today the fact is that English is widely used. We are not going to question why but we have to accept the fact that we have to adopt English and keep our national tongue to preserve our identity," he said.

The Prime Minister added that Malaysians must focus more on technical subjects and mathematics as these fields were important for this time and age.