



The writer receiving a 'watakah' appointment as a member of the International Council of Malay Language, representing Russia, from Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in 2014. - Pic courtesy of writer

Recent statements by the prime minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, intended to raise the profile of the Malay language seem very timely.

I myself have always emphasised in many interviews that the language policy in the country should be more consistent.

It is not only about the status of Malay as a national language, but also about the preservation of traditional Malay culture, which is closely related to the language.

Malay is one of the most beautiful languages in the world and is able to serve all the needs of communication between countries and between people effectively.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka works with language institutions in Indonesia and Brunei to create and standardise millions of terms in various fields. But more and more subjects at universities are being taught in English.

The main reason is the desire to increase the international ratings of universities, because the more foreign students and lecturers at universities, the higher the ratings. However, foreign students and foreign lecturers rarely speak Malay.

Once, at a conference, I was at the same table with Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the then deputy prime minister and education minister. During a break, he asked me how Russia resolved the issue of language with foreign students.

I told him that all foreign students, with the exception of those who come to study medicine, first have to take an intensive course in Russian for a year.

They go to class and listen to lectures in Russian together with local students. It was so in the Soviet Union (an example is Pramoedya Ananta Toer's brother, Koesalah Soebagyo Toer, who became a brilliant translator of Russian classical literature in Indonesia), and now in Russia.

Apply it in Malaysia as it is worth it — towards the preservation of Malay as an intermediary language in higher education institutions here.

And, the education in Malay is very important because understanding science in the mother tongue is more effective.

The people are talking more and more about the internationalisation of Malay. Much progress has been made in this field.

More foreigners are mastering the Malay language because they think it will help them understand the mentality of Malaysians and deal with them better (especially in the business sector).

One reason driving this is the increasing prestige and position of Malaysia on the world stage. Isn't the spread of the English language related to the economic strength of the United States?

So the stronger the country, the stronger the position of its language. All the more reason to make Malay a second official language of Asean.

Malay has been the lingua franca in Southeast Asia since ancient times, used nowadays as a communication tool as well in Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore. It is even the official language in Singapore, together with English, Mandarin and Tamil.

There is rich literature in Malay, including masterpieces, such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, which has been translated into several foreign languages including Russian.

In that regard, there needs to be continuous effort to strengthen the position of the Malay language and measures to internationalise languages must be supported by a more consistent domestic language policy.

What steps should be taken to develop the Malay language so that it is comparable with other world languages, especially English?

First of all, return to the name of the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) as enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution. Abroad, people are confused by the term Bahasa Malaysia.

Second, use the language in all areas. Every government employee, including ministers, must use the Malay language at all levels.

In 1977, the prime minister of Papua New Guinea, Michael Somare, used the national language of Tok Pisin during a visit to Japan with two translations: from Tok Pisin into English and from English into Japanese.

Of course, he knows English but wanted to show his national identity. An example to follow! I'm glad that the Malaysian prime minister emphasised this point in recent speeches, too.

The role of radio and television is important to spread the correct and pure Malay language. There are times when radio and television announcers wrongly pronounce Malay words, especially those borrowed from English.

In general, the recipe for preserving and expanding the Malay language is very simple: speak, write and read in Malay, and be proud of it!