

## **THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NATION BUILDING: A KEYNOTE ADDRESS<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

It truly gives me great pleasure to be able to share with you, this morning some of my humble thoughts on the theme of this colloquium, namely, *The Role of the English Language in Nation Building*. Before I proceed further, I must, at the outset of this session, express my thanks to the Organisers of the Colloquium for the invitation they have so kindly extended to me to be a keynote speaker.

I believe, we are gathered here, today, not so much to deliberate on the methodology of English language teaching *per se* – a subject that I do not have the right of claim to be an expert on or a specialist in; but rather, we are here to look at the topic in its broader macroscopic educational perspective. It is for this reason- for this perception on my part- rightly or wrongly- that I decided to accept the invitation without any hesitation, nor any sense of apology.

For the next half an hour or so, I plan to dwell on the subject in the following manner. I will first examine the concept of nation building by trying to look at its components or dimensions. I will not attempt to define the term “nation building” in a formal way but, hopefully, it will become evident through the examples given under various dimensions of nation building.

Subsequent to that, I will attempt to examine the role of education in nation building. Having done that, I will move to language education as such and, then narrow it down further to the Role of the English Language in Nation Building.

### **On the Notion and Dimensions of Nation Building**

Let us begin with the notion of Nation Building. Nation Building, to me, may be conceived as a phenomenon comprising a number of major dimensions. One such dimension is economic. It may be conceived of as efforts towards building the nation from an economic perspective. Under this perspective, the following may manifest:

- One, the national efforts to maximise our nation's economic productivity;
- Two, the national efforts to make our nation increasingly competitive in the open global market;
- Three, the national efforts to make our nation an attractive destination for the in-flow of foreign investments;
- Four, the national efforts to give due importance to Science and Technology in attempts to expedite scientific and technological progress in efforts to enhance industrialisation;
- Five, the national efforts to enhance the creativeness of our people as a means of creating a niche for ourselves in world markets;
- Six, the national efforts to build and further improve the infra structure so as to enhance productive economic activities.
- Seven, the national efforts, through economic means, to strive for an equitable distribution of wealth to the people consistent with the spirit of a caring society and social justice.

I have just mentioned seven kinds of efforts under the economic dimension of nation building. Let me assure you that the list is, by no means, exhaustive.

Another dimension is political. It may be conceived of as being two-fold, namely, *inter-* and *intra-*. In terms of the “inter-nation” perspective, as part of its nation building efforts, Malaysia must strive for a peaceful and harmonious co-existence with nations in the region as well as with nations of the world at large. This is increasingly important now that our globe has shrunk to become a global village. At the same time, in terms of its “intra-nation” perspective, in order to gain respect from the community of nations, and for the sake of national cohesiveness and unity, it is imperative for Malaysia to strive for a united, prosperous, healthy, democratic and peaceful nation.

Yet another dimension of nation building is socio-cultural. In its nation building effort, Malaysia attaches great importance to the development of national pride and identity. Perception and appreciation of its history and heritage- its art, literature and culture- is of paramount importance. All these naturally contribute to the emergence of its national and cultural identity. At the same time, facing the future, a nation must be able to instill in its people a sense of sharing of its future, i.e., the sharing of its “history in the making”, so to speak. This is done through the verbalisation of the national aspiration for the country. In the case of Malaysia, two things immediately come to mind, namely, the *Rukunegara* and, of late, the *Wawasan 2020*.

I have attempted very briefly to demonstrate, in a nutshell, what nation building is all about by looking at various dimensions of nation building efforts. I have mentioned only three major dimensions, namely, economic, political and socio-cultural. Again, they are by no means exhaustive; nor are they mutually exclusive.

Bearing that little note in mind, allow me to persuade you to pause for a while to look at something larger than the English Language- the subject matter of this colloquium. I propose to look at education, to begin with, and to examine its contribution towards nation building. Before proceeding further, let us admit that education is only a subset of collective factors contributing to nation building. Other factors include the economy, trade, infrastructure, the political system, international relations, race relations, conflicts and conflict resolutions, administration and management styles, national philosophy, aspiration and wisdom.

### **Contribution of Education to Nation Building**

Education, as we all understand it, contributes to nation building in two major ways. On the one hand, it is expected to maintain and sustain the well-engrained and well-established normative social and cultural practices of the society and the community. It has something to do with efforts at preservation of the *status quo*. However, this it must do in a flexible and selective way, or else, it will stifle the development of the nation in the face of the reality that no society on the globe may remain static because, as the saying goes, *the only constant about change is change itself*. The rate of such change keeps increasing over time, these days, thanks to the unprecedented progress in the development of ICT.

On the other hand, education is expected to extend the frontiers of knowledge, thereby, extending the capabilities of the nation. In terms of nation building, from the economic perspective, education is expected to provide the nation with a reservoir of able and capable human resources, education is expected to equip the people with relevant knowledge and skills.

In other words, education is expected to play a duality of roles, namely, that of preservation and that of advancement. It is expected to play the role of preserving our norms and values, and cultural practices that are unmistakably Malaysian, but it must not be done just for the sake of preservation. Rather, the end result of the mission is to ensure non-disruption and gradual transformation into eventual change. That way, smooth continuity and transition is, thereby, assumed to be assured. Of course it is true that this may not apply in all situations. There are things that come to us in a dramatic and revolutionary way. The emergence of ICT is indeed a case in point. Supposing, for a moment, all the so-called new things come to

us simultaneously and in a big way, social and cultural dislocation will result. Efforts at nation building may be adversely affected.

Therefore, there has got to be a balance of a sort between affiliation to the past that gives rise to the present and creative inroads into the future that, in part, results from the present.

The point I am trying to make is simply that the role of education in nation building is to provide the nation with an affiliation to the past in order to understand the present, and an appreciation of the present, not only with regard to where we stand, but also with regard to where other people elsewhere are, in order to best chart the future for ourselves. This is what education is all about.

Education, at various stages, translates into their respective curricula, aims at giving the nation a sense of history, a sense of national pride and identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of ownership, an obsession with a sense of achievement and progress, an obsession with knowledge and skills acquisition, a sense of unity in cultural diversity, a sense of direction for national cohesiveness and unity. Just as it enhances all these, including a sense of social justice and patriotism, education must, at the same time, attempt to eradicate a sense of selfishness, prejudice and chauvinism that threaten to break a nation.

### **Language Education in Nation Building**

It is in this overall scenario that I propose to look at language education and the role it plays. We are here talking about the role or roles of the national language, the mother tongue, the second language or languages and the foreign languages in nation building. When Malaysia- or Malaya then- attained its independence some forty-six years ago, it began from scratch, though not entirely so. It had to look at nation building, now that it had become rightfully independent. Its nation building efforts must be deliberately done with all seriousness since, due to incidents in history, it inherited the traditions of a *plural society* in Furnivall's sense of the term.

Highest on the priority list of our nation's "national building" efforts is naturally the setting up of a national system of education, hitherto non-existent, in which national unity through the moulding of a "Malayan attitude" and through a long-term plan of placing pupils of various ethnicity experience learning togetherness under the same roof. The issue of language in education was deliberately addressed for the first time.

Although the role of *Bahasa Melayu* as *Bahasa Kebangsaan* was given the prominence it deserves in the national education system, recognition was given to the role of the mother tongue in education. Education planners then did not lose sight of the importance of the English Language in our national education system and, of late, some foreign languages too have emerged to be prominent in the system. Suffice to say that language education is increasingly recognized in our national education system for the role it plays in our nation building efforts.

The role of foreign languages is recognized for the alternative "windows" these languages offer their learners, thus enabling them to access knowledge, information, skills, wisdom and civilization that are rich and useful and beneficial from the comparative perspective and also from the standpoint of the learning of new and distinct knowledge that is not found in other languages that we are familiar with. The role of the mother tongue is also recognized for its social-psychological learning rationale. *Bahasa Kebangsaan* and the English Language are given prominence in our national education system for different reasons though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

*Bahasa Kebangsaan* and the English Language are two major languages that have been assigned important roles in our national education system. Very briefly, *Bahasa Kebangsaan* is assumed to be the language for national unity and cultural identity; whereas the English Language is assumed to be the language for acquisition of knowledge, science and technology- and their roles are not mutually exclusive.

### **The Role of the English Language in Nation Building**

With that in mind, let me turn to the subject matter proper for this colloquium, namely, the role of English Language in nation building- I hasten to add- for Malaysia.

Let us go back to the three major dimensions of nation building I referred to at the onset of this address. The three dimensions, as you recall, are economic, political and socio-economic.

Under the economic dimension of nation building the role of English language consists of among many the following:

- One, to enable people to access knowledge and information found in a great number of sources throughout the world since the English Language is a major vehicle through which knowledge and information are transmitted. One has only to be at a computer in order to access knowledge and information through internet to surf various websites. The information therein contained is numerous and most current. As the nation is entering an era of the knowledge economy, the role of the English Language would be instrumental in our nation's efforts to create knowledge workers.
- Two, as I understand it, the flow of foreign investments into a country like Malaysia depends not only on the relatively low cost of labour but also on their capability to communicate in English commensurate with the position or levels of employment they occupy.
- Three, in the present ICT era, technological changes vary rapidly, so much so learning is no longer terminal but lifelong in nature. Work places also serve as learning places for the workers or employees who must keep up with the technological changes in order to remain relevant and to enhance productivity.
- Four, the role of English is further enhanced these days as Malaysia is committed to the idea of serving as a regional center or hub for educational excellence which would attract foreign students to come and study here because of quality and affordability.

Under the political dimension of nation building for Malaysia, the role of English Language complements well the role of *Bahasa Kebangsaan* in that the role of the latter is national in coverage and spread, while the former is still a language of communication in some sectors. Beyond the Malay-speaking region comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, the English Language assumes the role of diplomatic and business *lingua franca*.

The ability of our nation to participate- and be heard in numerous international fora would depend on the capability of our representative to verbalise effectively in the international *lingua franca*. Hence, the importance of the English language. In this respect, we must not lose sight of the importance of other major languages as well because in some sectors and regions of the world, these languages other than English would assume greater importance.

Lastly, let us see the role of the English Language in the socio-cultural dimension of nation building. A nation is not merely a physical area bordered by well-defined physical boundaries. A nation must have a "soul" of its own, consisting of its heritage, its body of cultural expression, its literature that mirrors sorrows and happiness in the everyday life of the society according to the time and history. All these manifest in a few languages spoken and written by various groups in the country. However, the greater extent of this heritage is found in the national language of any given country. The role of the English language here, at best is to complement and supplement but never to substitute or compete with the socio-cultural role that has been well entrenched in the national language.

The role of the English language in the socio-cultural dimension of nation building is plenty.

- One, it should help enrich the national language borrowing of scientific terms and expression
- Two, it should lend itself to supporting programmes of Malay-English and English-Malay translation, thereby, helping improve the Malay language and at the same time enhancing mutual understanding between users of the two languages in terms of precision of meaning in both languages.
- Three, through the translation of works in English into Malay, and vice-versa, there will be cultural and literacy enrichment on both sides.

I thank you for your great patience in listening to this address. To sum up, I have tried to explore the theme of this colloquium, namely, The Role of the English Language in Nation Building in the way that I personally understand it. I began by examining the notion of nation building in terms of dimension within the development perspective. I then attempted to look at the role of education in nation building efforts. It is in this educational context of nation building that I then focused on the role of English language. Indeed, it is true that the English language has certain roles to play in Malaysia's nation building efforts.

I wish you success in your meaningful deliberation in the colloquium for the rest of the day. May this colloquium serve as a good launch for your international conference that will follow.