

UMS, institute continue to protect, preserve mother tongues in Sabah

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KOTA KINABALU: Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) continue their joint effort to protect and preserve the various types of mother tongue in Sabah.

This collaboration was made official through a second Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) renewal signing at the UMS chancellery building here on Thursday, which aims to foster productive research and cooperation, expand educational opportunities, and strengthen the indigenous communities and languages of Malaysia, including Sabah.

SIL executive director Dr Timothy Philips said most of the languages in Sabah are considered endangered, partly due to the communities' small size, but also partly due to a break in the generational transmission of language such as when parents stop speaking the native language to their children which allows them no chance to learn it. Among the languages in Sabah that are very close to going extinct due to these factors are the Dumpas and Bokon.

"One of the things that we can do with UMS is to document these languages. As communities start to realise that they are losing their language, there is a chance that they can recover them through documentation should such a thing occur in the

future.

"This has been done in the Maori languages in New Zealand where the languages had started to disappear but they had enough documentation that they were able to revitalise them.

"Now, I would rather see languages rescued before they get to that point but regardless, documentation is always a good thing - it's good for academics and good for the university to publish about the languages in Sabah," he told reporters after the MoU signing ceremony.

Timothy said UMS as a premier university in Sabah attracts students from various ethnic tribes who either speak their mother language or their ancestors such as their grandparents do, and these students can be the key resource in instilling the passion of preserving their languages, especially since language is closely tied to culture and to lose it would be to lose a large part of a tribe's identity.

He said a person's language embodies everything that is important to them, adding that even when travellers pass through the Kota Kinabalu airport, they are greeted by a beautiful mural depicting people from the dozens of ethnic tribes in Sabah, and anyone who has any experience of the state cannot conceive of a Sabah without its rich variety of peoples and languages, nor should they need to.

"And so, we would like to foster a pride in the language,



Timothy (third right) and Kasim (third left) taking a commemorative picture after the MoU signing.

but not to the exclusion of other languages. When multilingual education is done well, the students can learn more languages and can learn them better than if they just learn in one language, so I see that SIL can help out UMS through its students and its commitment to excellence and research, and we are proud to be working with the university in its efforts to serve the people of Sabah and the nation of Malaysia by helping preserve its languages," he said.

Timothy stressed that SIL's collaboration with UMS is not just an academic exercise as the ultimate product of linguistics is to strengthen the languages to be used in language development not only through oral literature but also written literature.

He said for example, by using linguistics, they can transform a basically unreadable language, such as the Samai language

in West Malaysia which has 26 vowels, into a readable one by creating new alphabets or symbols to denote certain sounds which fit the language, where as soon as one knows how to pronounce a word, they know how to write it, and vice versa.

Timothy also noted that there are features in Malaysian languages that have not been found anywhere else on earth, such as in Sarawak which possess a unique aspirated voiced plosive, or several languages in West Malaysia which has something called in-copy fixation - a type of reduplication where a piece of the end of a word is taken and then in-fixed at the beginning of a word, as opposed to usual reduplication which normally occurs at the beginning or end of a word where part of it is repeated.

"Hence, we need to be more

concerned about indigenous languages. According to the Sarawak Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in March last year, four tribal languages by Sarawak ethnics are now extinct, namely Seru, Pegu, Bliun and Lelak. We should prevent such an incident from happening in Sabah," he said.

Meanwhile, UMS vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Kasim Mansor said the second renewal of the MoU represents a significant milestone in UMS and SIL's ongoing and steadfast partnership.

Kasim said the anticipated areas of collaboration including joint supervision of postgraduate students, engagement of invited SIL examiners for postgraduate programmes and the delivery of invited lectures to enhance the academic experience for their students and faculties alike, and some of the languages or ethnics

to be involved in this endeavour include Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, Rungus and Sungai, adding that it is also important to delve deeper into these languages so that they can provide the youth with the knowledge on them they would not be able to obtain otherwise.

He echoed Timothy's concern on several ethnic languages in Sabah, in which there are more than 43 overall in the state, which face risk of extinction, especially in this newer generation which does not utilise its mother tongue in daily conversations, pointing out the need for more concerted efforts to preserve these languages such as through carrying out researches, implementing related programmes, or documentation including the publishing of dictionaries of ethnic groups here akin to existing Kadazan Dusun ones.

At the same time, he lauded SIL Malaysia for its efforts to catalogue and research the numerous indigenous languages and dialects as well as the incidence of language change, with examples of its recent initiatives include the proposal of a process for profiling language vitality across the state and a study into the effect of language shift on the indigenous language spoken by the people of Pulau Banggi.

"Together, UMS and SIL will continue to empower individuals and communities through the preservation and promotion of language and culture," he said.