

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

# A lifelong passion for teaching

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**R**EFORMS in the education system are necessary to meet the demands of an ever changing world. As student demographics change and technology evolves, so too must the delivery of education to our children, and this responsibility to deliver lies primarily on the shoulders of teachers.

Belonging to a profession that creates all other professions, teachers are trained to adapt to reforms in education. They possess specialised knowledge to carry out their responsibilities, and before taking up teaching positions, they receive intensive training that prepares them to be lifelong learners. All this is encapsulated in what is widely referred to as teacher professionalism. In addition to possessing expert knowledge in their subjects of specialisation, teachers are also part of a wider professional community which allows them to exchange information and seek support when needed.

Although teachers receive intensive pre-service training, the evolutionary nature of education demands that lifelong learning features prominently in the career path of teachers. This is why we hear of teachers attending regular in-service training courses that form an integral part of their continuing professional development.

Today, the continuing professional development of Malaysian teachers is shaped to a great extent by the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, a document that charts the future direction of education in the country. To ensure that the next generation of Malaysians is ready to face local, regional and global challenges, the blueprint calls for eleven shifts that need to take place within the education system. These shifts have to do with changes in strategy and direction as well as operational changes for a move away from current practices.

The second of the eleven shifts projects a vision that every child that goes through the Malaysian education system becomes proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. This specific reference to language education highlights the important role that language teachers play in addressing national aspirations.

Over the years, a great deal has been said particularly about English language education in Malaysia and the English Language Roadmap 2015-2025 has addressed most of the concerns. There have been extensive discussions about the role of English language teachers in improving the standard of English among our students. If we are to achieve the targets set in the Malaysia Education Blueprint and the English Language Roadmap, significant changes must take place, and English language teachers have to lead some of these changes. However, they must first be equipped with new knowledge and the skills necessary to make changes. The best way of ensuring this is through continuing professional development programmes.

Realising the importance of continuing professional development programmes for English language teachers, the Ministry of Education Malaysia set up and tasked the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) to offer professional development courses for English Language Teaching practitioners including teachers, lecturers,

School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISC+), State English language trainers and English Panel Heads. Numerous courses are offered by the ELTC throughout the year. One of the more large-scale training programmes managed by the ELTC has been the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers or Pro-ELT programme. When the Pro-ELT programme began in 2013, it was indeed a huge undertaking involving some 18,500 English language teachers who needed support in achieving the desired C1 band in a CEFR-linked (Common European Framework of Reference) assessment. Over the years, the programme has seen a significant number of teachers improve in their performance.

The Pro-ELT programme essentially supports English teachers improve their proficiency in English through a blended mode of face-to-face and online instruction. In this way, the programme allows participants to take ownership of their professional development. Also, the face-to-face and online phases of the programme provide space for teachers to ask questions and engage in active dialogue with peers. Teachers are continuously given support for six weeks to engage in language based activities by experienced trainers from ELTC. Up until last year, a total of 16,009 teachers were trained under the Pro-ELT programme. Another 650 teachers are expected to be trained this year, while 800 and 1050 teachers will be trained next year and in 2019 respectively.

Feedback from teachers who have completed the Pro-ELT programme with the ELTC has been largely positive. The participants felt that the course was not just about helping them improve their performance in assessments; rather, it was about helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses and gain greater confidence in using the language. A significantly high number of Pro-ELT participants also reported greater motivation to master the language after attending the programme.

In addition to the Pro-ELT, a variety of other continuing professional development programmes are run by the ELTC for English teachers. These programmes serve specific purposes such as ensuring that classroom practices match prescribed standards and competencies. The Highly Immersive Programme and the Program Intervensi Tambah Opsyen Bahasa Inggeris (PITO-BI) run by ELTC are among the examples of professional development programmes that follow a top-down approach necessary to ensure that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to translate policies into practice. Beyond this, the ELTC also plays an important role in creating localised communities of practice, an important ingredient for professional development. Working closely with SISC+, the ELTC supports the creation of teacher networks at schools and districts so that independent professional communities of teachers are able to



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address local challenges through a process of reviewing existing practices.

In addition to continuing professional development programmes that are organised by authorities, there is a need for teachers to take ownership of their own professional development. However, the right conditions are needed for this. There needs to be space for teachers to ask questions, identify issues related specifically to their students, and engage in active dialogue. One way of doing this is by promoting a research culture.

Today, there are many continuing professional development initiatives around the globe that are getting teachers involved in action research. There is no doubt that teachers are researchers. They are constantly facing challenges in the classroom, and they experiment with a variety of approaches before settling on one that works best for them. However, this knowledge often remains tacit. Given the right conditions, more can be done to have teachers share their wealth of knowledge as part of their continuing professional development. School heads and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) could play a more supportive role in this by encouraging teachers to present their work at conferences and even publish their research findings. It is important that teachers see themselves as disseminators of knowledge in continuing professional development programmes and not always as passive recipients of information.

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