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The study of English language proficiency among Malay Form 2 students

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify factors that contribute to poor performance in English subjects by students of Form 2 of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Raja Abdullah in Kepong. This study involved 30 respondents consisting of male and female Malay Form 2 students, conducted in a quantitative manner. The researcher obtained information through the distribution of questionnaires to randomly selected respondents and from an analysis of examination scores. The questionnaire is divided into two parts; Part A and Part B. Part A is related to the respondents' background, while Part B involves several questions that are related to this research. Base on the students' examination score, respondents were students who scored 40 and below in the exam. Findings showed there are several factors why Form 2 Malay students of SMK Raja Abdullah do not master English subjects; reasons being socio-culture, environment, family, peers and themselves. With this study, it is hoped that all parties involved can play a part to contribute to overcoming this issue.

Keywords— Academic Performance, Malay Students, Factors, English

1. INTRODUCTION

English schools were constituted based on the philosophy to develop Christianity and spread the British colonial ideology. Penang Free School located on Church Street; Penang is the first school in Malaysia officially opened on October 20, 1816 (Tan Yao Sua, 2013). English schools are divided into two types, namely the Free School which gets help from the government, and the other type is partially-assisted and funded by a Christian missionary association, along with governmental aid. The direction of English education at that time was to train workers such as clerks and technicians for the government. However, in fulfilling the request of the Malay nobility, an English-born Grammar School in England introduced a Special Malay Class in the 1930s – to provide significance to the direction in the Malay's community education, in which was to nurture learning culture in the Malay community especially in English subject. According to Sua (2013), the opportunities to attend the Special Malay Classes were limited and the number of Malays attending English schools was alarmingly low.

In general, education at the British colonial was freely or laissez-faire because there were five types of schools which are English, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and Islam, created without uniformity. Each type has its own philosophy, teaching direction and curriculum. The variation, however, has caused difficulty in concept integration and unity between the races. The education system during the English government had placed distress on the current education system in terms of unity and in the national integration aspiration. To an extent the existing Vision Schools in Malaysia achieved to foster inter-ethnic integration and unity is debatable (Onget al. 2014).

However, the government is looking to expedite the implementation of a new policy to uphold the Malay language and strengthen the English language (MBMMBI) for first-year students from 2011 as opposed to original proposals in 2012. Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, however, said that MBMMBI's earlier implementation of replacing Science and Mathematical Teaching and Learning in English (PPSMI) depends on several factors (Ramasamy and Puteh, 2018). Among them are the sufficient number of teachers, new curriculum readiness and textbooks for Science, Mathematics and English which needed to be completed. Muhyiddin, who was the Education Minister at the time, informed that MBMMBI's implementation of the Year Four, Form One, Form Four begun in 2012 to enable the ministry to prepare all the necessary teaching and learning needs. Ramasamy and Puteh(2018) also added that new approaches and strategies are needed in teaching and learning so students can master the skills in accordance with the development of science and technology to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

2. BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Today, the lack of adopting the English language is getting severe among the students, regardless of levels; primary, secondary or university level. What is more upsetting is that the problem is infectious among Malay students. Here, we focus on the weaknesses in English language proficiency among Form 2 students. Let's evaluate why this problem occurs especially among Malay students. Rural areas are mostly occupied by Malays and adopting English as a second language in their daily activities seems less important (Siti Sukainah Che Mat and Melor Md. Yunus. 2014). Some students feel embarrassed when conversing in English, afraid that they will be ridiculed and denied – fearing the mockery of friends, which will result in a lack of confidence. Self-awareness and high concern for negative judgments for foreign and non-genuine pronunciation and accents, and potential mistakes or speech errors, English as Foreign Language (EFL) students who are shy will choose to avoid class discussions and conversations (Nasser Fallah. 2014). He also added that the lost opportunity to learn, especially when practicing to speak, can occur; causing frustration and low motivation to learn English. The truth is, Chinese students are more advanced and expert in English because they have the right attitude, the courage to try and not being ashamed of their friends' mockery. A study of 'Comparing Malay and Chinese Student's Spoken English' was made by Amerrudin Abd Manan and Sarimah Shamsudin (2017), their result shows that Chinese students have better performance in English language productivity, vocabulary range and sophistication. Malay Form 2 students on the other hand, mostly did not put in extra effort, change their attitude and relied solely on teachers to improve. Through the author's English language teaching experience, student's social background such as parental education, occupation, income level and social environment, contributes to the incompetency of students in the English language. In addition, no self-motivation has made the condition worsen. With such an attitude, students become more and more passive toward learning this second language.

Most students learn just to pass the exams; this includes English subjects. They only depend on the existing curriculum to help them get by. If they want to brush up on their speaking skills, negative perceptions and attitudes such as shame and worry about making mistakes when speaking need to be removed (Amerrudin Abd Manan and Sarimah Shamsudin. 2012). On top of that, students worry too much about their grammar, which hinders them from conversing and writing in the language, even as simple as writing a topic in English. This proved that Malay students are far behind. Students also do not want to 'explore' deeply in English. They consider English to be difficult and tough to understand, let alone use it in their daily life. The reason being, these students overthink, and they do not realize the importance of the English language to be a tool of advancement in their life.

Researchers also argued that the underlying causes of a poor command of English are due to the lack of grasp in grammar, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes and lack of investment in time and effort to strengthen their English. Most students depend solely on teachers to feed them the knowledge.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem of low English proficiency among Form 2 Malay students of SMK Raja Abdullah is at a concerning level. Various ways and strategies have been implemented by the Ministry of Education to encourage the use of the English language among the students. According to Director-General of Education Malaysia, YB TAN SRI Alimuddin Hj. Mohd Dom, the implementation of the teaching of Science and Mathematics for primary and secondary schools, several strategies have been proposed. The strategies include providing adequate English teachers – retiring teachers, teachers from overseas, private colleges and universities (IPTS), apart from recruiting teachers from Malaysia Institute of Teacher Studies (IPGM) and public universities (IPTA). In addition, the government also provided non-normative English teachers with two teachers for each class with a high number of students (e.g. over 35 students). The ministry has also provided reading materials and has introduced language literacy in English language teaching, in line with the government's efforts in implementing the new policy of promoting Bahasa Malaysia whilst strengthening the English language (MBMMBI). To overcome this problem, we need to identify the real factors and causes as to why some students have difficulties using and mastering the English language.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

In conducting a study, objectives are emphasized as a reference framework for the investigation to be conducted smoothly and in an orderly manner. Among the objectives to be achieved in this study are:

- To study the issues of low English language proficiency among the Malay Form 2 students of SMK Raja Abdullah in 2019;
- To identify the factors of the Malay Form 2 students having a lack of interest in English subject, at SMK Raja Abdullah in 2019.

5. HYPOTHESIS

Hypotheses are ideas or assumptions made to test hypothesis formation based on logical problems. Hypotheses need to be clearly stated with the correct terminology and can be executed, able to test and express differences or relationships between variables. The hypotheses for this study are:

- Students do not master English because of the influence of their peers and themselves
- The social background factor of a student's family does not speak English.
- Environmental factors in schools and residences cause students to not master English.

6. METHODOLOGY

This study was done in a descriptive manner in the analysis of data using frequency statistic and percentage, to explain the frequency of each variable characteristic. However, in this study, researchers use a basic percentage statistics. The data were obtained and compiled through questionnaires and analysis of examination scores. This method was used as it is suitable to know students' attitudes.

7. POPULATION

This study was conducted at SMK Raja Abdullah, Kepong. The population of this study only involves Malay Form 2 students with low English proficiency. Because the population size is small, all students who do not speak English are the respondents. Determining the number of samples in a study is important as the sample can represent the population being studied. The higher percentage of the sample percentage than the population is better because the sample taken is 100% representing the population of 30 samples involved in this study. When data is quoted in binary form i.e. "YES" or "NO", hence, the analysis used in this study is frequency. The selection of the form is due to the environment in which, the study and the scope of the study are limited.

8. FINDINGS

Descriptive analysis is a procedure for measuring and describing quantitative data. The purpose of descriptive analysis is to identify and describe trends and variations in the population, create new dimensions of the major phenomena, or describe samples in a study aimed at identifying causal effects. The description plays an important role in the general scientific process and educational research in particular (Loeb et al. 2017).

Table 1: Summary of descriptive analysis findings

No.	QUESTIONS	YES (%)	NO (%)
1.	I use English when speaking with my family at home.	10%	90%
2.	I do not understand everything that the teacher has taught me.	33%	67%
3.	I like to study English language at home.	20%	80%
4.	I often speak with my friends in English.	10%	90%
5.	My parents encouraged me to be more diligent in English learning.	70%	30%
6.	I like to participate in any activity at school that uses the English language.	13%	87%
7.	I like English more than other subjects.	30%	70%
8.	I enjoy learning the English language.	53%	47%
9.	At home, I have a special mini-library that has a lot of materials in English.	7%	93%
10.	I dream to be an English teacher.	3%	97%
11.	I love to watch movies & listen to music in English.	80%	20%
12.	English subject is easy to understand.	20%	80%
13.	I speak English more than I speak Malay.	10%	90%
14.	My library has less English reference books.	33%	67%
15.	My father and mother speak English fluently.	23%	77%
16.	I am interested in how teachers teach English in the classroom.	60%	40%
17.	In my residential area, there are always English language activities.	7%	93%
18.	The English language is concerned with teachers at school.	63%	37%
19.	Many friends have helped me to master the English language.	57%	43%
20.	I read English newspapers or magazines.	17%	83%
21.	I have attended tuition classes to improve my English.	37%	63%
22.	I am shy to speak in English.	33%	67%
23.	My friends will make fun and embarrass me if I speak English.	30%	70%
24.	Do you realize that the English subject is very important for your future?	10%	90%

Based on the table above, respondents do not have the best attitude in learning and mastering English as a second language. For example, only 10% of students often speak English with their friends, while 90% of students speak in other languages. According to Samira Al Hosni (2014), one of the factors that cause speaking difficulties to EFL learners is their own mother-tongue. Students who share the same mother tongue speak with each other in their first language just because it is easier and they feel more confident interacting. As seen in the table (item No. 4), only 10% of the students speak with their friends in English. Since there were only 33% of students who can understand what their teacher has taught them at school while the rest of the 67% could not understand. As a result, only 20% were interested to study English at home, while 80% would prefer to study other subjects or maybe did not study at all at home. This is also proven by item No. 7 where there were only 30% of students like English subject more than other subjects and the remaining 70% like other subjects more than English or they do not have any preference. Since the students did not speak in English, they did not understand the language, did not study the subject and did not like the subject, therefore, only 13% of the students would participate in any activity at school that uses the English language.

In addition, students did not get much support from their own parents. As mentioned, only 10% of the students speak English with their family at home because only 23% of parents are fluent in English. According to the table, only 7% of the parents provide a special mini library with a lot of English materials at home, while 93% did not.

Despite all the negativity, nonetheless, there are still hopes if we look at six positive items listed in the table. First, even though parents do not master the English language themselves, 70% of them encouraged their children to be more diligent in learning English. Secondly, 80% of the students love to watch movies and listen to music in English. A teacher needs to be creative to attract the students to learn English by using movies or songs in English. According to Samira Al Hosni (2014), she mentioned that Al-Abri (2008) recommended including some oral activities in the form of songs, poems, and simple stories and more conversational languages to allow students to have fun and enjoy learning to improve their speaking skills. Third, 53% of students actually enjoyed learning the English language and 60% were interested in how teachers taught them English in the classroom. Lastly, 63% of students realized that teachers were concerned more about English subjects at school.

The findings showed that the students did not master English due to a few family factors. Their parents are not fluent in English as they do not use English as the language of instruction and speech at home. They do not understand English and did not make many references for English. Consequently, these factors have caused most of them to consider English as a non-essential knowledge to be learned for their own future.

9. PROPOSAL

After this study, the researcher has provided some suggestions on ways to overcome the issue of mastering the English language for Malay Form 2 students of SMK Raja Abdullah.

- Encourage students to speak English throughout English class,
- Present work in English,
- English to be used during a school assembly, and
- Students to receive guidance, encouragement, and support from parents, teachers and peers.

10. CONCLUSION

Considering the seriousness of this issue, we should think of ways to overcome these poor English learners. Students should work harder to improve their English language proficiency. They should not be shy to seek guidance from their English teachers when they have problems in learning, should attend various English classes, practice reading and speaking in English and do more grammar exercises. Students should also read English books in order for them to improve their vocabulary and to be able to come out with content to produce essays in English. Undoubtedly English is a global language, a language of progress and a major tool in communication besides Malay. Moreover, it is one of the important tools for us to be on par with the current and future globalization era. We should be aware that (especially students) having a high English language proficiency does not mean that we are honoring the 'colonial' language, but it is as a stepping stone for us to evolve along with the fast-moving world. Malay language, on the other hand, remains sovereign to the Malays and it is no excuse for us not to master the English language like others. As the saying goes, "nothing is impossible to a willing heart." Hence, the sky is the limit.

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