

The Influence of Gender and Social Economic Status on Boarding School Students' English Language Performance

L'INFLUENCE DE SEXE ET DE LA SITUATION SOCIO-ÉCONOMIQUE SUR LA PERFORMANCE EN ANGLAIS CHEZ LES ÉLÈVES EN PENSION

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship between the students' gender and Social Economic Status (SES) and the English Language performance. A total of 355 form four students from four boarding schools in the state of Kedah and Perlis were taken as the subjects for this study. The research tool used was in the form of a questionnaire. The measurement of student's performance was based on their PMR English examination scores. The t-test and ANOVA were used to test the independent variables. The results obtained reported that gender, parents' total monthly income, parents' education level and the frequency of using English showed the existence of significant differences as related to the English Language performance. Other personal characteristics variables did not show any significant differences.

Keywords: Gender; Social Economic Status; English Language Performance

Résumé: L'objectif de cette étude est de décrire les relations entre le sexe des élèves, leur situation socio-économique (SES) et leur performance en l'anglais. Un total de 355 d'élèves venant de quatre internats dans la région de Kedah et de Perlis ont été choisis en tant que les sujets d'étude. Le questionnaire a été utilisé en tant que l'outil de recherche. L'évaluation de la performance des élèves est basée sur leurs notes d'examen du PMR Anglais. Le test T et l'analyse de variance (ANOVA) ont été

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utilisés pour tester les variables indépendantes. Les résultats obtenus ont indiqué que le sexe, les revenus mensuels totaux des parents, le niveau d'éducation des parents et la fréquence de l'usage de l'anglais avaient révélé l'existence des différences significatives par rapport à leur performance en anglais. D'autres caractéristiques variables personnelles n'ont montré aucune différence significative.

Mots-Clés: sexe; statut socio-économique; langue anglaise; performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Boarding schools or better known as "*Sekolah Berasrama Penuh*" (SBP) have been built through out Malaysia to provide the opportunity to the potential *bumiputera* (Malays and natives of any states of Sabah and Sarawak) students especially from rural areas to get better education. Hence, these boarding schools are well equipped with facilities to ensure the best education can be provided to these selected students. Realizing the potential of these boarding schools in improving the quality of education, the government has increased the enrolment especially from among the poor people. From year to year, more students especially the poor from all over Malaysia are offered the place in all SBPs. It is hoped that by giving them the opportunity to study in boarding schools, they are able to better develop their potential and improve their academic performance.

Every year analysis is done on the students' English Language performance obtained in the Lower Secondary Evaluation Examination (*Peperiksaan Penilaian Menengah Rendah/PMR*). Though many of these boarding schools managed to gain 100% passes in this particular subject, the quality is waning. This result has somehow given the impression that boarding schools fail to attain the standard set by the Fully Residential School Unit (Boarding School) that is gaining 100% 'A' in all subjects taken at the PMR level and English Language subject is inclusive. Therefore, this study is conducted to examine the students from the boarding schools to ascertain whether there exist the relationship between the students' gender and Social Economic Status (SES) and their English language performance.

There have been many studies conducted to identify the factors that contribute to the decline of students' academic performance. Lunn (1971), Nooman (1976), Levine (1980), White (1982), Astone and McLanahan (1991), and Sirin (2005) had documented the relationship between the social economic status (SES) and school achievement. The studies done by Koh Boh Boon (1976), Rumberger (1983), Walberg (1985), Stevenson (1987), and Xitao and Michael (2001) reported that parental involvement has a significant relationship with the students' academic achievement. Studies by Baker and MacIntyre (2003) and Kissau (2006), on the other hand, revealed the effects of gender on language acquisitions.

The objectives of this study are two-folds, namely to identify the significant relationship between the students' gender and English Language performance, and also to investigate whether there exist any relationship between the students' social economic status and their English Language performance.

2. METHOD

A correlational research design was used. The gender and SES variables, as measured by a self-report questionnaire, function as the independent variables and the English Language performance, measured by the Lower Secondary Evaluation Examination (*Peperiksaan Penilaian Menengah Rendah/PMR*) result, as the dependent variable (Figure 1).

2.1 Sampling design

A sample was drawn from the population of form four students from all the boarding schools in the state of Kedah and Perlis. A number of 355 students were taken as the subjects for this research. The selection criteria for attaining the samples was to exclude those students who entered the boarding schools at form four level which was after PMR. Only those who had been in the boarding schools since form one were chosen as the respondents. This is to avoid unnecessary interference on the collected data by those students who had experienced a non-boarding school environment before they sat for their PMR examination. All these subjects had received nine years of formal English instruction in school and had taken the PMR examination at their respective boarding school.

2.2 Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was designed to elicit the information on the subjects' personal characteristics. This includes the descriptive variables of gender, house location, primary school location, parents' education level, and parents' total monthly income, the frequency of using English, and the PMR result for English Language subject.

2.3 Data analysis

The data collected were computed and analyzed using the SPSS 12. Each student's score on the questionnaire was matched to his or her PMR examination grade. The statistical procedures used in this study were the t-test, and ANOVA.

3. RESULTS

3.1 PMR English Language result

The students were categorized according to their score in English Language subject in the PMR examination. It was obvious that majority of the students with the percentage of 75.2% attained grade A in the English Language examination. 23.3% attained grade B, grade C and D with only 0.6% respectively and 0.3% got an E. In this respect, 24.8% of the students failed to achieve the Fully Residential Schools' target which was to attain 100% A in all subjects including the English Language subject.

3.2 Gender

There were 192 (54.1 %) male students involved in this study. As for the females, there were only 163 (45.9%) students taking part in the research. There is a significant difference between the mean score of the PMR English Language performance of the male and female students. The mean score was slightly different. The average PMR English Language result of male students was 1.33 compared to the average PMR results of the female students which was 1.21; a difference of 0.12. The deviation from the mean was larger for the male students compared to the female students. The deviation for the mean for female was 0.50 compared to the male which was 0.54. Further analysis showed that the significant 2-tailed probability ($p=.002$) was smaller than $\alpha=.05$. Thus, there is a significant difference between the students' gender and their English Language achievement.

3.3 House location

Out of the 355 students, 184 (51.8%) were from urban housing areas and 171 (48.2%) were from village or rural housing location. There is no significant difference between the English Language Achievement of students who came from the urban housing areas and those from the rural areas as there was a slight difference in the mean for English Language Achievement. Comparing the two means, the difference was just 0.09. The deviation from the mean for urban areas was larger (0.57) compared to the rural areas which was 0.48. At the 2-tailed significant level, $p=.106$ which was greater than $\alpha=.05$.

3.4 Primary school location

More than 50% of the students had their first formal education in Primary Schools located in the urban areas. Only 43% had their first formal education at the primary schools located in rural areas. There is no significant difference between the performances of students from different primary school location. The mean was almost the same. The average English Language performance of those who had their primary education at the rural areas was 1.25 compared to those who had it at the urban areas which was 1.29. There was a difference of only 0.04. The analysis also showed that at the significant 2-tailed probability, $p=.302$ was greater than $\alpha=.05$. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the performances of students from different primary school location.

3.5 Parents' education level

Majority of the students' parents had SPM qualification as the highest education level that was 32%. The second highest was the degree level with a frequency of 90 (25.4%). The third highest (13.8%) was the students with the parents who had STPM. Another 12.7% of the parents had a Master or PhD and 8.7% belonged to those parents with SRP qualification. The lowest (2.3%) under this categorization was the parents with no formal education at all. Another 5.1% was those who had minimal formal education which was Primary School Certificate. Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the students in these four boarding schools had parents who attained higher secondary education level (SPM and STPM) with a percentage of 45.8. High education level (degree and Master/PhD) fell second with 38.1% whereas lower secondary education level (SRP and Primary School Certificate) with 13.8%.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to find out if there is significant mean difference in the English Language performance based on the different parents' education level. The results of the ANOVA showed $F=4.507$; $p=.001$. The significant 0.001 was smaller than the alpha level at 0.05. This indicates that there are significant differences in the different parents' education level to the English Language performance.

3.6 The Parents' total monthly income

The highest number of students fell into the category of parents who earned more than RM3001 (24.8%). The second highest was between RM1001 – RM2000 (23.1%). The lowest income (less than RM500) was reported to have the percentage of 17.2 and the same percentage was also reported for the income between RM2001 – RM3000. Others (17.7%) were reported to gain between RM501 – RM1000 monthly. To answer the question on whether students with parents of different total monthly income differ in their English Language performance, the researchers used ANOVA. The results of the ANOVA indicated that students with parents' of different total monthly income did differ in their English Language performance. The finding reported that $F=4.394$ and $p=.002$. At the significant level of $p<.05$, it could be concluded that there exist significant differences between the parents' total monthly income and the English Language performance.

3.7 The Frequency of using English

Most students reported that they used English at school only (73.2%). Out of 355 students, 6% of them used English at home whereas the remaining 20.8% used English at both school and home. To compare the English Language performance and the frequency of using English, analysis of variance was used. It was discovered that $F=2.968$ and $p=.02$. Since p was smaller than $\alpha=.05$, therefore, there are significant differences between the frequency of using English and English Language performance.

Based on the above findings on the statistical tests for each of the personal characteristics variables, there were some significant differences between the English Language performance and the students' personal characteristics. For example, the personal characteristics variables that were reported to show the existence of significant differences as related to the English Language performance were gender, parents' total monthly income, parents' education level and the frequency of using English. The other personal characteristics variables, house location and primary schools location, did not indicate any kind of relationship.

4. CONCLUSION

There are a few conclusions that can be derived from this study. It was discovered in this study that there was a significant difference between the performance of male and female students. However, this result on gender against students' performance was not in conformance with the studies done by Hancock (1996), Summers (2000), and Demie (2001). They highlighted from their studies that female students performed better than their counterpart on English Language. Conversely, this study revealed that male students in these four boarding schools in Kedah and Perlis got better grades in this subject. This had given room to the researchers to consider what Lanara (1999) had suggested that in certain societies, the linguistic work is considered "feminine" and in such society, the girls tend to perform better or example in the United States. On the other hand, boys will perform better if the linguistic studies are considered "masculine" subjects such as French and Germany.

This study had also revealed that there was no significant relationship between house and primary school location and students' performance. Therefore, this study supported a study by Steinberg (1996) that students' performance is not dependent on the house or school location.

Students, whose parents were highly educated, gained better grades in their English Language subject at the PMR level. Thus, this study revealed similar results as being reported in studies done by Rumberger (1983), Stevenson (1987), Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch and Darling (1992), U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993), Steinberg (1996) and Jacobson and Crockett (2000).

The parents with high total monthly income showed that their children achieved better grades in English Language as compared to the low-income parents. As highlighted by many researchers such as Lunn (1971), Koh Boh Boon (1976), Nooman (1976), Levine (1980), Niles (1981), Loveday (1982), Astone and McLanahan (1991), these parents were at the position that they could provide their children with materials or equipments that could help to enhance their children's learning capabilities and thus, their children performed better academically. Besides, this study also revealed that the more the students used the language, the better grades they scored.

5. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, the researchers propose several recommendations. The male students had a higher

mean score compared to the female. This has given the indication that the male students performed better than the female students. The female students in the boarding schools need to be motivated more than their counterpart to achieve better results in English Language. Therefore, it can be concluded that the student's gender does affect their performance. Hence, caution has to be placed when preparing the lesson plan for teaching the students of different sex. Teachers may need to be more sensitive with the different needs of the male and female students. For ease of teaching and learning, may be these two groups of students should be segregated during English classes. By doing so, the teachers would be able to prepare materials and apply the teaching approaches that suit the students of different gender.

The researchers believe that these three factors, parents' total monthly income, parents' education level, and the frequency of using English are inter-related to each other. This is because, well-educated parents would get better jobs and gain more compared to those who are not well-educated. These high educated parents have also learnt the language and to a certain degree are able to use the language with their children and thus, ensuring some kind of exposure to them.

Being educated people themselves would make them realize the importance of the language. Hence, they would use the language with the children more frequently compared to those parents who were less educated. Therefore, the best resolution to this is the administrators and teachers should understand how these three variables inter-related to one another. Parents with high education level would gain better income and thus, would be able to provide more materials and exposure to the target language to their children. Since these three factors are beyond their boundary, administrators especially have to make use of the PTA (Parents and Teachers Association) as the ground to ensure that the parents themselves are aware of these and know how they can help in improving their children's performance in English Language subject.

It can be concluded that certain factors under the students' personal characteristics do influence the students' English Language performance. Factors such as; gender, parents' monthly income, parents' education level, and the frequency of using English should not be taken lightly by the school administration and teachers. These variables can be considered as important areas that could be looked into to make certain better performance among the students.

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