

# Difficulties in Learning English Faced by Early Year Students in a Refugee School in Malaysia

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## Abstract

Early year students from refugee backgrounds need to learn English as efficiently as possible since they will be resettled in different English-speaking countries. This exploratory research on the difficulties of learning English among students with a refugee background in Malaysia, a country that has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, will provide valuable insights into the matter to the global community. There are no clear teaching and learning guidelines and procedures on how to create resources that can help to overcome learning difficulties faced by refugee students in learning English. This paper aimed to explore the challenges/issues faced by a group of early year refugee students in learning the English Language in a refugee school in Malaysia and to investigate how their circumstances affected their learning of the English language. Interviews were conducted with 20 selected individuals and observations were made within the selected sample group. Data was recorded according to the observation schedule and the responses from the students were categorized and analysed according to themes. The findings revealed that refugee students suffer a lack of motivation, language barrier, lack of resources, and financial challenges that impede them in the process of acquiring the English Language. Other causes for them not being able to learn English is the absence of school itself due to financial constraints, geographical location, law and policy and politics.

**Keywords:** Learning, Early Year, Refugee School, Malaysia.

## Introduction

English is a very important language that is predominantly used in the world of business, academia, politics, and it is recognized as an international language. Therefore, the study of English language by non-native English speakers has become the key component of the education curriculum of students even in the early years. It allows them to express themselves clearly, understand instructions, engage in meaningful conversations with peers, and understand complex concepts taught in the classroom.

The importance of learning English is even more so among immigrants; specifically, refugees in Malaysia, as they will then be resettled to other countries that mainly use English as their means of communication, such as Australia, Canada and the USA. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (n.d), there are a total of 182,990 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, which is a very significant population to be studied. As their priority is resettlement in another country, learning English is a must and not an option for them. Learning English is crucial in their efforts for social interaction and cultural integration and understanding, academic success, and future economic stability.

As to date, there is a lack of studies being done, especially in the Malaysian context, to investigate the challenges faced by this community especially in the education sector. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore and find out the challenges faced by early year refugee students in learning the English Language in Malaysia.

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research are

1. to explore the challenges/issues faced by a group of early year refugee students in learning the English Language in a refugee school in Malaysia.
2. to investigate how their circumstances affect their learning of the English language.

### **Problem Statement and Research Questions**

The English Language is used as the lingua franca by a majority of the people in the world. To ensure the survivability rate of the refugee community collectively, there is a need for early year students from refugee background to learn English as efficiently as possible since they will be resettled in different English-speaking countries.

Research on the difficulties of learning English among students with a refugee background in Malaysia, a country that has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, will provide valuable insights into the matter to the global community.

Moreover, there are no clear teaching and learning guidelines and procedures on how to create resources that can help to overcome learning difficulties faced by refugee students in learning English. The results and insights from this research will guide community learning centers, NGOs and independent institutions that provide education to the refugees to improve in their educational services to these students.

With all this in consideration, the research questions for this study are: -

- 1) What are the issues that cause learning difficulties in English among early year students in a refugee school in Malaysia?
- 2) How do their life circumstances affect their learning of the English Language?

### **Significance of The Study**

Not much research has been carried out in the Malaysian context related to English language learning and refugee students with their unique demographic background, coming from different cultures, life experiences and languages. The findings of this research will identify the perceived challenges that affect English language learning among early year students in a refugee school in Malaysia. This can lead to future research which can endeavour to perform statistical analysis to investigate the significance of the challenges.

Most importantly, the outcome of this research can assist stakeholders, ie education providers and teachers who play salient roles in providing education to refugee students in planning a better curriculum which can support teachers and equip them with the skills and

knowledge to design the teaching and learning resources that meet the needs of refugee students, as most of them will face challenges in learning a new language in a new environment.

It is also hoped that the findings of the research can provide some evidence and awareness about the need for changes in policy making and decisions to give more access to quality education for refugee students and to create an inclusive learning environment that will address their needs in order for them to succeed in their future lives.

### **Definition of Terms**

In the context of this research, the following definitions will be referred to throughout the discussion of this research:

Early year students: Students from the age of 4 to 8 years old.

Refugee schools: Independent schools that provide education to refugee students and marginalized/ displaced community.

### **Literature Review**

#### **English Language Learning Difficulties**

In understanding the learning difficulties associated with the English language, the importance of motivation and learning is highly researched across various fields of studies. It has been established by many academia that motivation is important in learning as confirmed by Jovanovic and Matejevic (2014), motivation (intrinsic) has an interdependent relationship with learning. Hence, the opposite of it is also true; demotivation has a direct impact on learning. In dissecting demotivation, Pathan, Ismail and Fatima (2020) have found that the main cause of demotivation in learning the English language is classroom environment, classroom material and characteristics of classes (the physical appearance of the classroom). Dachyshyn and Kirova (2011) have also observed that the set-up of the physical environment of the classroom is important in learning language as language and culture is learned in context. This implicitly suggests that classroom environment plays a vital role in learning the English language.

Apart from that, another learning difficulties in learning English as per my observation is language barrier. According to Malik et al (2021), the challenge for teachers in teaching children to speak and write English is that the students do not know what their teacher is explaining. This is especially true for native English-speaking teachers teaching non-English speaking students and Non-native English-speaking teachers teaching non-English-speaking students where they do not have a common language that both parties understand. This finding does echo with other literature; Morrice et al (2019) have found that learners are reluctant to ask questions or admit that they do not understand if they are not familiar with the language. Jewels & Albon (2012), have also found that students who lack proficiency in the English language is in a clear state of anxiety when they are responding in English as they worry about the correctness in vocabulary and grammar.

Moreover, another possible challenge in learning English is the opportunity to learn the language itself. Sadeghi & Richards (2015), in their studies have found that opportunity to learn from teachers who are proficient in teaching conversational English is scarce. According to Clarke (2022) out of 195 countries, only a total of 67 countries have English as their first language. This also means that more than half of the population in the world does not have access to learning English apart from learning them in school. Hence, the need for teachers who are proficient in the English Language to teach in schools. Leong et al (2017) in their

research have outlined the importance of teachers in teaching English; apart from having knowledge of words and sentences, they need also to motivate the students by providing encouraging feedback and positive encouragement.

Aside from the above, most of the literatures agreed that internal factors such as motivation, self-esteem, and willingness to learn play the most important factor in learning the English language. Leong & Ahmadi (2017); Pathan et al (2020) have clearly mentioned that intrinsic factors such as motivation, anxiety and self-esteem play a bigger role in learning English; lack of these could also be a major difficulty in learning English. Therefore, it can be deduced that intrinsic factors play an important role in the difficulties/ challenges that students face in learning English.

### **Refugee Student Learning Difficulties in Malaysia**

According to Loganathan et al (2021), Malaysia is host to at least 3.2 million non-citizens or 10 per cent of its population in 2019. More than 178,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia, including 46,000 children (about twice the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) under 18 years. While the majority are stateless Rohingya (102,000) and other minorities (52,000) from Myanmar (154,000), Malaysia hosts refugees from some 50 countries including Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and Palestine. Refugees live in urban, non-camp settings scattered around Peninsular Malaysia, with most concentrated around the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding Klang Valley. Due to the sheer volume of population of refugees, it is not a stretch to mention that refugees are part of the shadow economy in Malaysia as most business owners opt to hire refugees although it is illegal as it is a much cheaper alternative for labour due to the challenges in looking for jobs and employment in Malaysia.

It is important to understand the difference between refugees and immigrant. Immigrants are a group of people who choose to leave their homeland, while refugees are forced to leave due to persecution, war, and violence. This results in different circumstances regarding the adaptability process of the refugees. Among the various adaptability issues, learning difficulties faced by students are the most lacking in literature and academic documentation. Morrice et al (2019) have listed several learning difficulties faced by refugees who are struggling to resettle in a new country. Among those challenges listed, highlighted ones are waiting lists for classes/schools, the cost of classes/schools and eligibility for free or subsidized provision, and travel costs. BRYCS. (n.d.) have stated that refugee families are often moving from one refugee camp to another, which means less or no opportunity for school.

Opportunities for education are scarce since most refugee families come from lower income families. According to World Report (2021), Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and this means that refugees have no legal status and do not have access to employment and their children cannot attend government schools. This means that refugee children in Malaysia need to attend non-government schools which are not accessible especially to those children belonging to families who are financially challenged and without any monetary assistance.

Apart from that, Hoot (2011) also mentioned that adaptation to an unfamiliar school environment presents difficulties for refugee students. This is true where students who are forced to leave their country are not prepared to adapt to a new education system. This echoes with Gibson (1997) who mentions that immigrant students' success in adapting to new cultural norms and practices reflects a variety of factors, which include the society of origin, the society of settlement, and reasons for migrating. This circles back to the circumstances

that the refugees are in as for many of them; they are not financially or mentally prepared to live in a different country apart from their homeland.

### Refugee Students and English Language Learning Difficulties

It is unfortunate but there is not much research being done in the field of English Language learning among refugee students. However, extrapolating from the above-mentioned literature we can deduce the following as the difficulties of learning English faced by refugee students.

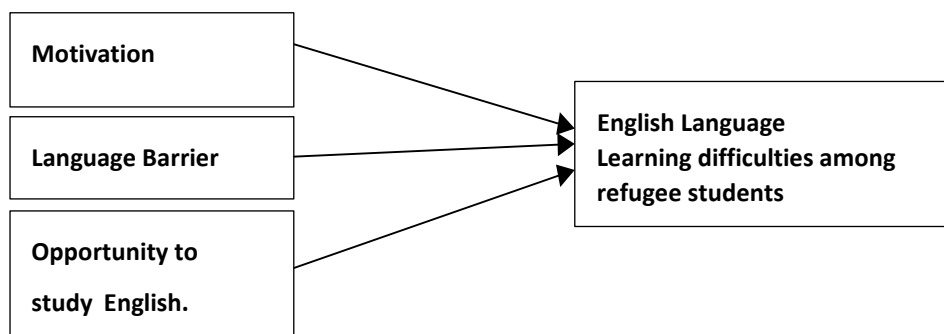


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

## Research Design and Research Methodology

### Research Design

This research is an explorative case study to obtain information on learning difficulties in the English Language subject faced by early year students in a refugee school in Malaysia.

### Research Methodology

This research was conducted in a refugee school in Malaysia focusing on early year students. Purposive sampling was used as the population related to this study was a niche population not found elsewhere due to the distribution of the population of refugees and as most of the community learning centers are not accessible to the public due to safety and legal issues. Interviews were conducted with a select few individuals and observations were made within the selected sample group.

In total, there were 20 participants selected for the interview. Interviews were conducted anonymously to preserve confidentiality and responses were documented. The interviews (Refer to Table 1) were conducted in English and as there could be language barriers, a translator was used as and when it was needed.

Table 1

*Interview Questions*

Interview questions (conducted in English or the native language of the interviewee with the assistance of a translator)	
Question 1	Why is it difficult to learn English?
Question 2	Do you think English is important? Why do you think it's important?
Question 3	Can you read in English? Why can you or why can't you read in English?
Question 4	Can you speak in English? Why can you or why can't you speak in English?
Question 5	When you listen to people speaking in English, do you understand them?
Question 6	Can you engage in an English conversation?

In addition, observations were made by voluntary observers which provided feedback on three groups of students with different competencies in the English language according to the given observation checklist (Refer to Table 2). The grouping was based on high competency, medium competency, and low competency of the English language. Observers were given strict instruction not to provide any external instruction or influence the students in any manner possible to preserve the reliability of the data collected.

Table 2

Observation checklist

Observation checklist	
Can the student understand the instruction given in English	Yes/No
Does the student communicate in other languages than English to complete the task given?	Yes/No
Did the student achieve the intended objective of the lesson?	Yes/No
Did the student speak in English to the instructor?	Yes/No
Based on your observation in the classroom, name three things that makes it difficult for the students to learn English (Writing, Speaking, and Reading)	1) 2) 3)

### Data Analysis Procedure

Data was recorded in the forms of writing and the responses from the students were then categorized into the following themes: Perception towards importance of English Language, Difficulties in English speaking and comprehension and Difficulties in task completion in English.

Common response was collectively addressed, and the response was compared against prevailing literature related to English language learning difficulties. At the end of the analysis a framework was presented as an outcome of this research which can be used by future researchers to perform statistical analysis on. Additionally, the researcher will provide recommendation that can be taken as steps that can be used by educators to overcome the perceived learning difficulties.

### Analysis of Findings and Discussions

20 students were interviewed from the age range of 7 to 8 years old. Nine were girls while eleven were boys. It is also noteworthy to mention that these students came from different countries of origin and are refugees here in Malaysia. Initially, there was difficulty in conducting the interview due to the age range of the students. Therefore, the questions were asked in the simplest way possible to ensure that the students understand the context of the question and they were not intimidated with the questions that were posed to them.

Table 3

#### *Demographic of Respondents*

Total No. of Respondents	Total No of Female (Girls) Respondents	Total No of Male (Boys) Respondents	Total No Ages 4-6 years	Total No Ages 7-8 years
20	9	11	8	12

### Perception towards Importance of The English Language

During the interview, 10 students stated that for them their mother tongue is important. When asked the question why it is important to learn English, they answered their mother tongue is more important. Some students even answered that they believe that their mother tongue can still be used to communicate with people in the country where they are going to resettle. 7 students answered that English is only important when travelling, while 3 students state that English is only important when they are studying. The observations made by the teachers also corresponded with this finding as students from families that do not speak in English at home finds it difficult to view English as important.

This somehow aligns with the finding of Dachyshyn & Kirova (2011) who states the importance of (classroom) environment in learning the English language. Logically, this makes perfect sense as students who grow up in a non-English speaking household have their needs (eat, sleep, companionship, etc.) fulfilled in their mother tongue which diminishes the importance of English language. Thus, the learning of English will only be possible in classroom environments where the language is used. From this, it can be concluded that the lack of exposure in English learning environments is a major hurdle in learning English.

Morrice, Collyer, and Brown (2019), states that one of the main challenges for refugee students to have the opportunity to learn the English language is the lack of opportunity to attend schools. Students who attend school have better opportunity in learning and using English and will have the opportunity to undergo techniques that trained teachers would use

to support them in their learning. Hence, children who do not attend schools will find it difficult to learn English by themselves.

### **Difficulties in English Speaking and Comprehension**

Out of 20 interviewees, more than half of them could understand and speak in English. This was an interesting discovery as even students who think English is not important can speak and comprehend English. However, only 8 of them stated that they can read simple English sentences and phrases and sometimes they have access to simple materials written in English. 16 of them stated that they can understand simple spoken English.

Most of them say that they mostly do not converse in English with their country folks. They will use English if the need arises to communicate with peers from other countries or with teachers. This is in line with the observation in that most students who were observed, spoke English to play with their friends. This highly suggested that the students use English to socialise with others. Therefore, using the language is not purely an academic exercise for them but is more social in nature.

Observations also showed that students who cannot speak in English have difficulties in mastering the basics of the English language such as pronunciation and reading. Additionally, students who have difficulties in English speaking and comprehension have very low tendency to read English books.

### **Difficulties in Task Completion in English**

It is important to note that from the observation that was carried out in the classroom, a majority of the students completed their task in learning English while not speaking the language. However, it was also established that the same group of students managed to achieve the intended outcome of the lesson of that session.

Motivation and interest were observed as the main difficulties that they face in completing their task in English. Some students were observed to be somewhat lethargic and were uninterested in completing the task. They were more inclined to do other non-related task such as drawing or talking to each other. A deduction can be made that this happened because of a lack of motivation and interest in learning the language and can perhaps be attributed to negative aspects in teaching techniques and resources used and the classroom physical environment. To quote Jovanovic & Matejevic (2014), motivation has an interdependent relationship with learning. Demotivation also has a direct impact on learning. The main cause of demotivation in learning the English language is classroom environment, classroom material and characteristic of classes (Pathan et al., 2020).

Yet another conclusion that can be drawn is that the students were communicating with one another in their mother tongue to help each other in the completion of the tasks and to learn from one another.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

From the observations and interviews carried out in the study, it can be concluded that a lack of motivation, language barrier and a lack of resources, are the subsequent challenges or difficulties that refugee students face in learning English after they have been enrolled in a school.

However, the root cause for many of them not being able to learn English is the lack of opportunity to attend school itself due to financial constraints, geographical location, law and policy, politics, etc. In understanding the difficulties for refugee students to learn English; the

main determinant that can be derived from this research is the deprivation of the opportunity to attend school which has an adverse effect on their learning of the English language.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In the future, more research should be done in the refugee community to investigate the social economic impact that education has towards helping this displaced community. In the journey of understanding the difficulties of refugee's students to learn English, it is safe to say that the opportunity to learn itself is the major hurdle that they must overcome. However, a more conclusive and rigorous research must be done to look at the statistical correlation on the variables presented in this research to verify the significance that each variable has on the English learning of refugee students. It is also highly suggested that older students can be used as interviewees for future research, as they will be able to give more in-depth and informed responses to the questions that are raised.

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