

English Language Education Reform: International Standards and Graduate Employability

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The new realities have led to the emergence of an international knowledge network accompanied by English as the dominant language of global communication. Together with new information and communication technology, these have exerted increasing pressure on higher education to put in place new systems and innovative approaches to the teaching and learning and assessment of English. The question that faces us is how to reform English language education to create environments of learning and teaching to prepare our students for the present century and make them lifelong learners.

In this presentation, I will focus on the links between English language education reform on the one hand, and English language education programmes in higher education including assessment on the other. The ultimate goal is to improve the English proficiency of Malaysian students, to enable them to communicate effectively in social and professional contexts, and to meet the challenge of the global workplace. The reform aims to address the emerging problem faced by many Malaysian graduates who cannot obtain suitable employment on account of the insufficiency of their English. Although the problem manifests itself at university level, the baseline study which measured the performance of English learners in 2013 traced it back to school, and provided us with firm evidence on which to proceed. The decision was thus made to embark on an English language education and assessment reform programme from preschool to higher education, including teacher training to transform the existing system from 'top to bottom'.

In response to the call for new ideas and change, a proposal was put forward to create learning environments that challenge students to become actively engaged, independent, lifelong learners within and beyond formal learning spaces. This is the context in which the notion of the environment as an ecosystem, which takes a more holistic and integrated approach to learning, has been conceived. In the formal learning environment, the key aspect of the approach involves adopting international standards in the form of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The adoption of the CEFR will require a shift in English language programmes in higher education towards skills-based, outcome-oriented learning, and communicative language teaching in keeping with the philosophy of the CEFR. The plan involves relating the English programme including assessment to the CEFR, setting targets at each stage of education, and using improved English as the means to achieve graduate employability.

Formal learning on its own, however, does not adequately produce the knowledge, skills and competences required by the jobs market. Support from informal learning is crucial. In this regard, the ecosystem makes a close link between classroom learning and language acquisition in a natural environment through authentic and socially interactive experiences. In the latter case, the focus is on communication, team work and human relations, and on solving problems, involving the individual student with others in the learning environment, and the available resources, tools and technologies. This necessitates also a change in the way we assess our students, i.e. the way performance in English is described, recorded and communicated. The decision has thus been taken to introduce a holistic approach to assessment, which takes into account not only the formal learning of English in the classroom but also real-world learning beyond the classroom.