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Clear need for English proficiency

LETTERS

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I REFER to the report "Yong: English is key for M'sia to remain competitive" (*The Star*, March 6) on the role played by Tan Sri Yong Poh Kon as co-chairman of Pemudah together with the previous Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Sidek Hassan, to improve the administrative machinery in delivering services to the public. The results of their work can be seen today in several government departments where renewal of passports, licences and permits are much more efficient, giving Malaysia a good name for ease in doing business.

Gone are the days when people had to start queuing at 5am at the Immigration Department or Road Transport Office to get the transactions done by lunch time so they could get back to work. And the civil servants today are more courteous and helpful.

As a successful businessman and industry leader, Yong made many contributions to public policy. During my time in the civil service, we had frequent discussions with him, especially when he was president of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers. He participated actively during the National Economic Consultative Council (NECC) meetings in late 1990 on the post NEP economic planning. It was the time when globalisation was becoming a reality with the Internet emerging to make the world borderless, flatter and less round. He and other private sector representatives drew attention on the need to adopt policies that would make Malaysia resilient and competitive both at home and externally. The NECC recommendations emphasised strongly on human resource development to prepare the country for the globalisation trends sweeping the world economy.

It was also reported that Yong stressed in his recent talk at the Star Media Group's "Power Talks Business Series" on the importance of English proficiency as we face an increasingly competitive environment.

Yong has been a strong supporter of Parent Action Group For Education (PAGE) under the leadership of Datin Azimah Rahim and Tunku Munawirah, my colleagues in G25. They and others worked closely with Pemandu and the Education Ministry on the Dual Language Programme (DLP) and the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) for schools to teach selected subjects in English and to use it daily in school activities. The DLP works on the principle of parents' own choice on what the schools should teach their children. Many schools have taken up the choice of teaching some subjects in English, indicating a strong desire among parents for their children to be taught in both languages.

One of the greatest educationists is Tan Sri Arshad Ayub. He has a clear vision that proficiency in English is indispensable for a successful career. Arshad insisted from the very beginning that Universiti Teknologi Mara, which he headed, must continue teaching its professional courses in English when it started to expand in the mid-1970s. Under his leadership, the university produced thousands of Malay professionals in business-related studies, many of whom became successful in the corporate sector, contributing significantly to the NEP objective of creating a bumiputera commercial and industrial community.

The Education Ministry Blueprint 2015-2035 for raising the quality of education from primary to tertiary levels has also stressed on raising the standard of English so as to produce school-leavers and college graduates with the knowledge and skills to become productive workers to meet market demand for trainable employees. Most importantly, the ministry is introducing thinking skills in the teaching methods to produce versatile students as they progress to higher levels of education.

It is most encouraging that there is recognition from all sides that while recognising the importance of upholding Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in the national education system, we cannot ignore the utility function of English to provide us access to knowledge and communication with the world.

English is undoubtedly the language of the world and for Malaysia to be engaged in the international community, we must not fall behind other countries in its daily use.

One of the factors why Malaysia is an attractive destination for foreign direct investments is that English is widely spoken here. It is essential to raise English proficiency among the new generation of school-leavers as in this digital age, industries are looking for workers who can understand the fast-changing technologies and use them intelligently to increase their productivity and drive costs down. These are the frontier industries which employ highly-skilled talents and pay them higher than market salaries. Employers find that workers who have a good command of English have a more confident personality than those who do not have it. They are also more easily trainable than those workers who are poor in English.

The high-tech industries are mission critical; we need them for restructuring the economy from its dependence on labour-intensive methods of production, which pay low wages to keep costs down, to skill-intensive types of production which employ less labour but pay workers higher wages for their higher productivity. These high-tech industries are essential for achieving the Government's objective of increasing wage levels for the bottom 40% of the population and thereby reducing income inequalities among households in the country. As the Government has stated that it intends to raise the share of wages to a higher level of 40% of GDP compared to a low 30% now, it must give high priority to promoting skills-based industries in the manufacturing and service sectors and developing an English-educated workforce to support such industries.

Currently, there is a rural-urban divide in English proficiency. We must close this gap for economic justice and also for strengthening national unity among the races. Rural Malays must have as much chance as other races in the modern sectors of the economy. Therefore, English must be made available to all schools in the rural areas so as to equalise the opportunities for children from poor families to complete schooling with prospects for entry into tertiary education or getting the jobs of their choice in the cities.

Our education system must be equipped with the resources to ensure the success of the DLP and HIP. The schools should have well-trained teachers in both languages. In addition, they need to have facilities like libraries, science labs, drama and music lessons, debating clubs and etc. to provide quality education and develop student creativity.

While classroom teaching is basic, extra-curricula activities also have a crucial role in education. They are important for character-building and encouraging students to be socially friendly to each other. This will create the pleasant atmosphere of children from all races studying and playing together.

The spirit of national cohesiveness in and outside the classroom with the children learning and talking in both Malay and English will encourage more parents to make national schools the first choice for their children.

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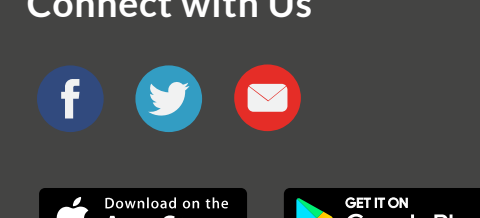
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