



## **‘Relook proficiency policy’**

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THE English language is an undeniable force to reckon with.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman stressed the value of having a strong command of the language in a global and regional marketplace.

Being multilingual and proficient in Bahasa Malaysia, he said, is paramount and an asset which must be taken advantage of but he questioned how the country will embrace technological changes and export its talent to a global market without mastering English.

“Many developing countries are investing to improve their command of English. English is here to stay as the language of commerce and industry, whether we accept it or not. With English, we can export our talent,” he added.

Syed Hussain pointed out that Malaysians’ command of the language has to be strong because it’s the main mode of communication today.

Many employers in Malaysia hunt jobseekers who are proficient in the language, he explained, adding that this is especially so when the former deals with regional and international clients.

If businesses in the private sector were to use interpreters or third-party translators, he said, they run the risk of losing the essence of their business deals.

As such, he said the government needs to review the national education policy and enforce strategies to enhance students’ English proficiency.

This is critical as the decreasing proficiency may jeopardise Malaysia’s ability to compete at the global marketplace. The government should take appropriate steps to enhance the teaching of English.

“In today’s global society, businesses are increasingly conducted across borders with English often being used as an international language of communication.

“The ability to use English in the workplace has a number of benefits, including building trust with colleagues and clients, building and improving international relationships through cultural understanding, enhancing skillsets and commanding a higher salary.

“The MEF also proposes that the government relook and implement the spirit of the Federal Constitution where Bahasa Malaysia is the national language, while providing special provision for the official use of English.

“The Constitution also allows (the use of) other languages an equal opportunity to grow and develop,” he said. In The Star’s report on April 3, Syed Hussain said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob is encouraging the private sector to use Bahasa Malaysia in its official communications – this follows his call for the government to use Bahasa Malaysia at international events.

StarEdu's report on the same day highlighted that while academics and the MEF backed the government's plan to promote the national language and said multilingualism is an asset in a borderless world, they called for English proficiency to be enhanced.

Universiti Teknologi Mara Academy of Language Studies senior lecturer Peter Francis said oral communication skills are vital for students' academic success and in meeting future job market demands. In the current competitive job market climate, he said students must not only excel in their academic achievements, but also acquire oral communication skills in English to enhance their learning and future employability prospects.

He recommended several initiatives that lecturers could implement to improve their students' command of the language (see infobox).

Similarly, Syed Hussain expounded that English is used for a variety of purposes, including in meetings and negotiations, writing reports, giving presentations and in social situations.

Being able to communicate and negotiate successfully with clients who speak the language makes this skill among employees more attractive to companies that conduct business internationally.

His sentiments were reflected in a 2013 study titled "Needs Assessment of Workplace English and Malaysian Graduates' English Language Competency", which revealed that 96.5% of the 295 respondents from 14 industry sectors said English language competency at the workplace is important.

Meanwhile, 49.5% of the respondents said their organisations provided in-house training programmes to enhance employees' English proficiency, and 83.7% said they would require graduates to sit for an English competency certification test to certify graduates' proficiency level.

### **The dominant language**

**English will be the dominant language for the foreseeable future, Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) president Dr Ramesh Nair said.**

**Students who are proficient in the language, he said, will have an added advantage when pursuing their studies at higher education institutions and subsequently, when entering the job market.**

**"This is true in Malaysia. English is the language of business and commerce, and countries which depend on foreign investment will need to claim that they have a workforce which is proficient in English. "For this reason, countries such as Malaysia and Singapore have language policies in place which encourage the learning of English.**

**"However, there needs to be political will to ensure that the policies are translated into action," he said, adding that such policies are easily politicised because language and identity are closely intertwined. A person can only become proficient in a language, he explained, when there are opportunities to use that language in the real world.**

**"There needs to be more conversations about how the use of both English and Bahasa Malaysia are accepted in a variety of settings, rather than continuous attempts to compartmentalise languages for specific purposes. "This way, our policies would appear more consistent with practice. Unfortunately, there is far too much evidence which reveals that we have not been successful in ensuring that those leaving our schools and universities have attained the desired proficiency in English. "Clearly, more needs to be done to address this because Malaysia's economic growth is closely tied to having a workforce which is proficient in the English language."**

**Institutions, however, should not wait for directives on addressing issues related to poor command of English among graduates and should act on it themselves.**

**Ramesh, who is also a senior research fellow at Universiti Teknologi Mara Accounting Research Institute, said it is a common complaint from industry that university graduates are not proficient in English, despite completing their degrees with English as the medium of instruction. “Universities should have experts who are able to ensure their graduates meet the expectations of potential employers.**

**“The reforms in English language education, which have been taking place in our schools, require universities to critically examine how they have been supporting students in improving their English language proficiency.**

**“This is vital to ensure our graduates are able to meet the expectations of their future employers,” he added.**

Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Languages, Literacies and Translation dean Prof Dr Salasiah Che Lah said English is widely used in business, commerce, trade, technology and sciences.

In addition to the ability to speak in one’s mother tongue and national language, she said speaking fluently in English provides better career opportunities.