

ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Stop, look, go: On the road to better language proficiency

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PROFICIENCY in English is, undeniably, an asset in today's world. It helps school-leavers to be prepared for an increasingly globalised job market, it enables us as a society to be more informed about world events, and it gives the country a better voice in the competitive international community.

It is therefore the duty of Malaysian educators to ensure that our children and future leaders become independent and confident users of English.

To meet that need, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 called for a review of English Language education (ELE) in the country and the adoption of an internationally established framework of reference — the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) — for teaching, learning and assessment.

Cambridge English was subsequently commissioned to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of ELE from pre-school to pre-university levels. The study looked at learner skill levels and attitude, time allocated for English in school, teacher competence, adequacy of infrastructural support, conduciveness of the learning environment, and other factors impacting on the effectiveness of English Language teaching and learning. This evidence-based 2013 Baseline Study provided the Education Ministry with a picture of how Malaysian English Language learners were performing against internationally recognised standards and suggested improvements to the ELE system.

The findings spurred intensive efforts to raise English Language proficiency, including the initiation of the Highly Immersive Programme. They also led to the development of the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025. Guided by the 2013 data, the Roadmap specifies CEFR-based proficiency targets for every level of education and outlines a systematic long-term plan integrating curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment to reach those targets.

Since the launch of the Roadmap, the strategies outlined in the first phase have been implemented. CEFR-aligned curricula have been and are being developed, as are CEFR-informed teaching-learning and assessment approaches and materials. The requisite teacher training is also being conducted.

Four years down the road from the 2013 Baseline Study, it is time to ask: how are we doing and are we on the right track as we head towards 2025?

The recently conducted Cambridge Evaluation Study 2017 provides some answers. The results from this latest study serve two major purposes: first, they highlight key changes in learner performance since 2013, and second, they indicate where learners and teachers are in relation to the 2025 CEFR aspirational targets. It is too early to determine the impact of the Roadmap strategies but the data provide us with a new baseline against which later performance can be reviewed.



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LEARNER PERFORMANCE

A total of 20,315 pupils in Primary Year Six, and Forms Three, Five and Six participated in the study. They all took Reading and Listening tests, with a smaller percentage involved in Writing and Speaking assessment. About 14,000 of them completed a questionnaire.

Writing was found to be the strongest skill across all school grades, followed by Speaking, while Reading (including grammar-oriented Use of English) and Listening were the weaker skills. The 2017 pupils were one CEFR level above their 2013 counterparts in Speaking (for Forms Three, Five and Six), Writing (Form 5) and Listening (Form 6). The 2017 cohort was weaker in just one instance: Reading and Use of English (Form 3).

It appears that pupils are performing better in the productive skills now. Writing has always received much attention because of its importance in tests, but the improvement in Speaking is a nod to the activity-focused initiatives that have been implemented since 2013.

Urban schools remained better performers than rural schools at the secondary level, but in contrast with the 2013 study, there were no significant differences for Year Six. The narrowed performance gap for Year Six may be a positive result of the LINUS initiative and professional development programmes for teachers.

The next question to ask is: how does the 2017 performance compare against the 2025 aspirational targets? It is encouraging to note that almost half the Year Six and Form Five pupils are currently at or above those target levels. The challenge to achieve the Forms Three and Six targets is certainly greater. However, with eight years to go, we have a fair chance of attaining the targets if — as cliché as it sounds — everyone sticks to the plan.

TEACHER PERFORMANCE

All efforts would come to naught without competent teachers. So, how are our teachers doing? The study, which evaluated 2,826 teachers in the participating schools, provides data on their English Language proficiency and teaching knowledge.

The findings show that 46 per cent of the teachers are currently at a CEFR C1 level of proficiency. Secondary school optionist teachers contribute most to that percentage, but over 30 per cent of primary school optionists are also at

C1 or above in various skills. Given that the target is for every English Language teacher to be at C1 by 2025, the figures suggest that the target is not unattainable with intensified and self-driven professional development.

The teachers fall in Band Three on a four-band scale of a Teaching Knowledge Benchmarking Test. This result indicates that they possess a generally comprehensive knowledge of teaching concepts, terminology, practices and processes. Although their knowledge level is apparently the global average, there is room for improvement.

MOVING FORWARD

The 2017 Evaluation study highlights areas of concern we should pay attention to as we go forward. Teacher training and upskilling has to be responsive to specific emerging needs. For instance, with Listening identified as the weakest skill, teachers need to (re)learn how to teach that neglected skill. Training should also address teachers' lack of understanding about autonomy in learning and differentiated learning for mixed-ability classes.

Despite the closing of performance gaps, equitable education remains a concern. To give struggling learners a chance to achieve the CEFR target at each level of education, early intervention in primary school must be stepped up so that no one drops too far behind. Rural learners need increased exposure to English. In the absence of English-speaking communities, school activities and electronic media at home must be exploited to provide access to the language.

The recommendations of the study reiterate the importance of quality learning materials. Well-written CEFR-aligned textbooks are a must, and while we are developing our own expertise to produce them, procuring such books from outside is a necessary strategy for now. Technology should be leveraged to support learning, but many schools that have access to technology were found not to be utilising it. This is a shortcoming that needs to be addressed.

The need for reform in assessment is also highlighted. Since the CEFR emphasises self-directed learning and communicative language use, assessment of language skills must be revised to be consistent with that approach. Indeed, CEFR-informed curriculum, teaching-learning and assessment must be developed in tandem as components of an integrated ELE system. These efforts are, thankfully, already underway.

Much more needs to be done. It's a long road still. But as we progress through Phase Two of the Roadmap, let's keep the 2025 targets in sight and not lose momentum. Let's give our children what they need to become proficient and confident English Language users. To do otherwise would be an injustice.

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