

Dr M: PPSMI intended for mastery of science and maths, not English
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 15 — Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad continued today to defend PPSMI, saying it was introduced to help students master the subjects of mathematics and science and not as a means to improve their English language skills.

The former prime minister, who was responsible for introducing the policy in 2003, pointed out all developments in the fields of science and maths over the centuries have been documented in books using the English language.

“I have been trying repeatedly to explain that using English to teach science and mathematics (PPSMI) is not for the purpose of learning English or to improve its use. The purpose is to master science and mathematics,” he wrote in a blog posting today.

Dr Mahathir said today without PPSMI, Malaysians would continue to be mere “consumers” of scientific and mathematic knowledge. — file pic
Dr Mahathir said as English was used for both subjects, it would be close to impossible to find an interpreter fluent enough in both Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and English as well as an expert in science who would be able to translate the subject thoroughly for students.

“If there were one or two, it is unlikely they would be willing to sacrifice their entire lives to interpret all science knowledge into English,” he wrote.

Dr Mahathir said without PPSMI, Malaysians would continue to be mere “consumers” of scientific and mathematic knowledge, which he said researchers use to develop new technologies and create new products.

He cited the invention of telephones and subsequently, mobile phones, as examples.

“Previously, wires connected telephone devices with operators to connect calls. Then, operators were replaced with diallers that would automatically connect calls, then they were connected through radio, and then discs and satellites were used, which could connect a mobile phone to any other,” he said.

The technological know-how in the creation of such amenities like mobile phones, added Dr Mahathir, could only be mastered through the use of the English language.

“We will continue to be merely consumers because we do not understand the technology of how to create these mobile phones.

“For how long do we plan to be consumers? Will we ever be a civilised and developed race if we continue to merely be a race of consumers?” he said.

Dr Mahathir rubbished arguments by PPSMI detractors that countries like Japan, Korea and Germany use their national languages as the medium of instruction for both subjects in schools, saying knowledge of English was required initially in order to gain an understanding of the subjects before they were translated into the respective languages.

"It is impossible for them to understand the exact meaning of a particular word, process or function if they first could not understand the full sentence in its entirety," he said.

"Our studies are not merely for us to be fluent in the languages — whether BM or English. Studies are meant for us to obtain and master knowledge.

"Only a knowledgeable race can build a highly-advanced civilisation," he added.

The Najib administration has come under fire from Dr Mahathir and pro-English lobby groups for its decision in 2009 to abolish PPSMI in schools and revert to Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction for the teaching of mathematics and science.

Despite much criticism, the government announced recently that it would not back down from the decision but would allow the final PPSMI batch to continue with the policy until they complete their secondary education.

When making the announcement recently, Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin explained the decision meant that students between Year Three and Form Five next year would be allowed the option of learning science and mathematics in Bahasa Malaysia, English or both languages, as allowed under PPSMI, until they complete their primary and secondary education.

But this year's Year One students, the first batch to undergo MBMMBI (Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening Command of English), would have to continue learning the two subjects in Bahasa Malaysia when they enter Year Two next year, he said.

MBMMBI was mooted in July 2009 to replace PPSMI and came into effect in January this year for Year One students.

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