The Star

English Lit losing shine

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ENGLISH Literature as an academic subject is on the verge of becoming extinct in schools.

According to the Malaysian Examinations Council's annual reports, 95 Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) candidates sat for the "Literature in English" paper in 2012, with the number dropping to 65 in 2022.

These statistics, combined with the lack of quality English Literature teachers and the fact that less than 50% of our students achieved the minimum level in the reading domain of the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) 2022, suggest that the study of poetry and prose is becoming a dying discipline in Malaysian schools.

This raises a bigger question: is the study of literature the key to improving reading levels? Universiti Malaya (UM) English Department head Dr Sharifah Aishah Osman said the country's recent performance in Pisa reading scores is a wake-up call that more needs to be done to address weaknesses in the education system and to foster a stronger reading culture in our society.

"Reading works of literature should not be regarded as an indulgent pastime but as an activity that benefits not only our mental health and well-being but also enhances our creativity, imagination, and ability to learn.

"There needs to be a similar shift in mindset with regard to the learning of literature as a subject," Sharifah Aishah told StarEdu.

She also shared that numerous studies have demonstrated how literature benefits students when literary texts are integrated into language learning.



Sharifah Aishah

“English literary studies expose students to the best ideas expressed in the best language, and in multiple genres, ranging from poetry to prose (both fiction and non-fiction) and drama,” she said.

Meanwhile, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT) English lecturer Priyadarsini Tinagharan said the absence of having a reading culture embedded in children is the reason for Malaysia’s Pisa reading scores declining from 415 in 2018, to 388 in 2022.

“Malaysia is not a reading society to begin with. The general populace does not appreciate and value literature simply because there isn’t much exposure to quality literary works,” she said, adding that amid the rising cost of reading materials and the multitude of online content in the digital age, it is easier for students to access knowledge through videos rather than reading.

“Not many students can afford the luxury of time to pore over a book for 10 hours unless they are really motivated or are exposed to reading at a very young age,” Priyadarsini said.

She added that while literature does help with improving English proficiency, the subject offers another scope of knowledge beyond language.

“When students learn literature while possessing a high level of proficiency in the language, it will help them appreciate literature,” she said.

According to Priyadarsini, the appreciation of literature exposes students to the analysis of context within a text.

“Take a Shakespeare play for example – when you study the text, you also learn about the history, culture and themes presented in it.

“When students are exposed to the cultures portrayed in literary texts, they develop an immediate interest in learning the language as well,” she explained.

Both Sharifah Aishah and Priyadarsini agreed that access to good literature is an issue, as quality books are not always easily available and those that are may prove to be out of reach for underprivileged students.

Making works of literature more affordable and widely available, said Sharifah Aishah, can boost reading habits and assist educators in ensuring that young readers receive the early exposure to literacy skills needed to become lifelong readers and self-directed learners.

Perception and practicality

Public perception of the study of literature having little practical application beyond serving as a tool for the enhancement of language learning is a misconception that must be corrected, Sharifah Aishah stressed.

This misconception is due to the way the subject tends to be taught in Malaysian public schools – as mere exercises in reading comprehension, she said.



Priyadarsini

“Analysing and discussing literary texts bring into play two generic skills that are very relevant in the digital age – critical thinking and analytical skills.

“Those who are unfamiliar with the value of literary studies are unaware that reading and interpreting literary texts train the mind in all aspects of higher-order thinking, such as the abilities to analyse, synthesise and evaluate information, all of which are essential to creative and innovative problem-solving and decision-making.

“Many parents who don’t understand the value of literature don’t want their children pursuing such a subject because of the perception that it is not financially viable and does not impart any useful skills, steering them to major in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) instead,” she said, emphasising the need for society to recognise and cultivate a love for literature and literary studies to impart important life skills in youths.

Sharifah Aishah said UM’s English Department graduate employability rates have been consistently high, indicating that employers appreciate the skills and knowledge these graduates bring to the competitive 21st-century workplace through their study of literature.

“Our students often share how rewarding their literature classes have been and how the subject remains highly relevant to their lives,” she said.

Priyadarsini, however, posited that while literature cultivates critical thinking, analytical skills and empathy, the study itself lacks economic appeal and value.

Commenting on the low uptake of the Literature in English subject among STPM candidates, she said the subject has to have “a certain economic value” in order for it to have more demand.

“In Malaysia, we don’t have a robust creative industry where writers are in huge demand, unlike in India where there is a need for English graduates to produce subtitles and scripts for its thriving movie industry,” she shared.

Parents, she said, tend to be practical when it comes to what their children study.

“Parents are willing to mortgage their houses to fund their kids by sending them overseas to study STEM degrees like medicine simply to fulfil the dream of having a doctor in the family.

“I’m not certain they’d do the same if their child aspired to be a writer,” she said, adding that STEM graduates are generally perceived to have a wider range of opportunities compared to language and literature graduates.

Priyadarsini called for a paradigm shift in public perception if the nation is to cultivate an appreciation for English literature.

“We can probably see an uptake in students taking literature courses if people stop equating the pursuit of knowledge solely with monetary gain, as literature can be seen as a form of appreciation and self-enrichment,” she added.