Sustained effects of socioeconomic status on proficiency and academic writing in English as a foreign language

Abbas Zare-ee
Assistant Professor, University of Kashan

Abstract
Research on teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at the undergraduate level has largely overlooked the significance of learners' socioeconomic backgrounds. This important variable is also missing in discussions of individual differences in second language acquisition. This study examined the socioeconomic status (SES) of 196 English-major undergraduate learners of English in relation to their general proficiency and academic writing ability. All the 196 participants provided survey data on their socioeconomic backgrounds, took a proficiency test, and performed an argumentative writing task that was evaluated by two independent expert raters on the dimensions of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. In spite of their similar background formal literacy experiences, the participants showed significant differences in both proficiency level and academic writing ability. Based on the analyses of variance, learners from high socioeconomic backgrounds significantly outperformed those from average and low socioeconomic backgrounds both in their proficiency test results (df= 2, 193; F=3.769; Sig=.025) and in their performance on argumentative academic writing(df= 2, 193; F=3.632; Sig= .028). The findings of the study and the related analyses clearly imply that learners bring with themselves the sustained effects of socioeconomic

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backgrounds to English classes at the undergraduate level. Stressing increased awareness of English language learners' socioeconomic influences (instead of encouraging their total neglect in EFL instruction for possible risks of class and race determinism) is the major contribution of the findings of this study. Based on the results and discussions some remedial pedagogical measures in accounting for these differences for the benefit of the less advantaged learners are suggested.

Keywords: academic writing, socioeconomic status, social class, argumentative writing, second language writing.

1. Introduction

Learners who attend English language classes at schools and universities vary greatly in their basic life conditions. These conditions form what has been usually called socioeconomic status (SES, henceforth). Therefore, English classes at primary, secondary, and even tertiary levels are the contact zones for people of various socioeconomic backgrounds (SES), people from the less privileged and the more privileged sections of society. This variable has been extensively studied in relation to variations in academic achievement (e.g. Sirin, 2005), oral language use (e.g. Bernstein, 1977), and first language literacy (e.g. Hecht & Greenfield, 2001). However, it has been largely overlooked in studies of academic writing in English as a foreign language or it 'has not been given major or explicit attention' (Kubota, 2003, p. 32). SES is also largely missing in most summaries of research on second language (L2) and EFL writing such as those by Raimes (1991) and Silva and Brice (2004). A tendency to overlook such differences in the practice of English language teaching can mean an unfair treatment of individual differences among language learners. To offer a conceptual definition of the term as the starting point of the discussion, it should be noted that past research has used different indicators of social status including education and income. It has grouped people into social classes in this way and explored certain linguistic features used by each (Romaine, 2001). Following the

example of Titus (2006) and Ethington (1990), this study defines SES as a composite measure derived from the sum of standardized parental income and standardized parental educational attainment.

One possible reason for the scarcity of research on SES can be the preoccupation of L2 writing researchers with other sets of variables. These include L2 writer variables, L2 text variables, L2 writing process variables, instructional variables, and assessment variables explored in relation to learners' failure or success in writing. L2 writer variables, for example, have included the influences of first language (L1) proficiency, L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, learning strategies, writing strategies, text pattern knowledge, writing experiences, perceptions of task difficulty, medium of composing, writer's goal, writing anxiety, and age of exposure to L2 among other factors (see Silva & Brice, 2004). Only in more recent years have researchers (e.g. Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008; Tarone, 2007) stressed that student's past and present cultural, educational, family, and personal factors be among the variables that writing scholars should explore to answer the question of how best to provide writing instruction for L2 writers. This shift of research emphases to new sets of social variables like gender, SES, and ethnicity is a major feature of the social constructionist paradigm (see Kubota, 2003) that defines such variables as dynamic, context-dependent, socio-culturally constructed and non-categorical concepts. This paradigm views writing as "... the situated activity of socio-historically constituted people who are dependent on their material and interactional circumstances" (Murphy & Roca de Larios, 2001, p. 26).

SES has also been generally neglected in the broader field of second language acquisition (SLA). To explain differential success in L2 learning, SLA researchers have shown interest in many variables such as age, aptitude, motivation, attitude, personality, cognitive style, hemisphere specialization, learning strategies, memory, linguistic disability, interest, sex, prior experience, and even birth order. These have been listed by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), Ellis (1995), and Gass and Selinker (2001) as individual differences or non-linguistics influences that can affect aspects of second language learning. SES differences among learners are, however, missing. Are possible problems of less

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privileged learners in tackling with different product and process aspects of second language learning not the concern of SLA or L2 writing research? The scarcity of research on the influences of the sensitive variable of SES on L2 writing may reflect the tendency of many L2 writing researchers and teachers to ignore or to totally deny its relevance to L2 writing. This tendency has left many important questions unanswered. Is the learners' SES irrelevant to us as teachers and researchers because of our moral, religious, social, professional, or other obligations? Compared with their more advantaged peers, do our socioeconomically less privileged writers approach the task of learning to write differently? Do they produce linguistically different texts? Do they require different treatments in research and instruction?

The rationale of the present study is that sensitivity to and awareness of possible SES-related differences in learning English as a foreign language can control the tendency to ignore such differences and to try to see all people, at least on the surface, as equal. Kubota (2003) argued that even though the study of race, class, and gender are sensitive, they should still be considered and carefully unpacked in relation to power and discourse. Vandrick (1995) also warned that "by ignoring the concept and discussion of class, we may in fact be patronizing working class or underclass students, subtly implying that there is something wrong with their background that should be politely overlooked (p. 377). Emphases on social histories, social identities, and social memberships of L2 writers (see Grant & Ginther, 2000; Kubota, 2003; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008) also point to the significance of SES and the value of exploring "the experiences of proficient working-class undergraduate writers, not only as a population of interest in and of themselves but also as a back door into considerations of relations among class, basic writing, and academic writing as a whole" (Ashley, 2001, p. 494). With this rationale, the present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there significant differences between the proficiency scores of undergraduate EFL learners from high, average and low SES backgrounds?

2. Are there significant differences between the mean writing quality scores of undergraduate EFL learners from high, average and low SES backgrounds?

2. Review of Literature

SES differences can differentiate the repertoire of L1 and L2 language learning experiences that students bring into EFL writing classes. Based on the principles of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), users from different social groups or 'user-types' have different norms in discourse that, of course, cut across groups. Hasan (2004) argued that there could be systematic variations among social groups and stated that "...in theory, and often in practice, there can be as many varieties as there are social groups/user types in a community, each norm differing systematically from others" (p. 19). Similarly, In L1 use, different levels of access to and use of elaborate or restricted codes of language (Bernstein, 1977) were linked to SES, with the working class shown to use the restricted code of language and the middle class shown to use both the restricted and elaborate codes (see also Littlejohn, 2002). Writing research has not yet explored possible consequences of less experience in the use of L1 elaborate codes for L2 writing. Research on The Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) by Sparks and Ganschow (1991) has also shown that problems with first language literacy, influenced by SES, resurface in the learning of a second language. LCDH holds that various levels of mastery in orthographic, syntactic and semantic components of L1 will lead to differential success in second language learning.

Learners of English try to learn to write not only *for* social contexts but also *in* social contexts. An apparent depersonalization of the *L2 writer* himself as the key player of the scene in academic writing seems to have resulted in the neglect of his or her ethnic membership, socioeconomic status, gender, and other social affiliations. Writing research has focused more on the social contexts of L2 writing and less on the social contexts of L2 writers. The social aspects of L2 texts (e.g. genre properties), the social aspects of the composing processes (e.g. context-dependent

strategies), and the social aspects of the audiences of L2 texts (e.g. expectations of the academia or disciplinary and professional norms) have been emphasized a lot in the shifts of emphasis in approaches to L2 writing from products and processes to genres and critical and multiple literacies (see Raimes, 1991). These changes of approach have resulted in more attention to the social aspects of the act of writing, of the written text, and of the targeted audience. However, the social being of the writer himself/herself in relation to L2 writing has become the concern of recent social constructivist research and the necessity of research into this area has been expressed by L2 writing scholars (e.g. Kubota, 2003; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).

The review of the related research illustrates four main points: a) sociolinguistic research has shown that linguistic variables are related to SES variables; b) studies of general educational achievement have shown low SES to be a relevant disadvantage.; c) studies of L1 literacy have also frequently reported high positive correlations between SES and writing performance; and d) there are very few studies of the role of SES in second language writing.

First, sociolinguists have noted that some differences in native language use, at least in its lexical and phonological forms, are related to social class and that "patterns of social class differentiation are fundamental to sociolinguistic variation" (Romaine, 2001, p. 8309). The relationships between social class, and language were basically noted by Bernstein (1977) who believed that middle and working-class children actually developed very different linguistic codes determined by their different forms of social relations. SES has also been recently claimed to affect the development of language in children acquiring their mother tongue by affecting the operations of the human's species-specific innate language learning mechanisms (Hoff, 2006). Zimmerman and Boden (1991) argue that the interaction of actual actors in social situations is a product of social forces that condition language and social interaction. Seligson and Berk-Seligson (1978) have gone so far to suggest that even speech be added as a component of socioeconomic status due to the strong associations between SES and linguistic choices. Researchers have found that middle-class speakers use an independent, speaker-oriented speech style while

working-class speakers use a collaborative, addressee-oriented style (Cheshire, 2005). Some middle-class speakers are also reported to use more adverbials to express stance clearly in contrast to the working-class speakers who use greater details and leave the interpretation to the interlocutor (Macaulay, 2002). In short, linguistic choices are partially determined by SES. Therefore, sociolinguistic scholars claim that "the choice of a linguistic variant, be it phonological or grammatical, depends, among other things, upon the social status of the speaker...and language variables correlate with a speaker's SES" (Seligson & Berk-Seligson, 1978, pp. 712-713).

Second, many studies of SES in relation to general academic achievement have shown consistent correlations. A meta-analysis of 74 independent samples including a total number of 101,157 students in 6871 schools in 128 school districts in the US by Sirin (2005) indicated that SES had a medium to strong correlation with academic achievement, which was moderated by the range of SES variables and the type of SES measures. The international literature reported to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (Erebus International, 2005) also showed that since the year 2000, SES had continued to play a significant role in different outcomes from schooling experienced by young people. Frederickson and Petrides (2008), who studied SES and ethnic group differences in academic performance in sample of 517 British pupils of a mean age of 16.5 years in Britain, found that White pupils outperformed Black and Pakistani pupils and high SES pupils consistently outperformed their low SES counterparts. The same patterns have also been reported in reviews of local research on the relationship between SES and general educational achievement (e.g. Salimifar & Nowroozi, 2008).

Third, like the research on SES in sociolinguistics and in education, studies of L1 literacy development have pointed out the significance of SES. According to Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro (1997) studies of literacy development in children have shown the relevance and effects of many out-of-school context variables like the role of bedtime stories, the family contexts of building interests in writing and reading, the traditions and messages that parents transmit to their children about the uses of

print, and the game interactions of parents and children. These are all tied with the socioeconomic status of the family. An examination of the research addressing SES in relation to literacy (e.g. Bernstein, 1977; Davies, 1995) revealed that learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were in most cases reported to fail in producing acceptable academic discourse in school. In learning L1 literacy skills at the school level, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2002) clearly indicated that writing performance was strongly related to SES, whether estimated by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, participation in Title I schools, or level of parental education. In college composition, the study of socioeconomic class has focused on working-class students, who are more likely to have poor performance on college composition (Durst, 2006). Researchers have shown that those from lower SES backgrounds experience more difficulties in reading and writing than those from a higher status in elementary school years (Hecht & Greenfield, 2001; Hecht, Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 2001). Possible justifications have included limited access to reading materials and inadequate modeling by adults in the family. In a study of both L1 and L2 writing quality, Ransdell and Wengelin (2003) compared Spanish-English bilingual children with their English-speaking monolingual peers and found that SES along with phonological awareness, grammar awareness, receptive vocabulary, reading comprehension, transcribing fluency, and home literacy predicted 67% of the variation in children's writing quality. They suggested that research on L1 and L2 writing should include socioeconomic variables in addition to sociolinguistic ones.

Based on the review of the research literature, SES can be legitimately explored in relation to the development of proficiency in English in general as well as in the promotion of learner abilities in individual language skills. EFL writers from lower class environments, where books, papers, computers, educated parents or care takers, and other literacy supports are inadequate may find it very difficult to catch up with their more advantaged peers who bring to the task of learning to write in English a richer repertoire of background literacy experiences.

In the current attempt just a few studies of SES in relation to L2 writing were located that can be used as the starting point for the

exploration of SES differences in undergraduate academic EFL writing. These mostly target populations at levels lower than then undergraduate. For example, in his postgraduate thesis on young EFL learners, Vanaki (2003) demonstrated that SES and attitudes toward leaning English were highly correlated and that higher SES was associated with better performance in all language skills. In another study, Krashen and Brown (2005) were surprised to realize that high SES was positively related to English language learners' literacy. They performed a secondary analysis of the consistent results of published data in three studies of SES and literacy to illustrate that high SES English language learners outperformed low SES fluent native speakers of English on tests of math and reading. They argued that SES could even offset the role of language proficiency and suggested that English language teachers provide aspects of high SES known to impact school performance. They further argued that high SES could lead to better literacy development for English language learners because it usually meant having more educated caregivers, living in a richer print environment, and receiving more appropriate education in L1 that could bring in the benefits of bilingual education. Olshtain, Shohamy, Kernp, and Chatow (1990) found that SES was related to foreign language learning and that L1 academic proficiency of socio-culturally different learner groups played a key role in predicting success in foreign language learning in school context" (p. 23). Learners coming from a literacy-rich environment arrive ready for EFL writing (see Fishman, 1989). Fishman argues that a low-SES child without a prior foundation in literacy "must first develop literacy-related socio-cognitive skills and dispositions" (p. 467). To see how whether such observation are equally true for undergraduate learners of English, the present study was designed to analyze the variable of SES in relation to academic writing performance and English language proficiency in a learner population less explored in this fashion.

3. The Context of the Study

Undergraduate English language learning in Iranian higher education is one of the main domains for the practice and

development of proficiency and academic writing skills in English. In spite of the homogeneity implied from many educational policy articulations and from many uniform practices observed in formal English language education settings, there are huge differences in the composition of the undergraduate learner population in terms of SES. This diversity is compounded by linguistic and ethnic diversity in the country (for more information on the relationship between SES and ethno-linguistic diversities, see Alexander, 2001; Ashley, 2001; Hassan, 2008; Kheiltash & Rust, 2009; Pool, 1972; Watson, 2007). Huge SES differences can, therefore, be seen as a marked feature of the context of Iranian English language education. The big gap between the socioeconomically underprivileged and the advantaged few people in the country actually fuelled the 1979 revolution as a social factor (see Kheiltash & Rust, 2009). The existence of poverty and gaps between the poor and the rich is a present-day reality in this as well as in many other L2 learning contexts worldwide. In short, there are vast SES-related differences in how learner can prepare for academic writing before and during their undergraduate studies. Depending on sources of support including the family, some learners afford to attend private language schools before or during undergraduate studies while others do not. Some learners have to work part-time and others do not. In an ethnographic fieldwork account of literacies in Iran, Street (1984) has referred to great differences between the more traditional ideological "Maktab" literacy in a village and the city literacy in the country. This tradition is partially inherited from the past contributing to variations in undergraduate learners' socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences. In this context, the exploration of SES-related differences in English proficiency and writing ability can be a valuable source of insight for learners, teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and syllabus designers.

4. Method

The study used a survey method in the first phase to collect data on the learners' SES and to divide them into high, average, and low SES groups. It then measured English proficiency and writing

ability using a proficiency test and an in-class argumentative writing task. Expert ratings and quantitative data analyses were used to answer the research question. In what follows, the participants, instruments, and procedures are described in full details.

4.1 Participants

The participants were 196 Iranian undergraduate EFL learners from content area classes in the third year of the BA program in English as a foreign language in the second semester of 2010. Based on the demographic data collected in the survey, this convenient sample included 48 male and 148 female learners with the age range of 20-24, around 30% of whom (n=56) were from rural areas of the country. There were no working students and all were dependent on their families for financial support. The participants had the same background experiences in L1 and L2 writing instruction. In their L1, all learners studied basic rules of correct writing (Aeene Negaresh) as part of Farsi language courses at high school and one Farsi course at university. In English, they all successfully passed their two courses in the basics of academic writing in the first two years of their undergraduate studies. Based on a standardized composite of parental income and parental level of education calculated as an index of SES level as described later, participants were grouped into low, average, and high SES learners. The low SES group were seen as the ones who received SES scores falling more than one standard deviation below the mean and the high SES were the ones who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean (Table 1). The consideration of standard deviation in grouping and the ranges selected for SES discrimination were deliberate. The intention was to increase the possibility that sub-groups that were compared in the study were really different in terms of SES.

Table 1: Breakdown of the socioeconomic level of the participants [a]

Socioeconomic Status	SES Z-Score range	N	Percent
Low	-2.55 to -0.91	40	20.4
Average	-0.92-0.73	114	58.2

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| High | 0.74-2.37 | 42 | 21.4 |
| Total | -3 to 3 | 196 | 100.0 |

[a] Group statistics: Mean=2.01 SD=0.65 Variance= 0.42

The learners whose SES Z-score fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean (n= 114=58.2%) were considered as those coming from an average socioeconomic background. Around 20 percent of the participants reported membership of the low socioeconomic section of the society and around 20 percent of the high socioeconomic section (Table 1).

4.2 Instruments

A researcher-made questionnaire was used to collect data on the participants' components of SES. This questionnaire yielded demographic data on the learners' gender, ethnicity, residence, parental jobs, parental education, and parental income. Based on the report of Erebus International (2005), parents' level of education and employment are identified as making the largest contribution to current conceptualization of SES used in research studies on schooling outcomes. Data on parental jobs were also collected in this instrument to validate SES classifications against job classifications into social classes in the country. Nayebi and Abdollahian (2002) offered a standard classification of occupations into social classes in a national research project done at the University of Tehran and divided jobs into 9 social categories with people like shoe-blacks, peldars, and hawkers falling into the lowest level and people like ministers, judges and, professors falling into level 9. The association between the SES indices calculated for participants using standardized parental education and income measures on the one hand and the social classification of parental occupation on the other hand was checked for validation of the questionnaire. The correlation coefficient between SES scores and parental employment category was 0.64 (n=196, p > 0.05). The second instrument in this research was a writing prompt that asked the respondents to write an argumentative piece to express their agreement or disagreement with euthanasia, the act of painlessly killing a person who is terminally ill. Agree or disagree prompts for argumentative writing like the one used in the instrument of this

study are used in English writing classes and even in some high-stake tests of argumentative academic writing ability. The last instrument was the Q-version of the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB). The test consisted of 100 multiple-choice items on grammar and language use, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. It contained no sections on written or spoken English. The Cronbach Alpha reliability of the test scores was 0.89.

4.3 Data collection procedure

The researcher explained the purpose of data collection for each class and asked the participants to write a paragraph of 150-250 words on the topic on coded papers to state their positions on the subject of euthanasia. They had only 30 minutes to write and were free to write more than one draft if they wished. They were informed that their written arguments on this topic will be numbered and examined under complete anonymity and confidentiality conditions. A few students opted out of the study either from the very beginning or in the middle of data collection. A total 196 out of 210 students completed both the numbered writing task and the matching survey questionnaire on SES and MELAB test.

To calculate SES as a continuous and categorical variable, mother's and father's income (reported in 6 categories for each from "0 to 250 thousand Tomans per month in the first category and more than two million Toman per month in the sixth category) and parental education (six levels for each parent ranging from "elementary or less" to "postgraduate degrees") were standardized to z scores, the difference of each score from the mean divided by the standard deviation on each of these measures. The z scores for these four variables were then summed up and produced the index of SES (Mean=0.022 SD=2.72 Range= -6.73 to 6.67).

To measure writing ability, all coded handwritten papers were copied to provide two sets of the same documents for scoring and coding by two EFL experts. Using the ESL Composition profile (Jabobs, Zinkgraf, Hartfiel, & Hughey, 1981), the raters independently scored the texts for content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (5 points). Interrater reliability indices (Cronbach's

alpha) for dimension scores and for total scores were all above 0.75
(p ≤0.01). Finally, the data were carefully recorded in SPSS data
files and were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics
(Z-test, ANOVA, and LSD).

5. Results

The distribution, range, and variance of English language
proficiency scores gained by the participants from all
socioeconomic levels were first examined and based on the results,
they were grouped into high, average and low proficiency groups.
As the results, summarized in Table 2, show, these scores ranged
from 37.5 to 87.5. Based on this analysis, 30, 94, and 72
participants fell into low, average, and high English proficiency
groups respectively.

Table 2: Breakdown of the proficiency level of the participants
[a]

Socioeconomic Status	Proficiency Score range	N	Percent
Low	37.5 to 52.5	30	15.3
Average	53 to 72.5	94	48
High	73 to 87.5	72	36.7
Total	37.5 to 87.5	196	100.0

[a] Group statistics: Mean=65.74 SD=11.16 Variance= 124.64

The analysis of the data indicated that the participants were
different in both proficiency and socioeconomic levels. Descriptive
statistics of proficiency test results showed that these third-year
undergraduate learners of English greatly varied in terms of English
proficiency with a score range of 37.5 to 87.5 and a standard
deviation of 11.16. Based on the descriptive statistics and the
demographic data on the participants (Table 1), they were
socioeconomically heterogeneous as well. The first aim of the study
was to explore if these differences between proficiency scores
among EFL learners were associated with their high, average or low
SES backgrounds. As shown in Table 3, one-way analysis of
variance between SES groups indicated that they were significantly
different in terms of proficiency scores. (F=3.77, $p≤0.05$). One-way

analysis of variance was used because proficiency scores (not the levels) were analyzed for this research question. The Least Significant Difference test was used later to further explore this significant difference.

Table 3: One-way ANOVA comparing proficiency across socioeconomic levels

Differences	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	913.619	2	456.810	3.769	**.025**
Within Groups	23391.610	193	121.200		
Total	24305.230	195	------		

The quantitative evidence examined in this study points to the significance of the independent variable of socioeconomic background in determining success in achieving higher proficiency in English as a foreign language. To further explore the role of learners' socioeconomic background in language learning, the writing skill was examined in relation to the second research question of the study.

The writing quality score for each leaner was calculated as the sum of the mean of scores assigned by two independent experts (the researcher and a colleague) to five dimensions of the written product: content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (5 points). The researcher is well aware of the possible limitations of this kind of scoring due to its neglect of the social dimensions of the ability (e.g. voice and audience awareness) but has opted for it because of its contested overlaps with general proficiency testing targeted for the first question. Table 4 summarizes the descriptive statistics for writing quality scores.

Table 4: Details of scores gained on writing quality (N=196)

Dimensions of writing	Low SES	Average SES	High SES	Total Mean	SD
Content	16.73	17.85	18.42	17.74	3.03
Organization	13.38	13.98	14.72	14.01	2.36

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Vocabulary	12.23	12.81	13.32	12.80	2.26
Language Use	15.04	16.09	16.77	16.01	3.06
Mechanics	3.11	3.23	3.25	3.17	.59
Total Score	60.64	63.68	66.50	63.71	10.04

The descriptive statistics shows that, in spite of their similar backgrounds in formal English writing instruction, the learners show very heterogeneous writing ability levels as shown in their raw scores ranging from 31.5 to 88.5. Although many product and process variables can be enumerated in relation to this differential performance, the descriptive data showed that mean scores in all dimensions of writing grew with SES scores. The second research question in this study aimed to explore the possible significance of socioeconomic level in relation to writing ability. As shown in Table 5, one-way analysis of variance between SES groups indicated that they were significantly different in terms of writing quality scores and that these mean differences were significant (F=3.63, $p \leq 0.05$). In other words, results indicate that SES makes a significant difference not only in the English proficiency but also the writing ability of the learners.

Table 5: One-way ANOVA for writing quality across socioeconomic levels

Differences	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	709.331	2	354.665	3.632	.028
Within Groups	18847.669	193	97.656		
Total	19557.000	195	------		

Least significant difference post hoc analyses revealed that socioeconomically more advantaged learners were the ones who significantly outperformed others in both proficiency and academic writing ability. Results of the analyses summarized in Table 6 showed that learners in the high SES group showed the greatest significant mean difference for proficiency (means difference=5.42, $p \leq 0.05$) and for writing ability (means difference=5.86, $p \leq 0.05$)

Table 6: Post hoc LSD test comparing between-group differences

Dependent Variable	(I) SES Level	(J) SES Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Proficiency	Low	Average	-2.07456	2.02316	.306
		High	3.34524	2.43222	.171
	Average	Low	2.07456	2.02316	.306
		High	**5.41980(*)**	**1.98718**	**.007**
	High	Low	-3.34524	2.43222	.171
		Average	-5.41980(*)	1.98718	.007
Writing	Low	Average	2.63158	1.81605	.149
		High	**5.85714(*)**	**2.18324**	**.008**
	Average	Low	-2.63158	1.81605	.149
		High	3.22556	1.78376	.072
	High	Low	-5.85714(*)	2.18324	.008
		Average	-3.22556	1.78376	.072

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Even though many important variables contributing to proficiency and writing ability were kept constant for the participants, the results pointed to the possible influences of learners' socioeconomic backgrounds on their achieved level of proficiency and writing ability. Field of study (English), level of study (BA), year of study (third-year), number of first language and second language writing courses, and writing and English proficiency courses taken in private language schools were kept constant for all the participants to make the findings more meaningful. Results, therefore, show that socioeconomic backgrounds, that can differentiate the background English language literacy experiences of the learners, significantly affects their ultimate level of proficiency and writing ability in English language learning at the university.

6. Discussion

SES-related differences were observed in both the quality of texts written by undergraduate learners of English and in their

performance on a proficiency test in this study. Even though this finding may not be generalized to all English as a foreign language contexts, the researcher asserts that these observations are not accidental. Learners' SES can influence literacy experiences in learning English at the university. That is to say, the adverse consequences of low SES found for general academic achievement (e.g. Sirin, 2005), oral communication skills (e.g. Bernstein, 1977), and first language literacy (e.g. Rust, 2006) are carried over to EFL writing at higher levels of education and place EFL learners on a unique platform for the development of second language academic literacy. This also implies that socioeconomically heterogeneous EFL learners may be involved in an unfair competition in learning to master the conventions of academic writing and require special considerations in the planning of EFL writing instruction. Low SES learners may also sometimes do their best to overcome all of their limitations in this regard and struggle to succeed. Ashley (2001) claims that disadvantaged undergraduate L2 writers who struggle to outperform their advantaged peers may not be exceptions. Readers may not find it too difficult to locate examples, nationally and internationally, of highly advanced L2/EFL writers and professionals who succeeded regardless of their backgrounds. To contextualize this finding, I argue that low the SES undergraduate EFL learners, who succeeded in the competitive nationwide public university entrance exam despite possible disadvantages, show signs of genuine wish to parallel their high SES peers. They are really worthy of scrutiny in the secrets of their success. They can probably be far better if given additional support (e.g. access to printed materials, help with technologies, tutorials, etc.) in learning English. In learning to write for academic purposes, for example, low SES learners may benefit a lot if matched with high SES learners. Since English language learners' informal experiences with argumentation is also relevant to their L2 writing performance, students of various backgrounds can also be matched in group work to share "socially acquired skills of stance support" (Chandrasegaran, 2008, p.253).

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

Like any other research, the present study has raised more questions than it has answered in relation to the role of learners' socioeconomic backgrounds in learning English as a foreign language. It can present some as suggestions for further exploration. For example, are the so-called standard conventions in EFL academic writing affected by SES-related influences? How are texts written by high and low SES learners different in argumentative as well as in other genres? Are the moves of academic texts of various types different among these groups? What is specific to the structure of arguments written by these groups of learners? SES in this study was quantified based on participants' reported parental occupations and levels of income and education. What more may be revealed through access to and the study of alternative data sources on students' SES? This study targeted a single task for thicker description and analysis. Future studies of larger learner corpora across topics, task types, contexts, and institutions can contribute more to the knowledge of how EFL writers construct texts and how the less advantaged can gain support in research and instruction.

To conclude, SES as a learner variable does not seem to have received the research attention it seems to deserve in the study of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. This study shows that differences between high and low SES EFL learners may not be limited only to their general educational achievement or their first language literacy experiences but can also be carried over to their study of English at the tertiary level. EFL teachers, schools, institutions of higher education, libraries, writing centers and student support units should, therefore, attempt to provide for the less privileged learners more affordable and accessible help with aspects of high SES that might improve and enrich their literacy experiences.

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