



Redouble efforts for English reform

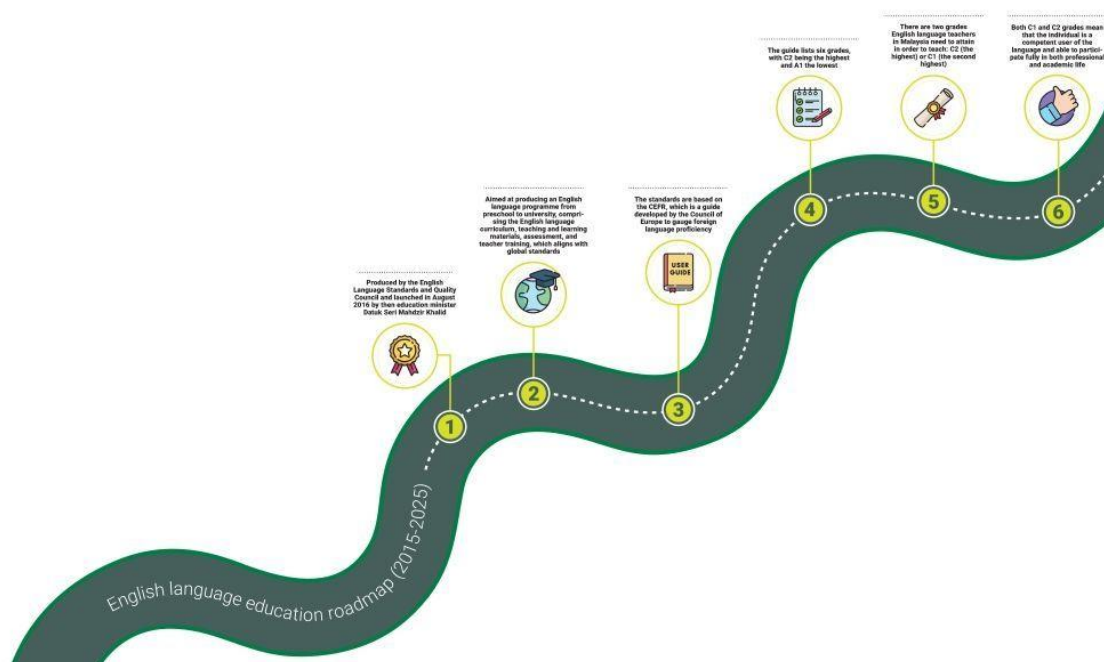
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WITH two years left before it runs its course, the time is ripe for a review of the effectiveness of the Education Ministry's Roadmap for English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (2015-2025).

Teach for Malaysia (TFM) research, design and impact manager Sawittri Charun, citing the non-governmental organisation's observations of students in schools it works in, is of the view that significant shifts have not been made in improving English language education.

"We still see large numbers of students not having foundational English language skills, despite being at the upper primary, and even secondary, level.

"Since we work mostly in underserved communities, it is not unreasonable to say that at least in these communities, we have a ways to go before meeting the objectives of the roadmap," she told StarEdu. For these students, she said, longstanding challenges such as limited exposure to the language and limited access to quality resources remain consistent.



“What is also true but perhaps less talked about is access to experiences that develop early English language skills,” she added.

Language learning, Sawittri said, is optimised when students develop foundational skills from a young age.

“Developing oral vocabulary, learning about the relationship between symbols, sounds and meanings, and learning the features of a book – these are all early literacy skills that boost a child’s later success in language learning.

“These skills are best explicitly taught, ideally through quality early childhood education. Unfortunately, how we make early childhood education accessible to all still leaves much to be desired, as evidenced by pupils entering Year One with underdeveloped foundational skills such as phonological awareness and basic vocabulary,” she said.

According to Sawittri, reforms in English language teaching have not led to desired results partly due to implementation challenges, such as insufficient support structures put in place to ensure that teachers are able to effectively carry out new changes and often, as well as teachers feeling that the changes proposed do not reflect policymakers’ understanding of real classroom conditions.

“Studies have shown that while teachers are aware of the features of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and its potential benefits, many have reported difficulties in its actual implementation, citing issues such as inadequate training models to help them develop the competency to use the new framework and lack of resources,” she said.

Echoing Sawittri’s sentiments, retired English language teacher Leela James Dass, who was also a teacher-trainer, said she believes there is still “a long way to go” to achieve what the roadmap had set out to do.

The main barrier, she said, is the ignorance among the stakeholders, primarily parents and children, on the relevance of the English language in their daily lives.

“The youngsters do not have the motivation because they do not need to pass the English examination paper to get a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) certificate; it is only compulsory to sit for the paper.

“Therefore, students and parents, especially from the rural areas, do not pay attention to the English language,” she said.

Leela, who is currently teaching English at local public and private universities, added that it is important to have “people who have no political or personal agenda to head the

change; who have a clear vision, and who only have quality student outcomes and holistic education as their main goals”.

“Our language teachers also need to be proactive in learning about other curricula, apart from our national curriculum, and about other assessments. This would make them become more open to different types of teaching and learning strategies,” she said.

Review strategies

Calling for an independent impact study on the implementation of the reform agenda, Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president Dr Ramesh Nair said there is time to take corrective measures and ensure that the aspirations spelt out in the roadmap, which serves as part of the implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025, are realised.

“The roadmap calls for significant reforms in the way we deliver English language lessons and assess student performance in terms which are globally understood. It is much more than the introduction of a curriculum aligned with the CEFR. “It calls for systemic changes which include reforms in teacher training, and the placement of qualified English language teachers in preschools. In primary and secondary schools, every teacher should have been adequately trained by now in the implementation of the new curriculum,” he said.

An impact study, he said, is needed to investigate whether or not teachers have complete understanding of what it means to teach using the new curriculum; the skills to adapt materials suitable to the level they are teaching; and the knowledge to carry out both formative and summative assessments.

On March 1, Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek, in a written reply to a parliamentary question, said her ministry had taken steps to improve the skills and capabilities of teachers teaching the English language since drawing up the roadmap. “The plan detailed the much-needed changes in the teaching of the English language in a more systemic and systematic manner to ensure that (our) English language level is on par with global standards,” she said.

She added that the ministry would continue reforming the national education system based on the MEB.

The G25, a group which comprises senior and eminent former civil servants, subsequently issued a statement on March 5 urging the ministry to table a progress report on the implementation of the MEB in Parliament.

The success of the roadmap, Ramesh asserted, lies in the hands of the English language teachers because any education policy is destined to fail if it is not translated into action in classrooms.

“If the implementation of the roadmap has been successful, we should not have students who are too far below the prescribed aspirational targets.

“For example, if we have Form Two students who are still at A1 – which is where one would expect a pupil in Year Two or Three to be (see infographic) – I would say the new curriculum has failed those students,” he said.

Stating that there has to be accountability for the system to work, he added that teachers need to “identify issues early and address them swiftly so that students are able get additional help quickly and catch up”.

“Students cannot be allowed to fall too far behind,” he stressed.

Filling the gaps

Weighing in on the issue, Universiti Malaya Education Faculty senior lecturer and teacher-trainer Assoc Prof Dr Zuwati Hasim said engagement with the right experts for policy planning and practice, especially in the fields of education, language literacy and educational psychology, is very important.

She added that while efforts have been made by the ministry, such as the integration of the CEFR into the English language curriculum and assessment, the adoption of new textbooks, and the introduction of the Highly Immersive Programme and the Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Programme, it would do well to look into language learning theories and the pedagogical angle.

“A few initiatives have been taken to improve the level of proficiency among students yet we are still complaining about the level of proficiency. The missing part is that we fail to understand that language is acquired, which means that language is naturally and easily picked up when there is a need, exposure and interaction with the language, rather than through formal instruction,” she said.

“Do not limit learning to textbooks and within classrooms. There needs to be a shift towards innovative pedagogy for language teaching. Also, there is a need to explore how language assessment is administered, which may have an influence on the assessment outcomes,” she added.

In addressing the problem of limited continuous training and exposure for teacher professional development, especially among those who are teaching in the areas where English is less spoken, Zuwati recommended giving opportunities for these teachers to have exposure to the communicative use of the target language under a mobility programme, and providing continuous courses for their target language development.

Describing teachers as the central actors in the reform process, Ramesh said pre-service teacher education must equip future teachers to be lifelong learners who are constantly engaged in developing their skills and becoming effective classroom practitioners.

“In-service continuing professional development programmes are also important, and opportunities must be created to position teachers as generators of knowledge, and not mere recipients of instructions,” he said.

In developing the foundational skills for language learning, Sawitri said parents and early childhood education practitioners need to be better supported to help young children.

“What if all parents received picture books when they go for neonatal visits? What if they were also given basic training on how language development happens, and what parents can do to support the learning of literacy skills, not only in English or Bahasa Malaysia?

“With many online resources available, parents need not be fluent users of English to support their children, but they do need to know where to find these resources and how they benefit language learning,” she said.

In English language teaching, Sawitri said a solution may work in a type of classroom but not in others.

“Therefore, the way we think about solutions should change from finding ‘one-size-fits-all solutions’ to finding ways we can empower schools to develop or adapt solutions to meet the needs of their learners,” she added.

All efforts, Ramesh said, ultimately need to ensure that students leaving the education system possess the kind of proficiency which will allow them to seamlessly transition to higher learning institutions anywhere in the world, where English is the medium of instruction.

“They must also be able to function effectively in the workplace, possessing the kind of strategic, pragmatic and sociocultural competence needed in a real-world setting,” he said.

For this to happen, he emphasised that English language lessons need to focus on helping students communicate with confidence, and this is only possible if they are given plenty of opportunities to build their vocabulary range and practise using the language.

“English language classrooms need to serve as a space for working in groups, thinking critically and having fun. Language assessments should only serve to inform learners about where they are in terms of their proficiency in the language,” he concluded.