

Good English still target

Najib says national objective remains unchanged but methods vary

■ By Hamidah Atan
news@nst.com.my

PUTRAJAYA: The national objective of enhancing the mastery of English among Malaysians remains unchanged and will "forever remain the same", Datuk Seri Najib Razak said yesterday.

"Only this time, the methods vary," the prime minister said, adding that the government's policy on English remained untouched.

He said English would continue to be given prominence for the future of the country and people, adding that the use of Bahasa Malaysia in teaching Science and Mathematics did not mean that English was unimportant.

"We still uphold the same objectives as we realise how important it is to have a good command of the (English) language," he told newsmen after chairing the Small and Medium Industries Development Corporation meeting at the Prime Minister's Department yesterday.

Najib said the government could reinforce the process of teaching and learning English by extending learning hours of the language, having better and more experienced teachers and enhancing existing infrastructure and facilities such as language laboratories.

Given time, Najib said, the decision would enable the government to require a pass in English in order to obtain the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia certificate.

"Like what (Education Minister and Deputy Prime Minister) Tan Sri Muhyiddin (Yassin) has said, we might make (a pass in) English compulsory at the SPM level.

"All this will augment our commitment and sensitivity to the importance of having a good command of English so that we can compete in this era of globalisation," said Najib, who is also the finance minister.

Najib said English Literature would also be introduced as "this is better than teaching and learning the two subjects (Science and



“ We might make (a pass in) English compulsory at the SPM level. ”

Datuk Seri Najib Razak

Mathematics) in English.”

He stressed that the goal was ultimately to enhance proficiency and mastery of English, something essential for the country and Malaysians in a globalised world.

On calls by the Parents Action Group for Education (Page) for schools to be given the option to teach the two subjects in English or Bahasa Malaysia, Najib said the suggestion would be referred to the Education Ministry.

"Let them assess if it is viable for consideration," he said.

Najib also said longer "contact hours" between English teachers and students was a proposal studied by previous Education Minister Datuk Seri Hisbammuddin Hussein and professionals.

"They came up with this proposal that we should go on the basis of longer contact hours in English and introduction of English Literature as the best route to be proficient and, eventually, to mastering the language."

Najib noted that only about eight per cent of teachers had enough confidence to teach the Science and Mathematics in English when the policy, also known by its abbreviation PPSMI, was in place.

"So, in reality, it is not really happening the way we wanted it."

He also said the question of critical allowances now paid to teachers teaching the two subjects in English would be another issue that the government would have to handle.

On the use of Bahasa Malaysia in the world of academia, he said those using the language in the past had also become doctors and entered other professional fields.

"So, this is not really a problem, as with many doctors who went through their education in Bahasa Malaysia, right up to university level. The doctors, from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for instance, are really good. There is no question of their quality being affected by the use of Bahasa Malaysia."

Najib also said the software and computers used during the PPSMI period would not be totally abandoned. "We are looking at a similar transfer in terms of policy change."

On disappointment expressed by former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the government's decision to stop using English to teach the subjects, he gave an assurance that the objectives remained the same.

"We still uphold the importance of English for the country. Only this time the methods are differ-

Steps to enhance English usage

- Extending learning hours of the language
- Having qualified and experienced teachers
- Enhancing existing infrastructure and facilities such as language laboratories
- Introducing English as a must-pass subject in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination in future
- Introducing English Literature as a subject

ent. That is all."

Dr Mahathir, who had mooted PPSMI in 2003, had expressed dismay over the decision to revert, saying he was sad over the future of young people who would find it harder to master Science and Mathematics.

Dr Mahathir had also said that it was the implementation, and not the policy itself, that should be blamed.

He had also added that the meeting between him and Muhyiddin and ministry top brass on Monday on the matter was purely a briefing and not a consultation.

On the PPSMI poll conducted by Dr Mahathir on his blog to gauge feedback towards the government's decision, Najib said it was difficult for any decision relating to education to receive unanimous acceptance.

"There are bound to be those who agree and those who disagree but, in this respect, the government has taken the best decision for the future of our students."

"This is a decision that will drive our students forward and provide them the opportunity to enhance their command of English while not hindering the development of Bahasa Malaysia as a knowledge language," he said.