

By : DATUK SERI SYED HAMID ALBAR
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"ENGLISH: THE GLOBAL LINGUA FRANCA"

Esteemed Educators,

Young Scholars.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As this event marks the start of UUM's English Language Month, allow me to make my remarks entirely in English. At the outset, let me express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Colonel Professor Dato' Dr. Ahmad Fawzi Mohd. Basri, Vice Chancellor of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), for extending this invitation to me to officiate the launching of the University's English Language Month here today.

2. I understand that the English Language Month will be held from 15 July to 14 August and has, as its objective, to further encourage the use of English language among the students of this University, which will, hopefully, enhance! their grasp, understanding and appreciation of the language. I laud this initiative of the University to give emphasis to English language as it is becoming all too clear and ominous that English is a language of great importance. Yet, while we may be exposed to it everyday be it in our reading of newspapers or magazines, surfing on the internet, watching television or listening to the radio – many still, unfortunately, do not have a good command of the language.

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LINGUA FRANCA

3. I am sure all present here today are aware that our Government has been encouraging the use of English language and has, in fact, embarked on some minor adjustments in the education system by introducing the use of English in the subjects of Science and Mathematics. That decision to make the change was not an easy one as language is always an emotive and sensitive issue for us Malaysians. But, the Government was of the view that this change was not only necessary but also vital to our ability to keep pace and move ahead in the fast changing world that we live in today.

4. The hardliners greeted the move to use more English in the selected subjects with a chorus of criticisms and accusations, questioning the real agenda of the Government. These hardliners had in the beginning missed a central point of the

current debate that, whether we like it or not, English has become the global lingua franca. In other words, English has emerged as the dominant language of today's world. The issue was not to over emphasise the use of English as against the use of Bahasa Malaysia, but rather, to strive to be in touch and able to compete with the rest of the world, while at the same time, remain strong defenders of our own national language.

5. Let me relate to you my job in the line of diplomacy and international relations as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the past, French was said to be the language of kings and diplomats; but it has now however, been taken over by the English language. At the United Nations and in many multilateral and bilateral meetings and negotiations, English is used extensively. That is similarly the case with many other international meetings that I attend in the course of each calendar year. Negotiations, discussions and lobbying at these meetings requires our diplomats to be proficient in the English language. If we are not up to mark, we will not be effective in putting forth the country's positions and interests at the international fora, and we will loose out. International trade too is predominantly conducted in English. More international media use English to get their message across. Even the French, who are proud of their language, are required to use English when their air traffic controllers give and receive instructions. In fact, as usually happens when speaking with those from other countries, people fall back to English as the common language if they cannot understand each other's language. English has not only taken over as the main language in diplomacy but also in many other facets of life.

6. More than anything else, English has developed to become the language of knowledge. Most of today's books, manuals, medical or technical skills, law review, journals and news use English as their primary medium. In this Information Age, information and the knowledge needed for us to develop further are found more in materials written in English. If we hope to wait for them to be translated into our own language, before we could benefit from them, it will take a long time and will result in Malaysia lagging behind. The building of barriers against wider use of the English language, I would add, would only be to our detriment. Therefore, the sooner we recognise and accept that English has become the global language the better it is for us. There is at present no other viable alternative. We have to master the language so that we can develop our own individual capacities and this should, in turn, contribute towards Malaysia's continued acceleration towards a developed country status by the year 2020 as envisioned by the Government. And it is not only Malaysia that realises this. Developed countries with a long tradition of industrialisation and that had no linkage to the English language such as Germany and Japan have made a similar shift. A casual look at countries in the region will also tell us that the likes of Thailand, Indonesia and Viet Nam, for instance, have recognised the need for proficiency in the English language. China, with an economy that is poised to reach greater heights, is fast turning to English. These are all our present and future competitors – out for a slice of the ever decreasing foreign direct investments with incentives including modern infrastructures and skilled labour force that is also able to communicate in the English language. We should worry that Malaysia has everything to lose if we do not act to arrest and consolidate our comparative advantage over our competitors.

THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS AT ENCOURAGING THE USE OF ENGLISH

7. It is in the Government's objective that the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English at national schools will be expanded over time to include all grades and levels of our education system. Despite opposition and concerns raised by various groups - from the teaching unions to school parent associations to nationalists and language rights groups – most, if not all, have begun to accept and recognise that a strong emphasis on English should not lead to the neglect of Bahasa Malaysia, our national language and the many other languages and dialects of our people. The teaching of English in Science and Mathematics is in fact, a clear and definite step towards making Malaysians more competitive in the global economy and environment.

8. You would agree, that our country has made tremendous progress, particularly in its economic development since Independence. We were once relying only on primary products and commodities. We now export manufactured goods. But the fast changing trends will only enable countries to move ahead and develop through the acquisition of a knowledge-based economy. To achieve this, we need people who are abreast and able to use the latest information, technology, and skills. The competitive, globalised world of today accepts no excuse and will be unkind to those who lack knowledge. Let me stress again that English is the one language that will enable us to acquire the knowledge and information. And, it is not only knowledge or information that will make a difference but also the speed at which the information is acquired and acted upon which prove just as crucial to our survival.

9. While the Government has begun the minor change in the education system using the English language in the teaching of Science and Mathematics Bahasa Malaysia will not lose its foremost position and will continue to be our national language, the language of pride of all our people. The Government has made clear that Bahasa Malaysia and the other vernacular languages will not be neglected and will continue to be the languages with deserved places in our national character. More usage English does not necessarily mean less importance placed on our own languages, but it does mean that the country will have citizens who can compete both within the country and globally. Through better proficiency and mastery of English, we will have citizens who can lead Malaysia's development in the future, and ensure that our country can remain an important player on the global scene.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE MONTH

10. I commend UUM for launching the English Language Month. Your efforts will no doubt benefit the whole University community from lecturers, to students, and the people around them.

11. I encourage the students to take advantage of this opportunity to use English more in your daily studies, work and life. Using English more will make you more confident of the language, and will be a good foundation when you join the labour force upon your graduation. We have found that many of our graduates are unable to effectively compete for jobs due to a lack of proficiency in English. My advice to you is, do not shy away from speaking English. Make mistakes as you develop your confidence in using English. It is after all not our mother tongue. But, if you have the will and the motivation to want to be better and fluent in English, there is no better way than to immerse yourself in everything English. If you find yourself in difficulty, searching for the right words to use, or not being sure of the correct phrase or sentence, do not be discouraged - double your efforts. Look it up in the dictionary, read English language books, and ask those who are proficient in the language. I am confident, that as young scholars and the future leaders of our country, it will not prove too difficult for you to have a better command of the language.

CONCLUSION

12. I wish all of you the best in your endeavours. It is my hope that all of you will make this English Language Month a success, and become an example to others that mastering English does not make one any less a Malay, Chinese or Indian. We have all to gain. The challenges and demands placed on the country in this era of globalisation demands that young, educated and informed future leaders of the country like all of you do your part in making this a reality. Your acceptance into this prestigious University is proof enough that you have it in you to make a difference. So, my call to you is to pick up the language and do not be disheartened if your grasp is not what it should be at the beginning. You can change that. Your destiny and that of the country is what you make of it.

Thank you.

Strategic Planning Division
Wisma Putra
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