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Factors contributing to proficiency in English as a second language among Chinese students in Johor Bahru

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ABSTRACT

There has been an ongoing debate about the importance of the English language. Employers are lamenting that new graduates these days lack communicative proficiency in English. The purpose of this study is to determine the factors which contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru. Investigating the factors that contribute to English proficiency might partially explain the occurrence of underachievement in the learning English. The study was conducted with a self-reported questionnaire as an instrument. Data was collected from a sample of 119 students from Southern College, a Chinese community run college based in Johor Bahru. Data was analyzed using the SPSS version 11.5. Descriptive statistics showed that respondents have interest in the language but lack confidence and motivation in using English. The independent variables which were hypothesized factors were correlated with the dependent variables. Findings showed that although parents and close significant others do have influence on the respondents' attitude and perception towards the English language, their English proficiency grades were not influenced by them. In conclusion, socializing factors such as family members and significant others are not significant contributors to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru but they do contribute to the positive attitude and perception towards English that many of the respondents have.

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Introduction

As Malaysians move towards globalization and become increasingly international, the need becomes greater for our children to learn more than one language, in addition to their mother tongue. Recent studies (Mayberry & Lock, 2003) have recognized that certain aspects of second language learning may be affected by age but older learners do have certain advantages.

As the adult workplace become increasingly international, the need is greater than ever for children to learn one or more languages in addition to their first language. It also appears that learning a second language facilitates achievement in other academic areas. (Daiz 1983; Reich 1986) Instructions in a foreign language sensitize young children to the international and multicultural nature of the world. Students who have L2 express more positive attitudes towards school work and are more independent learners. (Reich, 1986)

In this study, we look at the Malaysian Chinese children acquiring English as the second language. Young Malaysian Chinese children usually get acquainted with English when they go to kindergarten. English is generally taught using the translation method where nouns and vocabulary are translated from the mother tongue. Very few children learn English by the total immersion method where they hear and speak only English in the classroom. There is evidence that the total immersion method helps students become proficient quickly. (Collier, 1992; Cunningham & Graham, 2000; Krashen, 1996) However, there is a fear that the immersion method might lead to the loss of the

first language. This is the first fear of the Malaysian Chinese community.

English was widely used before Malaysian independence 50 years ago. The Malaysian Chinese community has gone through a lot of changes through the years. Malaysian Chinese maintain a distinct communal identity as an ethnic, cultural and political people. Mandarin is the lingua franca in most Chinese homes in Johor Bahru in recent years while the older generation converse in one of the many Chinese dialects (Asmah, 2004). Although they consider themselves as fully Malaysians, they hold on very firmly to their culture and traditions especially now when they perceived that they are being 'threatened'. The Chinese then actually fought to preserve their culture, heritage and education. The emphasis on ethnicity and culture has not helped the learning of English as a second language especially as it is not compulsory to pass English in major exams. Bahasa Malaysia is compulsory.

Education is the right of every child. As children spend almost half of their day at school, it would naturally have some influence to their second language acquisition. Socialization at school with peers and teachers could also provide factors that might influence English acquisition. In recent years, large segments of Chinese in Malaysia are "Chinese educated". Malaysia has a Chinese medium education system consisting of largely independently run high schools. Mandarin is the main language of instruction in all subjects except Bahasa Malaysia which is compulsory and English. Mother tongue education is

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seen to be important as it represents cultural roots and Mandarin or Chinese is not easily learnt in the confinements of the home.

It is estimated that more than ninety per cent of Chinese send their children to Chinese Primary schools (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian>). As the population at Chinese vernacular schools is mainly Chinese, students do not socialize with other races and there is little opportunity to use English to communicate.

Many employers in Malaysia complain that our graduates are not proficient in English and are thus not employable. When students graduate from secondary school after 11 years of learning English as a second language, many of them do not do well in the subject. Veteran English teacher Ibrahim Zakaria put forward that even intelligent young graduates have trouble getting ideas across in English. These students with poor command of English could score strong credits in other subjects in the SPM examination (Tan, 2005). Some students can hardly communicate when they need a second language for tertiary education or for job placement. University Malaysia Vice Chancellor Datuk Rafiah Salim claimed many law students did not have a strong command of English and are struggling in the Malaysian courts (www.tradeport.org).

There is a need to improve the level of English acquisition in Malaysian students. Students with a low level of English obviously would not have soft skills to do well when they need to communicate in the international arena. The Sultan of Pahang called for students to master the English language to enhance their skills in handling hi-tech devices in a speech recently (The Sunday Star, 10 Aug. 2008). He stated that as English is an internationally accepted medium of communication, it is vital to master the language to understand modern terminology. Those people who are fluent in English have better career opportunities.

While many factors may contribute to the Chinese students' English proficiency, the major factors point to the influences of parents and their opinion of cultural and ethnic education, teaching and learning styles in school, socialization with peers as well as students' own attitude and perception towards English. This study will attempt to confirm these factors as the major contribution to English proficiency in the Malaysian Chinese especially in Johor Bahru.

Method

The survey design is employed to fulfil the purpose of this study. A survey is to obtain self-reported information about the attitudes, beliefs opinions, behaviours and other characteristics of a population (Creswell, 2004). A quantitative approach was used in this survey. This study allows for data to be analysed quickly (Creswell, 2004). A quantitative research explains and predicts the probable relationship between the independent and dependent variables. This study examines and test the predicted relationship among the variables in the social cognitive theory.

A self-report strategy questionnaire was used to collect the data from the sample in this survey. The dependent and independent variables studied were:

(i) independent variables

- Parental role
- Peer influence
- Teacher role
- Attitude
- Learning style

(ii) dependent variables

- English proficiency

• Perception toward English

The questionnaire is developed by modifying a few examples located through literature reviews. Changes were made to fit the requirements to the study of English proficiency in Chinese students. Sample questionnaires were from: Mohamed Amin, Juriah and Mohd Isa, 2001; Karahan, 2001; White & Duda, 1996; Goh, 2007.

Participant

A sample is a sub-group of the target population. As shown in figure 1, the representatives or sample were selected as typical of the target population under study. The target population were all the students studying for a diploma in Southern College. They would enable the researcher to draw conclusions about the Chinese population as a whole. The sample was from cluster groups selected from the target population that the researcher studied for generalizing about the target population. The target population was a group of individuals who have the same defining characteristics such as being in a diploma programme and are studying in English in a very Chinese environment.

Random cluster sampling is when units of individuals are selected rather than the individuals themselves. In random sampling, the researcher selects participants for the sample so that individuals have an equal probability of being selected from the target population. Any bias will be equally distributed among the people chosen (Creswell, 2004). The participants in cluster sampling are homogeneous enough that any differences in the unit itself might not contribute to a bias (Creswell, 2004).

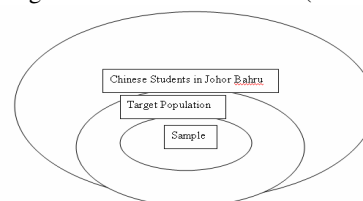


Figure 1. Representatives in the study

Data Analysis

Data for this study was collected using a self-report questionnaire. The data collected were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Window Version 11.5). Correlation provides an opportunity to predict scores and explain the relationship among variables. Correlation is used to describe and measure the degree of association between two or more variables. The variables are not manipulated but to relate the two or more variables to see if they influence each other (Ketner, Smith & Parnell 1997). The basic objective of correlation research is to explain the association between or among variables. The researcher looks for a pattern of responses and use statistical procedures to determine the strength of the relationship as well as its direction.

Result

The presentation of the descriptive analysis does not follow the order of the questionnaire but follows the order of the study objectives. This section on descriptive analysis presents the statistics of the dependable variable, students' current English proficiency as well as the independent variables, attitude towards English, parental influence, peer influence, teacher influence and learning styles as in Part 2 and Part 3 of the questionnaire. The descriptive analysis will follow the order of the objectives (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv).

Table 1 shows the grade for English that respondents got for the SPM or UEC examinations. The respondents' current proficiency in English was measured by their English language

performance in the SPM exams for students from National schools or UEC exams for students from Independent Chinese schools. The results are used to determine the relationship between variables.

The results show that 27 SPM students and 18 UEC students (38 percent) have grade C. 17 SPM students and 9 UEC students (22percent) got grade D. C and D are considered on the lower average in English achievement scale. Only 12 SPM students and 4 UEC students (13 percent) achieved good results with grade A and 11 SPM students and 10 UEC students (17 percent) achieved a B grade. 4 SPM students and 7 UEC students (9 percent) failed the English paper in the exams.

There is not much difference between the students' achievement in English whether they are from national school or from Chinese independent school. However, more students from national schools scored the higher A grade and there were less students who had failed.

Table 2 shows the result of items 31 to 40 from the questionnaire which determines if parents are factors that determine English proficiency in respondents. The rather low overall mean in this section shows that parents do not have a big influence on respondents' English proficiency. The low mean for "My parents speak English to the family", shows that many parents (93 percent) do not speak English to them. Their parents also do not subscribe to English newspapers at home (93 percent) or buy English reading material (96 percent). 90 percent of households also do not watch the English channels on TV. However many respondents agree that their parents encourage them to speak in English (66 percent) and parents gave support by encouraging respondents to go for tuition (40 percent) because they could not correct the respondents in English (40 percent). More than 60 percent of parents also do not think that being good in English will make their children more westernized.

The overall mean of 2.38 shows that the level of influence that parents have on the English proficiency of the respondents is moderate.

Parents are children's first teachers from birth and assume roles in their children's education. They model attitudes and behaviour that foster achievement and direct the interest and activities of their children. Children often learn prejudice attitudes, cultural etiquette and ethical customs from their parents. The results of the meta-analysis by Jaynes (2005) indicated that parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes and emerged consistently whether the outcome measures grades or a variety of other measures. Academic achievement scores for children whose parents were highly involved in their education were substantially higher than that of their counterparts whose parents were less involved. Parental involvement required a large investment of time, reading and communicating with one's children.

The result of this study showed that parents do not have a big influence on respondents' English proficiency as they were not highly involved in their children's English education. Many parents (93 percent) do not speak English to the respondents or at home. Their parents also do not subscribe to English newspapers at home (93 percent) or buy English reading material (96 percent). 90 percent of households also do not watch the English channels on TV.

However many respondents agree that their parents encourage them to speak in English (66 percent) and parents

gave support by encouraging respondents to go for tuition (40 percent) because they could not correct the respondents in English (40 percent). More than 60 percent of parents also do not think that being good in English will make their children more westernized.

Table 3. shows the results of items 11 to 20 in the questionnaire which determines if peers are a factor that could contribute to English proficiency. The highest mean for "My friends feel that English is important for our future career" shows that many respondents have friends who are aware of the importance of English in their lives (72 percent). Many respondents also have peers who are aware that English is as important as their native language (65 percent).

The lowest mean at 2.35 is the answer to "My friends and I seldom buy English books and magazines" which proves that many of the respondents do buy English reading materials as more than half of the respondents disagree with the statement. Another mean which is low at 2.87 was for "My friends are not very encouraging when I speak in English". It shows that respondents feel awkward when they have to speak English to their friends. More than 60 percent of respondents agree that they never use English with their friends outside the classroom.

The overall mean of 3.14 shows the level of influence that peers have on the respondents is moderate.

Many respondents have friends who are aware of the importance of English in their lives (72 percent). Many respondents also have peers who are aware that English is as important as their native language (65 percent).

Many respondents said that they feel awkward when they have to speak English to their friends. More than 60 percent of respondents agree that they never use English with their friends outside the classroom. Most people obey the norms most of the time (Baron et al., 2007). Teenagers are often sensitive to the social norms of their group and often will do a lot not to break the rules of the group. For example, verbal praise given in front of peer group for using English could cause ribald remarks from the peers. Young people would avoid performing well for fear of negative feedback from friends who might ostracize him and thus lower his standing in his peer group (Burns, 1982).

Table 4. shows the results of items 21 to 30 in the questionnaire which determines if teachers have influence on respondents' English proficiency. The high mean for "My lecturers guide my learning, especially in English", "My lecturers tell me my mistakes", "My lecturers translate from English to Chinese for me" and "My lecturers tell me what to study" show that respondents are highly dependent on their teachers or lecturers. It shows that they have preference for teacher centred learning.

The lowest mean (2.13) is for "My lecturers only give notes in English" shows that many respondents 971 percent) disagree with this statement which means that respondents are able to get translated notes from their lecturers. Respondents are undecided if their lecturers motivate them to use English all the time as 40 percent of them disagree with the statement while 40 percent of them agreed. 50 percent said that their lecturer will slow down when they didn't understand the lesson in English. It shows that students have the autonomy to speak up in class. 68 percent also said that their lecturers make learning English fun.

The overall mean of 3.38 shows the level of influence that teachers have on the respondents is moderate.

The results from the questionnaire which determines if teachers have influence on respondents' English proficiency

show that respondents are highly dependent on their teachers or lecturers. It shows that they have preference for teacher centred learning. Many respondents like their lecturers to give them translated notes.

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Teachers should strive for a balance of instructional methods. If the balance is achieved, all students will be taught in a manner they prefer, which will lead to an increased comfort level and more willingness to learn. Piaget and Vygotsky suggested that teachers provide experiences, guidance and assume a supportive role in assisting students' attempts to develop understanding (Good & Brophy, 2000).

Table 5 shows the descriptive data of every item in the questionnaire that determines the personal attitude towards English of the respondents. The overall mean is 3.57. The highest mean for "I find academic work in English difficult" shows that more than 64 percent of respondents agree with the statement. They however, enjoy lessons in English as shown by the next highest mean at 3.78.

The lowest mean for this section is for "I am not satisfied with my level of English proficiency" which shows that more than half of respondents (60 percent) are not really satisfied with their English proficiency. However, some 20 percent of respondents disagree with the statement. Respondents' attitude towards English is generally good as can be seen from the results although more than 60 percent agree that they lack confidence when they have to speak in English.

The overall mean of 3.57 shows the level of influence that respondents' have with their attitude towards English is moderate.

It was found that most respondents generally have a positive attitude towards the English language. Similar results were found by Karahan (2007) in his study with Turkish students. As can be seen in Table 4.12 which shows the mean of all the items in the questionnaire, the students are interested in English and they do enjoy English lessons. They are aware that English enjoys a prestigious position in many countries. They practice English every chance they get and frequently read and write in English.

It is noted that the respondents in this study were not afraid to speak to English speakers whenever they can. However, they said that they are not satisfied with their current English proficiency and they found that academic work in English to be somewhat difficult. They also lack confidence when they need to speak in English.

Table 6. presents the descriptive data of the learning styles of the respondents. It can be seen that more than 33 percent (40) of the 119 respondents were verbal or linguistic learners. They learn better by doing which include using the English language, taking notes and reading materials in English. About 28 percent (33) respondents were visual learners. These learners prefer to look at graphs, pictures and form mental pictures of what they are learning. 23 percent (27) were aural learners. These learners prefer to listen to lectures and instructions as they learn. 16 percent (19) of 119 respondents have a combination of two or all three learning styles. These respondents have no preference for

any particular learning style and might use different learning style in different circumstances.

The learning styles discussed are visual, aural and verbal learning styles. People with visual or spatial learning style prefer images, pictures, colours and maps to organize information and communicate with others. They visualize objects, plans and outcomes in their mind's eye. They learn best when information is presented visually and in a written language format. About 28 percent (33) respondents were visual learners. In most college classes, very little visual information is presented: students mainly listen to lectures and read material on the board and in handouts. Most students do not get as much as they would if more visual presentation were used in class.

People who have aural or auditory learning style like to work with sound and music. They have a good sense of pitch and rhythm. They typically like to sing and can identify sounds well. They learn best when information is presented auditory in an oral language format. They prefer listening to lectures than reading or looking at drawings. They like participating in group discussions or obtaining information from audio tapes. They often talk to themselves or read aloud when studying to aid recall. 23 percent (27) were aural learners. Most traditional classrooms are teacher centred and lecture based. Many schools still rely on classroom and book-based teaching, much pressured exams and reinforcement and review. However, only a small percentage of learners are aural. Students who are aural would have little problems in such classrooms.

Verbal learners get more out of words, both written and spoken explanations. Most people learn more when information is presented both visually and verbally. People with verbal learning skills find it easy to express themselves both in writing and verbally. They love reading and writing. They use tongue twisters and regularly make. It can be seen from the results that more than 33 percent (40) of the 119 respondents were verbal or linguistic learners. They learn better by doing which include using the English language, taking notes and reading materials in English. They gain understanding of material by hearing classmates explanations and they learn even more when you do the explaining. Some respondents said they like to try out what they have learned by practicing with their friends but mostly they prefer to take notes by colour-coding and sharing notes with their friends.

16 percent (19) of 119 respondents have a combination of two or all three learning style. These respondents have no preference for any particular learning style and might use different learning style in different circumstances. Many people have no preference for a particular learning style or are unaware of their preference. Some people may find they have a dominant style of learning. Others may find that they use different styles in different circumstances. There is no right mix.

Table 7. shows that the mean score for students' perception toward English. The mean ranges from 4.14 to 3.27 with an overall mean of 3.55. The rather high mean shows that respondents have positive perception towards English and know the role that English would play in their future. The highest mean at 4.14 is for "I believe that being good in English will help me in my future career". Respondents also believe that practice would improve their English proficiency (75 percent).

The lowest mean is for "I believe English is not a difficult subject" which shows that many respondents are not really averse to using English. More than 50 percent agree with the statement but less than 30 percent disagree.

Many of the students are aware that their current English proficiency has made their lives as students difficult. They are also aware that their lack of confidence would affect their communicative skills. These have influenced their perception towards English that it is a difficult subject and they have to work extra hard to improve. However, their general perception towards English is positive.

Objective (v): To identify the relationship between current proficiency in English and parental income among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and parental income among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Table 8 shows there is no significant relationship between respondents' current level of English proficiency and their household income as p value $.110 > 0.05$. The correlation at $r = -.147$ shows that there is low negative association between household income and respondents' English proficiency. This answers the objective (v) as there is relationship between current proficiency in English and parental income among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Respondents' current English proficiency is taken from their SPM or UEC examinations (Table 4.7) and parental household income is shown in Table 4.3. The null hypothesis - There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and parental income among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru - is thus retained. Results show that parental household income does not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Results from this study found that there is no significant relationship between respondents' current level of English proficiency and their household income. Results show that parental household income does not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru. The surprising results from the respondents could be attributed to the personal motivation of the respondents. Students who are motivated and have positive attitude towards English and are intrinsically inclined to do well while those not motivated will not do well. It could also be because many Chinese independent schools provide English tuition at very minimal cost. Also exposure to English use is everywhere in Johor Bahru especially from across the causeway.

Objective (vi): To identify the relationships between current proficiency in English and the factors such as parental influence, peer influence, teacher influence and personal attitude among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and parental influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Current English proficiency results (Table 1) are correlated with findings on parental influence as in Part 2 of the questionnaire (Table 2). Results as shown in Table 9 denote no or negligible negative significant relationship between parental influence and current English proficiency. The Pearson r is $-.030$ which denotes negligible negative association between the two variables. P value $.745 > 0.05$. The null hypothesis is retained as $p > 0.05$. Parental influence does not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Rosenberg in 1965 and Coopersmith in 1967 found that children whose parents were uninterested in their activities or performance in school denigrate themselves. According to Rosenberg, children internalize or accept the assessment and

view of significant others. In second language learning, parents who model the use of a language would reinforce their children's language also. The Chinese parents in Johor Bahru do not use English in the family as can be seen from the survey results. More than 90 per cent of parents do not buy or read English material or subscribe to English newspapers. They also do watch the English television channels. Thus, the English learnt at home is not reinforced at home.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and peer influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Respondents' current English proficiency (Table 1) is correlated with findings on peer influence from part 2 of the questionnaire (Table 3). Table 10 shows that there is no significant relationship between peer influence and current English proficiency. The findings show a negative Pearson correlation r of $-.182$. p value $.048 = 0.05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis is retained. There is no significant relationship between current English proficiency and peer influence among Chinese students in Johor Bahru. Peers do not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students.

The peer group is important as it replaces the family as a major source of support and opportunity to practise and rehearsal of tasks such as learning language. The peer group is a place within which an identity is secured as people become less like their parents and more like his peers (Coopersmith 1967; Rosenberg, 1965). Byrne and Griffitt (1966) reported that similar attitudes, interest and tastes were important reasons given for selecting friends. The respondents do have friends that can speak English but they do not use it among themselves. Many respondents say that they do not correct their friends' English as they are unable to since they mostly lack confidence and feel awkward when using English. The crucial area does seem to be peer interaction. In the peer group, people are respect worthy, competitive and competent. Behaviours that are unacceptable for parents may be ignored in the peer group or even accepted. Therefore it is better to follow the norm and not show any interest or proficiency in English as it could be unaccepted behaviour among the peer group.

Hypothesis 4: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and teacher influence among the Chinese student in Johor Bahru.

Respondents' current English proficiency (Table 1) is correlated with findings on teacher influence from part 2 of the questionnaire (Table 4). Table 11 shows a Pearson r of $-.018$ which indicates negligible relationship between teacher influence and current English proficiency. This shows a negative correlation between teacher influence and English proficiency. P value is $.963 > 0.05$. The Null hypothesis is thus retained. $P > 0.05$. Teachers do not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

The study has found that respondents thought their teachers are mostly of the traditional school. From the results in the questionnaire, many of the respondents would prefer the teachers to make learning English fun. However in secondary schools, English is still taught the traditional way which may be why respondents do not associate their English proficiency with their teachers.

Hypothesis 5: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and personal attitude among the Chinese in Johor Bahru.

Respondents' current English proficiency (Table 1) is correlated with findings on students' attitude towards English from part 2 of the questionnaire (Table 5). Findings in Table 12 shows there is no or negligible correlation between current English proficiency and personal attitude towards English. The Pearson $r = -.223$ implies a weak negative association between the two variables. The P value is at $.015 < 0.05$. The null hypothesis is thus rejected. Students' attitude towards English does contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor.

Attitudes about language and school success may be regarded as cultural inversion by some Chinese students. They hesitate to drop their mother tongue and adopt English because it would alienate their peers and distance their families (Ogbu, 1999; Eggen & Kauchak, 2004). These students may interpret success in English as rejecting their native values and culture. They oppose English use directly as they fear losing the friendship and respect of their peers. However, the advantages of learning English in terms of career advancement and future job prospects are in many cases overshadowed by the demand of society and the desire to conform to the norms of society (Thang, 2004). The findings from the correlation, found that there was relationship between respondents' current English proficiency with their attitude towards English. The negative value of the coefficient signifies a negative relationship. The null hypothesis is rejected. Students' current English proficiency does influence their attitude towards English and vice versa. Students with low proficiency tend to have lower efficacy when they have to use English.

Objective (vii): To identify the relationship between current proficiency in English and the learning styles such as visual or spatial learning style, aural or auditory learning style and verbal or linguistic learning style among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Hypothesis 6: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and visual or spatial learning style among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Students' current English proficiency results (Table 1) is correlated to Visual learning style preferred by students. Table 13 shows that there is weak relationship between current English proficiency and the visual learning style with correlation coefficient of $r = 0.29$. The p value of $.751 > 0.05$ and thus the null hypothesis is accepted. Visual learning style does not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Hypothesis 7: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and aural or auditory learning style among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Students' current English proficiency results (Table 1) is correlated to aural learning style preferred by students. Table 14 shows that there is no or negligible relationship between current English proficiency and the aural learning style with correlation coefficient of $r = .133$. The p value of $.148 > 0.05$ and thus the null hypothesis is accepted. The aural learning style does not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Hypothesis 8: There is no significant relationship between current proficiency in English and verbal or linguistic learning style among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Students' current English proficiency results (Table 1) is correlated to Verbal learning style preferred by students. Table 15 shows that there is very strong positive relationship between current English proficiency and the verbal or linguistic learning

style with correlation coefficient of $r = 0.75$. The p value of $.416 > 0.05$ and thus the null hypothesis is accepted. Verbal learning style does not contribute to English proficiency in Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

The results of the study have shown that learning styles do not contribute to English proficiency. Many people have a mix of learning styles. There is no right or wrong learning style. Some people may find that they have a dominant style but they usually adapt and fit in with the teaching style of the teacher and learning style of the majority. Traditional schooling used mainly linguistic and logical teaching techniques. Many schools still rely on classroom and book based teaching and exams for reinforcement and review.

Objective (viii): To identify the relationship between student perception towards learning English and the factors such as parental influence, peer influence, teacher influence and personal attitude among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Hypothesis 9: There is no significant relationship between student perception towards learning English and parental influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

The results as shown in Table 16 show a weak positive correlation between student perception towards learning English and parental influence. Pearson $r = .278$. P value is $.002 < 0.01$. This denotes a significant relationship at 0.01 level. Thus the null hypothesis is rejected. $P < 0.01$. There is relationship between student perception and parental influence. Parents do have influence on students' perception of English.

Erikson's views on the role of the parents in helping the development of trust and security as well as the balance between autonomy and dependence have not been disputed. When parents nurture their children to learn by encouraging them to explore and ask questions, they will develop a sense of competence and self-efficacy and autonomy which help enhance their motivation to learn. The fact that children are influenced by parental practices is not surprising considering the parents' generally accepted roles as significant others. It as Stott (1939) who first noted the pattern of child rearing that promoted positive development. He found that children who come from homes where there was acceptance, mutual confidence and compatibility between parents and children were better adjusted and thought more positively about themselves. Psychologists believe that parents have a unique opportunity to reinforce selectively their children's learning and to influence their general perception of learning (Burns 1982).

Hypothesis 10: There is no significant relationship between student perception towards English and peer influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Table 17 below shows that there is weak positive correlation between students' perception towards English and peer influence. Pearson $r = .243$. P value $.008 < 0.05$. $P < 0.05$. There is significant relationship between student perception towards English and peer influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru. The null hypothesis is rejected.

There is significant relationship between student perception towards English and peer influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru. Burns (1982) stated that adolescents who do not find support at home would look for support from peers. The peer group can replace the family as a major source of support. The peer group is where identity is secure as people become less like their parents and more like their peers. The power of norms and social identity govern and play a major role in students' learning behaviour. Students compare themselves with their

peers on where they stand academically and socially. If the pattern of perception towards learning English among the group is generally positive, the whole group will cultivate a positive attitude of learning English.

The results was a surprise as earlier correlation results between English proficiency and peer influence has shown that peers do not influence English proficiency. However, peers do seem to have influence on the perception towards English. Although peer pressure is a factor affecting development, its effects on behaviours have probably been over-rated (Berndt & Keefe, 1996). Most children acquire strong values and standards from their family and do not allow peers to influence them. Research by B.B. Brown in 1993 and Covington in 1992 have found that students may freight disinterest scholarly activities so as to maintain an image with peer but they lead 'double lives' by doing what they like in private to maintain academic success (Burns 1982).

Hypothesis 11: There is no significant relationship between student perception towards English and teacher influence among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru.

Results as in Table 18 show a strong positive correlation between the two variables students' perception and teacher influence. Pearson $r = .524$. P value $.000 < 0.01$. $p < 0.01$. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is significant relationship between students' perception towards English and teacher influence among Chinese students in Johor Bahru. Research results by Wong in Hong Kong also found that teacher specific motivation had positive correlation and direct relationship with their English attainment. Teachers provide students with mentoring, guidance and support. As Dornyei (2001) indicated, students adopted similar attitudes and perceptions through their teachers' communication of beliefs and attitudes.

Teachers are necessary and students' development is a response to the way the teacher provides situations for learning. Ryan (1961) demonstrated that productive student behaviour such as alertness, participation and confidence reflect their teacher's behaviour. It is part of the Chinese students' culture to show respect to teachers. This study has shown that teachers do not influence students' English proficiency but they do have strong influence on students' perception towards the language. Students know the importance of English in their future plans and they want to emulate teachers who show confidence and model appropriate English use.

Hypothesis 12: There is no significant relationship between student perception towards English and personal attitude among the Chinese students in Johor Bahru

Results in Table 19 show that there is weak positive correlation between student perception towards English and personal attitude. Pearson $r = .283$. p value is $.002 < 0.01$. $p < 0.01$. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is significant relationship between students' perception towards English and personal attitude.

As can be seen from the results, the respondents do have positive attitude towards English even though their proficiency in English is not on the high side. They are surrounded by English every day. They know they need to use English for college as well as for entertainment and hobbies. Chinese students have positive attitude towards English and American entertainment culture such as movies and music. Many Chinese students have ambitions to go aboard to an English speaking country for further studies or for a holiday. They also know the

usefulness of English as the common language between cultures. Respondents' positive attitude towards English has positive influence on their perception towards English in general.

English learning can be traced to Dornyei's (2001) explanation of factors that determine students' learning which are interest, relevance, expectancy and satisfaction. Students believe that they would do better if they had self-confidence and self-efficacy and they would gain more from learning if they enjoy the process of learning.

Recommendations based on the findings

Recommendations based on the findings are hereby proposed.

To Parents

It is hoped that parents would encourage their children to learn English or any other second language so as to do well in their future. Parents must realize that protecting their culture, race and heritage is well and good but the reality is that without English language skills, their children are not marketable in the job market. Parents who are better off can send their children overseas as can be seen by thousands of students crossing the causeway everyday, to study in English schools.

However, the majority of parents need to encourage English learning by being open to modern culture such as encouraging their children to read more in English. Parents remain an important factor even though respondents in this study stated that they do not contribute to English proficiency. Parents should be open to and encourage second language use in the homes so as to start exposure of the language to their children from young.

To the Chinese Students in Johor Bahru

English is not a difficult subject. All Chinese students realize the importance of the language in their future. There is a need to find the motivation to do well in English. The results of the study have found that parents, peers and teachers do not contribute to English proficiency but attitude towards the language does. Chinese students must ensure that they develop positive attitude and perception towards English. Chinese students need to look at the motivation that their close significant others give them which contribute to English proficiency. Motivation might not come from others but intrinsically. Chinese students who want to do well in English should look to themselves for motivation such as what their ambitions and the reasons why they want to do well in English. They can do this by being constantly being exposed to English in their daily communication. They do not have to be embarrassed to use English among their Chinese friends as practice makes perfect. Try to read more English books and get involved in more activities in English. Cultivate more friends of other races and use English as a common language of communication.

To the Government

The schools in Malaysia have become mono-ethnic. National schools are predominantly Malay while Chinese primary schools are almost entirely Chinese. Young children in Malaysia go to school learning their respective language and go home speaking their mother tongue, watch TV in their respective language and have friends only of their own race. There is no integration of the races with the school system. The government should look into using English as a unifying language so all the communities in Malaysia could be united. While the community leaders of each race are fighting to preserve their culture and heritage, our children continue to

suffer and the standard of English continues to drop while the rest of the world continues to progress and do well especially in technology.

The government should look into implementing policies that will ensure our students are on par with the rest of the world and policy makers must start now as our teachers and university lecturers are becoming less proficient in English as the older generation of educators retire and younger ones take over. In the 70s, English was the powerhouse then and English schools were the places to learn regardless of race or ethnicity. There was integration of all the races as people make friends and were not worried about losing their culture or heritage. English remain the powerhouse now as the world become smaller through technology but our standard of English has dropped. Our children should not be left behind. We must ensure that we regain our standard of English soon.

Recommendation for future research

This study was based in Johor Bahru where there is a large community of Chinese. The Chinese in Johor Bahru are largely influenced by the Chinese culture in Singapore as they are able to receive the media as well as many commute to work there. Although the results of this study are based on a relatively small sample, additional research on this issue should be considered in other communities, particularly as debate on the importance of English as a bridging (integrating) language is ongoing. Future research should explore and examine if the factors that influence English proficiency among the Chinese students in Johor are the same in Kuala Lumpur or in Penang. There are large Chinese communities in those cities but they are not near Singapore where English and Mandarin are of equal status.

Another area for future research could be to determine the factors that contribute to English proficiency among the other races in Malaysia. The other races in Malaysia especially the Malays also have issues with the low proficiency of English among their young people. It would be interesting to discover if the Malays and the Chinese have more in common then they think.

Researchers could also look into the factors that contribute to the difference in English proficiency among students in the cities and rural students. City students were more exposed to western culture and English use but rural students may be more intrinsically motivated to do well so as to move out of their situation.

Conclusion

The findings of the study were quite unexpected. Firstly, it was hypothesized that family and significant others would contribute most to English proficiency in the Chinese students. This was found not to be the case. Respondents do not think that their English proficiency was influenced by their family or by close significant others. However, their attitude and perception towards were influenced by significant others. Future research should also explore factors such as motivation and desire to learn English.

Second language acquisition is when people learn a second language in addition to their native tongue. According to Tse's studies (2001a, 2001b), literacy in a first language can be fostered only when conditions coexist to support its development, such as the environments, the opportunity to use the language, and guidance from adults. To foster bilingualism and maintain the first language, educators and parents who support Chinese-English bilingual programs must think creatively and provide children with high interest reading

materials and authentic Chinese and English learning resources. These resources are not only limited in quantity because of parental socioeconomic status but, more importantly be relevant to the Chinese culture and community. There is also the other second language, Bahasa Malaysia to be proficient in if students are to do well in Malaysian schools.

The findings from this study suggest that Chinese students should be more independent in their learning choices. They should be more willing to be exposed to as much conversational and written English as possible. If they are limited in their English language ability, they should consider eliciting help from peers or teachers who are fluent in English to practice with.

English development and maintenance of the Chinese language cannot be achieved without a strong commitment from the students themselves. Guidance of adults such as teachers can expose them to English literacy activities and apprentice them in the uses of the language (Smith, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). It would also be very beneficial to create supportive frameworks such as an English as a Second Language program at school and for parents to reinforce their Chinese language use at home. The role of the teachers is important to establish the environment to encourage students to practice speaking English with other Chinese students. Chinese students would not feel awkward when speaking to another Chinese in English if their Chinese teachers model as examples.

The socio-cognitive theory suggests that significant others play important roles in second language acquisition and language proficiency. This study has found that the theory does influence students in their language proficiency but significant others are not the only influence. Gardner's researches suggested that greater efforts from learners were encouraged by motivation (1985, 1992, 1995). Pierson, Fu and Lee (1980) found that in Hong Kong, students were motivated by the freedom of language choice, desire to learn English, lack of self-confidence in using English, discomfort over Chinese speakers using English and English as the mark of education. English learning environment and English exposure may affect Chinese students' motivation to learn English in Johor Bahru. It is known that it is difficult to get good jobs without good English but it is still possible to get a job in Johor Bahru or even in Singapore without English proficiency because mandarin is widely used and understood.

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Table 1 Frequency and Percentage of English grade in SPM and UEC

Grade	Frequency	SPM	UEC	Percentage
A	16	12	4	13.4
B	21	11	10	17.6
C	45	27	18	37.8
D	26	17	9	21.8
E	11	4	7	9.2
	119	71	48	100

Table 2 Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation of Parental Influence (n = 119)

Statements	Distribution on responses (%)					Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
My parents speak English to the family	52.9	40.3	4.2	2.5	-	1.56	.697
My parents encourage me to speak in English.	13.4	19.3	17.6	33.6	16.0	3.19	1.297
My parents buy English books and magazines.	45.4	50.4	1.7	2.5	-	1.61	.652
My parents subscribe to English newspapers.	52.9	40.3	5.9	.8	-	1.55	.648
My parents make me worry about failing	14.3	26.1	16.8	35.3	7.6	2.96	1.224
My parents often watch the English channels on TV.	52.9	37.8	8.4	-	.8	1.58	.719
My parents encourage me to go for English tuition.	11.8	23.5	25.2	26.1	13.4	3.06	1.230
My parents can't correct me when I make mistakes in English.	12.6	26.1	21.0	25.2	15.1	3.04	1.278
My parents have friends of various races and encourage me to befriend other races as well.	16.8	22.7	18.5	31.9	10.1	2.96	1.278
My parents don't think that being good in English means I have become westernized.	23.5	42.0	17.6	16.8	-	2.28	1.008

Overall mean = 2.38; minimum = 1.55; maximum = 3.19; Range = 1.64

Table 3. Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation of Peer Influence

Statements	Distribution on responses(%)					Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
I don't have many friends who speak English.	5.9	36.1	18.5	29.4	10.1	3.02	1.142
My friends are not very encouraging when I speak English.	10.1	33.6	22.7	26.9	6.7	2.87	1.127
My friends and I never use English outside of the classroom.	4.2	24.4	10.9	52.9	7.6	3.35	1.062
My friends and I seldom buy English books and magazines.	27.7	39.5	10.1	15.1	7.6	2.35	1.246
My friends and I speak English to our lecturers.	7.6	33.6	17.6	31.9	9.2	3.02	1.157
My friends and I have the same taste in English music and movies.	6.7	23.5	17.6	42.0	10.1	3.25	1.129
My friends don't correct me when I make mistakes in English.	13.4	20.2	20.2	35.3	10.9	3.10	1.238
My friends feel that English is important for our future career.	5.0	9.2	13.4	39.5	32.8	3.86	1.130
My friends and I find opportunities to use English often.	12.6	26.9	17.6	28.6	14.3	3.05	1.281
My friends find that English is as important as our native language.	5.0	16.0	13.4	51.3	14.3	3.54	1.080

Overall mean = 3.14; minimum = 2.35; maximum = 3.86; Range = 1.51

Table 4. Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation of Teacher Influence

Statements	Distribution on responses(%)					Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
My lecturers speak in English all the time	2.5	17.6	12.6	55.5	11.8	3.56	.997
My lecturers guide my learning, especially in English	4.2	12.6	10.9	45.4	26.9	3.78	1.106
My lecturers tell me my mistakes.	1.7	9.2	12.6	54.6	21.8	3.86	.923
My lecturers slow down when I don't understand lessons in English	5.9	21.8	20.2	43.7	8.4	3.27	1.079
My lecturers encourage me when I speak in English.	8.4	25.2	22.7	25.2	18.5	3.20	1.246
My lecturers make learning English fun.	3.4	9.2	19.3	37.8	30.3	3.82	1.071
My lecturers translate from English to Chinese for me.	7.6	20.2	19.3	28.6	24.4	3.42	1.266
My lecturers tell me what to study	6.7	8.4	11.8	40.3	32.8	3.84	1.172
My lecturer only gives notes in English.	30.3	41.2	16.0	10.1	2.5	2.13	1.041
My lecturers motivate me to use English all the time.	15.1	29.4	15.1	23.5	16.8	2.97	1.350

Overall mean = 3.38; minimum = 2.13; maximum = 3.86; Range = 1.73

Table 5. Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation of Personal Attitude towards English

Statements	Distribution on response(%)						Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree			
I am interested in studying English	-	25.2	13.4		52.9	8.4	3.45	.963
I lack confident when I have to speak in English.	1.7	21.8	14.3		52.9	9.2	3.46	.990
I practise English every chance I get.	1.7	11.8	23.5		47.1	16.0	3.64	.945
I am not satisfied with my level of English proficiency	5.9	13.4	20.2		52.1	8.4	3.44	1.022
I try to watch English TV shows and movies often	1.7	14.3	19.3		51.3	13.4	3.61	.950
I find academic work in English difficult	-	5.9	16.8		63.9	13.4	3.85	.721
I enjoy lessons that are in English.	-	10.1	17.6		56.3	16.0	3.78	.835
I am not afraid to speak to English speakers whenever I can.	.8	26.9	6.7		63.9	1.7	3.39	.931
I frequently read and write in English	.8	14.3	19.3		52.9	12.6	3.62	.911
I pay attention when someone is speaking in English.	3.4	22.7	12.6		42.9	18.5	3.50	1.134

Overall mean = 3.57; minimum = 3.39; maximum = 3.85; Range = 0.55

Table 6. Frequency and Percentage distribution of the Learning Styles

Learning style	Frequency	Percent
Verbal	40	33.6
Visual	33	27.7
Aural	27	22.7
Combination	19	16.0
	119	100

Table 7. Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation on students' Perception towards English

Statements	Distribution on responses(%)						Mean	SD
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree			
I believe English is the mark of an educated person.	6.7	18.5	21.0		42.9	10.9	3.33	1.106
I try to find out how to be a better English learner.	3.4	12.6	15.1		42.9	26.1	3.76	1.081
I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid to make mistakes.	4.2	19.3	22.7		39.5	14.3	3.40	1.084
I believe I can improve my English by going to tuition class.	7.6	15.1	22.7		41.2	13.4	3.38	1.127
I believe English is not a difficult subject	5.9	23.5	21.0		37.0	12.6	3.27	1.133
I believe that being good in English will help me in my future career.	.8	7.6	11.8		36.1	43.7	4.14	.959
I believe English should be a medium of instruction in Malaysia.	.8	23.5	21.0		31.9	22.7	3.52	1.111
I believe if I practice, my English proficiency will improve.	4.2	7.6	14.3		44.5	29.4	3.87	1.054
I believe if I use English my status will be raised.	7.6	13.4	24.4		38.7	16.0	3.42	1.139
I don't believe that using English will mean I am not patriotic.	5.0	17.6	26.1		31.1	20.2	3.44	1.147

Overall mean = 3.55; minimum = 3.27; maximum = 4.14; Range = 0.87

Table 8 Correlation Analysis between English proficiency and household income

		English Proficiency	Household Income
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.147
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.110
Household income	Pearson Correlation	-.147	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.110	

Table 9 Correlation Analysis between English Proficiency and Parental Influence

		English Proficiency	Parental Influence
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.030
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.745
Parental Influence	Pearson Correlation	-.030	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.745	

Table 10 Correlation Analysis between English Proficiency and Peer Influence

		English Proficiency	Peer Influence
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.182*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.048
Peer Influence	Pearson Correlation	-.182*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.048	

Table 11. Correlation Analysis between English Proficiency and Teacher Influence

		English Proficiency	Teacher Influence
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.963
Teacher Influence	Pearson Correlation	-.004	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.963	

Table 12. Correlation Analysis between English Proficiency and Personal Attitude

		English Proficiency	Personal Attitude
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.223*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.015
Personal Attitude	Pearson Correlation	-.223*	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 13. Correlation Analysis between Current English Proficiency and Visual Learning Style

		English Proficiency	Visual Style
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	0.29
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.751
Visual Style	Pearson Correlation	0.29	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.751	

Table 14. Correlation Analysis between Current English Proficiency and Aural Learning Style

		English Proficiency	Aural Style
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	.133
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.148
Aural Style	Pearson Correlation	.133	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.148	

Table 15. Correlation Analysis between Current English Proficiency and Verbal Learning Style

		English Proficiency	Verbal Style
English Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	0.75
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.416
Verbal Style	Pearson Correlation	0.75	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.416	

Table 16. Correlation Analysis between Students' Perception and Parental Influence

		Students' Perception	Parental Influence
Students' Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.278**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
Parental Influence	Pearson Correlation	.278**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 17. Correlation Analysis between Students' Perception and Peer Influence

		Students' Perception	Peer Influence
Students' Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.243
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008
Peer Influence	Pearson Correlation	.243	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	

Table 18 Correlation Analysis between Students' Perception and Teacher Influence

		Students' Perception	Teacher Influence
Students' Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.524**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Teacher Influence	Pearson Correlation	.524**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

Table 19 Correlation Analysis between Students' Perception and Personal Attitude

		Students' Perception	Personal Attitude
Students' Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.290**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
Personal Attitude	Pearson Correlation	.290**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)