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Malays urged to be bilingual or trilingual

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - All Malays should strive to be bilingual, or even trilingual, and place a high premium on education, New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad said today.

He stressed the need for the Malays to work towards mastering the English language.

In this regard, Abdullah described Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali as role models.

"They are both bilingual, and most importantly, they place a high premium on education. They epitomise a happy family with successful children. Their daughter Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir is very clever, diplomatic and respected worldwide.

"Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah can speak well even in the international arena, in very good English," Abdullah said when closing a oneday seminar on the thoughts of Dr Siti Hasmah at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia.

Addressing participants who were mostly undergraduates and representatives from women's organisations, Abdullah, who spoke in Bahasa Malaysia, pointed out that the majority of Malays now possessed the requisite knowledge and were armed with degrees.

But they lacked communication skills, especially the ability to converse well in English, even within their own community.

"What is the point of having knowledge if you cannot communicate effectively. The Malays must realise how important it is to master English, and that doing so would not make them any less Malay.

"Are Dr Mahathir, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz any less Malay because they are bilingual?

"Our singleminded emphasis on Bahasa Malaysia has caused us to lose one generation of bilingual Malays. While we should give utmost attention and priority to Bahasa Malaysia, we must also realise the importance of English as it is the language of knowledge and communication."

Abdullah said it was difficult for someone to have self-confidence if he could not communicate effectively.

"How can you be confident if you do not know what the others are saying?"

Abdullah also urged the Malays to learn from history.

"We must know our roots. If we do not know our history, we will not be developed. The problem is that many Malays tend to forget where they came from, especially when they do well. They forget the hand that feeds them."

Abdullah peppered his speech with personal anecdotes, drawing many examples from his wealth of experience in the political arena to help drive his message across.

On Dr Siti Hasmah, Abdullah said she had seen the merits of meritocracy in education. "Dr Siti Hasmah herself acquired her degree in medicine from the then University of Malaya in Singapore based on the principle of meritocracy."

The seminar was organised by the Federation of Malay Peninsular Students (GPMS). It was opened by Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob. Also present was GPMS president Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim. Dr Siti Hasmah, together with five friends, set up GPMS in 1948. She was among the organisation's first committee members.

