

Equal Effort, Unequal Outcomes: The Economic Divide in English Language Learning

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Abstract

This descriptive phenomenological study describes the economic impact on the learning of the English language among students. It aims to trace the relationship between socioeconomic status and the acquisition of English as a second language. Four participants were interviewed, and their lived experiences were analyzed to show the correlation between their economic conditions and language learning. The study includes an introduction, contextual background, a review of related literature, and the detailed narratives of the participants. The findings have shown that there is indeed a significant impact of economic status on the ability of students to learn English effectively. The results have underlined the importance of considering socio-economic factors in educational strategies to support language learning.

Keywords: Economic status, internet, motivation, language learning.

Introduction

English instruction, as a second or foreign language, has constantly involved a host of issues. Both linguistic and non-linguistic parameters have been known to impact the process of language learning. This study explored a component of non-linguistic factors, including cultural, political, social, psychological, and economic elements that impinge upon language acquisition. Of these studied dimensions, socio-economic influences stood out prominently. The usual meaning associated with socioeconomic factors pertains to the social and cultural backgrounds of students, together with their economic statuses. More specifically, the factors include aspects such as the level of income, education level, whether or not one is employed, neighborhood safety, and the availability of social and emotional support. Accordingly, the central purpose of this

study was to examine how much socioeconomic factors influenced the ability of the students to learn English.

Research Context

I had been a secondary-level English teacher at an institutional school for about three months at the time. The final exam had just ended, and I was reviewing the English class nine pupils' answer papers. Writing an email was one of the questions, but the email was written like a letter. I was taken aback when I received the letter, and I had a lot of questions. The message came from a student who said she had not fully comprehended the lecture on email writing and other free writing. In addition, she claimed that she was unable to access several essay writing models and other materials I had posted on Google Classroom because her father lacked a smartphone. Since we utilize a lot of ICT tools in our lessons and encourage students to explore the internet, she will be leaving the school to attend a community school, which is out of her price range because her father cannot afford internet service. I simply thought of the kids who hadn't completed the assignment, which required them to look it up online, and I reprimanded them for not telling me the real reason after reading the letter. After reading the letter I just remembered those students and thought for a while about the students who had not done the homework which they had to search on the Internet and I scolded them because they didn't tell me the actual reason and the truth was, I have not tried to know also.

This is only the small reason that drags my attention and I think that not accessing the facility of internet has an impact on the socio-economic conditions of the student's impact or not in language learning like me how many teachers are aware of it? While judging the student's capability of language learning, do we have the knowledge of their socio-economic conditions, availability of resources, and awareness of their parents for allocating the resources? Do parents are aware of it? Do the language learning policies address the issues relating to the socio-economic conditions of the students in language learning? These questions were made to do this research and explore the impact of the socio-economic status of students in language learning. Additionally, individuals are more in need than ever to learn efficient communication strategies because of how much the English language has grown. Becoming excellent communicators in the language is the aim of English language learners. In the same manner, Kaur (2014) said that the pattern of life is determined by the family's socioeconomic status. Families from different socioeconomic origins differ noticeably in how they spend money on their

children's education and how they treat their parents. In the middle class, parents are hopeful and proud of their kids. They keep a close eye on their kids and expect them to avoid any behavior that might cause disapproval within the family. Likewise, Oswani (2020) found that the parent's level of education and the family's income are two demographic characteristics that reliably disclose a student's social and familial background. Because students come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds within the social structure, there is little to no control. But students' academic achievement varied, according to the poll, with private school students surpassing their public school peers.

Based on the above research done by different researchers, we conclude that there is always a connection between the student's socioeconomic status and their learning outcomes. The status of parental income, the socio-cultural background of the students, the timing of parents, and the availability of resources are the key factors directly and indirectly connected with the student's learning.

Unveiling the Link: Socioeconomic Challenges in English Language Mastery

An achievement factor is always impacted and influenced by many variables. Teaching-learning is a cognitive process that has a connection with many linguistics and non-linguistics factors. Socio-economic characteristics of the students belong to the condition of socio-culture or background of the students with economic conditions. In comparison among living locations, the stronger impact of the socio-economic home factor on learning achievements was observed for those who live in cities and towns rather than those living in rural areas. In the same manner, Szabo (2019) discussed language aptitude has always been an extremely important value in predicting how fast and effective language learners can acquire a foreign language. Our research focused on the issue of language aptitude among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds which can easily create the self-misconceptions for learners and lead to prolonged failures in language learning as well as in the development of learner's attitudes, which will always blame the difficulties or impossibilities of acquiring the foreign language.

From the above research, we come to the point that, language learning and the socioeconomic background of the students are interconnected to each other. Especially, in economically backward groups and disadvantaged backgrounds students' motivation towards learning was found low in comparison to students from sound economic and social backgrounds. So, the study will be fruitful for the teachers, educators, and parents

who are unaware of the hindrances of socioeconomic status and their strong impact on learning the English language.

Teaching the English language as a foreign and second language always comes with obstacles and challenges. Sometimes linguistic factors like difficulties in reading pronunciation, writing, or listening, and sometimes non-linguistic factors like the psychological issues of the students, distracting learning environment, the background of the students, multilingualism, etc. The main purpose of the study is to find out how the socioeconomic status of the students impacts learning English among secondary-level students and how it creates different learning outcomes.

Barriers to Learning: Socioeconomic Factors and English Education

“Why haven’t you written the meanings of these words?”

“Mam, I don’t have a smartphone, my father said he has no money to buy it.”

“Mam, I used the internet and found all the meanings.”

“Mam, my mother is a teacher she helped to find the meanings.”

These are some utterances that drag me to give concern to the issue that do we teachers know the real issue of the students’ low learning outcomes. Teaching English as foreign English is indeed a challenging job but while discussing the variation among the students, have we ever tried to look to the real cause of different outcomes? In the multilingual society, English can be their third language and this can be one of the barriers for those children from multilingual society, they are not achieving the target scores in the English language. In an economic context, parental income is the main source of availability of resources. If the student has good resources for learning like enough reference books, and an internet facility along with the motivation and time of the parents, his learning outcome may vary from the child who is deprived of it. The main question is, do we know about the impact of the socio-economic condition of the students on their learning outcomes? Are we familiar with their socio-cultural background? Are parents aware of this factor and that they are providing enough resources and motivation to their children for good learning outcomes?

This study has a research question that is how does the socio-economic status of secondary-level students impact their learning outcomes in the English language?

This study focused on the impact of socio-economic status on students’ outcomes in the English language. It explores the impact on reading, writing listening, and speaking

skills of the students of English language only in general. Besides that, it does relate to any other subjects and the condition of the students, and learning outcomes.

What is the socio-economic status of students?

Different book articles and theories will be reviewed for this study. I will try my best to collect the resource that talks about the issue of the impact of the socio-economic status of students in learning English among students in different circumstances. I tried to explore more research theories and experiments relating to the issue of the impact of socioeconomic status on learning outcomes.

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), individuals earning less than \$2.15 per day are categorized as belonging to the lower or middle economic class. Economic classes are often stratified based on daily income, purchasing power parity (PPP), and access to necessities. The \$2.15 per day threshold, as outlined by the ADB, is a critical measure used to identify populations vulnerable to poverty. Generally, the status of the student refers to his rank or level. Society is the combination of people of different classes, castes, ethnicities, and races. As we say a child's first learning place is his home and his roots have an impact on his future learning. In the same manner, as of 2023, the per capita income of Nepal is approximately \$1,324 (World Bank, 2023). In the context of Nepal, low income is generally considered to be below \$1,036, which is the threshold for low-income countries according to the World Bank (World Bank, 2024). According to the American Psychological Association (2021), the concept of socioeconomic status (SES) includes not just money but also financial stability, educational achievement, and the individual's subjective assessment of their social class and standing. The possibilities and benefits that members of society are granted, as well as aspects of their quality of life, can all be included in SES.

Based on the above view, we come to the point that the socioeconomic status of the students belongs to the capability to manage resources for learning, availability of the opportunities and privileges given by society, etc. In simple terms, the social and economic recognition or capability to use available means and resources found for learning outcomes is known as the social and economic status of the students.

Different researchers researched and found different outcomes about the impact on learning through the social, cultural, and economic background and current situations of the students. Simone, P. et al. (2018) said that "there is a strong relationship between the socio-economic factors and gender and prior education on students' academic

performance. Multilingualism is also an important factor. There is a strong relationship between multilingualism and academic performance”. Economic status has a profound impact on a student's ability to learn English. Studies have shown that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally perform better in learning English compared to their peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This disparity can be attributed to various factors such as access to better educational resources, more exposure to English-speaking environments, and additional support systems like private tutoring. For instance, Koban (2016) found that students with higher socio-economic status tend to achieve higher academic performance in English language learning. Similarly, Zafar et al. (2023) concluded that socio-economic status significantly influences English language proficiency at the secondary education level, with students from wealthier families exhibiting better language skills. Likewise, Sharma (2020) claimed that English is the language of computers, aeronautics, diplomacy, and tourism. Knowledge of English extends the chances of obtaining a good job in the country or acquiring assignments abroad. It is very valuable to learn English for socializing raising the economic standard as well as can create many opportunities. So, socio-economically backward children may face many hurdles and odds while learning English due to different reasons.

After reading the above claims we come to the point that there is a vital relationship between socio-economic status and the learning outcomes of the parents and it impacts the learning achievements of the students. The socio-economic factor is directly related to the motivation of the students and indirectly impacts their learning of the students.

Learning English as a foreign language can be affected by various linguistic and nonlinguistic factors. The socio-economic condition of the students is always interconnected with the cognitive process. So, the research gap I want to fill is there was no research conducted in my area relating to the impact of the socio-economic status of students in learning the English language.

Methodology

The research is qualitative. It is a descriptive phenomenological analysis of the participants. Qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that requires an in-depth understanding of social phenomena in their natural setting. So, this research was qualitative, narrating the students' experiences in their natural situations. Interviews served as the research's technique of inquiry or data collecting. Open-ended questions

were used in in-depth interviews with the participants. The study investigated how a student's socioeconomic background affected their English language acquisition. Purposive sampling was used to choose four students. Before choosing them. Interviews were conducted with roughly 100 children from classes eight, nine, and ten to learn more about their socioeconomic origins. At first, it was seen that the students were anxious to talk about their financial situation. Individual interviews were done to choose participants to address this. Through observation, strong bonds were formed with the individual's following selection. The interviews were again repeated, this time in written and spoken form, with both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The challenges were the main topic of the closed-ended questions.

Responses included explanations of the resources available or unavailable to them, how their parents allocated time for their learning, and their level of participation in socially affiliated programs. The data is explored through primary data collection and the researcher himself/herself directly participated in the whole process. Richness enriched the text with the theoretical and empirical experiences of others. It explained the real experiences of the students. So, the violation of data is very. Researchers are always responsible for the ethical conduct of their research. Every researcher should take care of all the ethical issues related to their research. In the research also the privacy of the participants was maintained and precautions while collecting data through interviews and observation.

Results and Discussion

Breaking Barriers: The Economic Impact on English Language Learning

Teaching English as a foreign language comes with a lot of challenges and the socio-economic status of the students has a direct connection with learning. Dudiate (2016) found in the research that books and works of art factors have the strongest positive influence on the learning achievements of the students while personal space factors have the weakest positive influence on student achievements and wealth factor has a negative influence on the student's achievement. In this research also, four participants were selected through purposive sampling. The demarcation for the interview was parental income, availability of resources, allocation of parents' time, participation in social activities, education status of their family, and facilities provided by the parents were taken as the motivation factors. After taking the interviews, I got the following findings.

Parental Income and Access to English Resources

As of 2023, the per capita income of Nepal is approximately \$1,324 (World Bank, 2023). In the context of Nepal, low income is generally considered to be below \$1,036, which is the threshold for low-income countries (World Bank, 2024). One of the participants Sanjita said,

Extract 1

My father is working in the field from morning to evening. He earned very little money. During the time of cultivation and cutting the peddy I should also go with him because we cannot hire other workers. I have to do all my household work and take care of my brothers and sisters. I can give very little time to my studies and I cannot buy dictionaries and other learning materials for learning English because my father never has enough money. So, I don't like to read.

As Sanjita's problem is the lower income of her father another participant Raju shared a similar type of experience as,

Extract 2

My mother works as a domestic helper, and we can't afford private schools or tutors. There's no one to practice English at home with because we only speak Nepali. I try to learn from free YouTube videos and listen to English songs on the radio, but it's not enough. Sometimes, I feel left behind because I can't afford the resources that others do.

Another participant Bhawana answered about their parents' income:

Extract 3

I grew up in a village where opportunities were limited, and resources for learning were even scarcer. My father works as a daily wage laborer, and our family struggles to make ends meet. Attending private classes or hiring tutors was never an option for me. It feels like I'm trying to climb a mountain with no gear, while others have all the tools.

Regarding parents' income and the availability of resources, the study found that students with sound socioeconomic backgrounds have more resources to explore and learn than students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Effective Allocation of Parents' Time

Allocation of parents' time- in the questions replied by the students about their parents' time for their learning, it is found that the students from the middle class got enough attention from at least from father or mother for their learning English however the students belong to lower class does not get proper attention from their parents. Not only their parents but also themselves are not able to allocate sufficient time for learning English because they need to participate in farming and other household work. Regarding this issue, Raju said that:

Extract 4

My parents are farmers but we don't have our land. They need to work from morning to evening and they feel tired while reaching home which leaves them with little time to support their English learning. While they try to help when they can, their long working hours mean that I often have to rely on myself.

Likewise, another participant Sanjita had a similar situation, she said:

Extract 5

My father has land on lease. We are ten members in our family and most of us go to the field to help my father. My parents always remain busy in field work and if they have time they need to take care of cattle. So, they never have time for my study. Most of the time they remain busy to fulfill our basic needs.

The above narration of the participants makes it clear that the participants whose parents were able to allocate the time for their English learning have good support and whose parents remain busy to fulfill their basic needs.

Battling the Odds: Economic Challenges in English Language Learning

Economic status plays a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes, particularly in the acquisition of English language skills. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face significant barriers, including limited access to quality

educational resources, insufficient parental support due to economic pressures, and fewer opportunities for extra-curricular learning aids such as private tutors.

Extract 6

I want to learn English and I'm very influenced when somebody speaks very fluently. I want to know many words, and their meanings but my parents are daily wage worker and they cannot afford reference books and dictionary. Sometime our teacher gives an assignment to do with the help of internet but we don't have access to it because we cannot afford internet at home.

These challenges create a disparity in educational attainment and language proficiency, setting the stage for a compelling exploration of the impact of economic challenges on English language learning. This discussion delves into the personal narratives of students navigating these obstacles, highlighting the profound effects of economic inequality on their educational journeys.

Access to Quality Education and Tutors

The accessibility of having quality education with tutoring-accredited learners can make a difference in the learning and performance of a student in the English language. Socioeconomic disparities in Nepal hugely affect this access. For instance, rich families send their children to private schools with highly trained teachers and hire personal tutors for extra tuition. In contrast, economically backward families send their children to public schools that hardly provide them with well-experienced teachers or additional learning aids. Thus, they suffer from very unequal access in terms of English proficiency. My participant Sanjita said, *Growing up in a low-income household meant that we couldn't afford private tutors or access to high-quality educational resources. This made it challenging to keep up with my peers who had those advantages*” (extract 6). In the same manner, another participant Raju said:

Extract 7

Economic status played a huge role in my education. My parents couldn't afford to send me to a good school, and the public school I attended was underfunded. There were no after-school programs or tutors available, which hindered my learning.

From the above studies about the impact of students' socioeconomic status in learning the English language. Economic problems have a significant impact on English learning results and accentuate the disparities between students from different socioeconomic origins. The testimonies of informants such as Sanjita, Raju, and Bhawana demonstrate how students from low-income households are unable to pay for additional private tutoring, top-notch educational resources, and parental attention. Additionally, they must split their time between farming and housework. Rich families can afford to send their children to private schools, hire professional tutors, and provide other resources to help them learn English. Because impoverished children cannot afford to compete with their peers, this disparity in opportunities can only create a vicious cycle. These structural disparities demand focused measures, such as increased public school financing and learning subsidies.

Financial Hurdles: Parental Income and Access to English Resources

The economic status of parents significantly impacts students' access to English learning resources. Participants from lower-income families reported facing substantial challenges due to their parents' limited financial capabilities. For example, Sanjita shared that her father's occupation as a field worker meant he earned very little, and she often had to assist him during cultivation periods. This left her with minimal time for studies and no financial means to purchase learning materials (Sanjita, 2024). Similarly, Raju explained that his mother, working as a domestic helper, couldn't afford private schooling or tutoring, leaving him to rely on free online resources which he found inadequate (Raju, 2024). These narratives highlight the direct correlation between lower parental income and reduced access to essential learning resources, which ultimately hinders students' motivation and ability to learn English effectively.

Time is a Luxury: Effective Allocation of Parents' Time

The allocation of parental time is another critical factor affecting English learning among students from different economic backgrounds. Students from middle-class families reported receiving more attention and support from their parents regarding their education. In contrast, those from lower economic backgrounds often lacked this support due to their parents' demanding work schedules. Raju mentioned that his parents, who are farmers, work long hours and are often too exhausted to assist with his English studies (Raju, 2024). Sanjita echoed this sentiment, stating that her parents are

perpetually occupied with fieldwork and cattle care, leaving no time to help with her studies (Sanjita, 2024). These accounts demonstrate that the amount of time parents can allocate to their children's education is heavily influenced by their economic status, with lower-income families often unable to provide the necessary support.

The Quality Divide: Access to Education and Tutors

Socioeconomic disparities profoundly affect access to quality education and tutoring, which are crucial for mastering the English language. Students from wealthier families have the advantage of attending private schools with well-trained teachers and can afford personal tutors for additional learning support. Conversely, students from lower-income families typically attend underfunded public schools with fewer resources and less experienced teachers. Sanjita expressed that her inability to afford private tutors or high-quality educational resources made it difficult to compete with her peers who had those advantages (Sanjita, 2024). Similarly, Raju highlighted how the lack of after-school programs and tutoring in his public school hindered his learning progress (Raju, 2024). These experiences underscore the significant impact of economic status on the quality of education and tutoring available to students, which in turn affects their English language proficiency.

Conclusion and Implications

Economic challenges play a determining role in shaping the learning outcomes of English, making access, quality, and opportunities considerably unequal for students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Personal stories of students like Sanjita and Raju point to how financial constraints limit access to quality educational resources, private tutors, and parental support. These hurdles weaken students' motivation and their very ability to master the language, but even worse, their confidence and overall trajectories through school. On the contrary, children from rich families usually enjoy a lot of benefits: high-quality schools, very attentive parents, and additional private means of learning, which then extend the gap. Such economic inequalities, if addressed, will help guarantee that all students, irrespective of economic status, can achieve language proficiency and the wider opportunities that come with English mastery. The findings in this discussion emphasize the urgent need for systemic reforms to provide equitable resources and support for students, leveling the educational playing field.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several implications such as:

Policy Reforms to Bridge Educational Gaps

It means that reducing the economic disparities among learners at the policy level should, therefore, be a focus of governments and institutions. Subsidized private tutoring, better funding of public schools, and equal opportunities to access high-quality English learning materials would at least partly reduce the gap in learning opportunities. For example, either digital libraries or open-source educational platforms may be reasonably accessible and affordable to economically disadvantaged students.

Community-Based Support Programs

The issues can also be addressed with the involvement of the local communities and non-government organizations. Community-based centers can make arrangements for free or subsidized English language learning classes, peer tutoring, or after-school activities. These will help bridge the gap in the absence of parental involvement and give them a proper place to learn.

Parental Involvement and Education

Parents require education on how to help their children learn the language, which is very important. Workshops and other awareness programs could help even uneducated parents learn to provide a conducive atmosphere for their children at home.

Tapping into Technology for Inclusive Learning

Such technology can democratize education within geographies where economic disparities have kept people away from more conventional modes of access. Access to low-cost or free internet and devices would enable students to use an online learning platform and digital pedagogical tools.

Teacher Training and Resource Allocation

Teachers in underfunded public schools often face challenges in providing quality education due to limited training and resources. Investments in teacher training

programs focused on modern English teaching methodologies and supplying schools with necessary materials, such as books and audiovisual aids, are critical. A more equitable distribution of resources can significantly enhance students' learning experiences from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Addressing the economic challenges in English language learning requires a multi-faceted approach involving policy changes, community support, technological advancements, and systemic reforms. By implementing these strategies, society can create a fairer educational landscape that empowers every student to achieve their full potential.

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