

## THAI STUDENT'S SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CRITICAL STUDY

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explores the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and English language learning of Thai undergraduate students in a state university in the northeastern region. A total of 14 participants were selected from the regular and international programs. The data was collected by in-class observations and semi-structured interviews; theoretical frameworks were used as a lens to analyze the data and explain the findings of the study which shows that socioeconomic status (SES) correlates with identity and English language learning. However, some cases demonstrate conflicting results due to other factors that affect the learners themselves and their English learning.

**Keywords:** Socioeconomic Status, English Learning, Thai Undergraduate Students

### Introduction

In mainstream ESL/EFL learning, learners can learn well provided they have high motivation, investment, and are exposed to appropriate learning environments (Norton, 1997, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). However, Norton (1997) strongly criticizes the notion of "motivation" as a key element in language learning and instead raises the idea of identity as a complement to the mainstream theory of motivation. Additionally, numerous research studies are showing that these factors, though important, are not adequate in determining if ESL/EFL learners will be successful in learning the target language. In contrast to previous notions, the learners' status (social, economic, or otherwise) or identity is crucial in determining whether they will become successful language learners (Block, 2012; Gao, 2010; Norton, 1997, 2000). In other words, these statuses, or socioeconomic status (SES), can explain unequal achievement in learning English of EFL/ESL learners. Moreover, according to Pavlenko and Norton (2007) and Wenger (1998), language learning is not only learning and acquiring linguistic knowledge, but it is also the process of identity negotiation and construction. While learning any language (e.g., English), the learners make the decision to become or avoid becoming something. They acknowledge who they are and what they can do. This decision of learners can indicate their SES or their backgrounds.

Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to the social and economic position of people in society, ranked as a hierarchical structure. SES is a combination or association of social and economic statuses to describe one's ranking according to one's access to power and wealth (Mueller & Parcel, 1981). Social status is made up of gender, race, and ethnicity, and class; economic status is indicated by income, education, and occupation. Therefore, SES relates to the social and economic backgrounds of people, and it is the 'issue' affecting people's lives as ranked within the social hierarchy. Moreover, Rothman (2016) has stated that the dimensions of socioeconomic background (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class, occupation, education, income, etc.) intertwine with people's lives and are incapable of being isolated from the self or individuals.

To discuss the influence of SES (mainly social class) on people's lives, the concept of identity must also be considered because these two concepts, i.e. SES and identity, show overlapping

aspects. In other words, these two concepts can, on some occasions, be used interchangeably since the status and identity of a person can reflect each other. SES can identify what one can have, can do, and can be (identity), and identity can identify which SES one handles. Therefore, in this study, the researchers have used the concepts of both SES and identity to discuss their influences on the English learning of Thai students.

Norton (1997) has stated that identity is "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p. 410). From this premise, identity relates to the relationship between people in society or the position which people have in that society. It can be changed as a result of different times and spaces, and it tells the opportunities to perform of people. Besides, identity involves the needs of individuals to be recognized by and associated with others. However, sufficient material resources are required for the individual, due to the restriction of what an individual is and what they can do (West, 1992). Apart from raising the question, 'Who am I?' individually, the EFL/ESL learner needs to ask questions like, 'What am I for other people?' and, 'What can I do?' while learning English; these questions reflect one's socioeconomic status as well. Therefore, it is assumed that identity can affect people's lives, roles, abilities, and social performances as it depends on people's interactions and relationships in society.

EFL/ESL learners may be unsuccessful in learning the target language because of their own identities, which are shaped by the power of the social world and their socioeconomic status (Gao, 2010; Norton, 2000). Furthermore, several previous studies claim that learning achievement and performance of learners correlate with learners' SES (e.g., Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Memon, Joubish & Khurram, 2010; Salameh, 2012). However, in some cases, although they have the qualities of a good language learner — they are full of motivation, aspirations, and even have material support to learn the target language — their identities within their communities and social environment where they are learning English affect their learning and lead to negative results (Gao, 2010; Norton, 2000). Due to the different findings of these previous studies, the researchers aimed to explore and study the relationship between socioeconomic status and English language learning of EFL/ESL learners in a Thai context.

## **Research of Objective**

To study the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and English language learning of Thai undergraduate students in a state university in the northeastern region of Thailand.

### **Scope of Research**

1. The population of the study included 52 Thai undergraduate students from the regular and international programs of a state university in the northeastern region of Thailand. However, of the 52 students, 14 were selected to be samples of the study through in-class observations based on a salient expression shown in class.

2. Research Duration was three months, from October 2018 – December 2018.

## **Research Methodology**

### **1. Research Methodology**

This research is a qualitative study examining the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and English language learning of Thai undergraduate students. 2. Research Process The researchers first asked the lecturers for permission to observe five English classes and asked the students to complete consent forms to be participants of the study. Secondly, the researchers

conducted two in-class observations for observing the nature of learning English of the students in the classes. 14 students from a total of 52 students—38 students from the regular program and 14 students from the international program—were selected by the convenience sampling. Moreover, during the in-class observations, the researchers chose 14 participants with salient characteristics in-class participation. These 14 participants were asked to participate in two sessions of interviews—a first interview and a follow-up interview.

The data was collected by five in-class observations, and two sessions of semi-structured interviews. The first interview aimed to seek the participants' personal backgrounds, their perceptions of learning English in the past, and their perceptions about teachers and classmates while the follow-up interview purposed to find out additional information to what is found during the observations and to clarify some unexpected circumstances that happened during the observations. The interview questions of the first interview referred to the SES of participants, and they were adapted from SES indicators demonstrated in Lapthananon's study (1995). The interview questions of the follow-up interview were developed according to the data gained from the in-class observations and the first interview. The language used for interviewing was Thai due to participants' comfort to speak. The collected data was analyzed by theoretical frameworks of the study to explain the influences of socioeconomic status on English language learning.

### 3. Data Collection

Procedures of data collection included in-class observations and semi-structured interviews from 14 Thai undergraduate students. The researchers also used field notes and took audio recordings during the observations and interviews. The data collection took three months (12 weeks) for observing classes and interviewing individually.

### 4. Data Analysis

The data collected from the in-class observations and the semi-structured interviews was transcribed into English. The transcribed data was organized into a form of stanzas developed by Gee (1999, 2011) and grouped into themes. The data was later analyzed by the theoretical frameworks of socioeconomic status (SES) and identity which were used as a lens to the study.

## Research Results

The researchers collected the data from five in-class observations and two sessions of semi-structured interviews and transcribed the data into English. The transcribed data was organized into stanza form and sorted into themes. The theoretical frameworks of socioeconomic status (SES) and EFL/ESL learner identity were used as a lens to analyze each stanza. The salient findings were described below.

The results showed that all participants realized the importance of English and that it was advantageous to learn for their future lives. However, English achievement for some participants did not reach their expectations. In other words, they expected that they were good enough at English, but when their English score was announced, it was not as good as they expected. For example, Cara, a female student from the regular program, mentioned her English in the past and present, as shown in the Stanza 1.

#### *Stanza 1 Cara (English Knowledge)*

*Line 1a I never felt stressed when learning English until I was in Grade 12. 1b I like English. I could speak a little English, but I could listen and understand English.*

*2a But when I started studying at the university and I saw my English scores,*

*2b I realized that I didn't have any knowledge in English and I felt disappointed with my English scores.*

In Stanza 1, Cara previously thought that her English was good enough because she could speak, listen and understand English. However, when she studied English at university, her English scores disappointed her. Although she was disappointed in her English scores, she never gave up learning English. She expressed her seriousness in English classes and participated in every class activity. She tried to speak English in class even though she was afraid to make mistakes at her university. Moreover, she even took an extra course at the language center. However, she could only take the short course at the language center because she could not afford more courses. In an interview, Cara also talked about her wish to study abroad, and her expression showed her strong desire. However, her family's financial status was her obstacle to chasing her dream. To conclude, the main cause of her circumstances was that her family financial status had limited support for her English learning, as her parents still lived hand to mouth: her father worked abroad as a laborer, and her mother worked as a vendor in the market, as she mentions in Stanza 2.

*Stanza 2 Cara (Wealth of Parents)*

*Line 1a I took only short course there [at the Language Center] 1b because the course fee was expensive.*

*2 So, I continued studying English by watching videos in YouTube. 3 I also want to study abroad but I don't have money.*

*4a Some people says that money is not that important,*

*4b but for me money is really IMPORTANT!*

*5 My father have to work abroad in order to pay for my tuition fee. 6 He went to work there illegally.*

Even though Cara also mentioned that her father was willing to support her in learning English and could pay for the extra courses, if she wanted, it was assumed that she still felt unease to ask for more money from her father who was working hard (and illegally) to support the whole family. Based on her father's monthly income, she probably realized that it was not enough for her extra courses; it only covered the household expenses and her tuition fee. Therefore, she gave up taking more English courses in the language center, and she continued learning English by herself through watching video clips on YouTube.

According to what Cara mentions in the Stanza 1, she previously considered herself quite a good EFL/ESL learner with fair English skills. However, after she saw her English scores which did not meet her expectations, her thoughts changed and she considered herself a learner without any English knowledge. This showed her identity changed from one to another due to a factor like test scores which she believed had power over her English skills. As asserted by Norton (1997, 2000) and Weedon (1997), identity, which is the sense of self or understanding of self, was subjected to change across time and space due to the acknowledgement of the relationship to others and the world, similar to the case of Cara. Moreover, as shown in the Stanza 2, how Cara understood her SES and decided not to take expensive English courses in the language center, though she desired to improve her English; this revealed that her identity as low SES affected her English learning and her English could not be well improved. Supported by several previous studies (e.g., Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Memon, Joubish & Khurram, 2010; Salameh, 2012), SES of students affected their learning achievement and learning performance. In other words, students from high SES families—parents with high education levels, high income, and good social environments—tended to be more successful in learning English than those with low SES.

Apart from Cara's sense of herself or identity correlating with the power of English scores and her SES, her identity also associated with how she understood her relation to others (Weedon,

1997). As shown in Stanza 3 below, Cara compares her identity to her classmate, Jenny. During an interview, she expressed her perception towards Jenny.

She considered Jenny as having a higher SES, and thus helped in learning English because Jenny had a foreign stepfather, and she believed that this was an ‘advantage’ Jenny possessed. *Stanza 3 Cara (Classmates)*

*Line 1 I want to be good at speaking English as my classmate (Jenny) can. 2a Jenny is good at English because she has a stepfather who is a foreigner.*

*2b She can definitely speak English.*

*3 Jenny has that advantage.*

It was obvious that Cara felt inferior to Jenny in the case of SES and English skills. However, Cara’s inferior identity did not seem to have a significant effect on her desire and motivation in English learning. From observations in classes, Cara still studied hard and participated in every class activity. She also showed her passion for the English language and English learning.

Another interesting case was Jenny, whom Cara had mentioned above. Jenny was one of the participants of the study, and her background is the opposite of Cara. In other words, the case of Jenny both agreed and opposed several previous studies which insisted that SES affected learning (e.g., Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Memon, Joubish & Khurram, 2010; Salameh, 2012). Jenny’s (previous) low SES affected her English learning. Yet, her mother strived to help her as that the economic difficulty did not seem to affect her that much. Like what Cara had mentioned, Jenny had a well-to-do foreign stepfather and was considered to have a good life in the present. However, from an in-depth interview, Jenny expressed that her family had struggled against financial difficulty before her mother sold the house to clear all debts and married her stepfather five years ago. She continued that her mother worked very hard and far from home to support her child’s study at the private school that provided intensive English courses. As Jenny said during the interview, her mother believed in the importance of English learning for getting a better life in the future. Moreover, her mother financially supported Jenny’s English learning by buying English books, as Jenny’s expressions show in Stanza 4.

*Stanza 4 Jenny (Wealth of Parents)*

*Line 1a We didn’t have money in the past.*

*1b My mom worked extremely hard to send me to the private school and cram school.*

*2 Later, she earned some more money, and then she continued supporting me in learning English.*

*3a She gives me money to buy many English books.*

*3b I can even buy expensive books*

*3c and she never complain.*

The expressions in Stanza 4 showed that Jenny had received parental and financial support from her mother since she was young. It was assumed that her mother wished Jenny was good at English to have higher a SES in the future; therefore, her mother tried to support her child in learning English. In contrast to Cara who was affected by her SES in learning English, SES could not significantly disturb Jenny’s English learning. Her mother continuously supported Jenny to study at the private school and provide her English books to practice English even when the family were poor. Moreover, after her mother married her stepfather, Jenny had more parental supports with chances to practice her English; for example, having a chance to speak English with a foreigner (her stepfather). Her SES with parental supports and a supportive environment also

influenced her identity in learning English and English achievement, both inside and outside classrooms, as shown in Stanza 5.

*Stanza 5 Jenny (Outside the Classroom)*

*1a I can speak with my daddy (stepfather),  
1b and I often talk with him.*

*2a You know, my mother was very surprised when she first heard me speaking English with daddy.*

*2b She was like 'wow!' (laugh)*

*2c because I never told her that I could speak English before.*

*3a I really thank my mother for her supports.*

*3b I think I can speak English because I have studied at the private school and have been reading English books since I was young.*

The data from observing class also proved that her SES had an advantage for her English learning and performance. The researchers found that Jenny's case seemed to go along with some researchers (Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Memon, Joubish & Khurram, 2010; Salameh, 2012) in that with sufficient resources, so she had the confidence to speak English in classes and her speaking skill was good. Moreover, she demonstrated her identity as a knowledgeable person since she mentioned that she was a person who often tutored her classmates who were not good at English. To conclude, Jenny had a sense of herself or identity as a superior learner since she understood her relation to others (Norton, 1997, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

Another salient finding was from the story of Irene, a student from the international program and who had a high SES. She was one of the participants who had a notably high SES with parental supports, financial supports, social connections and a good environment for learning and practicing English, as presented in Stanza 6.

*Stanza 6 Irene (Parental Supports)*

*1a My father is the owner of a rice mill in Laos*

*1b and my mother has a restaurant located in the middle of Vientiane. 2 So My parents let me do everything I want to do... also admitted to the international program.*

*3a My father can speak English*

*3b and he has many foreign friends.*

*4 He also encourages me to speak English with him and the customers of our restaurant.*

*5 He wishes me will study abroad for higher education.*

*Stanza 7 Irene (Self Identity)*

*Line 1a I don't feel nervous*

*1b when I speak English with foreign classmates and the foreign customers.*

*2a But I feel nervous and quite shy*

*2b when the teachers ask me questions in class*

*2c because I can't answer immediately.*

*3 The English used to talk to the teachers is different from the English used to speak with friends and customers.*

Stanza 7 shows that Irene changed her identity due to the different societies. According to what she mentioned, she recognizes that the 'English language' used in the classrooms and used to speak with teachers is different from the 'English language' used with others outside the classes. In her view, 'English' used with teachers in the classroom was supposed to be correct and suitable for teachers whom she probably considered as the experts in class. It was assumed that she

recognized the differences of culture in two societies she participated in, and she recognized her abilities in each society. Although Irene came from a family with high SES with full financial and parental supports and supportive social connections, her identity as an EFL/ESL learner with sufficient confidence to speak English had changed to a learner who lacked confidence to speak in the classroom. The in class observations confirm that Irene often kept silent during class. Therefore, the case of Irene supports the claim of Norton (1997, 2000), Norton Peirce (1995) and Weedon (1997), that language learners sometimes changed their identity across society when they understood their relations and powers to others.

### Conclusion

The findings indicated that socioeconomic status (SES) correlated with EFL/ESL learners' identity and affected the English learning, as supported by the case of Cara. However, there was a conflicting finding in the case of Jenny, which showed that SES did not have a significant effect on her identity and English learning. Lastly, the case of Irene showed conflict results between English learning and performance outside and inside classrooms although she had high SES. The findings also indicated that, apart from SES, there might be other factors affecting EFL/ESL learner's identity and English language learning.

### Suggestions

The findings of the study revealed a relationship between socioeconomic status and English language learning of Thai students, which could encourage students, teachers, authorities, or stakeholders to see the importance of SES and identity in learning English. Moreover, the findings of this study shall benefit all concerned for being a complement to mainstream education practices of English learning in Thailand and for supporting Thai education.

### Suggestions for Future Research

1. Future research should extend the research duration for data collection in order to gain more precise data.
2. There were few research instruments used to collect data, i.e. in-class observation and semi-structured interview. Consequently, the data that the researchers received was reasonably broad. Any future research should employ additional research instruments, such as home visits, parent interviews, etc.

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