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# The Influence of Learners' Socioeconomic Status on Learning English as a Foreign Language

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## Introduction

The dominant role of English in education, technology, economy, science, communication, and entertainment is unquestionable in the current era of globalization (Crystal, 1997). Considering this role, English has been introduced as an essential element of the curriculum through the establishment of macro-level policies in many countries worldwide (Holliday, 2005).

Usually, the inclusion of EFL in the curriculum encourages students to become competent users of English enabling them to be active agents in modern society and future contributors to the economic development of their countries (Block, 2015; Mitsikopoulou, 2007). Similarly, to be competent in this language is an embedded demand of the current globalised society, one that students need to satisfy when aspiring to better job opportunities, life conditions, sociocultural experiences, and to be prosperous global citizens (Block, 2015; Crystal, 1997; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

Nevertheless, despite all the possible benefits that come with the mastery of English, little is known about how this asset promotes students' socioeconomic development. Furthermore, considering that EFL learning is usually approached as a communicative tool for professional, economic and social development, limited research has been conducted on the influence of learners' Socioeconomic Status (SES) as a fundamental part of agency in their EFL learning. Given the case that society is structured based on relations of power regarding economic resources, it becomes highly relevant to discuss the role that students' SES plays during EFL learning.

This report aims to argue for an urgent need of more empirical research from the sociocultural view towards EFL learning, mainly from the social class construct, on the impact of students' SES on their EFL performance and competence in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. To accomplish this objective, the paper is organised into three sections. The first section reviews the benefits of EFL learning and how these relate to the socioeconomic advancement in a variety of sociocultural contexts. The second section reviews exploratory research findings to discuss who the real beneficiaries of EFL learning are as well as how students' EFL performance, perceptions, and competence may be moderated by their SES characteristics. The final section of the report provides a brief critical reflection as well as suggestions for further research about the issues covered in this report.

In general, this literature review seeks to contribute to our understanding of the ways learners' EFL learning can be affected by their SES characteristics. Thus, the report engages in the ongoing debate about how learners' success or failure in EFL may be bounded to questions of social structures.

# What are the Benefits of EFL Learning?

In a globalised world, English is not exclusively used by Native English Speakers (NESs) from a specific culture in a defined geographical zone. Instead, English is the *de facto* language that people, including NESs and Non-Native English Speakers (NNESs), are employing as the default means of communication in a variety of global contexts (Canagarajah, 2006; Halliday, 2005; Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kachru, 1990; McKay, 2003). Thus, learning English is a common concern particularly for NNESs. However, the causes that promote the widespread desire to learn English are not equally clear for all the individuals that aspire to be competent in this language.

The current perception of English as the language of capital value can be traced back to colonial rule in Africa, Latin America, and Asia when English was imposed as the dominant language and culture over the invaded native communities (Mitsikopoulou, 2002). This process forced the local linguistic ecologies to accept and receive the dominant language sources (Canagarajah, 1999; Tollefson, 1991). Other historical events, such as the industrial revolution, and World Wars I and II, incited the rapid growth of the economy in nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Canagarajah, 1999). Also, the economic advances of developed countries, as well as the economic stagnation of unequal societies in less developed countries from Latin-America, Africa and Southeast Asia, potentiated the strength of neoliberal market systems, which contributed to the present status of English (Crystal, 1997).

As briefly illustrated in the previous historical review, the mastery of English has been associated with economic value and social development since the very beginning of its hegemony during imperialism. At present, English has reached such a global position that it has created a high economic, technological, scientific, cultural, and political value, which affects the socioeconomic development and social mobility of thousands of people worldwide (Pennycook, 2014; Wee, 2003). This view is underpinned by Mitsikopoulou (2007), in a paper where she discusses the dominant discourses and practices which permeate English language learning and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT):

> Recent changes led by globalisation and developments in Europe have created new literacies of power, where both English language learning and ICT literacies count as 'powerful' resources or cultural capital and are thus prioritised by families. Both are underpinned by common sense assumptions about their neutrality, and both are viewed as resources which all literate people of the 21st century should develop. (p. 234)

As illustrated in the previous excerpt, the relevant status of English in modern society is undeniable. In this regard, some developing countries have decided to act on the high value of English by designing and implementing macro-national educational policies to foster EFL learning at a variety of educational levels. These top-down policies frame EFL learning under the discourse and language ideology[1] of English as the language for socioeconomic development and social mobility (Canagarajah, 2006; Hamid, 2016; Lee & Li, 2008). Consequently, countries have progressively included EFL in their linguistic repertoires, which has resulted in the growing of the outer and the expanding circle areas of Kachru's (1990) model of English in concentric circles.

For instance, Bayley, Cameron, Lucas, and Kamwangamalu (2013) reviewed the current language policies and language ideologies in Africa. In their research findings, the authors reported that during the decolonisation period, there have been various language policies across Africa that aim to revitalise local linguistic ecology after the imposition of English hegemony during the colonisation. However, the solid presence of English as a functional device that fosters the socioeconomic development at the local market, an essential element of social mobility, made local language revival almost impossible. Also, the internationalisation of English through globalisation has made it reach such a dominant position in Africa that even non-English speaking African countries have come to replace their official language with

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[1] According to Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) *language ideologies* are cultural conceptions about the nature, structure, and use of language.

English, as is the case in Rwanda (Bayley et al., 2013).

Likewise, Hamid and Nguyen (2016) examined the macro educational policies regarding EFL in Asia as a response to globalisation. The study reported that countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, similar to the African case, approached EFL national policies to equip their students with a linguistic tool that would contribute to these countries' socioeconomic development, which is believed to integrate them into the globalising market as a by-product.

In Latin America, the same narratives seem to be repeated since EFL learning is also associated with the socioeconomic development and the opportunity to participate in a global market and economy (Matear, 2008; McKay, 2003). Developing Latin American countries such as Argentina and Chile have invested considerable resources in the implementation of macro national educational policies that foster EFL learning, which is considered the language for social mobility (Abrahams & Farias, 2010; Barahona, 2015; Porto, 2016). In the two cases, there are fundamental items considered by the two governments' annual budget. These items involve financing EFL materials, improving schools' technological equipment, fostering EFL teachers' training and professional development, promoting academic partnerships with English speaking universities as well as EFL research at the local contexts. Both nations aim to promote English literacy and enhance English competence among their students hoping that the future generations may contribute to the development of their countries (Matear, 2008; McKay, 2003; Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

In general, the described developing communities have ceded to the unquestionable status of English and its fundamental role in modern society as they claim that people master English to become active participants in a global economy (Kovacevic, 2004). In other words, EFL is perceived as the instrumental source that will eventually increase individuals' opportunities for socioeconomic development and social mobility, which is believed will transform them into global citizens. This idea is already installed in the social collective conscience, and it has been the motor for the widespread belief of English as the language of prosperity. However, the extent to which the discourses of English as the language for socioeconomic development are successful for all learners is still unclear.

For instance, Alhamdan, Honan, and Hamid (2017) conducted a qualitative study on the construction of the universality of English within Saudi Arabian (KSA) education contexts. The researchers focused on how the value of discourses about English as a global language is mediated, from a local situated perspective, by a variety of factors embedded through learners' sociocultural dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and geopolitical relations. Through the examination of KSA official EFL policy documents, teachers' and students' interviews, and classroom observations in a rural location within KSA, the study revealed a significant gap between social views of English and the materialisation of these in the classroom. In other words, findings suggested that even though teachers and students were aware of the capital outcomes that English may attribute to them, they did not view themselves as competent English users and active agents of the world. Thus, the discourses of English as a universal language of opportunities is not a guarantee, at least not for everybody since there are other elements that mediate who succeeds in EFL learning and who does not (Alhamdan et al., 2017; Hamid & Baldauf, 2011).

In this setting, the mere awareness and acknowledgement of the socioeconomic value of English learning seem not to be enough to push students to master EFL, as there may be other issues involved in the promotion or deprivation of learning English. From a sociocultural view of language learning, scholars highlighted the role of students' sociocultural background as a mediator of EFL learning. In fact, considerable descriptive research from the sociology of learning has explored the extent to which the ideology of English as a functional device to promote students' socioeconomic development and social mobility is accounting for people with better SES prospects (Hamid, 2011; Lin, 1999). Nevertheless, research on the area is still limited. As exposed by Hamid and Baldauf (2011) in their article about English and socio-economic disadvantage in rural Bangladesh, there is a need to focus on the sociology of EFL learning to analyse how students' academic experiences and outcomes are affected by their biographies and social variables related to it.

To summarise, this section reviewed the current dominant position of English as the language of

globalisation, and the socioeconomic benefits that its mastery may bring to students. Also, research findings of studies about macro-level EFL language policies in countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America have been briefly examined to illustrate how English learning has been associated with socioeconomic welfare, particularly in developing communities. Regarding these examples, glimpses of a sharp critique of the role of English as the language for socioeconomic development and social mobility has been suggested, particularly from the sociocultural perspective to language learning.

## Who is Benefitting from EFL Learning?

In the previous section, students' social background was suggested to have an influence on their EFL learning. However, before exploring how students' social issues can impact their EFL performances and competency, it is necessary first to define what is understood by social issues and the relevance of these in the language learning process.

The idea of acknowledging learners' social background emerged from sociocultural theory to language learning, which was developed during the period of 1980-1990 (Block, 2003). This perspective explains language development as an essentially social process that is enhanced through individuals' social interaction. This view considers language as a concrete and dependent system in which cognitive and social aspects are combined to process and build language knowledge (Block, 2003; McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Furthermore, sociocultural theory sustains that language, as a social construction, is modelled by all issues embedded in learners' beings, such as their identities, ethnicities, socioeconomic positions, and their entire experiences of life (Gardner, 2011; Rampton, 2006).

Supporters of the sociocultural view to language learning have conducted research that aims to examine the extent to which learners' social issues influence their language learning process (Abrahams & Farias, 2010; Gazmuri, Manzi, & Paredes, 2015; Kormos & Kiddle, 2013; Lambert, Philp, & Nakamura, 2017). However, most studies focus on how topics such as learners' motivation, beliefs, engagement, personality, and cultural background may affect their language performance and competence. Few studies have attempted to examine the role of learners' SES and its relationship while learning and using EFL, particularly in the settings where there is a dominant discourse of English as the instrumental tool for socioeconomic development. As a result, the issue remains almost unexplored, especially in socially disadvantaged contexts.

Given the broad nature of the concept SES, scholars such as Block (2015) and Rampton (2006) have attempted to outline the construct of social class and set it in the field of applied linguistics. Rampton (2006) identified two dimensions of social class. First, the material conditions, which is composed of all life experiences and practical activities that differ from people to people in different places and time. Second, the meta-level representations, which refers to the larger mental structures about social groups moderated by relations of power (Rampton, 2006). According to Block (2015), it is fundamental to study these, and the dimensions noted by Rampton (2006), by exploring the relationship between both. However, research has put inadequate attention to this concern, as stated by D. Block (2015) in his analysis of *Social class in applied linguistics*:

> In applied linguistics, there has been a degree of social class *denial,* but more importantly, there has been social class *erasure* in that the construct has tended to receive little or no attention in publications that deal with language and identity and social life. (p. 1)

Nevertheless, there are few studies that have considered learners' socioeconomic backgrounds as the main variable to explore EFL performance and competence. For instance, Lin (1999), concerned about the incidence of learners' sociocultural background in their language learning experience, studied how four different classrooms from diverse socioeconomic contexts are shaped by their participants' larger

social structures as well as the extent to which learners and teachers can transform these structures. The study draws on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital. Findings demonstrated that students from middle-class classrooms had compatible habits, cultural capital, and discursive strategies with the EFL lessons requirements; conversely, this was not found in classrooms with students from working and socially-disadvantaged classes.

Lin's (1999) qualitative research findings provide valuable insights into the possible implications of students' SES in EFL learning. Although these findings cannot be projected to other realities, they contribute to the evidence that EFL lessons may reproduce students' expectations and beliefs about their probabilities of success in EFL at the school and in society. Furthermore, these results call for more research on the sociology of EFL learning since they give rise to larger issues such as the real role of English as the promoter of socioeconomic development and social mobility.

Regarding the previous point, Hamid and Baldauf (2011) conducted a qualitative study that also focused on the sociology of EFL learning. The authors analysed the social variables that affected 14 learners' academic experiences and their perceptions of learning EFL in rural Bangladesh. Findings from this study evidenced considerable differences regarding students' socioeconomic history and their views about EFL learning. For example, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds were aware of the relevance of learning English due to the spread of discourse about its valuable linguistic capital. However, the study found that participants did not perceive the impact of the value of English. Furthermore, due to the poor education conditions of their rural schools and their unprepared EFL teachers, they perceived their socioeconomic position as a constraint to reach the desired English proficiency. In this case, the article highlighted the relevance of developing egalitarian educational policies which promote compulsory EFL lessons across all school levels. However, authors advise that social mobility narratives are not enough for developing English competences in socioeconomically disadvantaged sectors.

Another study that considers students' SES as an impact variable on students' EFL performance is the one conducted by Kormos and Kiddle (2013) in Chile. The researchers used the national quantitative dataset of students' EFL learning outcomes in the SIMCE test (Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación '*Educational Quality Measurement System*') to explore the relationship between students' motivation and their school SES while learning EFL. Findings evidenced that the socioeconomic background of the school has a medium-size effect on students' motivation. Specifically, the study revealed a significant difference regarding self-regulatory strategies and learning autonomy levels between students from upper-middle and high-social class schools in comparison with students from low- and lower-middle class schools.

Although it may not be appropriate to assume that Chilean schools are homogeneous units regarding their SES due to the existence of an educational voucher system. Kormos and Kiddle's study (2013) provided substantial evidence that the motivation of Chilean students, described as self-regulation and learning autonomy, varies according to the socioeconomic backgrounds of their schools.

The research examples that were presented, although different regarding aims and contexts, have provided insights into how learners' social dimensions, particularly their SES characteristics, can impact positively or negatively on their perceptions, attitudes, performance, and competence in learning EFL. However, at this point, it is essential to clarify that English learning may not be seen as the promoter of social inequality, but as a mediator for social development and mobility, as stated by Block (2015):

> English is not the cause of inequality in the world (we can leave that status to the logic of capitalism), but it does mediate inequality and, as a result, the reproduction of class hierarchies in those societies where it has become the centre of debate in education. In these contexts, knowledge of English is generally framed as must-have for all citizens if the nation is to prosper. (p. 11)

In regard to the previous excerpt, a pedagogical dilemma arises, that is, whether learners' sociocultural

and socioeconomic backgrounds are a strong influence in mediating students' EFL learning. If so, then how can we expect students to perform impartially in structurally unequal societies?

In this landscape, it is undeniable that the mere design and implementation of an EFL educational policy and curriculum that reflects the use of English as the engine for students' social mobility has not been enough. As noted by Hamid and Nguyen (2016), there is a mismatch between English language policy ambitions and the requirements for its successful implementation, a situation that may lead to an eventual and inevitable gap.

## Conclusion

This report drew on the origins of the widespread discourse of English as a utilitarian device for socioeconomic development and social mobility. Also, it addressed how this perception has impacted society by establishing the interest to learn English in the collective conscience. This interest is mainly driven by the socioeconomic benefits that EFL learning may attribute to individuals. Although this report did not engage in the discussion regarding dominant groups or relationships behind the discourse on the status of learning English, it did provide a general review of how EFL has been approached as a tool for socioeconomic growth by different NNES countries, particularly those which are currently in the developing stage. Finally, the report engaged in an ongoing critique on the urgent need of more empirical research regarding the influence of students' SES characteristics, especially of socially disadvantaged learners, on their performances and competence while learning EFL.

Concerning all the points presented so far, it is fundamental to stress the idea that the learning of English is valued as linguistic capital that can benefit learners' socioeconomic development and social mobility as the collective perception and discourse of English suggests (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kovacevic, 2004). In this regard, it is important to highlight how developing countries have reacted to the dominant position of English by designing and implementing macro-educational policies which focus on the introduction of EFL as a compulsory school subject of their educational curriculums.

However, these top-down policies, which are a first step addressing matters of English literacy, may not be enough to promote the students' English competency or provide them with opportunities for socioeconomic development and mobility. As illustrated by the different research findings discussed in section two, there are more complex issues embedded in students' sociocultural dimension that mediate their EFL learning (Hamid, 2011). About these issues, students' SES characteristics stand out as an element that directly influence students' perceptions, attitudes, performance, and competence during EFL learning. As a result, the famous discourse about the socioeconomic outcomes that English learning may bring to the students may not be guaranteed for all, especially for those in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts (Hamid & Baldauf, 2011).

Second, regarding the sociological view to EFL learning and the acknowledgement of students' SES as a factor that has an impact on EFL learning, some implications arise. For instance, how can policy makers, teachers, and students hope that approaching English learning as a tool for socioeconomic development will eventually foster students' social mobility if some of them are already in a socioeconomically disadvantaged position? As such, little is known on how students' SES can help or hinder their EFL learning. Thus, there is a need for more empirical research regarding the role of students' SES, particularly their social class, on the opportunities that they really have to learn EFL, as well as the quality of their EFL performance, their level of language competence, and the real socioeconomic benefits that EFL may bring to them. Most notably, this research concern should be investigated in developing communities, where EFL is approached as a tool for socioeconomic development and social mobility to overcome social inequalities.

Regarding the main issues cited in this report, further studies could focus on how research at a global level has explored the impact of SES on EFL learning to determine whether the influence of SES is a generalised phenomenon. Consequently, studies about the characteristics of macro policies on English

learning in contexts where students' SES is a strong moderator of EFL learning are needed to understand the weakness of these top-down policies for further improvements. Finally, it is also important to study the characteristics of the micro-policies and pedagogical practices of the educational communities, which despite their socioeconomically disadvantaged position, still manage to develop students' successful English learning.

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