



Social Class and EFL Learning in Indonesia: Listening to Teachers' Perception

Usep Sofyana,¹ John Pahamzah²

^{1,2}Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa

sepsofyana@gmail.com

Abstract

The social class status strongly affects the experience of students in language learning. The objective of this study is to explore the belief of teachers on social class and its influence on language learning in the EFL class. This study applied a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative method. The sample of this study was English teachers in bilingual primary school in Serang, Banten. Six teachers were selected as a sample using the purposeful sampling technique. The findings show that teachers believed that social class differences affect the language learning in the EFL class. The higher class students tend to obtain the supportive learning environment than lower social class students. Another finding also revealed that teachers believed that students from higher class families have better language such in vocabularies and pronunciation. These findings provided additional support to the need of intensive support for students from lower class families to fill the gaps of the language learning that is caused by the social class difference.

Keywords: EFL, social class, teachers' belief

Introduction

Sociolinguistics and language teaching has a strong tie. Some social factors such as situation, context, and social setting determine language teaching. Therefore, sociolinguistics should be taken into account as the essential factor in language teaching. In Indonesia, where English is mostly taught as foreign language, language teaching should consider the local social background where it can emerge the advantage or disadvantage for the English as foreign language (EFL) learning. Hence, involving the social context in foreign language teaching also can determine the success of teaching.

In the class setting, the teachers often disregard the sociolinguistics aspects in teaching language. They pay great attention

to words, grammar, and pronunciation (speaking). However, language learning should accommodate the social context. Therefore, the teacher should associate the materials to social contexts. The teacher may not neglect the influences of a variety of languages and social contexts of the students, especially in mother tongue or foreign language. This is due to effective ways to gain the purposes of teaching a language.

In Indonesia, the issue of social class and language learning are rarely to be investigated. However, the research on social class and language teaching has been conducted by many researchers abroad. For example, the notable research conducted by Vandrick (2014) clearly explained the role of social class in English language education. Baltenau (2016) investigated the role of



socioeconomic status in the efl/esl classroom. However, few of the researchers explored the view of the students, parents or teachers on the meaning of the social class in language learning. A research by Spencer (2012) examined two groups of adolescents about their perception on language, social class and education (Baltenau, 2016; Spencer, 2012; Vandrick, 2014). Some researches were also done in the context of EFL. Liu (2012) has done a large sample size of research in China. The result indicated that students from upper-middle class tend to have higher motivation in learning English compared to their peer from lower class. He added that this motivation link to their future ambition to continue study abroad in English speaking countries. Butler (2013) found that there was a link between parents' socioeconomic background and English-speaking performance.

The research on teachers' belief on social class and language teaching is limited in number. Even though, teachers' views in language learning influence the successful learning outcome in second or foreign language learning. The teacher's belief is the strong foundation for the teacher to provide the effective teaching practice (Griffith, Gore & Ladwig 2006, as cited in Wijirahayu, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' beliefs influence their behaviour and impact student learning accordingly. The teacher's belief also set the expectation and assumption about learner and learning (Clark-Goff, 2016). The

importance of teacher's belief was significant as teachers usually teach by making their learning experience, atmosphere, and material, which belief is derived, as their teaching inference (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001) and (Mardiah, Pahamzah, & Baihaqi, 2021). The beliefs about second language acquisition will consequently shape the learners' attitudes, motivation and learning style. Furthermore, the importance of the beliefs held by language teachers has been related to (a) the self-reflection form their own teaching practice), (b) everyday action and decision (c) response to any change of teaching practice, (d) their process of learning to teach, and (e) students' negative response to the new teaching methodologies or technique (Ferreira, 2013). Belief usually can be shaped by interaction, experience and impact of the environment that they obtained in their education (Grijalva, 2012). Furthermore, many studies have shown that beliefs are unlikely to change (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). Therefore, a teacher's belief will be in long term memory of the teacher which determines how the students will learn consequently.

Theoretical Review

In the term of sociolinguistics aspects, learners' identity such as gender, ethnicity and gender likely to be concerned as social context by EFL teachers; however, these teachers tend not to employ social class views in analyzing students. Social class



defines as an hierarchical stratification of people in a given society, who are grouped according to their social, economic, occupational, and educational statuses. One person social class can be categorised into four groups: lower class, working class, lower middle class and upper-middle class (Ellis, 2003; Vandrick, 2014). It is a stratified community of power, wealth and status (Ash, 2013; Trudgill, 2000). Social class also links to language. Some research on the relation between social class and language where higher and lower social class differed over the pronunciation of some words (Mooney & Evans, 2015; Trudgill, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2006).

Addressing social class is very important in language learning. The effects of social class status are not just an academic concept but strongly influence the learning experiences of language learner in foreign language education. Social class affects the language learning because it can cause great disadvantage or great privilege for the language learner. Thus, the teachers need to address the social class in their language teaching (Vandrick, 2014). The social class also affects students' achievement in language learning. Many of the reasons for English language learners' lower achievement are not linguistic but because they have to deal with social class (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). Some research about the relation of social class and language learning has been done by some researchers. Children

and young people from the lower class has high possibility for having language difficulties in preschool (Locke & Ginsborg 2003), primary school (Law, McBean, & Rush 2011) and secondary school (Spencer, Clegg, & Stackhouse 2012). Another research found that approximately half of children in socially disadvantaged areas has significant language delay on entry to school (Bercow, 2008).

Method

Considering the purposes of this study, qualitative research is considered to be the appropriate research design for this study since the topic of investigation is a specific phenomenon that was described and analyzed, and it explores people's life histories of everyday behaviour (Silverman, 2005). Additionally, the investigation was about the detail description of the teachers' action generating question. As Creswell (2014) points out, qualitative studies are able to develop a level of detail about the individual or place and to be highly involved in actual experiences or practices. Thus, a descriptive qualitative study was applied to conduct this research.

In selecting the site and participants, this study employed purposive sampling which uses personal judgment to select them representatively (Malik & Hamied, 2014). In this research context, 6 English teachers in a Primary School in Serang were involved as key respondents and were involved in



responding to the interview of the research. The criterias were a) taught English subject at classroom, b) had experience teaching English at least two schools with different social classes. The six participants have met these criteria. The researcher protected the identity of participants by exercising confidentiality. Teachers' interview respondents were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6.

The interview was conducted to reveal convenient information and to expose in-depth and detailed information from participants (Creswell, 2014). Besides, interview was used to elicit respondents' perception about how far the thing is appropriate to a single meaning in their experience (Silverman, 2005). The interview session was addressed to the teachers to reveal the data for answering the research questions in this study. In accordance with the type of the interview, semi-structure was used in this study. As an interviewer, the researcher provided an asymmetrical structure interview in which the interviewer initiated questions and will pose probes in response to the interviewees' descriptions (Berg, 2004). The researcher ordered the questions, adjusted the language, answered the questions and added or deleted probes in the interview session to get the comprehensible data (Berg, 2004). The Indicators of Interview were teacher's belief on social class and teacher's belief on social class and language learning.

Semi structured interview was arranged according to the indicators. The open-ended questions were used to elicit more detailed information from teachers' perspective regarding to their beliefs, knowledge, and practices. Some questions were asked : 1) How does the social class influence the language learning? 2) Do you think social class difference influence English vocabulary? 3) Do you think social class difference influence English pronunciation?

The data analysis process began after all data collection was completed. The thematic analysis was used to analyse the meaning of participants' experience. Thematic analysis is defined as the common structures of the particular experiences under study and the primary mechanism by which understanding is achieved (Morse, 1994). The data analysis follows the following steps: the interview was transcribed verbatim, the transcribed interview was read repeatedly by the author to gain the broad understanding, the text was organized based on the description of experiences and then labelled each, the data were sorted by categorizing, coding, and highlighting based on their similarities, sets of similar phrases were grouped and organized into preliminary themes, examined these meanings for what they revealed about the phenomenon being studied, re-organized the data into themes with description of each theme, share the themes with parents to gain deeper



understanding, and review the themes from the parents' suggestion.

Result

Two themes occurred representing the belief of EFL teachers' in foreign language learning and social class: (a) supportive environment, (b) language difference

Supportive environment

Teachers believed that language learning in the classroom is influenced by the environment at their home. Students with higher social class tend to have privilege to the better language learning support at home. The theme 'supportive environment' was described in the subtheme (a) parents support and (b) technology support.

Parents support

The teachers believe that parents' support was meaningful for language learning. The support from parents is represented by how the parents facilitate the language P1 mentioned that parents support was essential for the language learning.

"Students from the lower social class may have a lack of learning facility. Thus, the language learning process will tend to be slower rather than the higher social class, which are privileged by given the supportive learning facilities like English reading books and expensive dictionaries from parents".

These comments seem to provide the explanation that teacher believed that upper class students are privileged by the books, dictionary provided by parents which are good supplementary learning resources at

home. The teacher seems it takes effect on their learning experience at class.

The P3 confirmed the importance of parents' support for language learning.

"The reasons why the students from the lower social class have the obstacles in language learning are coming from many factors. Some factors are the parents that do not encourage students to get used with English communication and the lack of learning facilities"

These comments enhance the significance of parents' involvement in language learning. The parents' involvement is believed by the teacher to be an encouragement for the students to be familiar with English speaking. This positive encouragement may not be received by the lower social class due to their parents' socioeconomic background.

Technology support

Teachers believe that technology employs significant influence in student language learning. As P4 confirmed:

"The parents from higher social class tend to accommodate the students with technology device that allow students to listen to English songs, to watch movies, and read online English stories. These privileges will encourage students' confidence in language learning at classroom"

These comments provide evidence that some technology learning assistance is one of the parents' involvements in English learning at home. The teacher believed that the technology used at home affects their lived learning experience at the classroom. The students learn not from the rigid learning



sources but from the relaxing ones like songs, movies and digital story books.

P6 emphasized the use of online technology at students home to differ the social class in language classroom

“Many parents use online technology like youtube to accommodate student’s learning. They watch English videos like songs, vlog or movies. It sometimes influences the students’ English utterance in the classroom. They tend to imitate what they watch or hear from youtube”.

These comments provide evidence that students from upper class gain better English speaking features like-native speaker intonation and pronunciation from the help of technology at home. The teacher sees this as the benefit in foreign language learning.

The Language Difference

Theme 2, the language difference, described the teachers’ belief on the language difference that was made by the students from different social class. The theme ‘language difference’ was described in the subtheme (a) vocabulary gaps (b) pronunciation difference.

Vocabulary gaps

The teachers were aware that students from different social class differ in word use in their language communication.

As P2 mentioned;

“The English words are obtained from books, movies they watch, and people around them. The students who do not have access to this will have lack of words to communicate in English. However, when in his environment they have some foreigners to communicate, it will be helpful for them”.

These comments revealed two ways how the students from upper class obtained Vocabulary excellence. First they gain better Vocabulary from the learning resources at home. Second, from the way they socialise in their neighbourhood. Some upper class families live in the elite housing complex where expatriates including those from English speaking countries live. The family often be in contact with the expatriate in some occasions. The parents often see this as the opportunity for their children to practice their English skills. Teacher believes this contact is able to stimulate the students confidence and this confidence is brought to the classroom.

P1 elicited how students from higher social class possessed the confidence using extra words in language learning.

“The students from higher social class have confidence to use some ‘big words’ in the classroom. They may learn those words from the movie they watched or book they read”.

These comments revealed another significant influence of home learning assistance. In the context of Vocabulary, the upper class acquired some difficult words from the books they read which are not taught in class yet. The extensive reading activities often introduce them to the words which are not in their level of lexical. This eminence once again put the upper class students in some level of Vocabulary which make them well anticipated for any upcoming English text in the classroom.

Pronunciation difference



The teachers believe that students from upper class performed different pronunciation skills in the language classroom. P2 mentioned:

“The quality of students’ pronunciation is relatively similar between their classmates. However, some students tend to have more precise pronunciation compared to the native speakers when they speak English. I assume that this may be the result of their parents’ support at home to teach them how to pronounce precisely. Some parents work abroad; they have the basic knowledge of good pronunciation.”

These comments provide evidence that students from upper class gain their pronunciation excellence from the parents’ support at home. The parents’ professional background also influences this support. Teachers believe that some parents who work abroad tend to communicate in English with their children at a moderate level. This situation is believed to be a motive of support from parents to concern their children with correct pronunciation.

Then, P6 mentioned as described follows:

“For me, correct pronunciation is the result of the long process of intense learning. It also requires quite a long time to make students aware about the presence of the correct pronunciation. The students who are likely to have feeling the connection between the students with the native speaker, they tend to imitate the like native pronunciation. For example, when they have an idol as the vlogger, they tend to follow or imitate the way their idol speaks.”

These comments revealed that students from upper class families acquire their correct pronunciation from the imitation of

native speakers. Teacher found that upper class students tend to spend their free time at home watching some English speaking videos. It built the connection between the students and the one they used to listen to in the videos. In result, imitating words in correct pronunciation shape the positive habit from them.

The findings revealed that the teachers were aware about the effect of social class in language learning. The difference of words used and pronunciation in language learning occurred as the result of social class differences that were affected by home environment, like parents that facilitate learning both printed learning resources or by learning technology. The findings also revealed that the difference of words used and pronunciation in language learning occurred as the result of social class differences that were affected by home environments, like parents that facilitate the learning both printed learning resources or by learning technology.

Teachers’ belief: Supportive learning environment and technology usage

The teacher believed that social class differences distinguished the way students learn foreign languages in the classroom. The first belief was that a supportive environment affects the foreign language learning in the classroom. This belief aligned with the study that found social class affects language learning because it can cause great disadvantage or great privilege for the



language learner (Vandrick, 2011). The support from parents is a 'great privilege' for the students, since the parents facilitate learning facilities such as reading books and learning technology. Parental involvement in schooling like supporting learning at home is believed to have a positive on students' learning outcomes (Epstein, 2001). In case of language learning, parents' support in language learning is an important factor that contributes to learners' language development (Xuesong, 2006). He even specifically mentioned that the upper class students are provided technology learning tools like English TV programs by their parents. These supportive mediums affect the students' learning of the foreign language in the classroom. This finding also aligned with study by Liu (2012). The impact technology support can be determined as parents' investment in their children language learning. He found that upper class family had more motivation in supporting their children learning English (Liu, 2012). This also is indicted to be done to maintain their class privilege (Kanno, 2014).

Teachers' belief: Vocabulary gaps in lower and upper social class

The second belief was that the students have the different words used regarding their social class. The finding revealed that students from upper class tend to have richer vocabularies. This is affected by the supportive environment at home. This finding supports the previous study that

mentioned students from working class, or the lower social class have the lower vocabulary knowledge in the standardised language assessment assessments (Spencer, Clegg, & Stackhouse 2012). It is also in line with another study, which upper social class benefits from their better vocabulary to negotiate in their school (Siraj & Mayo, 2014). in context of EFL, Butler (2013) also mentioned that vocabulary has significant differences among students regarding their parents' socioeconomic background. This finding may take into account because vocabulary plays an important role in student's language development. It is significant in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It also influences the students' understanding toward instruction and participation in the classroom activities (Siraj & Mayo, 2014; Nation, 2013). The findings mentioned that teachers believed the vocabulary excellence of upper class acquired from the reading books activity at home. EFL students relied on extensive English books reading to gain their vocabulary mastery (Nakanishi, 2015). These are some clear obstacles for the lower class students to participate in the language classroom and also to actively engage in the learning process that is caused by their vocabulary gaps with the upper social class.

Teachers' belief: Upper social class pronounce English words better

The third belief was that the students from higher social class tend to have more



received pronunciation than the lower class. This finding is a minute support to the notable study from Trudgill (2000) that found higher the class, pronounced the words better (Trudgill, 2000). The lower social class obviously puzzled their foreign language development since the pronunciation is the basis of communication skills, without it there is no proper language or no communication at all (Julia, 2002). In relation with EFL context, the better pronunciation possessed by upper class is believed to link with the technology used at home such as *youtube* videos. The upper class has unlimited access to such platforms to use it as a live experience of foreign language learning. The study found that *youtube* potentially can increase the pronunciation of EFL students (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). The teachers' belief in this finding also supports the study by (Butler, 2013). He found that socioeconomic status effects on English speaking performance. In the context of pronunciation, it was mentioned that there was significant difference on speaking performance between upper class and lower class students. He emphasised that from four english sub-skills (grammar, fluency, vocabulary and pronunciation) pronunciation performance was the only skill that remain unchanged until secondary school level (Butler, 2013)/ Unlike teachers in this study who believed that the pronunciation was mainly influenced by the support of online resources like

videos, he noted that the pronunciation was influenced by the English tutor at home. There is correlation in the way those supports were derived, parents support at home.

In relation with teachers' belief, as we have known the previous studies on social class and language learning mostly concerned on students learning experiences or parents' behaviour toward their children language learning regarding to socioeconomic differences. Otherwise, this study has revealed the social class and language learning in the perspective of teachers. Teachers' beliefs shape their teaching and impact the students' learning accordingly (Clark-Goff, 2016).

Those three teachers' beliefs were the factors of students' language difficulties when they learn foreign language in the school since parents' involvement, vocabulary, and pronunciation were very essential for students in learning language. The students from the lower social class do not have those privileges and they possibly have the difficulties in language learning at every level of school (Locke and Ginsborg 2003; McBean, and Rush 2011; Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2012).

This research has two limitations. First, the teachers' belief in students' of lower class language learning experience was not exposed fairly. The teacher's response as seen in the interview verbatim mainly focused on the upper class students' language learning experience. The interview should



have accommodated equally both lower and upper class students' experience in language learning. Second, the researcher was unable to access the data of parents' socioeconomic status on the school database. Hence, the knowledge of information of parents' socioeconomic status was trusted to the teacher as they have gained the information as the consequence of teacher-parents relation. If the data can be accessed, so the exact numbers of students of different social classes can be obtained so the teacher can make the comments accordingly regarding students' group of social class.

This research is to explore the teacher's belief. Therefore, to gain additional support for this research, exploring parents' perspective in the relation of their socioeconomic status with their children's language learning experience is an interesting topic for further research.

Conclusion

The teachers believed that social class has an effect on foreign language learning in the classroom specifically in vocabulary gaps, pronunciation as the result of parents' involvement in assisting with learning resources at home. Thus, as future recommendation, teachers along with educational researchers and practitioners need to consider the difference of social class in their class by providing intensive support and help to facilitate extra language learning for the students from lower social class.

References

- Ash, S. (2013). Social class. *The handbook of language variation and change*, 402-422.
- Baltenau, A., H. (2016). The Role of Socioeconomic Status in the EFL/ESL Classroom.
- Bercow, J. (2008). The Bercow Report: A review of services for children and young people (0-19) with speech, language and communication needs.
- Butler, Y. G. (2013). *Parental factors and early English education as foreign language: A case study in Mainland China*. Research papers in education.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bailey, K. M., Curtis, A., & Nunan, D. (2001). *Pursuing professional development: The self as source*. New York, NY: Heinle & Heinle.
- Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. United States of America: Pearson Education.
- Clark-Goff, K & Eslami, Z. (2016). Exploring change in preservice teachers' beliefs about English Language Learning and teaching. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research* 4(3), (Oct., 2016) 21-36
- Ellis, R. (2003). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (10th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Grijalva. (2013). Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Language Teaching and Learning: A Longitudinal Study. Universidad de Sonora, Mexico
- Kanno, Y., & Cromley, J. G. (2013). English language learners' access to and attainment in postsecondary education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(1), 89–121.



- Locke, A., & Ginsborg, J. (2003). Spoken language in the early years: The cognitive and linguistic development of three-to five-year-old children from socio-economically backgrounds. *Educational and Child Psychology*.
- Law, J., McBean, K., & Rush, R. (2011). Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 46(6), 657-664.
- Liu, H. G. (2012). *Parental investment and junior high school students' English learning motivation: A social class perspective (Unpublished doctoral Thesis)*. Peking University, Beijing, China.
- Malik, R. S., & Hamied, F. A. (2014). *Research Methods: A Guide For First Time Researcher*. Bandung: UPI Press.
- Mardiah, M., Pahamzah, J., & Baihaqi, A. (2021). EFL Students' Awareness on Digital Literacy. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Cultural Studies*, 4(2), 67-77.
- Mooney, A., & Evans, B. 2015. Language, Society and Power an Introduction
- Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nakanishi, T. (2015). A meta-analysis of extensive reading research. *Tesol Quarterly*, 49(1), 6-37.
- Richards, J., & Gallo, P., & Renandya, W. (2001). Exploring Teachers' Beliefs and the Processes of Change. *The PAC Journal I*(1).
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Siraj, I., & Mayo, A. (2014). *Social Class and Educational Inequality: The Impact of Parents and Schools*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spencer, S. (2013). Language, social class and education: listening to adolescents' perceptions, *Language and Education*, 27:2, 129-143
- Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*. London: Penguin
- Vandrick, S. (2014). The Role of Social Class in English Language Education, *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 13:2, 85-91.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
- Watkins, J., & Wilkins, M. (2011). Using YouTube in the EFL classroom. *Language Education in Asia*, 2(1), 113- 119.
- Wijirahayu, S. (2015) . Teachers' Beliefs About Efl Learning Strategies And Classroom Practices. Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
- Xuesong, G. (2006). Strategies used by Chinese parents to Support English language learning voices of 'elite' university students. *RELC Journal*, 37(3), 285-298.