

*The Effect of Poverty on English Language Learning Outcome: College Level*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of poverty toward English language outcome in college level. Some techniques of quantitative methodology were applied. Twenty university students who enrolled in English I (EN101) were asked to complete the questionnaire consisting demographic information in order to categorize their family's economic status. Independent sample *t*-test was utilized to tabulate the difference mean scores of students between high and low income family background from collective data. The result is shown that the students who come from low income family background tend to gain lower English scores than students who come from high income's family background. This finding could be interpreted that students' family income could affect the language learning outcome. The key finding of this study is inequality in language classroom is still reproduced by applying communicative approach pedagogy which has been promoted from the Education Reform Act since 1999 to college education in Thailand. Hence, language teachers should realize that individual language learner has his or her unique social identity. This mentioned social identity could affect students' education attainment in college level where authentic activities are required.

**Keywords:** Poverty, high and low income family background, and English language outcome

## **Introduction**

Poverty is a stubborn fact of life especially in developing countries like Thailand. In particular, the poverty of Thai children has been a continuing concern for Thai government. It is believed that the source of poverty come from the lack of education. As Encyclopedia of the Nations (2012) reported that the growing of the Thai's income gap between city and rural people is occurred from inadequate education. Poverty in the rural are worsened, many people could not be able to send their children to school, hence their children unqualified for the higher paying jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors. Moreover, the financial and economic crisis that was occurred in mid-1997 also worsened the Thai economic, and it has also affected Thai education as mentioned by Ziderman (2003). Thai government realized the problem of student drop out due to the effect of economic crisis and poverty. Therefore, they initiated the student loan to promote educational equality for Thai children in 1996 (Ziderman, 2003). However, enrollment fee is only offered to students from this loan campaign, there are other extra costs for learning especially in college level. From the reform of National Education Act in 1999, government has focused on child-centeredness and communicative approach which might requires authentic activities or outside classroom activities which may require extra costs from students. It could be postulated that poverty is still be a problem of Thai students who is supported by student loan. Thus, question is raised from researcher whether poverty will affect the outcome of English language learning in Thai college level or not where student loan is offered? There are many studies reported about the effect of poverty toward education such as Ryan and Adams (2007), Phipps and Lethbridge (2007), and Hoddinot, Lethbridge and Phipps, (2007), as cited in Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller, 2007. But little has been paid attention to investigate the effect of poverty in Thai college level where communicative approach pedagogy has been applied. Discovering the inequality of language education improvement will shade light on language teachers to reconsider finding suitable language pedagogy and realize inequality in their classroom. Moreover, many educators have investigated the relationship between socioeconomic factor and school achievement in primary and high school education .However, there is little study on the poverty effect toward language outcome in college level. Hence, from all information reported, it leads to the research question;

How is poverty related to English learning outcome in college level?

### **Thailand Educational Loan Fund**

According to Ministry of Education (2008) defined Educational Loan Fund as loan fund that is provided for students who come from low income family and who study in non-formal. It is also established for students from high school level to undergraduate school (for both academic and vocational curriculum). After students' graduation, they must pay back the loan with 1% interest per year. The Student Loans Foundation was established on 28 March 1995 and is operated by 3 governmental sectors: 1) the Ministry of Finance, 2) the Ministry of Education, and 3) the Commission for Higher Education. Moreover, Ziderman (2003) also identified Educational Load funds as loans scheme that is proposed for alleviating the financial strain on studying at both upper secondary and college levels. Its ultimate aim is to increase educational accessibility and to increase equality of opportunity for education and enhance social impartiality. It plays a crucial role in sustaining student enrolments and protects student drop out from the education system.

Table 1 Number of loan recipients, open and closed public universities and private universities, 2008

University type	Number of loan recipients
<i>Open public universities</i>	
1. Ramkhaeng University	36,757
2. Sukhothai University	51
<i>Closed public universities</i>	
	65,771
<i>Private universities</i>	
	70,306
Total	172,885

### Poverty and educational attainment

There are several studies from westerner scholars who studied the relationship between poverty and educational attainment. Start with the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) in Canada has several studies that reporting the relationship between socioeconomic factor and school achievement (Ryan and Adams, 2007; Phipps and Lethbridge, 2007; Hoddinot, Lethbridge and Phipps, 2007, as cited in Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007). Phipps and Lethbridge (2007) investigated the relationship between income and child outcomes in children age four to fifteen years. They found out that higher incomes were linked with greater children outcomes. There are six measures that associated with incomes factor ranging from the most associate to the least associate with income: 1) cognitive, 2) school measures (teacher-administered math and reading scores), 3) behavioral measures, 4) health measures, 5) social measure, and 6) emotional measures. These findings are relevant with many studies in the United States that have mentioned the disadvantage of socioeconomic and the factors of risk that are connected with poverty such as low education of parent and high family stress could produces negative effect on cognitive development and academic achievement (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 2007; McLoyd, 1998; Duncan, Brooks and Klebanov, 1994 as cited in Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007). Furthermore, McLoyd (1998) also reported that living in the condition of rigorous and continued poverty could create negative effects. Moreover, American studies found strong relationship effects between socioeconomic status of children and exposure to risk factors. For instance, poor parent backgrounds were not only have their babies born prematurely, but their born children were also gained higher risk for school failure than children who came from higher income families (McLoyd, 1998). It is important to be notified that international studies have consistently shown similar connection between socioeconomic factor and academic outcomes. For example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessed the comprehensive literacy skills of grade four students in thirty five countries. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between comprehensive literacy skills and educational measure in all countries. In sum, the previous western studies above could be concluded that income produces negative effects on educational attainment in elementary school through high school. Therefore, it is worth to study in college level in order to examine whether poverty still produce negative effect toward language education attainment or not?

## **Methodology**

This study was a replication of a study conducted by Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller (2007) who examine the impact of poverty on educational outcome for children. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), the replication of the studies should be organized in order to confirm the validity and reliability of prior findings. Replication studies could promote the generalizability of previous results and furnish confirmatory data regarding the behaviors, subjects, and setting to which the findings are applicable. In the current study, researcher used a quasi-experimental design to replicate the study with a different sample in a different setting.

## **Research question and hypotheses**

The research question guided this study. Thus, research question was rephrased in the form of a testable null ( $H_0$ ) and directional ( $H_1$ ) hypotheses.

RQ: How is poverty related to Thai college students' English language learning outcome?

$H_{10}$ : There are no differences in English language learning outcome between Thai college students who have high economic background and Thai college students who have low economic background.

$H_{11}$ : Thai college students who have high socioeconomic background tend to gain higher mark in Basic English language course than Thai college students who have low socioeconomic background.

## **Instrumentation**

In order to obtain data for answering the research question, this study used the demographic questionnaire to categorize students who have high family's income background and low family's income background in order to find out the difference English learning outcome between two groups of student (see Appendix A). Then, Independent sample  $t$ -test was utilized to examine the significant difference in mean scores between two groups of college students who have different economic background. The dependent variable is Basic English language scores, and independent variables are 1) Student who has family's income over 150,000 baht annually, 2) Student who has borrowed government loan (has < 150, 000 baht annually).

## **Population and sample**

Participants are English major, 1<sup>st</sup> year student of Humanities faculty, Srinakharinwirot University. They were comprised of 100 freshmen. The sample size criterion was based on convenient sampling criterion, which represented 10% of the total population. Their information is summarized on table 2 below.

Table 2: The profile of participants

Independent Variables	Categories	N (Total N = 20)
1. Gender	Men	10
	Women	10
2. Multiage	18	0
	19	9
	20	11
	21	0
		<i>M=19.55 SD= 5.83</i>
3. Major study	English	20
4. Family's income	High (> 150,000 annually)	10
	Low (< 150,000 annually)	10

### Procedures

In this study, the researcher utilized the demographic questionnaire to categorize students who have high family's income background and low family's income background in order to find out the difference English learning outcome between two groups of student. First, at the beginning of the semester, students, who enrolled in English 1 (EN101) were selected as a sample group, filled out the demographic questionnaire. Next, at the end of the semester, their English scores were collected to compare the mean scores between two groups.

### Data analysis

Quantitative researchers, Borg and Gall (1989), suggest that the independent sample *t*-test nonparametric statistical test of significance should be "used when the research data are in the form of a continuous" (p. 559). The obtained data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (PASW Statistics 18). The level of significance for accepting the null hypothesis was set at .05. Independent sample *t*-test was utilized in order to find the differences mean scores between two groups of students who have high and low family income background. For this study, there is one independent variable: students' family income background which could be categorized as high and low family income. Moreover, there is one dependent variable: English scores of the sample size.

## Findings

One research questions were addressed in this study. The response to the research question is examined in the following section. In order to test the null hypothesis, independent sample *t*-test was performed to examine the differences English learning outcome between high and low family income students. In this analysis a significance level of  $p < .05$  was required.

In order to find an answer for Null hypothesis

*H<sub>10</sub>*: There are no differences in English language learning outcome between Thai college students who have high family's income background and Thai college students who have low family's income background.

The independent sample *t*-test was performed to find the difference between variables.

The result of this analysis was shown in table 3

Table 3: Independent sample *t*-test for English scores

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
English Scores	Equal variances assumed	.315	.582	2.671	18	.016*
	Equal variances not assumed			2.671	16.789	.016

\* $P < .05$ .

According to the table 3, ( $t= 2.67$ ,  $P < .05$ ), the Null hypothesis was rejected, because there are differences between students who are from high and low family income in English scores.

Furthermore, in order to find an answer for the directional hypothesis,

*H<sub>11</sub>*: Thai college students who have high family's income background tend to gain higher mark in Basic English language course than Thai college students who have low family's income background.

The descriptive statistic was performed to examine the mean scores between two groups of students. The result of this analysis was shown in table 4

Table 4: English mean scores between high and low family's income

	Annual family's income	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
English Scores	High income > 150,000	10	76.20*	3.938	1.245
	Low income < 150,000	10	70.70*	5.187	1.640

According to the table 4, the directional hypothesis was accepted, because students who are from high family's income tends to gain higher scores mean than students who are from low family's income.

### Conclusion and discussion

The finding supported the idea that poverty affects learning outcome from many studies (Ryan and Adams, 2007; Phipps and Lethbridge, 2007; Hoddinot, Lethbridge and Phipps, 2007, as cited by Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007). First, supporting fact from McLoyd (1998) who reported that living in the condition of poverty could create negative effects. The negative effect of poverty from this research was low attainment of students. This inference could be supported by the study finding from Phipps and Lethbridge (2007) who investigated the relationship between income and child outcomes in children age four to fifteen years. They found out that higher incomes were linked with greater children outcomes. They also found the association between income and school measures (teacher-administered math and reading scores). It is surprised that not only reading comprehension skill that poverty influence its outcome as report by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessed the comprehensive literacy skills of grade four students in thirty five countries but also general English language skill or among 4 skills of language outcome were affected by poverty. In sum, student loan may assist students to be able to pay for their enrollment. However students still suffer with their disadvantage socioeconomic background, because there are some extra costs needed for EFL learning based on communicative language teaching pedagogy. Thus, it is language teacher and policy maker responsibility to equalize the opportunity of every college student. Moreover, it is not only promoting chance for being able to pay for enrollment fee, but equality in language classroom should be promoted.

### Limitations

This research was conducted in a college with only ten percent of the total target population. They are relatively small group of 20 students. Therefore, the results could not totally represent the whole picture effect of poverty toward language outcome. The main subject in this study was at the beginning level of English proficiency, and more advanced students may also enhance the whole picture of the poverty effect. Moreover, in regard to EFL issues, this study focused on young adult learners aged from 18-20 and there were 10 females and 10 males. Learners of different ages may have different problem. Furthermore, Girls may have different language learning problem regarding to poverty from boys, but this study did not focus on the issue of gender.

### **Recommendation**

It has contributed to knowledge about the awareness of inequality in the classroom. This awareness makes language teachers realize that their students have different social background. Moreover, it is expected that the study will be helpful for scholars and teachers in similar situations and that it may also give valuable information for language teacher to find the suitable pedagogy that could match with different income background of language learners.

### **Suggestions for further study**

For further research, researcher suggests that because this study was based on quantitative method only, the qualitative method should be applied in order to ensure and support the finding. In addition, qualitative method can also explore deep down details in which sub factor of poverty that greatly influence toward language learning outcome.

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## Appendix One

### Questionnaire Form

#### Questionnaire of Poverty Effect toward English Language Learning Outcome

#### SECTION 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS

Task: Check

- Age:  18-20  21-24
- Sex:  Male  Female
- Major:  English  Thai
- Minor:  Linguistics  Communication  Other \_\_\_\_\_ (specify)
- Obtained Student Loan:  Yes  No

