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‘Address English delivery pitfalls’

Published in The Star, 4 February 2024

By **ROWENA CHUA**

A LARGE number of Malaysian students have been performing poorly in the annual Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English language paper.

This, said Dr Ramesh Nair, must be taken as an indication that all is not well in the delivery of English lessons in schools.

The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president added that the poor performance in the SPM 2021 and 2022 English papers was particularly concerning as these examinations were aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

According to senior international research scientist Amir Faizal Abdul Manan, over 150,000 (42%) of the 368,351 English language subject candidates did very poorly in English in the SPM 2022 examination.

Based on information derived from the Malaysian Examination Board's SPM examination results analysis report, 14% failed and another 28% scored a D or an E in the subject.

The same could be observed in the SPM 2021 examination with 369,018 candidates, he told StarEdu (see infographic).

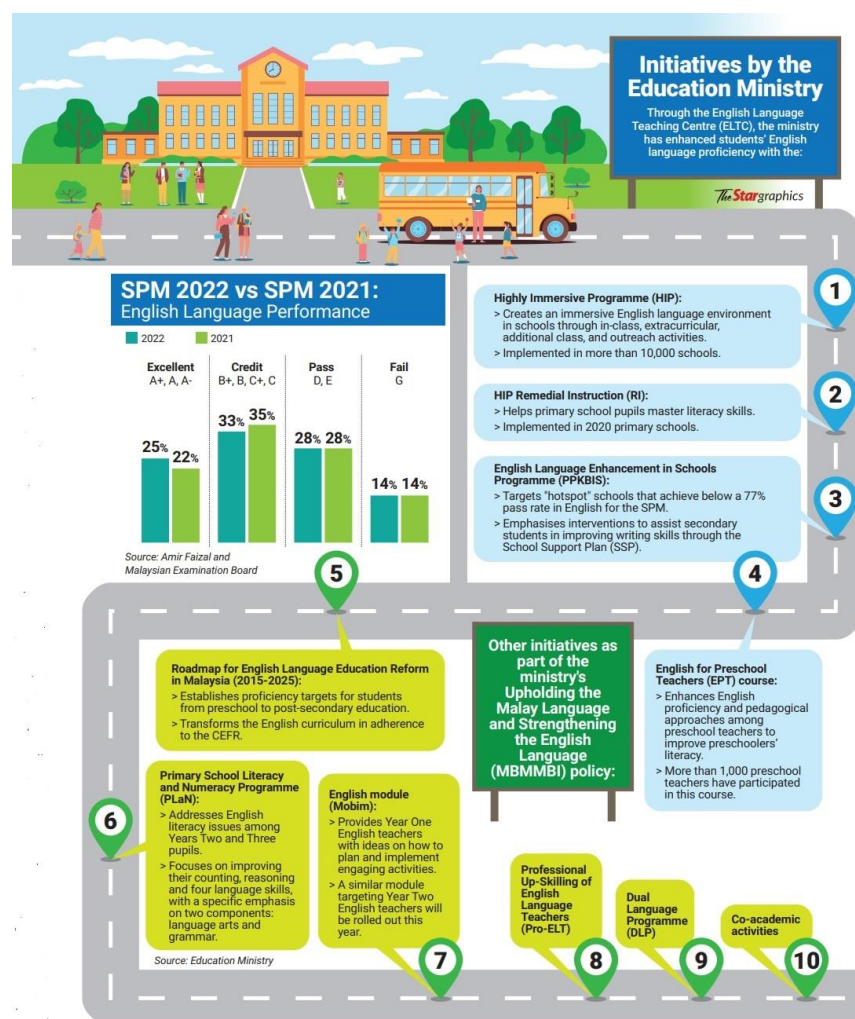
Pointing out that the CEFR-aligned English curriculum had been designed in consultation with experts from the United Kingdom, and that in-service teacher training programmes had been provided, Ramesh attributed the poor student performance to the failure to implement plans outlined in the ministry's Roadmap for English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (2015-2025).

The roadmap serves as part of the implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

To arrest the decline once and for all, he said there must first and foremost be proper execution of in-service teacher training.

“The success of any reform programme in education lies in our ability to ensure that our teachers are well-equipped to implement the desired changes.

“There is a need to question whether every English teacher received the type of training necessary to effect change,” said Ramesh, who is also an associate professor at the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Academy of Language Studies.



On Jan 19, Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek announced that her ministry plans to train 8,000 English language-option teachers this year, with a projected need of about 10,000 such teachers in the next five years.

She said as of last year, just over half (52%) of the English language teachers under the ministry had reached the C1 level in the CEFR.

Under the CEFR, language proficiency is measured in relation to the four communicative skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – on a scale starting with A1 and

progressing to A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user).

The new teacher training initiative is part of the ministry's ongoing efforts to improve the quality of English language education, which has been identified as the top priority for the ministry this year.

"We do not need to wait for the 2027 (new) school curriculum to begin mastering English. Mastering English and (improving) English quality begins now," she said during her New Year address to the ministry staff.

On recruitment, Teach For Malaysia (TFM) research, design and impact manager Sawittri Charun said a more rigorous selection process for new English teachers is needed.

"English teachers should be fluent in the language and oriented towards a student-centred, communicative teaching and learning approach.

"We need teachers who are able to create a rich, oral language environment not only within their own classrooms but also school-wide," she said.

TFM is an independent, not-for-profit organisation on a mission to give all children the opportunity to realise their potential through quality education.

It partners with the ministry to reach high-need national schools and is one of the 60 partners of the prestigious global education network Teach For All.

Echoing Ramesh's sentiments, Sawittri also emphasised the urgency to address the delivery of the curriculum.

"While the Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC), which was developed based on the CEFR, was guided by principles that we feel are important for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, such as 'going back to basics', 'fun, meaningful, purposeful learning' and 'pupil-centredness', the problem lies in the delivery of the curriculum.

"More needs to be done to help teachers unpack the curriculum – what do the learning standards in the curriculum mean? What strategies or techniques best deliver the different learning standards?" she said.

Citing the phonics approach as an example, she said blending and segmenting sounds are in the lower primary curriculum but this skill is not being taught well.

She proposed that the entire lower primary curriculum be pared down so that learners can focus on developing strong foundational skills – literacy in English and Bahasa Malaysia, and numeracy.

Agreeing with the need for careful implementation, Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said thorough studies and analyses need to be performed to ascertain problem areas and ensure interventions are in place.

“Transparent and authentic data on school performance needs to be published for specific and targeted interventions to take place,” she said.

She added that focus must be given to teachers to improve teaching and educational outcomes.

“Ensure that there are adequate teachers who are trained to teach and run the programmes that are designated,” she stressed.

She also said strengthening oversight of personnel and apparatus at the ministry, state and district levels will help improve implementation and ensure the continuity of methods to improve English proficiency in schools.

“Our country is not short of blueprints, roadmaps and expert opinions. It is about careful implementation and corrective measures to improve student outcomes,” she concluded.