

The Correlation between Socioeconomic Status and Reading Proficiency of English Education Students

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ABSTRACT

Socioeconomic status (SES) is often assumed to influence students' academic achievement, including reading proficiency. However, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may still struggle with reading performance. This study aimed to examine the correlation between SES and reading proficiency among sixth-semester students in the English Education Study Program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang. A quantitative correlational method was employed, using an SES questionnaire and a TOEFL-based reading proficiency test. The results showed that most participants came from middle-class families, yet their reading proficiency was generally low. Statistical analysis revealed no significant correlation between SES and reading proficiency ($r = -0.18$, $p = 0.857$). These findings suggest that SES alone may not adequately predict students' reading performance, highlighting the importance of other factors such as reading motivation, metacognitive awareness, and academic support.

Keywords: *English Education, Reading Proficiency, Socioeconomic Status, TOEFL, Undergraduate Students*

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INTRODUCTION

English is extensively used as a second or official language in various countries and is crucial to international communication, especially in the field of education. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010) define English as a foreign language (EFL) as the role of English in countries where it is not the native language and where it is taught in schools as part of the educational curriculum. Crystal (2003) emphasizes that English has become the global lingua franca, especially in academic and international discourse. As the main language of scholarly publications and collaborations, English is essential for students and educators to access and share global knowledge.

In line with the significance of English in education, reading emerges as a fundamental skill that supports individuals in accessing and understanding academic materials written in English. Reading is not merely a mechanical activity but a complex cognitive process that contributes to knowledge acquisition and critical thinking. Grabe and Stoller (2011) define reading as an interactive process involving prior knowledge and reasoning to build meaning. Smith (2004) adds that reading fosters critical thinking and intellectual independence. Likewise, Anderson (2008) notes that it enhances vocabulary, analysis, and global understanding. Thus, effective reading in English is vital for education and personal growth in today's knowledge-driven world.

In Indonesia itself, interest in reading is still very minimal, as evidenced by various data on both the ASEAN and international levels. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2000), only about 65% of Indonesians were literate at that time, compared to 86.4% in Malaysia. In addition, based on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2016), Indonesia was ranked fourth from the bottom among 45 participating countries

in terms of reading literacy. Sari (2018) found that Indonesia has a low reading rate, partly due to book prices and content accessibility, especially for low-income families. This makes fostering a strong reading culture a key educational challenge.

Despite the current low reading interest in Indonesia, it is important to recognize that reading plays a pivotal role in shaping and determining an individual's socioeconomic status, as it serves as the foundation for educational achievement, career advancement, and holistic personal growth. Kamil et al. (2002) state that reading motivation and engagement are key to academic success and lifelong learning. Early reading habits help individuals gain essential skills and broaden their perspectives. Arifin (2020) highlights the need for critical reading to enhance critical thinking, while Bernando (2022) links a growth mindset through reading to better academic outcomes. Shofaussamawati (2016) adds that frequent readers tend to be more knowledgeable, creative, and capable leaders. Thus, reading is not just an academic skill but a path to personal and socioeconomic advancement.

Building upon the significance of reading and literacy for individual and national progress, Indonesia's economic condition presents a paradox. Although the country has shown encouraging signs of economic development, its reading literacy level remains concerning. According to the Badan Pusat Statistik (2022), Indonesia experienced a decline in poverty rates from 2.04% to 1.74%, reflecting a positive shift in economic indicators. However, this economic improvement has not been accompanied by a corresponding enhancement in literacy rates. The Programme for International Student Assessment (2018) ranked Indonesia 74th out of 79 countries in reading literacy, revealing a persistent gap. This gap emphasizes the need to promote literacy awareness, particularly in economic aspects. As a research by Remund (2010), that found economic literacy refers to the ability to understand and apply basic economic concepts to make informed financial decisions. Furthermore, a study conducted by Sina (2012) revealed that individuals with low levels of economic literacy are more susceptible to financial risks, particularly fraudulent investment schemes. Therefore, cultivating economic literacy through reading is essential for both individual empowerment and the sustainability of Indonesia's economic development.

The persistent gap between economic progress and reading proficiency in Indonesia raises questions about the underlying factors influencing students' reading development. One of the key determinants is the role of family background, particularly socioeconomic status (SES), which encompasses parental education, income, and occupation. In line with the variables measured in this study, the Family Investment Model offers a relevant theoretical framework. Conger and Donnellan (2007) argue that families with higher SES tend to invest more in their children's education by providing academic resources, engaging in literacy-rich practices, and creating supportive learning environments. Parents with higher educational backgrounds are more likely to foster reading habits, while stable income and professional occupations allow access to better learning opportunities. Thus, SES-driven parental investment significantly contributes to reading proficiency, supporting the relevance of examining this relationship in the context of higher education.

The informal interviews were conducted with fifth-semester undergraduate students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang. Informal interviews revealed that while some students demonstrated strong reading proficiency, others reported moderate performance based on their TOEFL scores. One student, for instance, associated their limited score with a lack of reading interest (HF, personal communication, July 3, 2024). Meanwhile, several students explained that their reading development was positively influenced by the availability of literacy support from their families or campus, which they believed stemmed from their parents' relatively stable economic status (MZA, ZH, and SP, personal communication, July 3, 2024). These observations provide a rationale for exploring the correlation between students' socioeconomic status and their reading proficiency within a population characterized by economic diversity.

Review of Literature

Concepts of Reading

The Correlation between Socioeconomic Status and Reading Proficiency of English Education Students

Reading is a cognitive and interpretive process through which individuals derive meaning from written symbols. Siddiq (2022) defines reading as the act of decoding a sequence of letters and interpreting their meanings to understand words, sentences, and ideas. Similarly, Oktafiana (2014) notes that reading builds a connection between the writer's thoughts and the reader's interpretation. Firmansyah (2018) also describes reading as the use of prior knowledge and experience to understand and extract information from written text. There are two main types of reading: reading aloud and silent reading. Reading aloud involves verbalizing text to be heard by others, while silent reading focuses on internal comprehension without vocal output (Subedi, 2022; Rodicio et al., 2014).

Reading also provides significant benefits. Wagstaff (2020) explains that reading offers cognitive, social, emotional, and health-related advantages. Cognitively, it sharpens the mind and enhances problem-solving skills. Socially, it fosters empathy and awareness of different human experiences. Emotionally, it offers comfort and personal insight, helping readers relate to characters and situations. Furthermore, engaging with literature can improve self-perception and promote healthier thinking patterns, contributing to both intellectual and emotional well-being.

Aspects of Reading

According to Dile (2020), five key aspects influence the reading process. The sensory aspect relates to the reader's ability to recognize written symbols and punctuation. The perceptual aspect involves interpreting these symbols meaningfully. The schemata aspect refers to connecting information from the text with prior knowledge. The thinking aspect emphasizes inference-making and evaluating content critically. Lastly, the affective aspect reflects the reader's motivation and interest, which significantly influence reading engagement and success.

Reading Skills

Reading proficiency depends on the application of strategic reading skills. Mickulecky and Jeffries (as cited in Fisher, 2016) identify several strategies that support comprehension and efficiency. Skimming is used to grasp the general idea of a text, while scanning helps locate specific information quickly. Previewing allows readers to anticipate content before full reading, and predicting helps set expectations and foster engagement with the material. Making inferences enables readers to draw conclusions from both explicit and implicit information, and summarizing consolidates main ideas, aiding memory and understanding. These skills are essential for developing effective and critical readers.

Reading Proficiency

Reading proficiency refers to an individual's ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate written texts accurately and efficiently. Albishari (2023) highlights that reading proficiency includes not only comprehension but also the ability to critique and extract deeper meaning from texts. Ilma (2014) adds that proficiency involves functioning effectively in real-world contexts that require reading. Hempenstall (2016) identifies five crucial elements of reading proficiency: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Together, these components form the foundation for reading development and academic success.

Social Class

Social class is a system of stratification that categorizes individuals based on variables such as income, education, and occupation. Dewi and Fitriana (2021) define social class as a set of hierarchical groupings within society, commonly referred to as upper, middle, and lower classes. Li et al. (2023) distinguish between objective social class – measured through tangible criteria like income and job status – and subjective social class, which are based on individuals' perceptions of their own status. Social class plays a significant role in determining access to resources and opportunities, including those related to education.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Socioeconomic status (SES) is an individual's or family's standing in society, determined by education, occupation, and income. Mufti (2023) and Rahmatiah (2020) describe SES as a multidimensional construct that influences access to social and material resources, including

educational support. Novitasari (2021) adds that SES represents both the social reputation and economic capacity of a family. These dimensions of SES collectively affect a student's academic trajectory, especially in terms of access to reading materials, learning environments, and parental support.

SES Measurements

Crossman (2018) outlines three primary indicators for measuring SES: education, occupation, and income. Education is fundamental for personal development and social mobility. Marceylla and Subroto (2021) emphasize that education equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary for economic advancement. Occupation reflects both the type and level of work, which determine social status and financial resources (Yulia, 2017; Vadivel et al., 2023). Jobs are categorized into classifications ranging from managerial to manual labor based on the Indonesian Standard Classification of Occupations (KBJI, 2014). Income refers to the total earnings that can be used to fulfill basic needs and invest in education. According to Mufti (2023), sources of income can include salaries, business profits, pensions, or government assistance – all of which contribute to a family's capacity to support a student's educational needs.

METHOD

The study approach for this study was quantitative approach. Utilizing numerical data to investigate a phenomenon was the goal of a quantitative approach. Then, correlation study was chosen in this study with the goal of determining, describing, and interpreting the link between the variables. In this study, the design explained the information and tested hypotheses in order to ascertain the link between the variables, which were reading proficiency and socioeconomic status. The study procedure, two different forms of data were required to evaluate and find correlations between predefined variables. First, socioeconomic status data were collected via a questionnaire. Then, the second was the reading proficiency statistics obtained from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The questionnaire and TOEFL test results were obtained, and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to evaluate them.

Sample

The population in this study was undergraduate students in the sixth-semester of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang. Sixth-semester students was chosen as the population in this study because they had taken and completed literal reading, interpretive reading, and critical reading classes, so they were expected to have maximum ability in their reading proficiency. Furthermore, to obtain data, a total sampling technique was chosen to determine the samples. As a result, 100 students from all classes in the sixth-semester were chosen as samples in this study.

Instruments

This study utilized two primary instruments: a socioeconomic status (SES) questionnaire and a reading proficiency test. The SES questionnaire was adapted from Juniarli (2019) and structured based on the SES framework developed by Crossman (2018), which includes three major components: education, occupation, and income. The questionnaire consisted of 20 multiple-choice items – 6 items related to education, 9 items on occupation, and 5 items on income. The item-total correlation results showed that all items were valid, with ritem values exceeding the rtable value of 0.273. The reliability of the questionnaire was also confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.883, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Meanwhile, the reading proficiency test was adapted from the TOEFL-based Longman Complete Course by Deborah Phillips (2001), comprising 49 multiple-choice questions. These questions measured various aspects of reading skills, including identifying main ideas, locating specific details, understanding vocabulary in context, making inferences, identifying cause-effect relationships, and recognizing logical sequence. The item-total of the test showed that were valid, with ritem values higher than the required rtable threshold of 0.273.

Furthermore, the reliability analysis produced a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.812, confirming that the reading test was reliable and appropriate for assessing students' reading proficiency in an academic context.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the SES levels and reading proficiency scores. To examine the relationship between SES and reading proficiency, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used. Before conducting the main analysis, normality and linearity tests were performed to ensure the assumptions for parametric testing were met. In addition, a simple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which SES could predict students' reading proficiency outcomes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To gain an overview of the participants' socioeconomic backgrounds and reading proficiency, descriptive statistics were conducted.

Descriptive Statistics Analysis

To find out the socioeconomic status levels of students in English Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang for the 2024/2025 academic year. The analyzed data using SPSS 26, employing descriptive statistical methods. The results are presented in the table below:

Tabel 1. Descriptive Statistics Analysis of SES

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Socioeconomic Status	100	30	92	63.36	11.194
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Based on a sample of 100 respondents, the socioeconomic status variable's descriptive statistical analysis shows a minimum observed value of 30 and a maximum value of 92. The sample population's mean score of 63.36 indicates a moderately high average level of socioeconomic status, while the standard deviation of 11.194 shows a significant amount of dispersion around the mean, indicating variability in the participants' socioeconomic conditions.

Following that, to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-economic background of the respondents, the data was further categorized into three levels: low, medium, and high. The following table presents the frequency and percentage of respondents at each level:

Tabel 2. Distribution of Students' Socioeconomic Status Levels

Score	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Classification
$X > 74,55$	16	16	High
$52,17 \leq X < 74,55$	69	69	Middle
$X \leq 52,17$	15	15	Low
Total	100	100	

The result showed that there were 16 students (16%) who were indicated had high level of socioeconomic status. Then, there were 69 students (69%) who were indicated had middle level. While, there were 15 students (15%) who were indicated had low level. It can be concluded, from what was revealed from the questionnaire, that the middle level was the most commonly identified level of socioeconomic status among students.

The analyzed for the reading proficiency test was used to measure students' reading proficiency. It consisted of 49 multiple-choice questions and was conducted in 60 minutes. The table below displays the students' reading proficiency descriptive statistical analysis:

Tabel 3. Descriptive Analysis of Reading Proficiency

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading Proficiency Test	100	14	96	57.29	22.467
Valid N (listwise)	100				

In the reading proficiency test conducted on 100 undergraduate students, the test score data was obtained where 14 was the minimum score and 96 was the maximum score of the data. Then, the mean value of this data was 57.92, and the standard deviation was 22.467. As a result, the data indicates a considerable degree of participant score variation.

Following that, it was revealed that the undergraduate students had five levels of reading proficiency, with each level having a different number of scores. The details are described as follows:

Tabel 4. Distribution of Students' Reading Proficiency

No.	Score Interval	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Category
1.	80- 100	24	24	Very Good
2.	70 - 79	18	18	Good
3.	51- 69	16	26	Average
4.	25 - 50	37	37	Poor
5.	0 - 24	5	5	Very Poor
Total		100	100	

The results showed that there were 24 students (24%) who achieved a very good level of reading proficiency, indicating superior performance, 18 students (18%) were categorized as having good reading proficiency, reflecting above average achievement. The next group of 16 students (16%) fell into the average category, indicating an average level of achievement. On the other hand, 37 students (37%) were classified as having poor reading proficiency. Furthermore, 5 students (5%) were placed in the very poor category. Thus, the results of the research show that the majority of undergraduate students in the sixth-semester are at the poor level.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that there was no significant correlation between students' socioeconomic status (SES) and their reading proficiency. The Pearson Product-Moment correlation produced a coefficient of -0.018 with a significance value of 0.857, indicating that SES did not correspond to differences in reading achievement. Likewise, regression analysis showed that socioeconomic status had no significant influence on students' reading performance. These findings suggest that in this academic context, SES is not a decisive factor in determining students' ability to comprehend English texts.

This outcome contrasts with the common perception that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to perform better academically. Although SES can affect access to resources, reading proficiency is shaped by more complex and internal factors. One major challenge highlighted in this study was the lack of exposure to English reading materials and poor independent reading habits. As Mufti (2023) explains, without habitual and meaningful interaction with texts, students struggle to develop strong comprehension skills, regardless of their financial or educational background.

Another important factor is the absence of a supportive social environment. According to Dayanti et al. (2021), a reading-supportive community—whether family, peers, or school—plays a key role in shaping students' literacy behaviors. When such encouragement is lacking, even students with good access to materials may not develop the motivation or discipline to read regularly.

Furthermore, students in this study were found to have low metacognitive awareness when reading. Taylor et al. (2023) emphasize that proficient readers use metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor, and evaluate their understanding while engaging with texts. The absence of such strategies hinders comprehension and makes reading tasks more difficult, particularly in academic settings.

In summary, while SES might offer certain advantages in terms of access, it is not a standalone determinant of reading success. Factors such as reading behavior, social support, and metacognitive skill development appear to have greater influence on students' English reading proficiency. This implies that interventions aiming to improve reading outcomes should move beyond economic indicators and focus on strengthening students' reading habits, strategic thinking, and supportive learning environments.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study found no significant correlation or predictive relationship between students' socioeconomic status and their English reading proficiency, suggesting that economic background alone does not determine students' reading ability. More

influential factors included limited exposure to reading materials, poor reading habits, low metacognitive awareness, and insufficient social support. These findings imply that interventions aimed at improving reading proficiency should go beyond economic considerations and focus on fostering intrinsic motivation, strategic reading practices, and a supportive academic environment. However, this study has several limitations. It focused solely on one cohort from a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. The SES measurement relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Future research should include diverse student populations across institutions and explore other potential factors such as digital literacy, instructional quality, and language anxiety. Moreover, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how reading proficiency develops over time and what sustained interventions are most effective.

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