

## *Family Household Income and Children's English Proficiency in Malaysia: A Case Study*

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The Asian Conference on Education 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Malaysia is a diverse country where the population covers people with different races that results in most Malaysian being able to be either bilingual or multilingual. Although the differences is a common factor that might be influencing their English proficiency, yet many of the research that has been done to study the correlation of races and English proficiency prove that the relationship between those two is there. Most people tend to ignore the influence of household income towards 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. A few interviews had been conducted to obtain the qualitative data from Malaysians with different family household income. This study reveals that there is a relationship between family household income and their children's English proficiency in terms of the level of awareness on the importance of English, the practice of English in daily life and the resources provided by parents.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Household Income, Awareness, Parents and Children, Malaysia

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## Introduction

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 which are B40, M40 and T20 which differ based on the salary range of the household income. The Table 1 below serves a better understanding of the mentioned term.

### *Definition of Terms*

Term	Definition
B40	Romelli (2022) mentioned that the bottom 40% of Malaysian household income is known as B40. They make less money each month than RM4,850.
M40	The M40, or Middle 40%, group represents Malaysia's middle class. According to the 2019 Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey, the average monthly income in Malaysia is between RM4,851 and RM10,970.
T20	According to Rebecca (2022), The T20 group represents the top 20% of household income in Malaysia. They are regarded as high earners because they make more than RM10,971 every month.

Table 1: Definition of B40, M40, and T20 in Malaysia's Household Income Classification

This study focuses on how the household income could affect or to 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 that use English as their mother tongue. In Malaysia, there is a noticeable difference in children's English proficiency from different households. Children from the urban area have an excellent English proficiency compared to the children from the rural area which has poor English proficiency. Yet, the 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 parents' awareness on the importance of English language, the practice of English language in their daily life, and the resources provided by parents.

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 differences of their background is the household income of the parents of the children. As cited from Winsler (2014), it is frequently challenging to separate the influence of English proficiency against poverty in predicting early school results for DLLs because a large portion of DLLs live in poverty (Capps et al., 2005). (Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2006).

In their 2002 study of DLLs in Miami's kindergarten, second, and fifth grades, Oller and Eilers discovered that socioeconomic status (SES) was a more reliable predictor of English language and literacy skills than language spoken at home. 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 relevancy of this study involving the parents' household income and their children's English proficiency.

This research aims 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 and to identify the effect of family household income and its relevance in influencing the children's English proficiency.

## **Literature Review**

### **Parents' Awareness on 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 a 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 center 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 regard to this, the main contributor of fluency is mostly from the parents themselves who have been encouraging their children to be able to have a good English proficiency. Majority of parents in Malaysia are fully aware of the importance of English language proficiency yet not the majority is taking it into practice in their real life 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. Ruzita Mohd Amin and Noraini Idris' (2013) study, "Children's English Language Utilize in Multilingual Homes in Malaysia," looks at how

children in multilingual families in Malaysia use the English language. According to the study, children in multilingual households in Malaysia regularly utilize several languages, including English. The study also discovered that factors like the languages spoken at home and by their classmates had an impact on how youngsters utilize language. To add more, *The Influence of Parental Attitudes on Children's English Language Use in Malaysia* is a 2015 study by Siti Zalina Ahmad and Zainab Mat Saad that discovered that parental attitudes have a significant impact on children's English language use in Malaysia and that positive parental attitudes towards English language use are positively related to children's English language use in their daily lives.

### ***The Resources***

In encouraging children's English language proficiency, parents play the major role. The resources provided by parents can also be in various forms such as physically or mentally. Parental involvement in English language learning among Malaysian families is the subject of one study, "Parental Involvement in English Language Learning: A Study of Malaysian Families," by Mohd. Nadzir Osman (2013). According to the report, parents in Malaysia use a range of tools to help their kids become more fluent in English, including hiring tutors, enrolling them in language programmes, and providing English language study materials. 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 actually give a positive impact towards children's English proficiency. According to a 2016 study by Norlidah Alias and Shuhaida Sari titled "A Study of Parental Support for English Language Learning in Malaysia," parents in Malaysia offer a variety of supports to help their kids become more fluent in the language, including teaching them English, encouraging them to speak it, and enrolling them in language schools. Parental support is favourably correlated with children's English language proficiency, according to the study.

### **Research Methodology**

The design of this research focuses on the qualitative method where all of the data is extracted from an interview session with a few respondents from various backgrounds that are related to 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 of 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.

### ***Biography of the Respondents***

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

Table 2: Biography of the respondents

All of 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.

All of the respondents chosen are willingly to participate and there was a thorough background check that had been done before they were being selected to be interviewed. All of 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 on the importance of English language
- Theme 2: The practice of English language in their daily life
- Theme 3: The resources provided by parents

### **Results & Findings**

#### ***Parents' Awareness on the Importance of English Language***

Based on the interview conducted, it can be seen that all of the respondents from B40, M40 and T20 agreed that 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 practise their English.

### ***Practice of 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 are different responses from the respondents throughout the interview session on 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 due to the fact that 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. Although there are a few respondents who admit that there are challenges that come with the weight of being multilingual. This is align with the studies from the National University of Malaysia (NU Malaysia, 2020) and University of Malaya (UM, 2018) emphasise 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.

### ***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 family household income 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". To add more, respondents from T20 family household income clarify 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), a number of 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 school and not private school which would still require the use of Malay in other subjects than English and to not use English wholly. As for the other two respondents, they believe that their household income had given a significant impact on their children's English proficiency. According to them, the income they gained is the main reason that they are able to provide more resources and opportunities for the growth of their children's English proficiency. This is supported by one of the respondent 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 the community and school. All of 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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