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Malaysia third in Asia for English, but experts dispute results

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PETALING JAYA: The international 2023 Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (EPI) puts Malaysia in third spot in Asia for English proficiency, but experts here are disputing the results.

They said determining the proficiency of English on a global scale should ideally involve the assessment of all language skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking, and should involve a larger sample.

Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president Dr Ramesh Nair said the test only focused on the receptive skills of reading and listening, with productive skills like writing and speaking not assessed.

“Language proficiency is assessed based on the ability of users to articulate thoughts through conversation and writing. It is equally important to evaluate a person’s productive skills,” he said.

The EF EPI, the largest international survey of adult English skills, evaluates the English language proficiency of 2.2 million non-native English speakers in 113 countries and regions. On a global scale, Malaysia was on the 25th spot.

Malaysia ranked third in Asia for high English proficiency, with Singapore coming out tops followed by the Philippines.

“Also, a sample of 2.2 million adults is very small if we consider the world population. We must therefore be cautious about reading too much into such rankings,” said Ramesh.

He also said irrespective of this or any other ranking, it is undeniable that there is a pressing need for greater efforts to enhance English language proficiency in Malaysia.

“We are a nation which is highly dependent on foreign investments, so a workforce proficient in English is vital.

“Pushing the narrative that one language is preferred over another in certain contexts sends the wrong message to language learners.

“Allow all languages to thrive. This is especially important in schools,” he said.

He said children should be able to see the value in mastering the English language and they must be provided with opportunities to use the language while at school, rather than be asked to learn it for use in the future.

Concurring, Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said the index measured corporates, the business world and private sector – where English is the main medium of communication.

Unfortunately, she added, it is only a small select group.

“Imagine the possibilities that would unfold if every Malaysian could be proficient in the language,” she said, adding that the Dual Language Programme (DLP) in schools should be reinforced in order to continue improving English proficiency.

Universiti Malaya (UM) Faculty of Languages and Linguistics dean Assoc Prof Dr Surinderpal Kaur Chanan Singh says it was important to place equal emphasis on productive language skills.

“A well-rounded assessment is a more comprehensive measure of one’s language capabilities in the real world,” she said.

UM Faculty of Education Assoc Prof Dr Zuwati Hasim said there were various factors to consider when making comparisons.

“Especially when every country has its own language policy and different mediums of instruction. It should also be based on the extensive use of the target language in the local context,” she said.

Transparency, she added, was needed in the study as to why the focus of the test was only on the receptive skills of reading and listening.

The 2023 EF EPI placed Perak as the top state in Malaysia for English proficiency, securing a score of 587.

Kuantan took the spotlight as the top city, achieving a score of 603, with Kuala Lumpur also categorised as a city with high English proficiency (score of 564).

Individuals within the age range of 26 to 30 exhibited the highest level of English mastery in the nation, showcasing an average score of 582.

Overall, Malaysia secured a total score of 568 in the 2023 index, marking a slight decline of six points compared with last year.

Around the globe, the index reveals a concerning decline in youth’s English proficiency over the past five years and a growing gender gap.

The EF EPI ranks countries and regions by English skills annually based on test scores from the EF Standard English Test (EF SET), used worldwide by schools, companies, and governments for large-scale testing as well as individual test takers.