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It is to our advantage to master English

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AMONG several issues highlighted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his recent National Day message was one concerning the need to master the English language.

Commenting on the need for the Malaysian workforce to ensure better output and productivity through enhanced efforts and skills, the Prime Minister said workers must be willing to be retrained so that they could use more sophisticated equipment that could facilitate increased output.

In this regard, he pointed out that the mastery of English was very important. Every level-headed Malaysian will agree that learning English should not be made into an issue when it is good for the nation.

Mastering English does not mean one has to give up the national language or mother tongue. Nor will learning it make one less nationalistic.

On the contrary, it can reinforce the spirit of nationalism if it can help bring progress.

English should be regarded as a universal language. It is to our advantage to know and master it.

As we strive towards Vision 2020, it is essential to adopt an open-minded approach towards not only English but any language while remaining steadfast in ensuring that Bahasa Malaysia is the official and national language.

However, we must accept that one language is insufficient in this modern and technological age. We need other languages such as English for progress and development.

It is the international language for science and technology, business and commerce.

Malaysians must strive to be bilingual or even multi-lingual now that most Malaysians, particularly the younger generation, have mastered Bahasa Malaysia.

The fear of the English language, which some still regard as a legacy of British colonialism, is clearly misplaced.

More needs to be done to convince parents and students, particularly in the rural areas, about the importance of learning and mastering it.

The poor performance of students in English in the PMR and SPM examinations is cause for concern. Even in our institutions of higher education, the standard of English among students is below par.

As a matter of fact, Malaysia's standard of English has declined compared to the situation a generation ago.

What is even more worrying is that our standard of English today is too low to serve the country's needs into the future. It has even affected our job seekers in finding employment here and abroad.

While the Human Resource Ministry is taking steps to address the issue, it is also necessary for the Education Ministry to look into more effective measures to produce quality English teachers.

Improving English proficiency will not be achieved if teachers themselves are not proficient. And mastery of English is not possible if grammar is not emphasised.