

**English not a zero-sum game, says Najib**  
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**By Lee Wei Lian**

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 11 — Mastering English does not mean that the national language will lose out said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak today.

This comes after bilingualism was endorsed in the new national education masterplan launched today that will run from 2013-2025.

The prime minister said that a command of the English language was a valuable asset and it needed to be taught using English literature.

"If we can't start with Shakespeare, start with Enid Blyton, then move on to Shakespeare light and finally Shakespeare," said Najib.

He added that Malaysians if possible should even learn three languages.

"I encouraged my son to learn Mandarin," he said. "This is because we want a competitive edge."

Najib sought to allay the insecurities of those who felt the national language could be under threat under a bilingual policy saying today that every Malaysian must be able to speak Malay well.

"Even if they can't write well, they should be able to speak it well," he said.

He added that Malaysia's multicultural make-up was part of its legacy and that the new educational masterplan should be implemented at all schools to avoid it being politicised. "We are multi-racial and multi-lingual. We can master many languages - why lose that advantage," he said.

The prime minister's remarks during the launch of the new education masterplan comes as his administration finds itself caught between different language groups each pushing for their own agenda.

Malaysia converted its English language medium schools to Malay medium schools in the 1970's but reintroduced English as a medium of instruction for mathematics and science in 2003.

This was again overturned in 2009 in what many perceived to be an effort to placate both Malay and Mandarin hardline groups. Malaysia currently offers public education in three languages — Malay, Mandarin and Tamil — while English language education remains the preserve of those wealthy enough to send their children to private schools.

Language in education is often contested on political rather than academic grounds in Malaysia, with both Malay and Mandarin advocate groups in the past threatening backlashes at the polls if their language demands were not met.

The Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) meanwhile said yesterday that abolishing the option of giving children the option to learn science and mathematics in English — the lingua franca of the two subjects — could be severe, including a continued decline in the interest in science.

Najib said that the issue of education must transcend politics and political parties.

"We must ensure every child regardless of place and race can reach their God given potential if they are willing to work for it," he said. "To ensure a bright future, leaders need the moral fortitude to depoliticise education and make decisions for the sake of the children and not for populist reasons."

The prime minister also stressed that nobody has a monopoly on knowledge and the era of "government knows best" was over.

"I invite all Malaysians to give their input on the plan," he said.

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