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English beyond the classroom

FOR the umpteenth time, the Prime Minister has urged Malaysians to master English. For the umpteenth time, he has said that we need English to progress. And for the umpteenth time, he has said mastering English would not be at the expense of Bahasa Malaysia.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has very good reasons to go on repeating these things. The acquisition of English by Malaysian children has not been as universally successful as expected. Too many students begin school with little or no English proficiency and leave it 11 or 13 years later without making much progress in the language. This problem is especially pronounced among the Malays, even in the urban areas, let alone the kampungs.

The age of information technology has made English even more important than ever before. The linguistic divide between English and non-English speakers can only lead to a digital divide and to an even greater socio-economic divide. In the 21st century global economy, employers place a premium on competence in English. Those who don't speak and write in English will find difficulty in getting jobs and run the risk of being locked into low-paid work or unemployment. They then become disgruntled and blame the Government for their plight.

Far from destroying the uniqueness of the Malay identity and undermining the Malay language, the creation of multilingual Malays who are equally at home in Malay, English, Mandarin or other languages, will strengthen their capacity to avoid marginalisation in a globalised world where English holds sway.

The decision to teach Science and Mathematics in English is based on a sound principle of effective language learning - the greater the input of and exposure to English in the classroom, the greater the likelihood of students acquiring the language. While the Ministry of Education has to address the practical problems of this radical move, such as training teachers who lack competence in English and developing teaching materials in English, the more urgent task is to take a hard look at the existing curriculum and practices in pedagogy and see what needs to be done.

For instance, in order to learn to speak a language, considerable effort must be spent on talking. But many students end up with little or no speaking ability in English. Although learning activities may be in English, children interact with one another in their first language, using little or no English inside and outside the classroom. Effective strategies need to be developed to overcome problems like this.

Reading is the magical key that can unlock the mysteries of language and the Ministry has rightly restored literature into the English language curriculum. The danger is that books read for study rather than for pleasure dulls the imagination and fail to whet the appetite for reading. For reading to work its magic, parents and families must be mobilised to support and promote English in the home. Apart from investing in private English tuition, parents should also invest in books. Studies have shown that students who live in homes where they have access to books are more likely to read and to develop positive attitudes towards reading. Children who are read to at home, read more on their own.

If Malaysians are to master English, they have to be weaned away from a misguided reliance on formal courses of study. Learning languages takes time, will-power and effort. What happens outside the classroom is often

more important than what happens inside it. Language can quickly fade away if it is not used. Language skills have to be retained, refined and replenished through a lifetime of learning.