

PPSMI: Malaysia in the lost world?

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COMMENT Following the announcement by Education Minister Muhyiddin Yassin to stop the teaching of science and mathematics in English from 2012, Malaysia is once again embroiled in a messy controversy, this time cutting across political and racial divisions.

It is messy because the ideas are aplenty and issues are floating around without proper focus.

kuala lumpur chong hwa independent high school Sadly, both the proponent and opponent of PPSMI (the teaching and learning of science and mathematics in English) are wrong in their rationale.

The proponent is wrong in saying that PPSMI will bring proficiency in the English language, as the key to achieve such proficiency is through proper teaching of the language itself, and not through learning another subject using English.

The opponent is also wrong in saying that PPSMI will weaken the national language or injure our national pride.

While the former reason is more imaginary than real as can be vouched by experienced educationists, the latter reason is more a reflection of an inferiority complex, rather than legitimate nationalism.

Continue or abandon PPSMI?

So how do we move from here? Abandon or continue PPSMI?

To answer this question, it will be helpful if we go back a few years and trace how the idea first started.

When former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad first conceived the PPSMI in 2002, it was in recognition of the fact that our English language level was in shambles and that we badly needed improvement in order not to be thrown further behind by the rest of the world.

Mahathir's intention - to upgrade English - was correct, but the path chosen was wrong.

There was no dispute that English was very important or that it needed to be upgraded urgently. But to start teaching the subjects in English the very next year (2003) without first ensuring the availability of English-proficient teachers was wrong.

The result was a drop in the standard of science and mathematics without effective improvement in English proficiency.

That Mahathir's program has been a failure is attested by Muhyiddin who said that only a small minority of schools are still adopting PPSMI while the rest have abandoned it due to lack of competent teachers.

perodua tea time with mahathir function 271011 05 In fact, Mahathir (left) should have zeroed in on the teaching of the language itself as the first phase of operation, and temporarily forget about PPSMI. We should start with our teachers.

Due to the large number of teachers required to be upgraded (hundreds of thousand) in their English proficiency, we should adopt the strategy of first training a large core brigade of English teachers, who will in turn train other teachers who need to be upgraded.

To train this core brigade, we need to import foreign teachers in addition to recruitment of local English teachers who may include those already in retirement.

Only when we have trained sufficient English-proficient teachers in the schools, can we contemplate the introduction of PPSMI. For that reason, the program may have to be introduced gradually, at a pace commensurate with availability of qualified teachers.

Merits of PPSMI

Though PPSMI is not the best gateway to good English, it is nevertheless a worthy endeavour that will bring the twin benefits of improvement in English as well as ready connectivity to the world of science and technology.

Opponents of PPSMI often cite the examples of Russia and China as proof that one can stick to one's national language and yet achieve outstanding progress in science and technology.

But these critics forget that countries like Russia and China are huge countries with immense pools of talents and scholarship in the sciences and technology, while relatively diminutive Malaysia, lacking indigenous technology, has to constantly import foreign sources of knowledge which are acquired mostly in the English language.

As a matter of fact, English text books are already widely used in our institutions of higher learning, so why not start its use at an earlier age, such as at secondary school level, or even earlier if requisite conditions are fulfilled? It will surely be an advantage for our children to do so.

For that reason, Muhyiddin's decision to stop PPSMI is unwise. His watered-down decision to phase out PPSMI completely by 2016 for primary schools and 2021 for secondary schools for the small number of remaining schools still sticking to PPSMI is even more inexplicable.

The only acceptable reason for stopping PPSMI should only be one of technicality (the lack of competent teaching personnel) and not one of concept (the desirability of using English for the two subjects).

If certain schools have weathered nine years (2003 to 2011) of rough riding with the new system of PPSMI, it means that these schools have already overcome the birth-pangs of the new system, which should be a blessing to the students; does it make sense then to revert to the old system now?

Whose interests does the education minister has in mind - the students or his own political fortune?

The way forward

In fact our government should not only treasure what we have already achieved with the schools that have succeeded with PPSMI, we should expand such success with other schools, using the strategy I have outlined above - a serious program to urgently train a large pool of English teachers to teach other teachers.

Muhyiddin (left) said that while cutting off PPSMI, he is pursuing a serious program to upgrade English, for which he is trying to bring in 300 English teachers from the US to help out in those schools which need help.

But alas, he is making the same mistake as Mahathir - failing to see the realities. We have thousands of schools and all of them are weak in English.

So, to which schools must we send these 300 teachers? Aren't they a drop in the ocean of Malaysian schools? How would that kind of deployment of US teachers be effective in raising our English level?

Now that election is around the corner, and both political camps - BN and Pakatan Rakyat - are scrambling to snatch vital electoral support, I find that PPSMI has unfortunately fallen as a political pawn.

Politicians are issuing statements not with an eye to the interest of our students, but with political power

as the target. Any give or take on the PPMSI issue is calculated on the basis of net electoral gain or loss.

This is admittedly a difficult time for politicians, but it is also the time when true statesmanship can shine.

He who speaks genuinely for the welfare of our children's education and yet can convince the majority that it is the right way forward will be the winner - for himself, his party and the nation.

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