

31/03/2005

Schools plan: One step forward two steps back?

By Syed Nadzri

FORTY-SEVEN years after Independence and 30 years after prominence was given to Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction in schools, Malaysia appears to be still confused about its education policies and priorities.

It should be quite obvious by now that a lot has to do with the nationalistic and chauvinistic fervour of some sections of the population which, perhaps in tune with the demands of local politics, policy-makers sometimes cave in to.

And this where it's most unfortunate. The call by delegates at the Second Malay Education Congress last Saturday for a review of the system of teaching Science and Mathematics in English provides a classic case of taking one step forward, two steps back.

The fact that the suggestion came just two years after the adoption of English for the two subjects defies logic. And it could only mean that, like the racking opposition to the Vision School concept by some quarters, self-interest is at play here. Worse, it gives the impression that our education system is in utter confusion.

Among the arguments put forth to support a review were:

&#x2022; many teachers and pupils, especially in rural areas, cannot cope with the system in English and they will fall by the wayside;

&#x2022; the fear that Bahasa Malaysia will cease to be a medium for Science and Mathematics and a medium of teaching in universities; and,

&#x2022; there will come a time when Malays will not be able to think Science in their own language.

The above certainly makes for an excellent point to rouse nationalistic feelings from the podium. But playing to the gallery should be furthest from our minds - especially when 80,000 graduates (revised to 18,000 after disputes), mostly Malays (not disputed), are reportedly jobless and intense international competition brought about by globalisation is set to sweep in like a juggernaut.

This sense of reality must have sunk in when it was decided three years ago that the two subjects should be taught in English.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was Prime Minister then, had this to say on Oct 10, 2002: "The Government should have realised the importance of English when it decided to change the teaching medium to Bahasa Malaysia decades ago. But because we were nationalistic, we decided on the switch, hoping that when the English schools were converted to national schools, they would attract multi-racial students.

"Unfortunately, it failed because some people used national schools for the advancement of one race, with the emphasis on making them Malay schools."

Dr Mahathir remained consistent in his views in an interview with Utusan Malaysia on Tuesday.

And on July 21, 2002, former Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, in officially announcing that schools would start teaching Science and Mathematics in English, gave this rationale: "The move is purely to enhance the knowledge of pupils in the two subjects and not really a platform for them to learn English.

"This is because the bulk of information and knowledge in Science and Technology is in English. The contents of the Science and Mathematics syllabi also change with time unlike other subjects. At the same time, pupils' contact time with English will be increased."

Most importantly, the move then even received support from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the official custodian of the Malay language. Its director-general Datuk A. Aziz Deraman said on Feb 8, 2003: "The teaching of Science and Mathematics in English should not be misconstrued as an attempt to undermine the status of Bahasa Malaysia as the official language. Bahasa Malaysia, English and other local languages have their respective roles in the nation's political and socio-economic development."

Actually, the call by the Malay Education Congress was in a way not unexpected - a meeting of minds under such a banner is sure to produce clarion calls of that nature as emotions are whipped up. But in the final analysis, reality and practicality should reign.

What exactly does the congress - or anyone else thinking along the same lines - want for the Malays?

From the statements, it is quite clear that, instead of coming out with plans to push Malay pupils to do better studying Science and Mathematics in English, it wants this system reviewed and if necessary to bring back Bahasa Malaysia. That, as everyone can tell you, is the easy way out.

The hard part is: What then? Reference books, for one, are mainly in English.

Even if Malay students do better in their exams with the subjects in Bahasa Malaysia, the real test will be competing in the job market. And if many Malays remain unemployed, the same people from the congress would lament the situation.

So what is it that they exactly want?

In the meantime, let's look at some of the measures that are supposed to have been in place in the move to improve the standard of English as mentioned by Musa on Aug 28, 2002:

&#x2022; English language consultants to be placed in all district education departments. Comprising retired teachers, these consultants will also be placed in some major schools and be paid RM100 an hour.

&#x2022; Many teachers to be recruited from the United Kingdom to act as English language consultants.

&#x2022; The training of teachers to teach Science and Mathematics in English, especially in rural schools would be intensified.

&#x2022; Textbooks for the teaching of Science and Maths in English would be easily available.

Looks like the Education Ministry has some unfinished business on its hands.

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(END) Source : New Straits Times