

## **High English Literacy among Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds: Exploring the Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

In many cases, having a low socioeconomic status (SES) is a factor that impedes a student's literacy development and language proficiency. Yet, in spite of the multiple life stressors they face, numerous low SES students manage to overcome life's challenges to acquire high English literacy and proficiency. This study examined this phenomenon--how students from a disadvantaged background overcame their SES obstacle and moved on to acquire competency in the English language. The study also examined the factors that helped them to overcome learning challenges stemming from their low SES. To address the research objective, three students--aged fourteen to sixteen--were chosen as the interview participants through purposive sampling. A qualitative semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain the data from which three themes emerged. The study discovered challenges related to individual, family and school variables. The participants agreed that their internal motivation, effort and hard work were the most important factors driving their quest for greater English language literacy and competency.

**Keywords:** *Low socioeconomic status (SES), English literacy, English proficiency, English competency, language learning motivation*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of literacy has become an important subject that requires everyone's attention over the years. Literacy, according to Luyee, Fauzan, Nor Hafizah and Fatin (2015) as cited in the National Institute for Literacy (2008), refers to a combination of skills like "decoding, oral reading, fluency, reading comprehension, writing and spelling" (p. 4). Hence, English literacy is defined as one's ability to decode meaning, read, write and spell in the English language. Like other school curricula, the Malaysian National curriculum aims to develop students "with the ability to communicate accurately and effectively in the most common English language activities they may be involved in" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 230). Clearly, people who are highly literate are more likely to be acknowledged and respected.

Literacy and proficiency in English assume a paramount importance as the language is not only used to connect people globally, but also serves a variety of functions, be it in business, technology or other fields (Juliana, 2010; Abdur Rehman, Hafiz, Muhammad Afzal, Anser & Umer, 2013). In the Malaysian context, English is the second most important language after the national language, Bahasa Melayu. Realizing its importance, the Malaysian government took many efforts to improve the English literacy of the Malaysian people, some of which included the English Teaching Assistant (ETA) programme, Teaching and Learning Science and

Mathematics in English (PPSMI), and others. These programmes did not only aim to give students a broad exposure to the English language, but they also aimed to improve the students' ability to converse in English. With such exposure, Malaysian students would be more proficient and confident to use the language (Ringgit, 2014).

Factors that may impede a student from acquiring high literacy and proficiency in English are many. They have been examined thoroughly in previous studies. As indicated in previous research, socioeconomic status (SES) has a significant impact on students' learning and mastery of English. Very often, SES reflects an individual's income level, educational background and occupation or position in a society (Boskey, 2017). SES is measured based on the level of parental education (usually maternal), occupation (usually paternal) and the family income (Hoff, 2013; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Considine & Zappalà, 2002). Rather than income, other definitions have used "economic deprivation" to mean overall living conditions such as the type of housing, medical treatment and income level (Völkel, Seabi, Cockcroft & Goldschagg, 2016; Ginsborg, 2014). Alternatively, SES has also been defined as "one's access to financial, educational, and social resources, and the social positioning, privileges, and prestige that are derived from these resources" (Pace, Luo, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2017, p. 287). In general, many studies reveal that individuals who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to risks such as negligence, abuse and limited educational opportunities (Pace et al., 2017). Students from such backgrounds usually have a higher tendency of not performing well in the English language as compared to those of high SES.

Existing literature suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds usually suffer from poor literacy skills due to the lack of access to literacy materials and having parents who are not well educated (Frechette, 2013). Similarly, many low SES students display lower levels of English language skills as compared to those from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Hoff, 2013; Phon, 2017). With low family income levels, these students are said to be exposed to more "risks" that can negatively affect the development of their English language. These risks include low parental education levels, lack of supportive learning materials and unfavourable home environments to promote learning. Parental education is an important factor that supports children's literacy development. Studies conducted by Martorana (2015) confirmed that parents with a good educational background are usually keen on being involved in their children's literacy activities. That is, they are willing to provide necessary support and guidance to help their children to improve their literacy skills. Moreover, Dexter and Stacks (2014) agreed that the quality of language that a child acquires depends a lot on the parents' reading quality.

Although sufficient evidence connects high literacy and proficiency in English to parental variables and SES, some rare cases exist that defy such empirical evidence. In these cases, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were found to perform well academically in spite of the life hardships that could have constrained their abilities. Over the years, studies have revealed the experiences of high performing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Williams, 2011; Liu, 2017; Litster, 2013). In terms of achievements in the English language, it is not clear how students from economically deprived homes are able to rise above the challenges and acquire good mastery of the English language when empirical evidence shows that children of such backgrounds often do not perform well academically (Altschul, 2012). Despite the economic and social disadvantages, the students have managed to find ways to improve their English literacy. However, even though there has been substantial research on the poor English literacy of low SES students, the issue of high English literacy

among them is far less understood and little explored (Baltenau, 2016). Few studies have examined the relationship between low SES and high English literacy. In fact, little is known about the experiences of low SES students who have acquired high English literacy in terms of the challenges they faced and the factors that helped them to overcome those challenges. Moreover, Chew (2012) in his study on English literacy among Malaysians confirms that the literacy rate among secondary school students remains low and is, therefore, a cause of worry for the nation. Thus, knowledge about these students who have acquired high English literacy is imperative to help teachers to strengthen the learning of English.

Additionally, the stories of successful students from low SES backgrounds in acquiring high English literacy can further be understood through Resilience theory. Norman Garmenzy, a pioneer in research on resilience, views the concept as the ability to withstand and cope with negative life experiences (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The theory explains how some individuals flourish in the face of adversity, while others languish. Resilience theory expounds on two key elements, namely risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are the challenges that one experiences, while protective factors are elements that support and help one to cope with adverse situations and succeed in life. In relation to this study, both risk and protective factors are crucial to explain how a student from a low socioeconomic background was able to surmount economic deprivation to acquire high English literacy. This was the focus of this qualitative study--to gain an in-depth understanding of the efforts and sacrifices made by the low SES students to achieve their English literacy goals.

## METHODS

### Setting and Design

This qualitative study adopted the critical inquiry design that involved an interpretive analysis of low SES students' experiences in acquiring high English literacy. Using this approach, the conditions that promoted or hindered their acquisition of high English literacy were explained clearly, hence prioritizing the importance of ethical aspects such as truth-telling to maintain the accuracy of shared data. Besides, focusing on a specific group of low SES students, a case study was used to provide in-depth information on how they managed to overcome the challenges and succeeded in English. This study was conducted at a selected secondary boarding school in Selangor. To date, the number of students at the school has reached 650, and they come from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Those from disadvantaged income groups were given enormous support from the school community, one of them being financial assistance (Biasiswa Kecil Persekutuan).

### Participants and Participant Selection

Three students (two female and one male aged between 14 and 16) were interviewed in this study. They were assigned different pseudonyms as Participants A, B and C. They were selected via purposive sampling with the following two criteria: the participants must be from low SES families, and they must have obtained an A for the final year English test. The test was used as an indicator to measure the students' English literacy as it tested both reading and writing skills (directed writing and reading comprehension questions). For SES, family income with a threshold of RM1,500 was used as the indicator, which rendered the participants deserving of the school's financial help (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017). Generally, all students who met the two criteria for participant selection were included in this study. Low

SES students with health and mental challenges were excluded. As SES is associated with parents' educational background and occupations, the school refused to reveal much information about the students' backgrounds. Hence, only those that were good in English (having obtained an A in the school's English exam) with an RM 1,500 family income were shortlisted.

### **Instrument**

A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews. In addition to the guide, the participants were probed with relevant questions to ensure detailed information could be extracted. The interview guide, shown in Table 1, was reviewed by content experts to ensure that they could be understood by the young participants.

Table 1  
Interview Guide

Questions
1. Do you like English? Why?
2. What do you like most about the English language? Why?
3. What do you dislike most about the English language? Why?
4. How do you learn English?
5. Do you think that English is easy? Why?
6. What and who normally encourages you to learn English? How were they helpful?
7. How are you able to be good in both reading and writing skills in the English language?
8. What are the difficulties you faced in learning English? How do you overcome them?

### **Data Collection**

Data collection started with phone calls made to the school's Head of the English Unit. The purpose of the phone calls was to confirm the availability of low SES students who were good in the English language who could be used as participants. The purpose and background of the study were explained to the English Unit's head, followed by a research request letter sent to the school principal. Upon the principal's approval, interview dates with the students were arranged. Informed consent was requested from the students on the day of the interview. They were briefed about the purpose of the study and duly informed about their rights to withdraw from the interview sessions. The interview was conducted in a quiet place to avoid disturbances during the sessions.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. Each participant's responses were transcribed and categorized under several codes, i.e. small meaningful units of data (label) that were attached to phrases or short sentences found in the transcription scripts of each participant. After this process, the coded segments were grouped into similar categories before the themes were created. Member checks were conducted to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. The participants were given the interview transcriptions to check whether the information contained therein matched correctly with what they shared during the interviews.

## FINDINGS

Three themes emerged which included individual, family and school factors, and these were used to explain the challenges and the factors that helped the low SES students to be proficient in English. The summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2  
Summary of the Findings

Themes	Sub-themes	
	Challenges in acquiring English literacy	Supporting factors for achieving high English literacy
Individual	Personal weaknesses Low self-confidence Incompetence Overconfidence	Positive personality traits Diligence Motivation
Family	Home-based factors Financial difficulty Academic help Learning environment	Positive family environment Sibling's mentorship English speaking environment Educated parents
School	Unsupportive school community Peers' demotivation Teachers' discouragement	Learning motivation Language practice Teachers' support Positive peer pressure Competition Mentorship Financial assistance

### Challenges Low SES Students Faced in the Course of Acquiring High English Literacy

#### *Individual Factors*

All participants agreed that their own personal weaknesses brought negative impacts on the development of their English literacy. Three problems, i.e. low self-confidence, incompetence and overconfidence, were reported as the most common problems faced by the participants. All of them mentioned that they always felt shy and conscious about their family background, and this consciousness impacted their English language development negatively as they rarely felt comfortable to voice out their ideas in class. Comments like, "Actually when my friends ask about my family, I feel aaa... shy," and "I don't like to talk much (about my family background)" surfaced during the interview. One participant commented that she always felt unsure and hesitant to speak English in public. Participant A mentioned:

"When speak[ing] in public, I actually don't [feel] confident about myself because I feel that...that person maybe laugh at me because I'm not good."

Apart from having low confidence, the participants also felt insecure about their language incompetency. This was due to a lack of knowledge about the rules of the English language.

Participant A commented:

"...English has a lot of rules that we must....obey such as grammar. I really hate grammar. English [has] a lot of words that I can't understand that [are] really bombastic."

In the meantime, Participant C mentioned:

"The only thing disturbing is the pronunciation and sometimes there are words that are defined by [their] pronunciation."

Participant B, on the other hand, admitted that since English is her first language which she is used to more than the Malay language, she sometimes felt overconfident. She regarded this as one of the challenges that she encountered especially, when things did not turn out the way she expected. She said:

"Well, I think this is a difficulty not faced by all since I grew up speaking English and I am always confident in English, it could lead to overconfidence. So, sometimes, I reflect oh, yes I can do it but then that's not how things begin to happen."

While two participants (A and C) faced the problem of diffidence, the third (Participant B) viewed her overconfidence as a challenge that led to her discovery of new things.

### ***Family Factors***

The challenges related to the family factor were grouped under the sub-theme 'home-based factors'. Several problems were identified under this sub-theme, ranging from (1) financial difficulty, (2) academic help, and (3) learning environment. Generally, the participants informed that they faced great financial difficulty to pay school fees. Due to this, one of the participants did not continue with school after Year 6, and had to wait for four months after the UPSR results were released. Participant C mentioned:

"I started to realize this after my father passed away, so we need to fully depend on the pension salary.... my mom said that if I get an offer to [go to] school, there will be [a] waste of money."

At one point in their lives, financial constraints had limited the participants' ability to progress in education. Apart from money, the participants also agreed that the kind of academic help they received at home was very limited. Participant A explained how her home environment did not support her English language development:

"...because my parents...my father works as a lorry driver and [my] mother is a housewife.... they also finished their studies at [the] SPM [level], so they are not good in English. So, my parents...my family...they [do] not help me to speak in English."

When probed about challenges, Participant B responded:

"My father's salary is about... only one thousand which is not enough. So, I have to depend on the scholarship money or my siblings to help me with all the school fees. And my siblings, they rarely help me in English because they are not really interested in language."

One participant discussed the unsupportive learning environment that impeded the English learning process. The lack of a supportive environment was created by the medium of communication used at home, and by the absence of facilities--such as the Internet--that promote the development of English language learning. Participant A stated:

“Because... [in] my home, aaa... aaa...we are speaking in Malay. So, aaa.. When in school, in English subject also, sometimes I’m speaking in Malay too.”

She also added, “Yes, actually we have computer but we don’t have Internet. So, when I want to learn about English in specific websites...so I have to go to cyber café.”

### ***School Factors***

Besides individual and family factors, schools also brought a significant impact to the development of English literacy among the participants. Two major problems were identified and grouped under the sub-theme, ‘unsupportive school community’. Peers were often very critical and demotivating. Teachers too were always finding faults with the way they spoke and were never encouraging. To explain further, the participants informed that they sometimes received criticisms from their friends if they tried to speak English or unconsciously made mistakes when using the language. Participant B mentioned:

“Difficulties...like when I try to talk [in English]. So, the difficulty is that maybe some friends just don’t like hearing it.... and there are some people (friends) who criticize me...”

In addition, Participant A also commented:

“My friends from Sec. 1 when I actually wrote a diary and then they criticized [me] about it.”

Besides friends, not all English teachers were supportive of their effort to learn the language. Some teachers pressured students to study hard for the subject, while some others were not so willing to provide much assistance to struggling students. Participant A remarked:

“Actually, teachers sometimes, pressure their students to get high marks in English.”

Another example from Participant C was:

“Your teachers here, do they encourage you? Not that much.”

To summarize, the study participants shared three important challenges they faced while learning English. These included their own self-perceptions, their families, and some school factors. They all apparently agreed that low self-confidence, incompetency and overconfidence were the reasons that made English a challenging subject to learn. Other issues such as financial difficulty, lack of academic help and unsupportive learning environment were also highlighted as family-level challenges. Besides agreeing to their current state of financial instability, the participants complained about not getting enough academic support from family members. In fact, they also reported that the unsupportive learning environment made the process of acquiring high English literacy more difficult. Lastly, at the school level, the participants mentioned that teachers’ discouraging attitude and friends’ criticisms were two problems they experienced in the course of learning English.

## **How Low SES Students Overcome their English Language Learning Challenges**

### ***Individual Factors***

All participants cited diligence and motivation as key factors to their English learning success. These two variables were categorized under 'positive personality traits'. For instance, Participant A mentioned:

"I do a lot of practice about the essay. I do [the practice] and I go to meet [my] teacher and ask her to mark my essay. And when we are watching movies, some of the words that we aaa... don't understand. So, I check the dictionary [for the meaning]."

In the meantime, Participant B mentioned:

"I like to read. I really like to read the kamus, the dictionary. I have two novels with me. I like to discover new words and I like to use them [when] I write. I really put my effort on studying English."

According to Participant C:

"I start to watch television and cartoons in English because English cartoons are better than the Malay cartoons. Sometimes, they spoke words that I don't know, so I search the Internet and I learn the definition of the words. I also read a lot of books.... because it expands my imagination, my ideas and also my vocab[ulary]."

It appeared that all of the participants were highly motivated to learn English. This could be seen in their strong determination to succeed despite the presence of life stressors. Participant A explained the reason behind her motivation and efforts:

"I must study because I want to change my family to live a better life. Always trust in yourself that you can do it. Don't think about others that she's from low background family, she couldn't do that. Don't think about it. Just do what actually you want. Actually we must change our mind set. If you think you can't do that, it won't happen. So, you must think, I can. I can. I can."

Participant B also said:

"I'm the type of person who think that if I can do something is because of me... I want them to believe that your background doesn't define you."

Participant C stated:

"I used to encourage myself because I always want to be better than the others at the things that I know."

### ***Family Factors***

All of the participants agreed that they had received meaningful support from their families. The sub-theme 'positive family environment', was explained in respect to (1) sibling mentorship, (2) English speaking environment and (3) educated parents. As for sibling mentorship, Participant A shared that she received much help in her English language

learning process from her siblings, who also gave useful advice that encouraged her to succeed in life. Participant A described:

“Well, actually [I] sometimes try to speak in English. With my sister. I always learn English with my sister. She’s good in English. My sister...she always said that we are from poor family. The knowledge will help you to be a better... to live a better future. So, from that I study hard [for] English.”

Having an English speaking environment was also another factor that contributed to the participants' English literacy development. Participant B said:

“English is technically... I say I guess English is my first language. Because ever since I was young... in a way because I [did not use] Malay first in my family.”

Participant C gave a similar comment:

“I [am] used to speak[ing] English with my family. Both of my sisters are very [good] in English. My brother speaks English as well, but he is not as smart as the other sisters.”

The participants concurred that having educated parents was important for student success. Having parents that always encouraged them to read widely besides giving them an early exposure to English language was crucial to their own success in English. Participant B stated:

“... previously my father used to hold a position that would equate to CEO now but now he is a security guard.....so they both went to university...So, my mom bought Enid Blyton books. She made me watch television [and] kids shows that are in English, like ABC. And ...the television [programmes] taught me how to..like...speak and all the pronunciation.”

Participant C reported a similar experience of parental influence:

“Yes, they both went to university... they [parents] bought [English] storybooks. My mother always [watched] English dramas and movies.”

### ***School Factors***

Based on the participants' responses, three important types of support were extracted under the school factor theme. They included (1) learning motivation, (2) positive peer pressure and (3) financial assistance. As for learning motivation, the participants mentioned that the activities held at school such as English presentations and educational programmes were useful in enhancing the language practice. Participant A mentioned:

“When [our] school [has] a programme about English, I think I must be good in English because I want to speak in public. I want everyone... [to be] proud of me.”

Participant C also commented:

“When teachers gave me assignments and asked me to present.... when I present, I need to use [the] right structure and also [the] right words.”

From what the participants shared, positive peer pressure appeared to have played an important role in improving their English literacy. Peer pressure was present in both cases of competition and mentorship. The participants agreed that they often felt challenged by their friends' success thus motivating them to work harder. Participant A commented:

"And I have friends just like me [who got] scholarship from Yayasan Teraju, she can speak in front of [a] public. And I'm very jealous of her because [her] academic level is [the] same [as mine], but why I can't be like her?.."

Participant B also mentioned:

"I think overall, what makes me get an A or A+ is...the achievements of other students....I feel challenged to try to gain that same reaction from the teacher...to try to get her [to] say that my essay is also good."

Participant C explained how seeing others succeed compelled her achieve:

"I motivate myself when seeing others being better than me and I try my best to surpass them."

Other than peer pressure that is motivating, the participants disclosed that they often received help from friends regarding the English language. Participant A explained:

"I help her in Arab[ic] and she helps me in English. When I want to... when I [write] essays, I will see her [for help]...."

Unlike Participant B, she did not receive help from friends but extended her help to others. She felt internally rewarded and encouraged when friends consulted her about school work:

"I think it [was a] sort of...encouragement when my friends usually turn to me for questions. And they always ask me, "What does this mean?""

The last support that the participants mentioned was financial assistance in the form of scholarship. Even though the scholarship did not directly improve their English literacy, it did remove some of the financial burden the families faced. Naturally, with less financial problems, the students were able to focus in their studies. Participant B said:

"So yeah, that (scholarship) helps a lot in a way to help support the things that I have to pay for.."

Participant C also added:

"Well, I got 2 scholarships...I got RM1590 per year (to buy books and pay fees)."

Summarily, three factors (individual, family and school) helped to improve the participants' English literacy. They believed that their hard work and motivation had been a tremendous help in their quest to master the English language. Family wise, they agreed that having siblings to mentor them, having educated parents, and being in an English-speaking environment provided the support needed for learning the English language. Lastly, they also believed that the

learning motivation, positive peer pressure and the financial assistance received from school provided them with greater opportunities to excel in English.

## DISCUSSION

In regard to the challenges faced by low SES students in acquiring high English literacy, the participants believed that their own personal weaknesses such as having low self-confidence, incompetence and overconfidence were the major threats to their success in learning the English language. Due to such weaknesses, they were often less confident about the correct usage of the language (Satriani, 2014). Nimmala, Nowbattula, Mylabattula and Sodadasi (2016) elaborated that despite the lack of self-motivation, frequent use of the native tongue other than English during interactions also hindered one's mastery of the English language. In contrast, overconfidence rather than diffidence was a challenge specific to Participant B whose English proficiency was remarkable for a young Malaysian person. Participant B agreed that being overly confident was an excuse for her not to study hard for the English subject, resulting in her expectations frequently not being met. Parents' lack of education was mentioned as a constraint on the participants' academic success in the English language. Norman (2016) and Salameh (2012) wrote about the important role of parents' education in influencing children's academic inclinations and performance. Parents should serve as good role models and provide children with the initial exposure to the English language. While this was a challenge to Participant A, it was not however an issue with Participants B and C, whose parents had obtained a good university education and were able to provide a home environment entrenched in the use of English. The last set of challenges encompassed peers' demotivating attitude and cynicism towards English and teachers' discouraging comments. For instance, the participants shared that their attempts at using English often invited criticisms from friends; similarly, they were often chided when they made mistakes in language use. This negativity, Liu (2017) and Ler (2012) believed, could diminish a student's passion for learning.

Having to admit their own personal weaknesses, all the participants however, agreed that their strong motivation and diligence had helped them a lot to be good in the English language. These, they emphasized, were key to their success in English as they were often very motivated and determined with their goals in life. As the students were highly motivated to learn English, they were able to excel and display good understanding of the language (Phon, 2017; Ariani & Ghafournia, 2016). In contrast, Ali, Naeimeh and Fatemeh (2016), Buriro, Buriro and Abbasi (2015) and Gayton (2010) concurred that the low SES students were usually not motivated to learn English as compared to those from high SES. Furthermore, to relate with the participants' efforts in learning English such as reading English books, watching English movies and others, Arratibel (2013) believed those activities could help improve their pronunciation and knowledge on word meanings. Additionally, sibling mentorship, English speaking environments and educated parents were also instrumental factors. Personal determination is imperative to drive individuals towards excellence, and this usually stems from a positive home environment and consistent family support (Kim, Curby & Winsler, 2014). As the participants were exposed to the English language at home, the exposure instilled a feeling of comfort with the language and helped to foster their English literacy development (El-Omari, 2016; Hamid, 2011). In addition to the family factor, the kinds of English activities held in school contributed to the participants' mastery of English. As postulated by Suleimenova (2013), supportive English programmes functioned to reduce students' English language anxiety. Just as much, teachers' offer of academic help and assistance played a significant role in promoting students' success (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen & Iyamu, 2006; Huang, Eslami & Hu,

2010; Hamid, 2011). Friends were the last factor responsible for improving the students' English literacy. This was explained in regard to the educational help and motivation that the participants received from their peers (Korir & Kipkemboi, 2014; Sarı, Çeliköz & Ünal, 2017).

To sum up, in terms of socioeconomic status, only Participant A could be categorized as having fulfilled all the participation criteria set in the study (i.e., parents' income level, educational background, and occupation) for one to be considered a low SES student; whereas both Participants B and C reportedly became economically disadvantaged due to sudden, tragic life events (e.g. parents' death). A few differences and similarities surfaced between these two groups of students, the most obvious being how they reacted to the challenges they faced in learning English. The participants clearly differed in terms of English confidence. Participant A expressed diffidence in the language due to the lack of exposure she received at home from young. The fact that she came from a poor family became Participant A's main motivation for learning English and succeeding academically. In contrast, Participants B and C did not have a confidence issue with English and were expressly comfortable with the language. Neither of them claimed their low SES status as the factor that motivated them to achieve high English literacy. The last difference concerned their parents' educational background and occupation. Participant A, whose parents did not obtain a proper education, did not have access to academic help at home so she had to rely on others outside her home environment to teach her English. Quite the opposite, both Participants B and C admitted that English was often used at home. Hence, learning English came as an easy, natural process for the both of them. Having well-educated parents who spoke English at home and who once held good jobs, they excelled in the language. This was not at all surprising as they had the right kind of exposure and home support for English language learning. Despite the differences, all of them agreed that socioeconomic status should not be an excuse for one to not perform well academically, especially in English. They also mentioned that their strong internal motivation and determination were the key to their success in learning the English language.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to explore the challenges faced by low SES students and the factors that helped them to acquire high literacy and proficiency in English. The results suggest that the participants' internal motivation is the most important factor behind their success in English. To be good in English while having to face difficult situations in life will definitely require a strong motivation from within. The participants elaborated that it is very important for individuals to value and believe in their own strengths to achieve the goals they have set in life. But, having a strong motivation alone is not enough to help improve one's English literacy. One must also consistently work hard to rise above all the challenges, be they unsupportive attitudes of the people around, cynicism, criticisms or financial difficulty. The study's three participants, given their SES and backgrounds, had challenged common stereotypical ideas about the abilities of students from low SES families. They were able to prove the contrary, hence suggesting that SES is not the only determinant of academic success and high English proficiency. Other factors, like goal setting and internal drive for success, are implicitly at play, and these are worth researching about in future studies.

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