

Examining the Impact of Family Household Income on Children's English Proficiency in Malaysia: A Case Study

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Abstract

Malaysia is a diverse country where the population covers people of different races, which results in most Malaysians being able to be either bilingual or multilingual. Although the differences are a common factor that might be influencing their English proficiency, much of the research that has been done to study the correlation between race and English proficiency proves that the relationship between those two is there. Most people tend to ignore the influence of household income on their English proficiency, which results in less research being conducted. Thus, this study aims to investigate the parents' experiences between family household income and children's English proficiency in Malaysia. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative data from Malaysians with different family household incomes. This study reveals that there is a connection between family household income and their children's English proficiency in terms of the level of awareness of the importance of English, the practice of English in daily life and the resources provided by parents.

Keywords: *English proficiency, household income, Malaysian parents*

Abstrak

Malaysia adalah sebuah negara yang pelbagai di mana penduduknya terdiri daripada pelbagai bangsa yang mengakibatkan kebanyakan rakyat Malaysia mampu bertutur dalam dua bahasa atau lebih. Walaupun perbezaan ini adalah faktor yang biasa yang mungkin mempengaruhi kecekapan berbahasa Inggeris mereka, namun banyak kajian yang telah dijalankan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara bangsa dan kecekapan berbahasa Inggeris membuktikan bahawa hubungan di antara kedua-duanya wujud. Kebanyakan orang cenderung mengabaikan pengaruh pendapatan isi rumah terhadap kecekapan berbahasa Inggeris mereka yang mengakibatkan kurangnya penyelidikan yang dijalankan. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengalaman ibu bapa di antara pendapatan isi rumah keluarga dan kecekapan berbahasa Inggeris anak-anak di Malaysia. Enam temu bual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan untuk mendapatkan data kualitatif dari rakyat Malaysia dengan pendapatan isi rumah keluarga yang berbeza. Kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa terdapat hubungan antara pendapatan isi rumah keluarga dan kecekapan berbahasa Inggeris anak-anak mereka dari segi tahap kesedaran tentang kepentingan bahasa Inggeris, amalan bahasa Inggeris dalam kehidupan seharian, dan sumber yang disediakan oleh ibu bapa.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between various family household incomes and their children's English proficiency in Malaysia. The household income in Malaysia can be divided into three categories, B40, M40, and T20, which differ based on the household income range. This study focuses on how household income could affect or not affect their children's English proficiency, especially in Malaysia, where English is not the primary language, unlike other countries like the United Kingdom and Singapore, which use English as their mother tongue. In Malaysia, there is a noticeable difference in children's English proficiency from different households. Children from urban areas have excellent English proficiency compared to children from rural areas, which have poor English proficiency. Yet, English proficiency does not rely on the locality of the children but the household income instead. Thus, the focus of this study is to find the correlation between household income and children's English proficiency in Malaysia, and it is divided into three parts, which are the parent's awareness of the importance of the English language, the practice of English language in their daily life, and the resources provided by parents.

Problem statement

This research is being conducted due to the fact that there is a noticeable difference of English proficiency in children from different backgrounds in Malaysia. The obvious difference in their background is the household income of the parents of the children. According to Ashcraft, in 2023, low socioeconomic status households put children at a much higher risk of developing academic struggles because of the need for more resources and opportunities, in addition to acquiring a new language. As cited by Winsler (2014), it is frequently challenging to separate the influence of English proficiency against poverty in predicting early school results for Dual

language learners (DLLs) because a large portion of DLLs live in poverty (Capps et al., 2005). There is a lot of research outside of Malaysia that has been discussing how financial household income could affect their children's English proficiency yet there is still limited research involving Malaysia on the very same topic. This is concerning as the English language is being used widely in Malaysia. Regional English is not viewed as a distorted form of the English language but rather as a flexible variant that is feasible for efficient communication (Ong L. T., & Stephanie, 2018). This is the solid reason for the relevance of this study, which involves the parents' household income and their children's English proficiency.

Research objectives

- To investigate the differences of family household income and their awareness on the importance of English proficiency in Malaysia.
- To explore the English proficiency of children from various financial backgrounds.
- To identify the effect of family household income and its relevance in influencing the children's English proficiency.

Research questions

- Do the differences in family household income affect the level of awareness of the importance of English proficiency in Malaysia for parents?
- What are the differences in English proficiency levels for children from various financial backgrounds?
- How does the family household income affect children's English proficiency level?

Literature Review

The parents' awareness of the importance of English language

The English language in Malaysia is considered as the second language that has been widely used after Bahasa Melayu since Bahasa Melayu is considered as the national language. Most Malaysians have the capability to speak English fluently despite their different race that has their own mother tongue. According to research that has been cited, Malaysia was recently classified as having the greatest level of English proficiency among Asian nations where English is not the native tongue (NST 7, April 2011; referenced in Thirusanku & Melor, 2012, p. 11). Malaysia came out on top, followed by Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and the EF EPI (Education First, English Proficiency Index), a global education centre that specializes in academic degrees, educational travel, cultural interaction, and language instruction. Five competency levels—very high, high, moderate, low, and very low—were assigned to the Asian nations. According to the survey, which was published on March 30, Malaysia was the only Asian nation to be evaluated as having a high level of English proficiency. In regards to this, the main contributor to fluency is mostly from the parents themselves, who have been encouraging their children to have good English proficiency. The majority of parents in Malaysia are fully aware of the importance of English language proficiency, yet the majority are taking it into practice in their real lives and solely rely on their teachers at school. English Language Education in Malaysia: Challenges and Strategies, a 2016 study by Rabea Malik and Noraini Idris found that despite parents' awareness of the value of English for their children's education and future employment, access to resources and high-quality English language instruction was still problematic. In order to assist English language development, the study also emphasized the need for improved communication and teamwork between parents, teachers, and schools.

The practice of English language in daily life

The usage of English language in children's daily life in Malaysia is varied as

there are many factors that might be influencing them. Even the level of English proficiency of each child might differ from time to time, there is a probability that any factors could be affecting children's English proficiency. Students must memorize all the lexical items as separate entities, which are then applied to the rules that have been memorized. By doing so, it is expected that students would be able to speak and write 'correctly' or 'accurately.' As a result, most Malaysian children use English only in the classroom during English lessons. Hence, it is a norm to have students who score highly in English in the school and national examinations but may not speak English (Yamat & Hamidah, 2019). To add more, a study conducted by Singh and Nagarajah in 2024 found that parents strongly pointed out that they engaged better through interactive learning platforms when opting to teach English to their young children at home, mainly due to certain design elements used, such as video, audio and gamification-sort of lesson content that can have an impact on learning, motivation, and educational outcomes.

The resources provided by parents

Parents play a major role in encouraging children's English language proficiency. The resources provided by parents can also be in various forms, such as physical or mental. According to Ishak, Satar and Zakaria in 2020, parental involvement is one of the determinants of students' academic achievement. However, low parental involvement has been identified as one of the factors that deterred the improvement of the quality of education in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that households with both parents working involved less in their children's education. The study also discovered a positive relationship between parental support for children's language acquisition and their ability to speak English. The involvement of parents in providing resources can give a positive impact towards children's English proficiency. Educators must actively promote and support parental engagement in their children's education to enhance positive outcomes, including regular

communication on academic progress and offering resources like reading lists and educational apps for continued guidance at home. Numerous studies consistently demonstrate the pivotal role parental involvement plays in fostering favorable academic and social results for children (Leung et al., 2021).

Methodology

Research Design

This chapter emphasizes more on the method of conducting this research with the aim to explore the relationship between the household income and the children's English proficiency in Malaysia. The design of this research focuses on the qualitative method, where all the data is extracted from an interview session with a few respondents from various backgrounds who are related to the study.

Sample of the study

To ensure the findings and results of this research is accurate and reliable, a few interview sessions were conducted with different backgrounds and household income of parents. All the parents that were being interviewed had adhered to the characteristics of the respondent that is being set before the research being conducted. In other words, a purposive sampling is being directed in this research.

The characteristics of the respondents are as follows:

- The earning of the household according to the classification of Malaysian Household Income
- The period of being parents is at least five years and above
- The age of their children is at least 7 years old.

Table1

Biography of the respondents

Respondents	Gender	Household Income Class
1	Female	T20
2	Female	
3	Male	M40
4	Female	
5	Female	B40
6	Male	

1	Female	T20
2	Female	
3	Male	M40
4	Female	
5	Female	B40
6	Male	

Instruments

The interview is being conducted through phone call interview and using either English or Bahasa Melayu considering the request of the respondents. All the interview sessions are being recorded and transcribed as proof and transparency of the interview conducted. All respondents are given the same set of questions covering the three research objectives.

The list of interview questions that were asked are as follows:

- What is your opinion on the importance of English proficiency for your children?
- Do you think your children have a good command of English?
- How do you use English in your daily life with your family?
- What is your children's norm of using English in their daily life?
- Do you think your financial situation affects your children?
- To what extent can you provide support for your children to improve their English proficiency?

All the respondents chosen were willing to participate, and a thorough background check was done before they were selected to be interviewed. All the respondents were given the freedom to answer the questions based on their experience or opinion.

Themes of findings

The interview that was conducted has resulted in a few themes including the prior theme set beforehand of the study.

The themes are as follows:

- Theme 1: The parents' awareness of the importance of the English language
- Theme 2: The practice of the English language in their daily life
- Theme 3: The resources provided by parents

Results & Findings

Result of the parent's awareness of the importance of English language

Based on the interview conducted, all the respondents from B40, M40 and T20 agreed that the English language is important for their children. The outcome of the interview is parallel to a study that has been conducted by Malaysia's Ministry of Education. As mentioned by a respondent from the B40 family household income, now the age of technology has changed... so English is very important. This is also supported by respondents from M40 and T20 family household income in which they shared, "English is very important... we mostly have to use English," and "it is important... because English is basically an international medium." According to a Malaysian Ministry of Education study, parents are extremely important in helping their children become proficient in English and understand its significance (Ministry of Education, 2019). According to the study, parents who understand the value of English language competence for their kids' future success are more likely to support their kids' education and give them chances to practice their English.

Result of the practice of the English language in their daily life

The practice of English in the children's daily life revolves around their communication between their parents, siblings and, also, their peers. Although there are other factors that could affect each child's English proficiency, to only rely

on one factor that could affect it is unreliable. Thus, there were different responses from the respondents throughout the interview session regarding their children's daily practice of English due to different factors. Respondents from B40 and M40 family household income mentioned, "When with friends, they usually speak English. It seems like that. Sometimes it sounds like a mixture of English and Malay too." and, "They also speak English with their friends. I rarely listen to him speak Bahasa Melayu." However, a respondent from T20 family household income said that "the school factor that influences my children to have a good proficiency in English... my children have a command of English from school and friends." Multilingual children in Malaysia typically have greater cognitive capacities and a higher level of metalinguistic awareness, per a study by the University of Malaya (UM, 2018). This is because kids are exposed to many linguistic structures and languages, which can improve their cognitive growth and capacity for critical thought. Additionally, children who speak multiple languages may have greater career and social mobility chances. However, there are a few respondents who admit that there are challenges that come with being multilingual. This is aligned with the studies from the National University of Malaysia (NU Malaysia, 2020) and the University of Malaya (UM, 2018), which emphasize the necessity of comprehending the complexities of multilingualism and the difficulties multilingual children in Malaysia face, as well as the significance of providing support for their language development and academic performance.

Result of the resources provided by parents

Going deeper into the research objectives, all respondents were being questioned as to whether their financial situation would have the tendency to give effect towards their children's proficiency and four out of six respondents clearly mentioned that their financial situation would not be affecting their children's English proficiency. Respondents from B40 and

M40 families' household incomes mentioned that "Mastery of English actually comes from one's own interest." "It doesn't matter what our income is, it will not affect my children's English proficiency". Furthermore, respondents from T20 family household income clarified that "It actually depends on their desire, not their economic status." According to a study by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2019), several factors can affect children's enthusiasm in studying the English language. Children who view learning the English language favourably and believe it will be beneficial and important to their futures are more likely to be interested in it. Additionally, kids who are eager to learn English are more likely to have high levels of self-esteem and confidence. To add more, all of the respondents' children were sent to government schools and not private schools, which would still require the use of Malay in other subject than English and to not use English wholly. The other two respondents believe that their household income had a significant impact on their children's English proficiency. According to them, the income they gain is the main reason that they can provide more resources and opportunities for the growth of their children's English proficiency. This is supported by one of the respondents from the M40 family household income, "It is actually affecting my children because I cannot give them the usual things that I used to give back then

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study to find the correlation between family household income and children's English proficiency in Malaysia is achieved as to where the relationship between family household income and children's English proficiency exist in terms of the parents' awareness on the importance of English language, the practice of English language in their daily life, and the resources provided by parents, but it is not the major factor that is affecting the children's English proficiency. Yet, there would still be a minor effect on the capability for parents to provide resources to improve their

children's English proficiency. This study also reveals that the responsibility to ensure children's English proficiency does not only rely on the parents but also on the community and school. All these parties should be able to work together to ensure there is a balance of empowering English and Malay proficiency in Malaysia, where most of the people are bilingual and multilingual. To wrap this study up, there is a favourable correlation between household income and children's English competence, although this is not the only aspect to consider in Malaysia. To fully understand the relationship, additional study is required, and initiatives should be taken to guarantee that kids from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to advance their English language skills.

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