

A Comparative Study of the Achievement and the Proficiency Levels in English as a Second Language among Learners in Selected Rural and Urban Schools in Peninsular Malaysia.

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Introduction

There have been many statements by officials from the Ministry of Education, educationists and parents regarding the decline in the standard of English among Malaysian secondary school students and also about the differences in the achievement and proficiency levels between urban and rural students.

The decline of the standard of the English language has become a serious concern for the Ministry of Education, English language teachers and parents. The continuing decline of the pass rate in the Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) English language paper is a sure indicator of this downward trend.

The acquisition of the English language to most of the Malaysian community according to Gaudart (1987:34) is "seen as a necessary evil. This attitude spills over to the children in school, making it more difficult for them to have any intrinsic desire to acquire English."

Gaudart (1987:17) also added that the "Malaysian society is constantly regaled with opinions about the falling standards of English. Falling where and in what way is seldom mentioned." This study was undertaken as a result of the 1986 English language results being the lowest pass rate among all the subjects and there being claims that there is a disparity in the performance of the rural and urban students in the English language. This study was also undertaken to provide statistics to show the disparity (if any) in the performance between rural and urban students and to investigate if this disparity was significant.

The primary objective of this study was to compare the proficiency test (a validated proficiency test administered by the researchers) results of rural and urban students. This comparison was used to determine if there was any significant difference in the results between them. The proficiency test used for this study was a comprehensive test which comprised twelve test components. It was designed to measure the overall proficiency of the students and not to evaluate the students' proficiency in each individual test component.

This study also analyzed the results of the 1986 SRP English language paper of students from eight urban and eight rural schools from four selected states. The SRP examination which is an achievement test is used as an index to indicate the students' achievement level at the end of their lower secondary education. The achievement levels are broadly categorized as distinction, credit, pass and fail. For the purpose of this study, the English language SRP results are used to complement the proficiency test results.

This study, however, was not an attempt to investigate any factors such as, the socio-economic background of students, attitude of the teachers or the students towards the English language which might have contributed to the present standard of the English language in the rural and urban schools in the four selected states. It was felt that such an attempt could be another research project in itself. Furthermore, the analysis of the factors contributing to the present standard of English was not one of the objectives of this study.

The Study

The Sample

This study investigated the achievement and proficiency levels of students in four selected states in Peninsular Malaysia, namely: Selangor Darul Ehsan, Negeri Sembilan Darul Khusus, Melaka and Johor Darul Takzim. For each state, two rural and two urban schools were randomly selected for the study. Therefore, sixteen schools were selected for this study. And from each school two form four classes were also randomly selected. A total of 1004 Form Four students were involved in this study.

The researchers deemed schools rural or urban as stated by Chandrasegaran (1981) that schools in Malaysia are classified by the Ministry of Education depending on the location and the population of towns and districts in which they are situated. Rural schools are those which are situated in towns or districts with a population of under 10,000 people. Urban schools refer to those schools which are situated in towns or districts with a population of more than 10,000 people.

Instruments for the Study

The following instruments were used for data collection:

- a. SRP 1986 results to ascertain the students' achievement level;
- b. a validated proficiency test on listening, writing and reading skills to gauge the students' proficiency levels.

The proficiency test was specifically designed to measure the overall proficiency levels of the students. The components of the proficiency test were as follows: translation, language forms and functions, error identification, vocabulary, singular-plural, subject-verb agreement, sentence completion, prepositions, pronouns, tenses, reading comprehension, listening comprehension and written composition. There was no oral component in this test.

The students were allotted one and a half hours to respond to the questions in the objective section of the proficiency test, which comprised eighty-five questions. They were then asked to write a composition within thirty minutes and were also informed that one of the aims of the study was to

find out how well they could express themselves in English. They were allowed to write on any topic as it was felt that if certain topics were set for them, this may restrict their ability to express themselves.

An error analysis was then carried out on one hundred of the students' scripts (10.4% of the sample). It was felt that such an analysis would give a general overview of the students' performance in their writing skills. The error analysis was done on the following grammar items: verb forms, passive voice, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, pronouns and plurality as these grammar items are emphasized in the primary and lower secondary English language syllabuses.

The following aspects were considered in the implementation of this study:

- a. the proficiency level of the students;
- b. the achievement level of the students;
- c. the location of the schools (rural and urban).

The Findings

The Proficiency Levels in Rural and Urban Schools

The tables below present the results of the proficiency test for the rural and the urban schools:

Rural Schools	R.S.*	S.D.*
1. S.M. Methodist, Banting	45	11.2
2. SM. Sultan Sulaiman Shah, B. Berjuntai	48	7.9
3. S.M. Batu Kikir, Batu Kikir	49	12.9
4. S.M. Datuk Mansur, Bahau	57	12.8
5. S.M. St. David, Bukit Baru, Melaka	34	9.1
6. S.M. Simpang Bekoh, Asahan	31	7.0
7. SM. Ungku Husin, Endau	37	10.2
8. SM. Sri Mersing, Mersing	51	9.8

Table 1 Proficiency Test Results: Rural Schools

**R.S. is the mean raw score *S.D. is the standard deviation*

Urban Schools	R.S.*	S.D.*
1. S.M. (P) Assunta, Petaling Jaya	76	6.1
2. S.M. (L) Bukit Bintang, Petaling Jaya	72	9.1
3. S.M. King George V, Seremban	56	9.6
4. S.M. Tuanku Ampuan Najihah, Seremban	54	11.3
5. Sek. Tinggi Melaka	74	9.4
6. S.M. St. Francis, Melaka	66	10.2
7. SM. Sultan Ibrahim, Kulai	59	10.5
8. Sek. Tinggi Muar	58	12.4

Table II Proficiency Test Results: Urban Schools

**RS is the mean raw score *SD is the standard deviation*

The mean raw scores for the proficiency test for the rural and urban students are significantly different at the 0.01 % level of significance (P less than 0.001). The standard deviation for the rural schools was 13.0 and the standard deviation for the urban schools was 12.6. The mean raw score for rural schools was 44.4 and 64.3 for urban schools.

The mean percentage scores for the proficiency test for rural and urban students was 63,7%. There was a wide margin in the average scores between the rural and the urban school students, the difference being 23.4%. The mean percentage scores of the urban schools was 75.5% and the rural schools was only 51.9%.

The standard deviation for the sample of this was 16.1. Based on the mean raw scores for the schools, the performance of the students in each school was categorized into three groups: good (71.5 and above), average (between 39.3 and 71.4) and poor 39.2 and below).

Therefore, with reference to the above categories, five rural schools were considered average in their performance in the proficiency test, the other three schools were in the poor performance category. None of the schools were in the good category.

However, three urban schools were considered as good in their performance in the proficiency test while the other five schools were in the average performance category. None of the schools were in the poor performance category.

As stated earlier, the proficiency test was designed to measure the overall proficiency levels of rural and urban students. It was therefore difficult to draw any general conclusions on the significant differences in the performance of the rural and urban students for each test component because the number of items in most of the test components was relatively small.

However, the mean scores for each test component do indicate to a certain extent the different proficiency levels between rural and urban students. It is clear that the urban students performed better in all the test components though there may not have been any significant difference in their performance in most of the test components.

The performance of the students in the proficiency test according to the test components is shown in Table III (page 00).

As shown in Table III, both rural and urban school students had the highest scores in sentence completion (rural 73%; urban - 93%). "Forms and Functions" was the area in which both groups of students had the second highest scores (rural - 69%; urban 90%). The third highest scores were for vocabulary (rural - 65%; urban 84%).

There were, however, some differences in the ranking in the following test items for the two groups. Pronouns ranked fourth for rural students (60%) while prepositions and error identification ranked fifth for rural students (52%).

In the case of the urban students, prepositions ranked fourth (82%), whereas pronouns and tenses ranked fifth (80%). There were also slight differences for the following test components: tenses ranked seventh (50%) whereas listening comprehension and agreement ranked eighth (45%) for rural

students. For the urban students, listening comprehension, error identification and agreement ranked seventh (73%).

Test Components	Mean	
	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
a. Translation	41	54
b. Forms and Functions	69	90
c. Error Identification	52	73
d. Vocabulary	66	84
e. Singular-Plural	44	64
f. Agreement	45	73
g. Sentence Completion	73	91
h. Prepositions	52	82
i. Pronouns	60	80
j. Tenses	50	80
k. Reading Comprehension	42	67
l. Listening Comprehension	45	73

Table III Proficiency Test Components and Results for Rural and Urban Schools

The score for the singular-plural test component ranked tenth for rural students (44%) and eleventh for urban students (64%). In the case of reading comprehension, it ranked eleventh for rural students (42%) and tenth for urban students (67%).

Translation was the test component for which students from both rural (41%) and urban (54%) schools had the lowest average scores. This test component in the proficiency test acted as a control item in relation to the other test components. As expected, both the rural and the urban students obtained the lowest scores in this test component. This could be the result of the fact that this skill is not taught in the lower secondary English language syllabus or in the form four syllabus.

Although there were some similarities in the way in which the different test components ranked for the rural and urban students, it is quite clear that the scores of the urban students for every test component was much higher than the rural students. For the rural students, the mean percentage scores ranged from 41% to 73% whereas for the urban students, the average scores ranged from 54% to 91%.

Error Analysis of Written Compositions

An error analysis was carried out to provide information on students' errors in writing. The error analysis was done on the following grammar items: verb forms, passive voice, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, pronouns and plurality as these grammar items are emphasized in the primary and lower secondary English language syllabuses.

An initial analysis of the scripts indicated a general trend of the types of errors that were being made. Therefore, one hundred scripts (fifty urban and fifty rural students' scripts) were analyzed. This was 10.04% of the sample of this study.

The analysis indicated that both rural and urban students had problems with verb forms. The most commonly used tense was the simple past tense which was followed by the simple present tense. The students seemed to resort to these verb forms with minimal usage of the other verb forms. This could be the result of most students describing their families, personal likes and dislikes and also events that they were familiar with. Students who attempted to use the other verb forms often used them incorrectly.

In the case of the rural students, those who attempted to use the past progressive, present perfect tense, past perfect tense and passive voice were totally incapable of using them correctly. After these tenses, articles was the area with the highest incidence of errors. This was followed by plurality, simple past tense, problems regarding future time, simple present tense, prepositions and subject-verb agreement. Students were quite competent in the use of the pronouns.

The urban students too had problems with verb forms. Surprisingly, problems regarding future time ranked the highest. This was followed by present perfect tense, present progressive, past progressive, passive voice, and past perfect tense. They also had a relatively high incidence of errors for plurality. The grammar items with a lower incidence of errors were: prepositions, simple past tense, pronouns and articles. The students were very competent in the use of the simple present tense.

As in the case of other test components mentioned earlier, the percentage of errors in the grammar items for the written composition was much higher for the rural students than for the urban students.

Achievement Levels in Rural and Urban Schools

Table IV provides the 1986 SRP English language national results.

Distinction	9.7%
Credit	16.8%
Pass	30.1%
Fail	43.4%
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Total Percentage of Passes	56.6%
Total Percentage of Failures	43.4%

Table IV 1986 SRP National English Language Results

Table V below illustrates the SRP English Language results for the rural and urban schools in this study.

	Pass (%)	Fail (%)
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Rural Schools		
1. S.M. Methodist, Banting	69.4	30.6
2. S.M. Sultan Sulaiman Shah, B. Berjuntai	39.9	60.1
3. S.M. Batu Kikir, Batu Kikir	59.6	40.4
4. S.M. Datuk Mansur, Bahau	55.2	44.8

5. S.M. St. David, Melaka	58.3	41.7
6. S.M. Simpang Bekoh, Asahan	41.2	58.8
7. S.M. Ungku Husin, Endau	43.7	56.7
8. S.M. Sri Mersing, Mersing	47.2	52.8

Urban Schools

1. S.M. (P) Assunta, Petaling Jaya	98.1	1.1
2. S.M. (L) Bukit Bintang, Petaling Jaya	97.7	2.3
3. S.M. King George V, Seremban	81.2	18.8
4. S.M. Tuanku Ampuan Najihah, Seremban	79.7	20.3
5. Sek. Tinggi Melaka	97.8	2.2
6. S.M. St. Francis, Melaka	85.0	15.0
7. S.M. Sultan Ibrahim, Kulai	67.0	33.0
8. Sek. Tinggi Muar	80.0	20.0

Table V 1986 SRP English Language Results

It was interesting to note that the mean percentage of failures for the 16 schools in this study was 30.5% which was slightly lower than the national failure rate.

A further analysis of the results of the schools in this study showed that there was a wide margin in the percentage of failure between the rural and the urban schools. In the case of the rural schools, the percentage of failure was 47.7 and the percentage of failure for the urban schools was only 13.4. It was clear that the rural schools contributed to the high failure rate in the English language.

Furthermore, a closer analysis of the results indicated a wide difference in the achievement levels of the students. The majority of the students in the rural schools were in the credit and pass levels whereas the majority of the urban students were in the distinction levels.

Only 3.9 percent of the rural students managed to score distinctions, while 14.6 percent obtained a credit and 33.8 percent obtained a pass. The remaining 47.7 percent failed.

On the other hand, 37.6 percent of the urban students scored distinctions, 26.4 percent of the students obtained a credit and 22.6 percent obtained a pass. The remaining 13.4 percent failed. Therefore, it was clear that there was also a wide margin in the achievement levels of students in the rural and the urban schools.

Conclusions

Achievement level

An analysis of the 1986 SRP English language results of the schools in this study indicated that there was a wide margin in the percentage of failures between the rural and the urban schools. The percentage of failures for the rural schools was 47.7 percent and only 13.4 percent for the urban schools. Therefore, it was clear that the rural schools played a major role towards the high failure rate in the SRP English subject.

As in the case of the above percentages of failures there was also a clear difference in the achievement levels of the percentage of rural and urban students who passed. The majority of the

students in the rural schools were in the credit and pass levels whereas the majority of the urban students were in the distinction and credit levels.

It can be concluded that the students' performance in the English language paper does in a way reflect one of the objectives of teaching the English language in accordance with the National Education Policy - to produce a small group of students with high English proficiency for the purposes of further education, with the remaining majority of students only expected to have some knowledge of the language for use in their work and specific activities (Report of the Cabinet Committee 1985: 57-58).

In view of the above conclusion, it is rather interesting to note that the majority of the urban students could be in the first category and most of the rural students in the latter category.

Proficiency level

The results of the proficiency test clearly showed that the urban school students were more proficient than the rural school students. The statistical analysis in this study indicated that there was a significant difference in the proficiency levels of the rural and urban students.

The results of this study also seem to indicate that there is a correlation between the achievement and proficiency levels of the rural and the urban students. The results for both the achievement and the proficiency tests consistently showed that the urban students were better in their performance as compared to the rural students in the English language.

Recommendations

As there is a clear indication of the difference in the achievement and the proficiency levels between rural and urban students as shown in this study, a complementary study could be undertaken to investigate the factors that have contributed to the present standard of the English language in both the rural and urban schools.

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