



**MALAYSIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
TEACHING ASSOCIATION**  
*More than 65 years of service to the nation  
1958-2023*



## **‘Pisa score reflects language gaps’**

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IN the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) 2022, Malaysia scored 388 for the reading domain, a drop of 27 points from 415 in 2018, with less than 50% of our students reaching the minimum level (Level 2) for the domain.

Based on data provided by the Education Ministry, only 17% of the sampled students chose to answer the Pisa tests in English.

“Therefore, in the context of the Pisa 2022 findings, there is no clear correlation to link the decline in Malaysia’s performance with a decrease in English proficiency,” the ministry told StarEdu.

Teach For Malaysia (TFM) research, design and impact manager Sawittri Charun, however, said it is clear from the Pisa performance that Malaysian students struggle to make a deep sense of written texts, not only in English but also in Bahasa Malaysia (BM).

“Most reading comprehension skills are transferable. In fact, research shows that English as a Second Language (ESL) students who are already able to read in their first language are able to apply similar strategies when reading in English,” she said.

Emphasising that students need literacy skills to access materials for all subjects, Sawittri said TFM’s stance is “all teachers are literacy teachers”.

“Although we do not expect our non-language teachers to be using a large chunk of instructional time to teach literacy skills, we do believe that if non-language teachers are able to model the use of reading strategies and scaffold lessons based on learners’ literacy skills, students are likely to understand what they are learning better.

“This means that reading comprehension strategies that you use in your BM or English lesson are also useful when reading History or Science content,” she said.

Agreeing, Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president Dr Ramesh Nair said the recent Pisa report revealed that students are struggling with reading, specifically with comprehending longer texts, picking up on textual cues, even distinguishing between fact and opinion.

“English lessons are perfect settings for helping students develop their critical reading skills. Again, the role of teachers is central in designing lessons which nurture such skills,” he said.

He added that implementing a good extensive reading programme can go a long way in helping students become proficient in English.

“Success, however, depends on effective implementation. An extensive reading programme should not be seen by students as a task to complete, and it certainly should not be a burden to teachers,” he said.

### **All in a package**

While it is important to ensure students master literacy skills, Universiti Malaya Faculty of Education Assoc Prof Dr Adelina Asmawi emphasised that all four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – are equally crucial and must be developed sufficiently.

“There is a need to highlight the routine of English instruction that often focuses largely on one or two skills, instead of all four skills.

“Each skill assists in creating efficient language users. If one skill, such as listening, is not explored, there is an imbalance in the way students develop their language skills,” she said.

She also said language learning should be communicative and not drill-based.

“If the learning is far removed from what happens naturally in language use, it is not a healthy learning environment.

“If students are drilled on grammar tasks, they will only be able to function as drilled and this does not make them natural users of English,” she said.

She also emphasised the need to strengthen English language use and instruction at the earliest stage possible.

“Interactive and pleasurable learning of the English language should begin early. Reading, for example, should be fun, disconnected from examination-related ideals,” she said.

### **More time, please**

Drawing attention to the allotted time for English lessons in primary schools, senior international research scientist Amir Faizal Abdul Manan said providing only three to four hours per week, which constitute about 15% of the total schooling hours, for language learning is not sufficient for pupils.

“How many pupils actually get the opportunity to practise and use English outside of those few hours in school?

“This is a problem since language proficiency requires practice,” he said.

Ramesh proposed allocating more time for English language learning.

“We may, for example, want to explore curriculum narrowing, where the allocation of time for non-core subjects is reduced to make way for a focus on core subjects such as English.

“This has to be done carefully to ensure that our students still have access to a rich curriculum,” he said.