

‘English proficiency a must’

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NATION

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PETALING JAYA: Jobseekers and undergraduates should include improving their English proficiency in their New Year resolutions if they are aiming for a better future and career path.

This is because proficiency in English is among the top five skills that employers look for when hiring, a study by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) has found.

Its president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman said it was an important finding from the 2021 MEF Salary Survey for Executives and Non-Executives.

“From the survey, the top five skills that employers place importance on when it comes to newly-hired graduates were oral and written communication, critical thinking, English proficiency, interpersonal skills and flexibility or adaptability skills.

“For the advancement of knowledge and continuous learning, and to establish a better career path, it is necessary for employees to acquire English proficiency,” he said yesterday.

Syed Hussain noted that those with good English language skills enjoy greater career benefits, including higher starting salaries, faster progression through job grades, better salary increases and more opportunities for global postings or assignments.

Educationist Tan Sri Dr T. Marimuthu said our interdependent world has progressed so much with the Industrial Revolution 4.0, robotic and digitalisation advancement that “we need to communicate in a language that the world can understand”.

As an export-oriented nation that relies on foreign direct investments (FDIs), he said Malaysians, in general, need to have language skills that can “influence others”.

“Most knowledge is produced in English. If we neglect English, we are doing it at our peril,” he said.

One’s language proficiency, he noted, has nothing to do with patriotism or loyalty to the country.

“This is very negative thinking that also gives a wrong impression to the younger generation.”

While every country should have its national language, he said it was sad that English was devalued in schools when the medium of instruction was changed to Malay in the late 1970s.

“There is no doubt we need to uphold our national language, but we shouldn’t have neglected the teaching of English in schools.

“Because of our nationalism, the pendulum has swung to one side.

“I feel sad to see our students struggle with English now,” he said.

Marimuthu argued that even political leaders should learn how to speak proper English.

“Otherwise, it gives a bad impression during international meetings or conferences,” he added.

Weighing in, former ambassador Datuk Noor Farida Mohd Ariffin said Malaysian politicians should have shown wisdom and be practical.

Quoting one of India’s former prime ministers, she said, “Why give up something that we already have?”, in reference to the country retaining English as the medium of instruction in schools.

“The lack of English proficiency has impacted our competitiveness at the global level as well as in attracting FDIs.

“Some Malay politicians, in particular, have used language, race and religion to justify their ‘Ketuanan Melayu’ policy.

“They don’t seem to realise that English is an international language and that proficiency in English would put our country at an advantage economically and in the international arena.

“This has resulted in a brain drain for us.

“Many Malaysian professionals have migrated abroad mainly for the sake of their children’s education,” she added.

Noor Farida, who served five years at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, said that she and many other Malaysians there would never have had the opportunity if their English was not good.

“People who possess proficiency in English have greater career opportunities whether at home or abroad.

“In the civil service, officers lacking in English skills are at a disadvantage when they attend international meetings or conferences, or even bilateral meetings with other countries.

“Let’s not forget that English is also the language used at Asean meetings,” she added.

Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim pointed out that our English proficiency has declined over the years.

“In the pursuit of a Malaysian identity through the Malay language, we lost focus on the English language, neglected it and allowed it to deteriorate to the level it is now.

“Without a doubt, every Malaysian should be able to converse in the Malay language with ease and confidence.

“However, no language should lose emphasis as a result of that belief.

“Neither is it a zero-sum game,” she said, adding that even China has adopted English as it forges ahead in becoming a global superpower.

To succeed at work and in life, Noor Azimah said English proficiency is vital, as even contracts and agreements are generally drafted in English.

Calling on Malaysians to take some politicians’ rhetoric “with a pinch of salt”, she said younger Malaysians should not just rely on the school system to learn English.

“Instead, do it at your own pace in any way you can.

“Practise until you are confident and can stand on a pedestal,” she added.