

# A Comprehensive Study on the Decline of English Language Standards: Evaluating Pedagogical and Institutional Practices in Klang Valley Secondary Schools

Leang Tian Loong<sup>1</sup> and Chandra Mohan Vasudeva Panicker<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> School of Education, Lincoln University College, Malaysia.

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the alarming decline in English language standards among secondary school students in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. It explores how pedagogical practices and institutional structures contribute to this trend. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 350 students and 20 English language teachers across ten secondary schools. The findings reveal that outdated teaching methods, rigid curricula, insufficient teacher training, and a focus on high-stakes testing are key drivers of poor language outcomes. Furthermore, limited English exposure outside the classroom and a lack of communicative teaching practices exacerbate the issue. This research offers evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform, professional development, and the integration of communicative pedagogies to restore English proficiency in Malaysian secondary education.

**Keywords:** English proficiency, pedagogy, secondary education, Klang Valley, curriculum, institutional practices

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English language has long held a privileged status in Malaysia as a vehicle for socio-economic mobility, international engagement, and national development. As a former British colony, Malaysia inherited a strong tradition of English language usage in administration, education, and commerce. For decades, Malaysian students were considered among the most proficient English speakers in Southeast Asia, and English fluency was seen as a mark of educational attainment and employability (Asmah, 1992; David & Govindasamy, 2003). However, this status has been gradually eroded, with current trends revealing a **steady decline in English language standards**, particularly at the secondary school level.

In urban areas such as the Klang Valley—Malaysia’s economic and educational hub—this decline is paradoxical. Despite greater access to educational resources, qualified teachers, and exposure to English through media and technology, student outcomes remain suboptimal. Employers, university lecturers, and language experts have consistently voiced concerns about graduates’ inadequate English proficiency, especially in oral communication and academic writing (Morshidi et al., 2018; Mustapha, 2021). These issues have implications not only for individual career prospects but also for Malaysia’s ability to compete in a globalized, English-dominant knowledge economy.

Several national and international assessments have further reinforced these concerns. Reports from the Malaysian Examination Council and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) show that many students fall short of achieving functional fluency, often struggling with even basic grammar and vocabulary in real-world applications (MOE, 2022). This suggests that the problem is not just student-related but **systemic**, rooted in the way English is taught, assessed, and institutionally supported within schools.

The Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), the national secondary curriculum framework, has undergone multiple revisions aimed at integrating communicative approaches and higher-order thinking skills. Yet, these reforms often falter in implementation due to entrenched exam-oriented teaching practices, inadequate teacher training, and inflexible instructional designs (Kaur & Sidhu, 2020; Sivapalan et al., 2021). Teachers frequently report

being constrained by rigid syllabi and pressured to prepare students for high-stakes examinations, which reinforces rote learning and limits authentic language use in the classroom.

Moreover, institutional factors such as limited access to digital tools, lack of ongoing professional development, and insufficient administrative support further inhibit innovation in English language instruction (Yunus & Sukri, 2017). These barriers are compounded by broader sociolinguistic issues such as declining English usage in daily life, especially in Malay-speaking households, and reduced motivation among students to master a language they perceive as irrelevant outside the academic context (Gardner, 2008; Aziz & Hamzah, 2020).

This study therefore aims to investigate the pedagogical and institutional factors contributing to the decline in English language proficiency among secondary school students in the Klang Valley. Specifically, it focuses on evaluating the alignment between the curriculum and real-world communicative needs, examining teaching practices and classroom strategies, and analyzing how institutional policies and resource allocation shape English language learning environments. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, this research integrates the lived experiences of students and teachers with empirical data to offer a holistic and nuanced understanding of the challenges facing English language education in Malaysia.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is not only to diagnose the problem but to provide evidence-based insights that can inform future reforms, ensuring that English education in Malaysian secondary schools remains responsive, relevant, and capable of meeting the demands of a competitive global society.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The decline in English language proficiency in Malaysia is well-documented in national reports and academic literature. Studies indicate that Malaysian students, despite years of English instruction, often lack the ability to communicate fluently or apply the language in real-world contexts (Tan & Low, 2020). Contributing factors include an exam-oriented education system, outdated syllabi, and insufficient teacher autonomy (Ong, 2019; Sivapalan et al., 2021).

Pedagogically, classrooms remain dominated by rote learning and teacher-centered approaches, which limit students' opportunities to practice authentic communication. The focus on grammar and translation exercises does little to promote fluency or confidence in using English (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Moreover, many educators lack access to current teaching resources and professional development opportunities that could enable more innovative practices (Littlewood, 2007).

Institutionally, policies often emphasize national examinations, creating a culture of teaching to the test. Teachers are pressured to cover syllabus content for standardized assessments rather than tailor instruction to student needs. In addition, disparities in school infrastructure and language support mechanisms between urban and suburban areas exacerbate the issue, even within the Klang Valley (Aziz & Hamzah, 2020).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

A **convergent parallel mixed-methods design** was used to gather and interpret both statistical and thematic data simultaneously.

### 3.2 Participants

- **Quantitative phase:** 350 Form Four and Form Five students across ten public secondary schools in Klang Valley.
- **Qualitative phase:** 20 English language teachers with a minimum of five years' teaching experience.

### 3.3 Data Collection

- **Surveys** measured language exposure, student attitudes, classroom experience, and perceptions of curriculum relevance.

- **Semi-structured interviews** with teachers focused on instructional practices, curriculum challenges, and institutional constraints.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

- Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and correlations.
- Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding using NVivo.

## 4. FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the mixed-methods data collection, incorporating student perspectives gathered through structured questionnaires and teacher insights collected via in-depth interviews. The findings are organized to reflect the voices of both stakeholders—students and educators—in understanding the roots of declining English language proficiency in Klang Valley secondary schools.

### 4.1 Student Perspectives

The survey results from 350 secondary students revealed several critical insights regarding their experiences with English language learning. A **significant 72% of students** reported that English is used predominantly within classroom contexts, with minimal exposure or usage in daily communication outside the academic setting. This heavy reliance on classroom instruction as the primary source of language input underscores the importance of pedagogical quality and teaching strategies in fostering proficiency.

When asked about their classroom experiences, **more than 65% of students agreed** that their English lessons are primarily focused on exam preparation. This suggests an environment where communicative aspects of language learning, such as speaking and listening, are often sidelined in favor of grammar drills and writing tasks meant to improve test performance. Many students described their English classes as monotonous, lacking in creativity, and overly reliant on textbooks. This reinforces the need to adopt more interactive, student-centered approaches that can stimulate interest and promote practical language usage.

The table below summarizes students' responses to key statements regarding their English language learning experience:

**Table 1: Student Perception of English Classes**

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
My English classes focus mainly on preparing for exams	65	35
I enjoy my English lessons	38	62
I feel confident speaking English in public	25	75
Our curriculum encourages group discussions and speaking	30	70

The responses in Table 1 reveal a discouraging reality: students are not only unenthusiastic about their English lessons, but the majority also **do not feel confident using English in public**, with **75% reporting low confidence levels**. This lack of communicative competence points to deeper pedagogical issues, particularly the absence of speaking opportunities and learner autonomy within the classroom. The finding that **70% of students disagree** that the curriculum supports group discussion or speaking activities further validates the notion that language is being taught as a static subject, rather than a dynamic tool for real-life interaction.

These statistics highlight the urgent need to restructure classroom practices to include more task-based and communicative learning, where students are encouraged to collaborate, express themselves, and engage meaningfully with the language beyond written forms.

## 4.2 Teacher Insights

Parallel to the student data, interviews with 20 English language teachers revealed a nuanced view of the systemic challenges and limitations they face in delivering effective language instruction. One of the most frequently cited concerns was **curriculum inflexibility**. Teachers described the English syllabus as prescriptive and examination-driven, offering little space for adaptation to the diverse linguistic abilities and learning needs of their students.

Another major theme was **test-centric teaching culture**. Teachers expressed that they are often assessed based on student performance in standardized exams, which limits their willingness to take pedagogical risks or to incorporate more communicative and interactive activities into their lessons. This exam-oriented accountability model discourages creativity and reinforces a narrow focus on grammar, vocabulary, and essay writing.

Professional development also emerged as a major constraint. Most teachers had limited access to **training workshops on innovative or student-centered methodologies**, and many had never received formal instruction in communicative language teaching (CLT). In addition, schools frequently **lacked the resources**—such as audio-visual aids, language labs, and modern language tools—that would enable more engaging and diversified lessons.

These recurring issues are captured in the thematic breakdown below:

**Table 2: Themes from Teacher Interviews**

Theme	Description
Curriculum Inflexibility	Textbook-based lessons dominate; little room for contextual adaptation.
Test-Centric Teaching	Teachers are evaluated based on student exam scores, reducing pedagogical freedom.
Professional Development Gaps	Few opportunities for workshops on modern teaching methods.
Resource Deficiencies	Lack of multimedia tools and speaking/listening resources.

Table 2 demonstrates that teachers operate within an ecosystem that is both structurally rigid and pedagogically limited. The **inability to tailor content** based on student proficiency levels undermines differentiated instruction, which is essential for catering to mixed-ability classrooms. Meanwhile, the **absence of adequate training and technological resources** further restricts efforts to modernize classroom practices and introduce learner-centered methods.

The convergence of these institutional and instructional barriers creates a classroom environment that is ill-equipped to foster holistic English language development. Teachers acknowledged that many of their students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have few opportunities to interact with English outside school. This makes the classroom the most critical space for language acquisition—yet current practices fall short in maximizing that potential.

Ultimately, the findings from both student surveys and teacher interviews provide compelling evidence that the **decline in English proficiency is deeply rooted in systemic shortcomings**, including rigid curricular policies, limited instructional freedom, inadequate teacher support, and the overall marginalization of communication-focused language learning.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that the decline in English proficiency is driven by both pedagogical and institutional failures. The curriculum remains overly focused on written accuracy and exam techniques, neglecting the development of oral and listening skills. Teacher responses reveal systemic barriers such as inflexible policy directives, insufficient support for professional growth, and a scarcity of teaching materials.

These results are consistent with previous research suggesting that language education in Malaysia is more concerned with performance metrics than communicative development (Gill, 2014; Kaur & Sidhu, 2020). Moreover, the lack of a meaningful language environment outside the classroom further limits students' ability to internalize and apply their language skills.

It is evident that without systemic changes in teaching methods, curriculum content, and institutional structures, efforts to reverse the declining trend in English language proficiency will remain ineffective.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Revise syllabi to prioritize communicative tasks such as debates, role plays, and project-based learning.
2. **Teacher Training:** Provide regular, targeted professional development in CLT, differentiated instruction, and digital pedagogy.
3. **Resource Allocation:** Equip schools with multimedia tools and English reading corners to promote autonomous learning.
4. **Assessment Balance:** Diversify assessment to include oral presentations, listening tasks, and peer evaluations.
5. **Community Engagement:** Foster partnerships with local organizations and media to increase students' real-life exposure to English.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The decline of English language standards among Klang Valley secondary school students is a multifaceted issue that cannot be resolved by minor curriculum tweaks or superficial interventions. A paradigm shift is required—one that reimagines the purpose of language education from test preparation to meaningful, lifelong communication.

This study highlights the urgent need for reforms in pedagogy, institutional policy, and resource distribution. Addressing these systemic issues is not only essential for improving student outcomes but also for ensuring Malaysia's linguistic readiness in an increasingly globalized world. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must act collectively to restore the credibility and effectiveness of English language instruction in Malaysian schools.

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