

## **ISSUES CONTRIBUTING TO LOW PERFORMANCE OF ENGLISH IN A NATIONAL SCHOOL IN SONG, SARAWAK**

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**ABSTRACT:** English is becoming more important in this globalized world. In Malaysia, calls have been made from rulers and commoners alike to use English as the primary medium of instruction in primary schools. Although Malaysia has centralized education system for every state, rural schools might be in danger of losing out to their counterparts in the urban areas. Numerous programmes have been done to bring the standard of English in the school up to par with their counterparts from urban schools and yet English remains a tricky subject to master. In a rural school in the district of Song, Sarawak, English has always been the lowest performing subjects in UPSR year after year. Parallel to UPSR, the pupils for English intervention programme (LINUS BI) has the most compared to Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and Mathematics. This paper will attempt to research and understand the primary issues contributing to low performance of English in the school. At the same time, this paper will attempt to compare the background of pupils with high performance of English and pupils with low and mediocre performance in English and the causes leading to what they are today.

**KEYWORDS:** low performance, rural, primary school

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### **INTRODUCTION**

SKNE was established in 1964, making it almost the oldest school in Song. As of now, the school caters to 139 pupils with average 23-24 pupils in each class from primary 1 to 6. The strategic placement of the school by the side of the Rajang River makes it the primary choice for parents from nearby long houses compared to SKUM (P3 status).

The teaching staff of the school in 2016 comprises of 14 teachers and 6 of them were newly posted (<6 months). There are 3 English teachers with TESL background with 2 of them newly posted. Even then, the only more experienced English teacher only has 5 years of experience teaching the UPSR class.

All of the pupils are of Bumiputera status and 98% of those are of Iban ethnicity. The primary language of instruction in the school is Iban while Bahasa Malaysia (BM) is the second language. English is the foreign language as it is only a classroom subject and not utilised outside the classroom at all.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In SKNE, English is the most critical subject meaning that of all the subjects tested in UPSR, English has the worst GPMP (Gred Purata Matapelajaran). At the same time, English has the most pupils involved in LINUS BI, an English intervention compared to Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and Mathematics. Although various steps have been taken by the education office to rectify this problem, English is still the worst performing subject for years. Hence, there lies the problem. Worth mentioning is that among all the subjects in national schools,

English is the only subject using English itself as the language of instruction while the other subjects use BM. Therefore, English is not used communicatively compared to BM.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Through readings of different materials, low performance of English can be caused by low teaching and learning motivation. Low motivation in English acquisition can be derived from the fact that out of the classroom, English serves no purpose as the community around the school environment does not use English (D. Mustafa, 2013). Therefore, the motivation for English acquisition is low. This can snowball to other effects causing low confidence to use English among teachers and the students themselves (D. Mustafa, 2013).

Family’s financial and educational background is also an issue worth looking it. Compared to urban parents, parents in SKNE have low financial ability and almost all of them work primarily as farmers and fishermen. Excluding financial help from various governmental agencies such as ‘e-Kasih’ and ‘BR1M’, parents in these areas do not have the means to support their children. This can be translated to not being able to support their children to go to tuition classes and buying extra learning materials compared to parents from the urban schools. Besides that, parents’ low educational attainment means that they also cannot support their children in learning from home (Lamb, 2008). Therefore, learning is relegated to teachers and that can only happen in schools.

Lastly, teacher factor also plays an important role. In Song, teacher turnover is high. Experienced teachers often transfer back to their original states thus taking their precious experience of teaching English to another school. To counter that, new teachers are posted but they don’t have the experience to teach English effectively. Some teachers are also low motivated when they are posted to these rural schools and that can be carried into the classroom, rendering the teaching and learning process of English ineffective.

By looking at the various issues above, it is imperative that these issues be identified and chronicled into order according to their impact and severity before concrete steps can be formulated to overcome these issues.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

<b>Research Objectives</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>
To determine issues contributing to low performance of English	What are the major issues contributing to low performance of English in the school?
To identify overlooked issues contributing to low performance of English according to their impacts	What are the issues that may be overlooked that contribute to low performance of English in the school?
To compare the differences of low/mediocre performing pupils with good performing pupils of English in terms of issues presented	How are high performing pupils different from low performing pupils of English in terms of issues presented?

**METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative research through the use of case study where data is collected through semi structured interviews. The data collected is to identify issues contributing to low performance of English in the school. At the same time, data collected also aimed to identify issues that may be overlooked in contributing to low performance of English in the school. The respondents for this research were four teaching staff of English and also four identified pupils. The respondents were chosen through purposive sampling where all the teaching staff are those that teaches English while the four pupils were categorized into two groups where the first group consisted of pupils who excelled in their English subject while the second group consisted of pupils who are very poor in their English subject.

**Table 1: Profile Of The Teacher Respondents**

Respondent	Sex	Professional Qualification	Teaching Experience
T1	Male	English Studies	32 years
T2	Male	TESL	5 years
T3	Female	TESL	1 year
T4	Male	TESL	1 year

**Table 2: Profile of the Pupil Respondents**

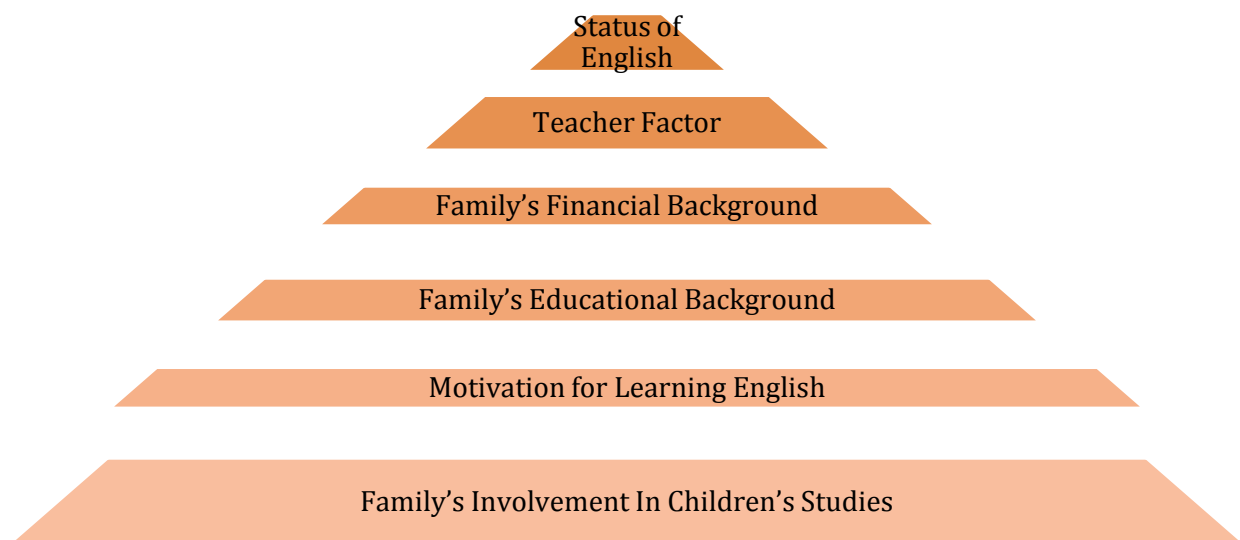
Respondent	Sex	Primary	Average English marks
High Performing Pupil 1 (HPP1)	Female	6	>80 (A)
High Performing Pupil 2 (HPP2)	Female	4	>70 (B)
Low Performing Pupil 1 (LPP1)	Male	4	<30 (E)
Low Performing Pupil 2 (LPP2)	Female	6	<40 (D)

The research instrument for teaching staff are one ordinal questions and semi structured interview questions. Ordinal question was used to determine their views on the impacts of the issues presented. After that, semi structured interviews were conducted to further delve on the reasons for their order on the ordinal question given earlier.

Meanwhile, four pupils with different performance were chosen for semi structured interviews to find out the difference between them and how they came to this performance. Interviews were done majorly in Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and Bahasa Iban (BIB) as pupils could understand the questions better and able to express their answers accurately in their first language.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table 3: Order of Impact According to Issues Presented**



Looking at the pyramid graph above, it can be seen that family’s involvement in children’s studies had the most impact towards English performance in the school. After that, motivation for learning English has the biggest impact. This is anticipated as pupils do not see the importance of learning English in their immediate environment. Moreover, English serves no purpose once they leave the classroom as they communicate in BM and BIB. Next, family members’ educational background also serves a big impact in English performance. Majority of the local population leave their studies as young as 15 to 17 years old. As such, they became a negative role model for pupils to follow as they deem that learning does not serve a purpose. For the last three issues, the severity is considered minor and more focus has to be given towards the first three issues. However, all the issues shall be presented in depth.

**Emergent Theme 1: Family’s Involvement in Children’s Studies**

In looking at this issue, multiple perspectives were given by the teaching staff. Their responses are as below:

T1: *“Most of the parents don’t care about the children. In fact, they are not at home most of the time.”*

T2: *“A lot of time is spent at home compared to in the school. When I gave homework, many of them don’t do it as no one helps them at home.”*

T3: *“It seems that they (parents of the pupils) expects us to educate their children while they themselves do nothing. How much can we help them?”*

T4: *“When they (pupils) go back, their school bags remained unopened till the next day. I can only scold or motivate but if the parents don’t do anything for them (pupils), it (English performance) will still be the same.”*

Similarly, in interviews conducted between low performing group and high performing group, family’s involvement in their studies were shown to be significant indeed.

HIGH PERFORMING PUPILS (HPP)	LOW PERFORMING PUPILS (LPP)
Family members (FM) ask about homework and monitor their completion	Family members don’t ask/ask but do not monitor
FM makes sure homeworks are recorded	FM do not ask pupils to record their homework
Use of English even minimally	No presence of English use at home

**Table 4: Comparison between high performing and low performing pupils of English**

HPP1: *“My father does not allow me to watch TV or play if I don’t finish my homework. Sometimes, he would go to school and ask the teacher if I have homework or if I’m naughty in school.”*

HPP2: *“Every day, my mother would make me sit down with her and do it (homework) with me. She also asks me questions (in English) like ‘What is your name?’ and ‘What day is today?’”*

LPP1: *“No one asks at home. I usually copy from my friend the next day”*

LPP3: *“I go home and play only. My mum has to take care of her (youngest sister) and dad is working.”*

What can be seen from the transcription given is that family members' involvement in their children's studies are very significant, no matter how small. Eipstein (1995) has defined parent's involvement into six types: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making and (6) collaboration with the community. For the pupils interviewed, their parents achieved at least 4 out of 6 types of involvements given. Out of this 6, perhaps the most important for these pupils are parenting and learning at home. Time spent at home is significantly more than time spent in school. There is only so much a teacher can do and bulk of the responsibilities goes to the parents or the family members themselves. It is already proven that children whose mother work during their growing-up period have less educational achievement compared to mothers who spend their time at home with their children (Ermisch, 2000).

Furthermore, it was observed that the parents of LPPs never attended any teachers-parent sharing session where primary teachers talk to the parents on their children's performances. As recalled by the teaching staff, they can say out the names of parents that come for their sharing sessions and it reflects a lot on their children's performances. For one, involvement through communicating gives children the sense of being monitored and appreciated as their parents care about their well-being and teachers have the opportunity to communicate to their parents on their successes and failures. As such, Parents' involvement in their children's education affects achievement, attendance, attitudes and communication. (Machen et al, 2005).

***Emergent Theme 2: Motivation in Learning English***

Motivation in learning is a very powerful tool in predicting a learner's success in acquiring the language (Brown, 1987). This statement can be seen from the transcription of interviews conducted on the teaching staff.

*T1: "Sometimes I have to give rewards so that they learn. However, intrinsic motivation is the most important as pupils can learn on their own initiative."*

*T2: "Shahira (a pupil) is more motivated than the others it seems. She likes the subject. That's why she can learn faster."*

*T3: "I don't think they feel that English is important. What do they learn English for? They are going to quit school early."*

*T4: "My kids (pupils) said that English is too hard for them. That's why they don't like it (the English subject)."*

Based on the responses given by the teaching staff, it can be surmised by majority of the pupils are not motivated to learn English. The most common factor is that English is too hard for them. This can be attributed to the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1983) saying that when a learner has high level of anxiety, he/she cannot absorb knowledge efficiently. The contrast in motivation between HPPs and LPPs can be seen here:

***Table 5: Comparison of Motivation between HPPs & LPPs***

<b>HPP</b>	<b>LPP</b>
Actively asks questions in and out of the classroom	Do not seek assistance except from more able peers
Actively search for words in the dictionary	Negates the use of dictionary even when given
Prefers English materials	Prefer materials of first language
Actively listen to English songs	Not interested at all

Tries to use English to communicate

Not motivated to even try

*HPP1: "My mother said that I must learn English to go oversea (further education) next time. I want to go to England!"*

As seen from the transcription, HPP1's motivation stems from the desire to visit a country where the speakers are English. Moreover, HPP1 also stated that her ambition is to become an international singer, rendering English very important for her future. As such, her intrinsic motivation caused her to have high motivation in learning English and it shows in her English performance.

*HPP2: "I like English songs and English movies. Teacher said I must learn English to understand (the lyrics and dialogues in the movies)."*

Similarly, HPP2's motivation comes from the desire to integrate herself deeper into the culture of English. Again, this confirms Gardner's elements of motivation (2001) which is effort (the energy to learn the language), desire (wants to achieve the goal) and positive effect (enjoying the mission of learning the language). As such, HPP2's desire (wants to understand the lyrics and dialogues in English) gives her the energy (effort to learn English) to achieve the positive effects (able to enjoy English songs and English movies).

In contrast, LPPs lack the motivation to learn the language either intrinsically or extrinsically.

*LPP1: "I think I won't use English next time. My parents don't use English."*

When probed further, LPP1 explained that he is not going to study after primary school and intends to work with this father as a construction worker. Therefore, it can be said that LPP1 do not see the importance of English in improving his family's live hood in the future.

*LPP2: "I don't like English. Too hard. I always fail (in tests and examinations)."*

LPP2's reason was more towards negative perspective of the language. LPP2 also has very high affective filter towards English. This supports Krashen's hypothesis that said an individual whose attitudes are not ideal for second language acquisition will seek less input.

### **Emergent Theme 3: Family's Education Background**

Parents' education background influences their children's achievement through their own beliefs and also home behaviours (Lamb, 2008). Families with family members that goes to colleges and universities seemed to value education more than those who do not. In Song, not many people has ventured out from the small town and goes for further education in local universities. More often, survival is deemed as more important than education and students drop out early from their schools in order to make a living for the families. From the perspective of the teaching staffs, family's education background is an issue that can affect pupils' viewpoints towards the importance of English.

*T1: "From past histories, many pupils from our school do not make it to Form 3 (secondary school). They just want to find money (earn a living)."*

*T2: "To be honest, they (parents) do not care if their kids know English or not. Doesn't make a difference in the wages they get."*

*T3: "I believe that if the parents are like those from urban areas (higher education level), their kids will surely learn not English, but all the subjects faster as their parents can help them!"*

*T4: “Many of our kids (pupils) did not go to ‘KEMAS’ (a type of government pre-school) so they come to us in year 1 without knowing ABC (basic literacy skill)! They don’t even have ICs (identity cards). They just don’t know how.”*

Not to be denied, there are many perspective to this issue. Some parents might not have high education background but if they have the awareness, they would try to send their children to parties that can teach them. Parent who have finished schooling know the situation of classroom learning and better prepared to assimilate their children with the official education system (Gratz, 2006). When a family member decides to attain education towards a higher level, this view will be projected onto the other family members, particularly the younger ones. Therefore, parents’ educational achievement is a powerful forecast of their children’s educational accomplishment (Haveman, 1993).

In interviews with HPPs and LPPs, comparison of family’s education background is very evident.

**Table 6: Comparison of Family’s Educational Background Between HPP and LPP**

HPP Family’s Educational Background	LPP Family’s Educational Background
At least has 1 FM who has finished tertiary level	Do not have any FM who has finished tertiary level
Can use basic English at home	No presence of English use at home
Most FM do not drop out/finished SPM level	Most FM dropped out by Form 3

*HPP1: “My sister works as a nurse in Kuching. She said I must study hard to become a teacher next time.”*

*HPP2: “My father wants me to study in Kuching next time because the schools are better.”*

From further interviews, HPP1 indicated that a few of her relatives has finished their tertiary levels and her parents wish for her to follow their footsteps. Interesting to say that although her parents only had basic education, their views towards education were shaped mainly by extended family members who enjoyed better social and economic status. HPP2’s parents are both working in the education field and the father is even a headmaster. Therefore, it can be surmised that parents’ education background mainly shapes their children’s views towards education also.

*LPP1: “My sisters dropped out in form 2. Now most of them are married and stays at home.”*

*LPP2: “No one uses English (at home). Maybe next time I will stop (quit school) after year 6 and work.”*

In contrast, LPPs views towards education are rather negative and apathetic. As mentioned above, their main concern are shaped by their parents and elder family members who puts no importance towards education and more towards survival and day-to-day living. Parents with less education do not contribute as much in their children’s education because they do not see the importance of their communication with schools (Gratz, 2006). Therefore, it is evident that ‘parents’ education influences child achievement indirectly through its impact on the parents’ achievement beliefs and stimulating home behaviour (Lamb, 2008).

**Emergent Theme 4: Family’s Socioeconomic Status**

Parents with better economic ability have the resources to provide better learning condition and opportunities for their children (Willingham, 2012). In the area of Song, majority of the population works as farmers and fishermen. As expected, their socioeconomic status can be considered very low. In a survey done through data collection of pupils' profile, most of their parents belong to 'poor' and 'hardcore poor' category.

**Table 7: Financial Background of Pupils' Families**

Primary	High & Average Income	Poor	Hardcore Poor	Unspecified	Total
1	0	11	14	1	26
2	1	8	17	1	27
3	1	9	8	1	19
4	2	9	11	1	23
5	3	9	10	4	26
6	1	2	14	1	18
TOTAL					139

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Based on UNIT PERANCANG EKONOMI (2015)

\*RM950 = miskin (poor)

\*RM600 = miskin tegar (hardcore poor)

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Further information can be seen from interviews conducted to see the differences between families of HPPs and LPPs.

**Table 8: Comparison of Families of HPPs and LPPs**

Higher Income Families	Lower Income Families
Has a specific corner for studying (tables and/or chairs)	Do not provide any space for studying
Very willing to buy English reading materials	Very rarely buy English reading materials (money for survival)
Good preparedness for school (stationery)	Stationery mostly borrowed from friends/given by teachers
Has English dictionary at home	Most do not have dictionary of any types at home

HPP1 (RM8000 average monthly salary)

\*HPP2 (RM1200 average monthly salary)

\*LPP1 (RM500 average monthly salary)

\*LPP2 (RM 700 average monthly salary)



In many researches done, family's economic status does provide learning advantages. From the differences above, it can be seen that education attains a high level of importance in the homes of HPPs. Further interviews also revealed that LPPs usually follow their parents to work at the farms and construction sites. Therefore, it was shown that learners who live below the poverty line lacked educational resources at home (Pettigrew, 2009). More so, parents with lower income have to work longer hours and this left them with little time to get involved in their children's learning processes (Gratz, 2006).

It was observed that HPP1 came from fairly well off family and the family sees no problem in supporting her financially by buying her electronical dictionaries, providing Internet access to find information and has her own room at home to study.

In the same vein, HPP2 indicated that she also works with her mother at the family farm most of the time but whenever she has homework or tests, her parents would ask her to stay at home. This supports the view where even low income parents have the attitudes and awareness to help their children to focus on studies (Neuman, 2002).

***Other Themes: Teacher Factor & Status of English in the School***

Among the six issues presented in this research, teacher factor and status of English were considered to be an extension of the issue of motivation. Initially, the teacher factor presented was researched from the perspective of teacher's teaching experience, salary and attitudes towards teaching. However, studies conducted in the U.S revealed that there was no systematic evidence of the factors presented to affect student performance (Hanushek, 1996). In this context, interviews conducted revealed that it was more about teacher-pupil relationship and how the relationship affects learning. In a sense, when a teacher has a good relationship with pupils in and out of the classroom, pupils would have lower affective filter during learning and that will enable input to be received more efficiently. In the table below, we can see that teacher does affect motivation to learn.

***Table 9: Perception Towards English teachers***

HPPs	LPPs
Sees teacher as funny and encouraging	Afraid of the teacher
Mostly able to understand classroom instructions	Forced to seek help from peers
Prefers to have the same teacher the following year	Prefers to have a different teacher the following year

As seen above, the differences can be equated to how teacher project motivation in learning English. On the issue of status of English the school, it is considered neither major nor critical.

**CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS**

More the issues presented above, it must be emphasized fully that education begins at home. Of all the issues presented, 3 of them mentioned the importance of family and how they will affect children's learning for the long term. The primary issue among all is family's involvement in their children's studies. In learning English, perhaps the least that parents can do is to accompany their children to do homework and to study at home. Parents are the first shareholder responsible for creating excitement to learn for their children (Gratz, 2006).

More so, parents have the greater influence on their children compared to schools (Jackson, 2010). In primary education, families have the greatest impact on their children's studies as that is the time where they need family support the most. Although family's economic status and education background do matter, family's involvement in children's studies still reigns the top spot. As mentioned, 'parents' involvement is important for children's learning, attitudes about school and aspirations (Dauber & Eipstein, 1993).

Motivation is also an important factor to consider. As summed up earlier, motivation can come from family support, teacher factor and status of English. However, motivation cultivated and attained in school can only do so much compared to motivation that comes from home. Nevertheless, teachers are also imperative in bringing motivations to study and master English in schools. As successes in school will no doubt bring up pupils' motivation to learn, 'It will be the teacher's job to set goals and tasks at which most of his or her students can be successful (Ahmed, 2015). When pupils do not see the importance of learning English compared to Mathematics and Science, teachers have to elicit interest and involvement in the subject even when pupils are initially not interested in it (Harmer, 2002). Yunus also said that 'to motivate the students is the most intermittent and essential concerns...' (Yunus et al, 2011).

Lastly, it is worth noting that all these factors work together to bring good performance in school. When families support their children at home, teachers in school will surely have the advantage to educate these children better and with this, comes the motivation to learn English successfully. All these factors do not work in isolation (Etsey, 2005). Rather than pointing fingers towards who or what contributes to performance of English, it is worth reminding that children are our future generations and it is up to all the shareholders to work hand-in-hand to ensure success for them.

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