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‘Priority to improve standard of English’

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By **ROWENA CHUA**

PETALING JAYA: While Malaysian students have exceeded targets set by Cambridge English for English language achievements in schools, experts roundly express concern over the overall decline in the standard of English across the country.

The Education Ministry told Sunday Star that although the target set for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) 2022 was for 48% of students achieving the B1 level and above, 55.8% attained it.

It added that in 2021, when the SPM English language paper was first aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), 61.2% achieved B1 and above.

Under the CEFR, language proficiency is measured in relation to the four 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).

Senior international research scientist Amir Faizal Abdul Manan, however, drew attention to information derived from the Malaysian Examination Board’s SPM 2022 examination results that showed over 150,000 (42%) of the 368,351 English language subject candidates performing poorly in English.

He said 14% failed and another 28% scored either a D or an E in the subject.

“The same could be observed in the SPM 2021 examination with 369,018 candidates,” he said.

Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president Dr Ramesh Nair said the poor performance in the SPM 2021 and 2022 English papers was particularly a concern as these examinations were aligned with CEFR.

“The examinations followed the introduction of some significant changes in the delivery of English language lessons several years ago.

“A great deal of time and money was invested in aligning the English language curriculum to international standards and providing in-service teacher training courses.

“The question therefore is why have we not been able to see the kind of significant improvements which should have resulted from such initiatives?” he asked.

He added that while some may argue that the Covid-19 pandemic caused disruptions to learning, the truth is that poor performance in English, particularly in several states in Malaysia, has been a serious concern for decades.

On Jan 19, Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek said improving the quality of English language education is the top priority for the ministry this year.

In her New Year address to the ministry staff, she 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.

She said about 96% of 10,000 schools have reached Levels Three and Four in the ministry's Highly Immersive Programme (HIP).

HIP is aimed at increasing students' exposure to English through English-supportive activities in schools.

The ministry, in its statement, said other than HIP, various initiatives and English language programmes have been implemented through the English Language Teaching Centre.

Among them include the HIP Remedial Instruction in 2020 primary schools, the English Language Enhancement in Schools Programme (PPKBIS) for “hotspot” schools (those that achieved below a 77% pass rate in the SPM English examinations), and the English for Preschool Teachers (EPT) course, which has trained more than 1,000 preschool teachers.

The ministry said it will continue to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the ongoing initiatives outlined in the Roadmap for English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (2015-2025), which serves as part of the implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025.

“These initiatives are currently reaching the pinnacle of their implementation, with the remaining two years, 2024 and 2025, marking the final phase of the roadmap,” it said.

Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said the MEB target by 2025 is for 70% of SPM graduates to achieve the minimum credit (B1) in English.

She added that the plan in the MEB included English being made a “must-pass” SPM subject in 2016.

“To date, it has yet to be realised,” she said.

The SPM 2023, which is currently in session, saw a total of 395,870 registered candidates taking the English paper on Jan 31.