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Do not belittle Bahasa Malaysia

I REFER to the remarks of Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim of the Parent Action Group for Education on the PPSMI (Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English) policy ("It's the language of knowledge" — NST, Nov 18) and her conclusion that Bahasa Malaysia is not the language of knowledge and not the language of Science and Mathematics.

First, when Islam was spread by ulama and the *pendakwah* throughout the Malay world (the Malay peninsula and the archipelago), were they using the Arabic language or the Malay language? It is the latter, of course, and yet Noor Azimah says Bahasa Malaysia is not the language of knowledge.

The Malay language during the 15th century Malacca Empire was the language of court (*bahasa istana*), the language of literature and philosophy (*bahasa persuratan*), the language of Islam, the language of commerce (*bahasa perdagangan*), the language of diplomacy, and last but not least, the

lingua franca of this part of the world. European travellers admitted then that the Malay language was the language of knowledge, with a position equalling that of Latin in Europe.

As to her remark that Ba-

hasa Malaysia is not the language of Science and Mathematics, I would like to point out that more than a quarter of a million students who graduated from local universities between 1970 and 2003 had their education in Bahasa Malaysia. About 40 per cent were from the science stream in the fields of engineering, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, biotechnology, etc.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia alone, which uses Bahasa Malaysia, has produced 120,000 graduates, including doctors, engineers, mathematicians, physicians and astronomers. Some have obtained master's degrees and PhDs from overseas universities. Surely, Bahasa Malaysia has not failed our country.

Also, there are thousands of theses and graduation exercises at master's and PhD levels in Science and Mathematics — produced by local graduates and written in the Malay language — available in university libraries. Is this not knowledge in the Malay language based on research work?

Noor Azimah should know that even our astronauts Datuk Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor and Dr Faiz Khaleed had their education in Bahasa Malaysia up to university level.

On the role of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), it is possible she does not know that

since 1994, translation work has not been done by DBP but by the Malaysian Institute of Translation. And we should thank DBP which has produced Science and Mathematics textbooks in the Malay language (original work and translations) which made it possible for our universities to produce the graduates mentioned above.

Noor Azimah said the growth of scientific knowledge in the Muslim world centred on Baghdad and later in Europe during the Renaissance. Who

are these Arabs who acquired knowledge available in other languages (Greek, Latin, etc)? They are the elite few researchers and scholars who formed less than one per cent of the population. When they disseminated this knowledge in the Arab world or developed them, they did so in the Arabic language and not in a foreign language.

Those Europeans who acquired knowledge from the Arab world brought back this knowledge, translated it and disseminated it in their own native language (German, French, etc) and not by asking their schoolchildren to master the Arabic language. Acquiring new scientific knowledge and discovery is the work of those who have higher-level qualifications (masters' and PhDs)

and not those at the primary or secondary school levels.

Surely, English is important and I admit that most of the texts at university level are still in English. But from my 30 years' experience as a lecturer in a local university, I know that almost all students who enter university have acquired adequate fluency in English and do not face any problem understanding textbooks in English. Their skill may be lower in oral communication, and for this, they need regular practice. They will gradually improve in a working situation.

Similarly, thousands of Malaysian students who had their education in the Malay medium since the early 1970s have been sent overseas for further studies. They were not failures because of a lack of competence in the English language. And these students did not go through the PPSMI scheme between 2003 and 2009.

So please do not underestimate our students' capability and the standard of English taught at our schools, though admittedly there's room for improvement. The government's new policy is doing just this.

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