



# My Bella TV interview: Malaysia's falling proficiency in English - Should we be worried?

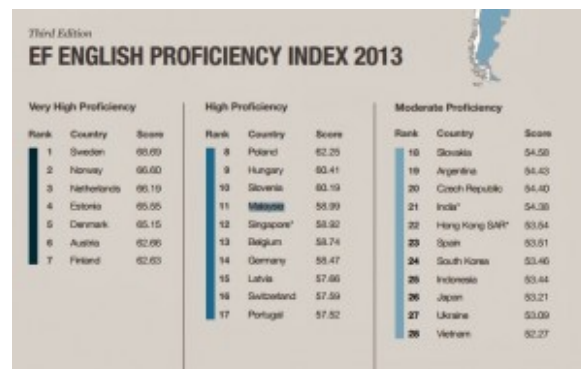
A [recent survey](#) by [Education First](#), a Singapore-based English school, found that Malaysia's competency level in English was the highest in Asia (beating even Singapore), and Malaysia was ranked an impressive 11th-position out of 60 countries. A similar excellent result for Malaysia was also obtained in the first survey in 2011.



Prawn cock, anyone? Yet more evidence of poor command of English in Malaysia.

The problem is, few Malaysians believe it - and rightly so. This is because EF's two surveys contradict sharply with what we Malaysians experience everyday about our English language command.

The main fault with EF's survey is this survey is done via online with no random sampling of participants. In Malaysia, most online users are urbanites with a higher command of English than those in more rural areas. Moreover, those who voluntarily take the EF's survey are most probably those who already have a good command of English. Ask ourselves this: would someone with a poor command of English voluntarily take EF's survey? I don't think so.



Education First's (EF) two surveys (2011 and 2013) show that Malaysia is ranked impressively high in the world in English competency. Unfortunately, even Malaysians do not believe these findings (photo from harimaucapitol.com).

I was recently invited for a second time to [Bella ntv7 show](#) (Nov, 26, 2013), hosted by [Elaine Daly](#). I came to this show willing to talk about the standard of English in Malaysia and why our command of this language is so poor.

Below are the questions given to me prior to the show. Although I was not asked some of these questions, I placed them here with my answers for my blog readers.



On Nov 26, 2013, I appeared on

Bella ntv7 programme to speak on the falling standard of English in Malaysia, my experience at my university, and what we can do Malaysia's falling competency level in English. Also invited were Haris Hussain (Assoc. Editor of NST Production) and Chook Yuh Yng (Country Manager of Jobstreet). Seated far right is the Bella host, Elaine Daly.

## **So we keep on hearing that the undergraduates are lacking on English proficiency. But whose fault is that? Where does this problem start?**

The underlying problem lies in the social element. Malaysians communicate with one another in the language in which they are the strongest and most comfortable. And the language Malaysians choose to use to communicate typically isn't English but their mother tongue: Chinese, Malay, or Tamil. According to a survey in 2001, only 2% of Malaysians (less than 400,000 people) have English as their first language.

Malaysians are proud of their mother tongue and will defend it because their mother tongue is a part of their culture. Malaysians in general have no problems of learning English as an additional language, but they will put English in its place; that English is a foreign language, that people who speak English frequently are the elite minorities, and that English is typically useful only in international relations such as in international business or politics.

In other words, Malaysians learn their mother tongue and English in two different contexts: one as part of their culture (their mother tongue) and another (English) as a foreign language to be used only in official or formal occasions.

Another important problem or reason why English proficiency is low in Malaysia is the lack of practice among Malaysians. The mastery of any language requires

frequent and prolonged practice. It is not enough just to learn English during English period at school. We need to apply a language in our everyday lives by practising speaking and writing the language outside school as well. This is what is lacking in this country.

However, we need to understand that Malaysia's problem isn't unique just to us. The same worries about declining English proficiency exist also in Hong Kong, Japan, Philippines, and India. The governments there have spent a lot of money and resources to increase English proficiency among the people but with little success. I suspect the reason for this is the same as in Malaysia: lack of practice in English and seeing English as a foreign language to be used only in certain specific and narrow circumstances.



The falling standard of English in Malaysia. Only for the camera: you would learn better reading a English-language book instead, ladies (photo from thestar.com.my).

**It is agreeable that education starts at home. But there's so many that the parents can do especially when they have to work and maintain the household. Isn't it the school's responsibility to**

## **brush up our child's English skills? Isn't that why we send our kids to school in the first place?**

It is wrong to think that education only starts and ends at schools. The home and the parents can have a large impact, sometimes an even bigger impact, on their children's education success. Yes, parents cannot always teach everything because some subject matter are out of the expertise or know-how of the parents. But what is more important is the parents must be aware of what is currently being taught at school and how their child is progressing in school. That way the parents can remedy any shortcoming or conversely, encourage any key learning strengths in their child.

Interestingly, studies have shown that the most important factor in the success of a child's learning isn't the size of classroom but in how well the parents monitor their child's learning. In other words, the parents' awareness and involvement of their child's learning progress is very important.

Parents may be busy working but that is no reason to neglect their children's education or to outsource all or a large part of their education to schools or someone else.



Three students were also interviewed about their experience on English competency levels in their college.

## **Speaking on behalf of the parents watching, maybe the parents don't have good command in**

## **English as well. And that is why they don't practice it at home and expect a more professional education (school) to do that job. What is your opinion on this?**

Yes, if the parents don't speak English, their children are in a disadvantage because they may not be able to practise English at home. But this isn't a critical, unsolvable problem. Again, as I mentioned earlier, the parents' involvement in their children's learning progress is very important. Parents cannot teach everything; no one can. Parents don't have to have PhDs in mathematics to encourage the love of mathematics in their children. So why the different standard for English language?

There are ways to ensure that their children's weaknesses in learning can be overcome. To increase English proficiency, the children can be enrolled in English classes or in social activities where English is widely spoken among members or participants. Put the children in an environment where English is spoken intensively. English-language reading materials with genre which the children enjoy can be bought to strengthen reading and language skills.

## **Some young adults are embarrassed to speak in English, especially when they are not sure on their grammar/pronunciation and afraid they might say the wrong thing. Can't we relate to that problem? How do we overcome this?**

Yes, it is true that some - but not all - youngsters would feel embarrass to speak English for fear of being evaluated by their teachers or by native speakers. But there is simply no shortcut or some secret technique to a successful proficiency in English. It still takes hard work and practice, practice, and more practice.

When I first started working as a university lecturer, I remember having one freshman (first year undergraduate) telling me that he wouldn't be able to speak to me any more. I was of course surprised by his admission. When I asked him why, he replied that he wasn't used to speaking in English. Lo and behold, six

months later when I met him again, he was conversing with me with fluent English. I think some students underestimate their ability in English. It sometimes takes some coercion to force them to speak and they will readily speak in English. It might not be perfect English, but it is seldom as bad as they had initially thought. Besides, their English would often improve after some practice.



As the three students were interviewed, the other guests and I were seated at one corner as some questions were also directed at us.

That said, however, I had a Malay student many years ago who tried to speak to her other Malay friends in English. But she was treated as an outcast because her friends felt it uncomfortable and strange to speak in English among friends, outside class. Unfortunately, it is similar to the Chinese who feel a Chinese who speaks English too much is like a banana: yellow on the outside but white in the inside.

This again comes back to the social element on why English proficiency is declining in Malaysia. Many Malaysians see English like a foreign language, not part of their culture, a language used only in official or international activities, and a language used only by elite minorities.

**In your opinion, what is the biggest mistake that most young adults make when it comes to mastering English? Are they unwilling to seek the extra help, are they unwilling to consult the**

## **dictionary, are they embarrassed to make mistakes?**

Most youngsters are not fully aware of the importance of English in their careers. Yes, they understand the importance of English, but they fail to fully appreciate its importance of English mastery in their career and learning. They might believe that English proficiency can be achieved later or when they need later in their career. But English language mastery takes years to achieve; it takes hard work and lots of practice.

This is a shame because youngsters are self sabotaging their careers.

## **Many young adults can relate to this. Since young, we are taught mostly from books. It is not a surprise when we are stronger in writing than speaking. How do we overcome the problem of stronger in writing than speaking?**

I am always skeptical when people tell me that they are better in writing than speaking in English. I think people often underestimate their verbal proficiency and overestimate their writing proficiency in English. I have some students telling me the same thing, but when I read their written work, I am often an English teacher first and a science teacher second.

I spent more time correcting their English grammar or rewriting their sentences than checking their scientific facts, analysis, interpretation, and discussion of their work. I also have students expressing their confidence in the written English but only to be found out when they take international English exams such as TOEFL or IELTS. They can't even meet the basic competency level.

We need to understand the difference between spoken and written language. When we learn a language, we often learn to speak the language first. Sometimes speaking comes naturally especially after exposure for prolonged periods to the language. But writing (and reading) needs to be taught. Writing is not speech written down on paper. Writing is harder because spelling and grammar must be correct. Speaking uses more informal and simpler sentences than writing.



Speakers receive more immediate feedback and respond correspondingly in case the spoken message is misunderstood or unclear. Writers, on the other hand, work in solitary, receives no immediate feedback, and must consider the level of interest and knowledge their readers needs to know about a given topic.

So, it is untrue that one can be more competent in written than in spoken English.



The show ended by having all three of us back to the hot seat to have our closing remarks.

## **In your opinion, what needs to be fixed quickly? What can the schools do? Or the parents do?**

Malaysians can be a pampered lot, always asking for things either to be free or as cheap as possible. But Malaysians need some tough love: a kick, so to speak, to be coerced to master the English language. A simple pass in English is not enough. Job promotions, civil service jobs, university entrance, and scholarships should require mandatory and higher competency level in English. Even salaries can differ depending on how proficient a person is in English.

## **There are some parents who has this mindset of “We live in Malaysia, we work in Malaysia, so why English is THAT important?” How would you address this kind of mindset?**

Such parents are naïve because they fail to see the world today has evolved. It is no longer like before. In the 1980s and 90s, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong were favorite places for the manufacturing sector because goods

produced here were cheaper with lower costs and wages. However, such competitive advantage is never for long because wage costs will inevitably rise. Today, it is China that offers the lowest cost of production.

Today Malaysia needs to focus on high value activities such as research and development (R&D) activities. Consequently, it is very important that the educational level of the country's workforce increase to maintain Malaysia's competitive advantage as we lose our advantage in less skilled areas to countries in lower development chain. And it isn't just Malaysia thinking like this. Many countries like Norway, India, and Singapore are aiming to enhance critical thinking and creativity in their respective citizens. This knowledge-based economies require smarter people, and a handicap in English can be a stumbling block in achieving this goal.

We talk about the importance of English proficiency in Malaysia, but our country also needs to be proficient in science. Consequently, there is a close relationship between science and English, at least for Malaysia. This is because English is the lingua franca of science. Books, magazines, scientific articles, and documentaries are mostly in English. Malaysians unfortunately do not write many books either in English or in another language, and Malaysians do not also translate many books.

Consequently, low levels in English proficiency means Malaysians are missing out on current and important issues. Malaysians will have to wait until the information gets translated from English into our comfortable language, if it gets translated at all.

So, in many ways, Malaysia should worry. Low proficiency in English and coupled with low reading levels and low science literacy are harming our nation's future and growth. Two international assessment on science literacy paint a disturbing trend for Malaysia. [PISA \(Programme for International Student Assessment\)](#) and [TIMSS \(Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study\)](#) separately showed that the science literacy among Malaysian students have been declining steadily throughout the years, so much so that Malaysia now ranks among the lowest in the world in science literacy.

So when you observe such a declining trend, it is no surprise then that the Malaysian government has reverted back from using English to the Malay language as the medium of instruction in schools. Malaysia have attempted to kill

two birds with one stone. Instead of teaching science and mathematics separately from English, it was hoped that the English language could be taught simultaneously as science and mathematics are taught. While this system worked in some European countries like Finland, this approach was not successful in Malaysia.

So, while I understand the government's decision to revert back to Malay as the medium of instruction, we should also be aware that an outlet to increase English proficiency has been sacrificed in the process.



Increasing globalization means it is not only important to learn and master the English language but also to be multilingual as well. Parents need to understand and appreciate this (photo from [focis.wayne.edu](http://focis.wayne.edu)).

## **In your opinion, what is the standard of English that the employers are looking for?**

The higher we go up the corporate ladder into increasingly upper management levels, the importance of English proficiency becomes increasingly more important. In fact, English proficiency can be one of the criteria for job promotions. This is true in Malaysia and even in Hong Kong. Employers expect not only high levels of knowledge and technical skills, but also the ability to communicate, think, and learn; ability to work in teams; and the person's attitude and adaptability.

As I mentioned earlier, the world today has evolved. Globalisation is not some buzzword or a theoretical idea, but it is already happening right now, whether we like it or not. Exchanges of goods and services, transfer of knowledge, and mobility of people from one country to another is today more rapid, seamless, and

extensive. So while we talk a lot about mastery of English, the challenge today is also the mastery of two or more languages.

It might be surprising to some to learn that English is only the fourth most widely spoken language in the world. Mandarin is the most widely spoken language. But if we include the number of speakers for the second language, English moves up the rung to the second most widely spoken language with Mandarin still firmly anchored in the first spot.

Interestingly, the number of English native speakers are declining steadily over the years. Likewise for Mandarin native speakers. Instead, the number of native speakers for languages such as Arabic, Hindi, and Spanish see a steady increase. In the 1990s, more than 80% of the web content is in English, in 2000, the proportion was 50%, and in 2005, 30%. Most students who opt to study overseas still go to universities where English is widely spoken, but the number of students opting to go to non-English universities are also rising. So while English remains the most dominant language, it is a mistake to believe mastery of a single language such as English is sufficient. Globalisation means multilingualism proficiency is essential.

Many nations are looking to China. The country is fast growing into the world's largest economy. China is also pushing Mandarin as a foreign language to some countries, just as English is a foreign language to other countries. But at the same time, China is also pushing to increase the people's proficiency in English. English is a compulsory language for students beginning Year 3, and in some schools, Year 1. Job promotions for Chinese police officers pre-requisite some basic level in English proficiency.

So at the end, globalisation means it is not enough just to learn English. We need another language or two. We need to be multilingual. So, in this perspective, Malaysia, a multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation, is in an advantageous position.



Malaysia is in an advantageous position, being a multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation. However, Malaysia needs to be proficient in these languages and in English to compete in the world (photo from [theagora.blogspot.com](http://theagora.blogspot.com)).

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*You can watch this Bella episode for free at [tonton.com.my](http://tonton.com.my), Episode 231.*