

‘MOVE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE A PRACTICAL ONE TO TAKE’

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Prof Datuk Khairuddin Abdul Hamid

KUCHING: Academicians have joined the voices supporting the call by Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Adenan Satem for English to be used as one of the state’s official languages apart from Bahasa Melayu (BM).

University Malaysia of Computer Science and Engineering (UniMY) vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Khairuddin Abdul Hamid said it was just a matter of practicality to expand one’s prowess to master major languages for the very survival of the nation, in view of stiff competition due to globalisation.

“Let’s be practical — we have to expand our perspective as Malaysia is a small country with only 30 million people. We have to look at ASEAN, then the Asia-Pacific region and then, at the whole world to expand our economy. But how can we achieve it if we are so narrow in our approach and perspective?

“So basically, besides having the right mind-set, we must also be able to master major languages such as English and Mandarin. By mastering these two, our future generation would be able to compete in the global workforce,” the professor told The Borneo Post.

He highlighted his tenure as vice-chancellor in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) not too long ago, where he had also emphasised the importance of English to its students, starting from the first year.

On the other hand, Unimas’ Faculty of Economics and Business senior lecturer Dr Muhammad Abdullah Zaidel opined that there was a reason behind the criticisms hurled by some Malay nationalists and Peninsular Malaysians, in that they felt the use of English as second official language in the state could impact the development of the Malay language and indigenous rights.

“(However) those groups that have been highlighting the significance of using Bahasa Melayu to instill national unity for development remain very much just rhetoric.

“I fully support the recent endorsement by the chief minister to make English a second official language for Sarawak as it will balance the importance given to the national language and at the same time, to instil national unity. English use for greater involvement in the move towards globalisation is, to my opinion, obviously recommended.”

According to Muhammad Abdullah, English has been widely understood in the Malaysian service industries and it is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools.

“It has been the main medium for lectures in our Faculty of Economics and Business, and I believe (English) is spoken in most faculties in other public and private universities in Malaysia.

“English has always been taking precedence over BM in certain official contexts, especially in Sarawak, as our chief minister had made it official that English is the second working language — for those ignorant of this, this has always been provided under our National Language Act 1967,” he said.

Muhammad Abdullah said in the context of Malaysia National Agenda, BM should be used as a ‘means of communion rather than as a means of communication’.

“Commonality of speech creates a web of connections holding our people together. BM is obviously a Malaysian identity that is to be preserved and protected. If BM were indeed under threat by adaptation of English as second official language, matters might have been different. Any honest appraisal of the situation in Malaysia must concede that it simply is not,” he stressed.

The lecturer said, without realising it, one of the national agenda aiming to create a large middle class of Malaysian ethnic indigenous, namely the New Economic Policy (NEP), had to some extent helped in the acceptance on the use of English in Malaysia.

“As an academician myself, I for one feel that adaptation of English as a second official language by Sarawak government will certainly not deprive our national agenda and as true Malaysians, we should support the move without prejudice.

“Additionally, I think today, the national agenda to inculcate nationalism through BM use has to deal with competition and the need for proficiency in English as the language for global communications, science and technology. If we only mastered BM, we could not actively move forward in the world, especially in economy.

“In a recent development, Honda Motor Company in its annual sustainability report issued in June this year announced that English would be the official language for all inter-regional communications at the Tokyo based company.”

As such, Muhammad Abdullah believed that mastering English was vital for progress as it is the international lingua franca, with much of valuable knowledge and information today in that language.

“I sincerely believe in order to not fall behind, it is necessary to have a good command of English.”

In a similar sentiment, Samarahan Walikota Dato Peter Minos opined that although some people in Kuala Lumpur were not supportive of Adenan’s move, they had no locus standi to interfere.

“Look — because of federal policy, Malaysians have lost proficiency in English. As a result, thousands of our public university graduates turn up unemployed — even locally-trained doctors are giving up. This situation would get worse if the current education policy continued.

“Yes, we need BM but we also need English to improve and survive. English is the global lingo in many fields such as commerce and industry, science, technology, diplomacy, literature and law. Without good command of English, we are like half-blind people — not knowing of many things and unsure of the future.”

For Minos, Malaysian patriotism had nothing to do with English.

“Our first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was trained in law in the UK — he attained independence for Malaya in 1957 and helped create Malaysia in 1963. I’d say he was indeed a patriot.”

Minos opined that certain quarters who criticised the move were ‘not thinking straight’.

“Those who disagree for silly reasons, let them be. Why should we allow them to hamper our progress? If the anti-English groups shout, that is their right and business — we shouldn’t be bothered by them.

“We determine our own destiny and future, and proficiency in English plays a big role in that future. CM Adenan — we are 100 per cent with you. Just proceed with your English policy — one that is the best for Sarawak.”

Minos said on behalf of Sarawakians, he resented the insinuation that implementation of English as the second official language for Sarawak would create problems.

“Quite the opposite, it will help us to go up. (There’s) no logic in thinking that English proficiency would create problems or troubles. We must not be distracted. In fact, if English became our medium of instruction, we would be the happiest.

“If there were more private English schools around, they would be full. It’s really sad and regrettable that we had almost abandoned English ever since 1971, which has brought us big problems.”

