

## COMMENT

# Learning Malay via other languages

**FUN WAY:** Reading classical or modern works of translation can help one master the national language

**I**F one masters a knowledge discipline, a field of study, the knowledge corpus belongs to the person, not to any other. Arguments are often made that because the person belongs to an ethnic group, religion or nation, then the body of knowledge constitutes the wealth of that nation or ethnic group.

If one masters a language, the language belongs to the one who masters it. Language mastery begins typically with the mastery of the mother tongue, the national language, other languages in the community and international languages.

God endows humans with the

capacity to master more than one language. Mastery of dialects and languages makes a person bilingual, trilingual or multilingual.

A person is a coordinate bilingual if the competences in the two or more languages are equal, in speaking or writing. Language mastery can be subordinate, when the level or degree of mastery is unequal, meaning that the level of the person's mastery of the language learned is at lesser competence and performance than in one's mother tongue.



**Prof Datuk Dr Ibrahim Bajunid**  
is Deputy Vice-Chancellor of INTI Laureate International Universities

Conversion to a religion means a person must lose original faith, and change the total ways of life. Unlike religious conversion, mastering a language which is not the mother tongue is about gaining, not losing, the tools of thoughts and expressions and knowledge of other cultures, through other means of perceptions. One can still go about blissfully speaking one's own language or dialect.

There is no reason to hate somebody else's language. There is no

reason to hate or fear international languages like Spanish, French, Mandarin, Russian, German, Arabic or English. Mastering another language adds to one's personal assets. If Malaysians are not multilingual, it means that language resources are unutilised, and unmaximised. Attitudes towards other languages change when we master those other languages.

One New Year resolve as we approach the future is for Malaysians to be strong bilinguals and trilinguals with positive attitudes towards language learning. All Malaysians can use the Malay language which has been the lingua franca for millions, for centuries and is the unrivalled medium of national unity.

To discover, rediscover the Malay language and its various functions, and contribute to its growth, increases the linguistic wealth of a person and simultaneously increases the wealth of the language. Malay can really be fun to learn, at bus stops, markets, talk shows, and all domains of interactions, adding to the pleasures of learning the varieties of Malay wit and humour beyond scholarly High Malay.

As every Malaysian becomes at

least bilingual or trilingual and at best multilingual, people do not have to be abashed or apologetic to use the national language.

There are many ways of inviting people to learn and accept Malay. The normal or traditional way is to get people to learn the language itself. A non-traditional way is to get learners of the language to learn to translate. Yet another way is to get people to learn the Malay language through other languages, through classical or modern works of translations.

There are now enough important books on Malay literature which have been translated into English. As people learn Malay literature in English, they will learn the history, culture, economics, and politics of Malaysian society.

Simultaneous with the learning of the best of Malay works in English, there can be mastery of language through the competence of translations into English. In fact, as more works are translated into other languages, the Malay-Indonesian language can be learned through those other languages.

There are learners ready to learn Malay (and English) as well as their own languages through great

works of translations. If such non-traditional initiatives in language learning are taken, then multilingual Malaysia could be the leader in ensuring that mankind uses the fullest of linguistic and creative potentialities. A polyglot world would ensure networks of communication possibilities among the peoples of the world and, hopefully, foster global peace.

The core principle of the learning would, of course, be translation. With the assistance of learning technologies, translation would be fun. The advancement of knowledge and the world of translation exist only when there are people who are bilinguals or multilingual.

Today Malay has over a million words coined in all disciplines of knowledge. With an increasingly strong culture of translations, the Malay language is now positioned and capable to move from literary creativity to scientific and technological creativity.

As this is done, the reality, as acknowledged by writer James Collins, is that "Malay is a World Language of the Ages". (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 1996).

[iabaiw@yahoo.com](mailto:iabaiw@yahoo.com)