

**By : DATUK SERI SYED HAMID ALBAR**  
**Venue : RIVIERA BAY RESORT, MELAKA**  
**Date : 15 MAY 2000**  
**Title : MILLENNIUM MICELT (MALAYSIA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING)**

*"ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN MALAYSIA: LEARNING FROM LESSONS FROM THE PAST, FORGING TRACKS FOR THE FUTURE"*

ENCIK JAYAKARAN MUKUNDAN

CHAIRMAN, MILLENNIUM MICELT

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

1. I WISH TO THANK MICELT FOR INVITING ME TO ADDRESS THE MILLENNIUM MALAYSIA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING THIS MORNING.

2. WHEN MALAYSIA ACHIEVED INDEPENDENT, ENGLISH LANGUAGE WAS AN IMPORTANT LANGUAGE IN OUR COUNTRY. ALL MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS USED ENGLISH AS THEIR MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION. IT WAS THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE AND ALSO THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY THE ELITES AND THE MIDDLE CLASS MEMBERS OF SOCIETY. INDEED ENGLISH IS NOT A STRANGE OR ALIEN LANGUAGE TO MALAYSIANS, IT IS JUST A QUESTION OF STANDARD OR LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY THAT IS OFTEN DEBATED AMONGST US.

3. AS AN INDEPENDENT NATION WE NEED TO HAVE AN IDENTITY OF OUR OWN. A SENSE OF PRIDE THAT WE ARE NOT A CONTINUATION OF OUR COLONIAL PAST. IT IS FOR THIS REASON THAT WE DECIDED TO HAVE A NATIONAL LANGUAGE OF OUR OWN, WHICH IS INDEGENOUS TO OUR COUNTRY. AT THE SAME TIME PRAGMATIC ENOUGH TO RECOGNISE THE ROLE OF ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE - IMPORTANT TO INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND COMMERCE, AS WELL AS FOR THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE EVER CHANGING AND DYNAMIC WORLD.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

4. LOOKING BACK AT HISTORY, WE CANNOT DENY THAT WITH COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM THE LANGUAGES OF INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS WILL FACE A STRONG COMPETITION FOR ITS SURVIVAL. IN MANY COUNTRIES, IT TOTALLY REPLACED THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES. HOWEVER IN MALAYSIA, THE LANGUAGE OF THE INDIGENOUS POPULATION, MALAY, HAD COMPETED WITH ENGLISH AND SURVIVED. NEVERTHELESS, ENGLISH REMAINED POPULAR EVEN AFTER

INDEPENDENCE. THE UPPER CLASS STRATA OF MALAYSIANS EDUCATED THEIR CHILDREN AT ENGLISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS RUN BY THE GOVERNMENT OR MISSIONARIES. AS ENGLISH IS THE LANGUAGE OF TRADE AND COMMERCE, THOSE EDUCATED IN ENGLISH, HAD BETTER MARKET ACCEPTANCE, ESPECIALLY IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR. THEY WERE ABLE TO SECURE BETTER PAID JOBS. DURING THE EARLY PART OF OUR INDEPENDENCE THE MALAYSIAN SOCIETY WAS DIVIDED ALONG MARKED RACIAL LINES, AND EVEN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES COULD CLEARLY BE IDENTIFIED WITH ETHNICITY. WE NEED TO INTERGRATE OUR SOCIETY AND DEVELOP A SENSE OF BELONGING AS TRUE MALAYSIANS, IF WE WANT TO DO WELL AND SURVIVE AS A NATION. WE DID THIS THROUGH LANGUAGE AND ECONOMIC POLICIES AND WE WERE SUCCESSFUL. THE MALAY LANGUAGE PLAYED THE UNIFYING ROLE AND YET THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE WAS NOT ABANDONED.

5. THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE ACT OF 1967, GAVE THE LEGAL BASIS FOR MALAY TO BECOME THE SOLE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF THE COUNTRY. THIS WISE MOVE ALLOWED A YOUNG COUNTRY LIKE MALAYSIA TO ESTABLISH ITSELF AS A UNIFIED COUNTRY WITH MALAY AS THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE. HOWEVER, THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE WAS STILL ALLOWED TO THRIVE AS AN IMPORTANT SECOND LANGUAGE. THE 1969 TRAGEDY MADE US REALISE THAT THERE WAS STILL DEEP DIVIDE IN OUR SOCIETY. WE HAD BEEN SLOW IN USING THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF UNITY. AS PART OF SOCIO ECONOMIC POLICIES TO RESTRUCTURE OUR SOCIETY, THE GOVERNMENT EXHILARATED THE USE OF MALAY IN ALL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNMENT AIDED SCHOOLS. LET ME EMPHASISED THAT IT WAS A GRADUAL SHIFT, ONE WHICH CAUSED VERY LITTLE DISCOMFORT. BUT IT WAS A HUGE SUCCESS AND BY 1972, 89.7 % OF THE POPULATION IN WEST MALAYSIA WAS PROFICIENT IN BAHASA MALAYSIA.

6. SURPRISINGLY, SIMILAR MOVEMENTS TOWARDS THE FIRM ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL LANGUAGE STARTED VERY LATE IN COUNTRIES MUCH MORE DEVELOPED, LIKE THE UNITED STATES. LARGE NUMBERS OF HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS WERE, IN THE EYES OF ENGLISH SPEAKING AMERICANS, "ALTERING THE BALANCE OF SOCIETY", AND THERE WAS ALARM THAT ONE DAY ENGLISH MIGHT LOSE ITS LEADING ROLE. SPANISH BECAME WIDELY USED IN FLORIDA, THE SOUTH WESTERN STATES AND NEW YORK CITY. A PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT IN 1981 TO MAKE ENGLISH THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF THE UNITED STATES FAILED. AND IT WAS ONLY IN 1983 THAT AMERICAN ENGLISH WAS FOUNDED TO MOVE THE IDEA FORWARD AND TO PROMOTE ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF UNITY TO INTEGRATE US ETHNIC DIVERSITY.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

7. TODAY, THE MALAYSIAN NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY QUALIFIES AS A MODEL FOR ANY NATION ASPIRING TO USE LANGUAGE TO PROMOTE NATIONAL UNITY. IT IS PERTINENT TO NOTE WITH THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE ENGLISH IS STILL ALLOWED TO GROW AS AN IMPORTANT SECOND LANGUAGE. ENGLISH IS TAUGHT IN BOTH PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND TESTED IN PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS. IT IS ALSO AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT IN PROGRAMMES OFFERED IN ALL TERTIARY LEVEL INSTITUTIONS.

8. BAHASA MALAYSIA WAS ABLE TO REPLACE ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE FOR PARLIAMENTARY AND STATE ASSEMBLIES IN 1983. IT EVEN SUCCEEDED IN ESTABLISHING ITSELF AS THE LANGUAGE OF COURT PROCEEDINGS DESPITE MISGIVINGS FROM SOME SECTORS OF THE LEGAL PROFESSION WHO BELIEVED THAT "JUSTICE CANNOT SPEAK IN THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE".

9. THE GOVERNMENT'S NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY HAD ALLOWED BAHASA MALAYSIA TO GROW. ENGLISH ON THE OTHER HAND WAS ENCOURAGED TO CO-EXIST. IN MANY COUNTRIES HOWEVER, WE SEE THAT THE LEXICAL INVASION OF ENGLISH HAD MANAGED TO SUPPLANT LOCAL LANGUAGES LIKE CUMBRIC, CORNISH, NORN, MANX, MOST AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES AND MOST AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES.

10. IT IS CLEAR THEREFORE THAT MALAYSIA'S LANGUAGE POLICY HAD PROVIDED THE BRIDGE LINKING THE TWO LANGUAGES, BAHASA MALAYSIA AND ENGLISH. TODAY WE HAVE A STRONG NATIONAL LANGUAGE WHICH HAS UNIFIED THE DIFFERENT RACES AND ENGLISH CONTINUES TO BE WIDELY USED. WE REALISED THAT WE HAVE TO FACE THE CHALLENGE OF HAVING TO SEEK CROSS BOUNDARY ACCEPTANCE IN A FAST CHANGING WORLD WHICH IS DOMINATED IN ALL ASPECTS BY THE USE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

11. OF COURSE IT IS NOT AN EASY TASK TO ATTAIN MASTERY IN BOTH THE MALAY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES. IT IS A QUESTION OF EMPHASIS AND APPROACH THAT NEEDED TO BE PRUDENTLY PURSUED. EVENTHOUGH WE SUFFERED A DETERIORATION OF STUDENT OF ENGLISH BUT I CAN SAY THIS IS NOT THE RESULT OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY. IN PRACTICING AND PROMOTING BOTH LANGUAGES THERE IS A NEED TO STRIKE A BALANCE, EMPHASISING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE, AT THE SAME TIME GIVING DUE FOCUS ON THE PROPER USE AND TEACHING OF ENGLISH. THE DETERIORATION IN THE STANDARD OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BECAME MORE EVIDENT AS WE OBSERVE THE POOR COMMAND OF THE LANGUAGE IN BOTH THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR. CONSTANT CHANGES MADE IN THE SYLLABUS OF THE TEACHING OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HAS NOT NECESSARILY HELPED AS EDUCATORS GRAPPLE TO PREPARE MALAYSIANS IN MEETING THE DEMANDS OF ENGLISH IN VARIOUS SECTORS INCLUDING INTERNATIONAL COMMERCE, FINANCE, LAW AND IN THE DIPLOMATIC SERVICE.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

12. NAVIGATING NEW TRACKS FOR THE FUTURE WOULD MEAN ACCEPTING THE EXISTING REALITIES. THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT RECOGNISES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW WORLD DRIVEN BY TRADE AND COMMERCE. WITH GLOBALISATION AND THE SO-CALLED "BORDERLESS WORLD" AND THE ADVENT OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (CIT). IT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY CLEAR THAT THE DEMAND FOR PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH AS AN IMPORTANT MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION IN THE WORLD IS FULLY ACCEPTED AND

RECOGNISED. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT ABOUT 80% OF ALL INFORMATION IN THE WORLD ELECTRONIC RETRIEVAL SYSTEMS ARE STORED IN ENGLISH AND THAT THREE QUARTERS OF THE WORLD MAIL IS IN ENGLISH. MOST INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS CONDUCT THEIR BUSINESS IN ENGLISH. AND EVEN NATIONAL COMPANIES WITH A STRONG SENSE OF NATIONALISM LIKE SWEDEN AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA ARE INCREASINGLY CONDUCTING THEIR BUSINESS IN ENGLISH.

13. FOR MALAYSIA, THE DEMAND FOR PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH IS LIKELY TO INCREASE AS WE MOVE FROM AN ECONOMY BASED ON PRIMARY COMMODITIES AND MANUFACTURING TOWARDS ONE BASED ON HIGH TECHNOLOGY INPUT. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MULTI-MEDIA SUPER CORRIDOR (MSC), MALAYSIA'S OWN SILICON VALLEY, MAKES THE USE OF ENGLISH ALL THE MORE IMPORTANT. ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IS ALSO INCREASINGLY REQUIRED BY THE CONTINUED NECESSITY FOR MALAYSIA TO EXPORT HER PRODUCTS WORLD-WIDE. OUR OWN DOMESTIC MARKET IS SIMPLY TOO SMALL TO ABSORB ALL THAT WE PRODUCE. AND AS WE MOVE TOWARDS MAKING MALAYSIA AS THE CENTRE OF EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN THE REGION, WHICH WILL REQUIRE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MORE UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING, IT HAS BECOME OBVIOUS THAT SUCH AN OBJECTIVE WOULD NOT BE EASILY ATTAINED WITHOUT GIVING DUE WEIGHTAGE TO THE WIDER USE OF ENGLISH.

14. GIVEN THE CURRENT TREND, IT IS CLEAR THAT MANY OF THOSE WHO DO NOT HAVE ADEQUATE PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH WOULD BE DISADVANTAGED AND LOSE THEIR COMPETITIVE EDGE. IT IS NO EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT WITHOUT SUFFICIENT PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH WORKERS WILL BE UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND INSTRUCTIONS AND PROCEDURES IN THE TECHNICAL MANUALS AND MANAGERS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SELL AND MARKET THEIR COMPANIES' PRODUCTS. SIMILARLY, A DIPLOMAT WHO LACKS PROFICIENCY IN THE LANGUAGE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO OPERATE OR NEGOTIATE EFFECTIVELY TO DEFEND AND PROMOTE HIS COUNTRY'S NATIONAL INTERESTS ABROAD. INDEED, THERE IS THE DANGER OF SUCH DIPLOMATS UNABLE TO EFFECTIVELY REPRESENT HIS COUNTRY AT BOTH BILATERAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS.

15. IN ORDER TO MEET THE HIGH DEMAND OF THOSE PROFICIENT IN ENGLISH AND AVOID MALAYSIA BEING UNCOMPETITIVE IN THE MARKETPLACE, THE GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN THE NECESSARY STEP TO GIVE THE REQUIRED ATTENTION TO ENGLISH AS THE MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION. HAVING LEARNT FROM ITS EXPERIENCE, MALAYSIA SUBSCRIBE TO THE VIEW THAT THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CAN BRING BENEFIT NOT ONLY AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION BUT ALSO AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPMENT WHILST MAINTAINING AND PROMOTING BAHASA MALAYSIA OR MALAY AS THE SOLE NATIONAL AND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE. VARIOUS MEASURES HAVE BEEN ADOPTED TOWARDS THIS END. MORE SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN BUILT JUST AS MORE TEACHERS HAVE BEEN TRAINED. SIMILARLY, THE HOURS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH IN SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN INCREASED AND THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALSO EXEMPTED PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FROM USING BAHASA MALAYSIA AS THE SOLE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION.

16. INDEED, AS WE MOVE TOWARDS A HIGHER LEVEL OF INDUSTRIALISATION AND DEVELOPMENT THE STANDARD OF ENGLISH THAT WE ASPIRE FOR SHOULD AIM NOT ONLY AT THE GENERAL MINIMUM PROFICIENCY. WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE FOR A PROFESSIONAL LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY IN EVERY SECTOR. EACH PROFESSION AND INDUSTRIAL SECTOR HAS ITS OWN PECULIARITY IN THE USE OF ENGLISH AND INDIVIDUALS CONCERNED MUST ATTAIN A PROFESSIONAL LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY IF THEY ARE TO PERFORM THEIR ROLE EFFECTIVELY. INDEED WITH OUR INCREASINGLY GLOBALISED WORLD THE STANDARD OF OUR GENERAL AS WELL AS PROFESSIONAL PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH SHOULD BE ON PAR WITH ACCEPTABLE WORLD STANDARD. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE SHOULD SPEAK LIKE AN ENGLISHMAN BUT IT DOES MEAN THAT WHEN WE SPEAK OR WRITE IN ENGLISH WE CAN BE EASILY UNDERSTOOD BY OUR LISTENERS OR READERS. IT MEANS THAT WE MUST GET OUR BASIC GRAMMAR RIGHT AND THAT OUR PRONUNCIATION MUST NOT DEPART TOO FAR FROM INTERNATIONALLY ACCEPTED NORMS.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

17. WITH THESE WORDS MAY I WISH THE CONFERENCE EVERY SUCCESS.

THANK YOU.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
WISMA PUTRA  
KUALA LUMPUR

15 MAY 2000