

**THE PREDICTIVE RELATIONSHIP OF IDEAL SELF,
INTEGRATIVENESS, DIRECT CONTACT, AND CULTURAL
INTEREST ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE READINESS FOR THE
ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF GRADE 8 STUDENTS AT
HORWANG SCHOOL, THAILAND**

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Abstract: The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the English language readiness for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand, under the hypothesis that ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest had positive predictive relationships on English language readiness. A total of 116 Grade 8 students comprised the sample of this study. The TOEFL Junior Tests measured the participants' English language readiness for the AEC, while the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) English Language Readiness Model Questionnaire collected data on students' ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest. Descriptive statistics and correlational analysis (using multiple linear regression) were used to analyze the students' responses. The results revealed that the participants had strong levels of an ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest in relation to the use of the English language as ASEAN citizens.

Furthermore, the participants were found to be very ready in terms of their English language readiness for the AEC. From the initially hypothesized combination of four predictor variables having a positive predictive relationship on participants' English language readiness for the AEC, the correlational analysis indicated that there was a significant, positive predictive relationship only for the combination of two predictor variables, ideal self and cultural interest, which explained 11% of the variance in respondents' English language readiness for the AEC. Based on the theoretical and practical

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implications of the findings, recommendations for action and further study are provided.

Keywords: Ideal Self, Integrativeness; Direct Contact; Cultural Interest; English Language Readiness for the ASEAN Economic Community

Introduction

One of the most crucial world economic shifts in recent decades has been the increased emphasis on the importance of cooperation and collaboration over competition. Regional and global trade agreements have helped countries cope with the demand of globalized trade (Egger & Larch, 2008). One of the newest and most ambitious economic cooperation and integration programs is the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), established in 2015. The AEC is an integral part of the ASEAN Community (AC) and one of its main pillars.

In support and preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community, the Thai Government believed that reforms in the education system were necessary. Several reform measures have been introduced, such as the English language being pushed to be taught at schools. However, there were still questions of their efficiency and effectiveness as the Thais' level of English proficiency remained low compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Bolton, 2008; Khamkhien, 2010, 2012). More recently, in the 2019 Education First-English Proficiency Index ranking of countries and regions by English skills, Thailand was still considered very low in proficiency compared to other ASEAN-member countries. Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia were ranked first, second, and third, respectively. Out of the 25 countries in Asia that were indexed, Thailand ranked 17th place (Education First, 2019). This unsatisfactory performance in Thais' English language readiness indicated that English language development in Thailand moves slowly despite all sectors' efforts. The contributing factors to these unsatisfactory results might include ineffective curriculum design (e.g., Hallinger & Lee, 2013; Noom-Ura, 2013), lack of qualified English language teachers and lack of resources (e.g., Bolton, 2008), and culture-influenced student-level factors such as the fear of making mistakes (Chuanpaisit & Prapphal, 2009). However, according to the researcher's observation, little interest has been given in Thailand to the motivational and attitudinal variables that might also have significant contributions to the English language acquisition of Thai students. In language acquisition theories and studies focusing on non-ASEAN settings, factors such as ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest were identified to significantly influence language acquisition and readiness (Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Lamb, 2004).

Therefore, expecting to contribute to the English language learning literature in Thailand by conducting an empirical study using the aforementioned variables, the researchers decided to examine the levels of an ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest held by a convenience sample of Grade 8 students from Horwang School, in order to determine whether these variables could serve as significant predictors of the students' English language readiness for the AEC.

Research Objectives

The following were the research objectives developed for this study.

1. To determine the levels of the factors possibly affecting the English language readiness for the AEC of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
 - 1.1. To determine the level of ideal self of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
 - 1.2. To determine the level of integrativeness of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
 - 1.3. To determine the level of direct contact of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
 - 1.4. To determine the level of cultural interest of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
2. To determine the level of the English language readiness for the AEC of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
3. To determine whether there is a significant predictive relationship of an ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest on English language readiness for the AEC of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.
4. To determine whether there is a regression equation that can be used to significantly estimate the predictive relationship of an ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest on English language readiness for the AEC of Grade 8 students at Horwang School, Thailand.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study was conducted based on two supporting theories: Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) second language (L2) motivational self-system and Tremblay and Gardner's (1995) model of second and foreign language motivation.

Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System.

This theoretical model identified several factors that potentially influence learning English as a second/foreign language. Those factors are detailed below.

The ideal self. According to Markus and Nurius (1986), the ideal self represents the possible self, the imagined future self. In line with this conceptualization, Dörnyei (1998) postulated that the ideal self represents an individual's idea of what he/she might become and what he/she would like to become. In relation to learning a second language, the ideal self serves as a powerful motivator to learn the language because of our psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between our current and possible future selves (Dörnyei, 1998).

Integrativeness. In the English learning literature, the development of a positive attitude toward learning was earlier attributed to integrativeness, which is defined as the genuine desire to learn a new language so that one can communicate with the members of the community who use the language as their medium of communication, the individual's interest of coming closer to English-speaking communities (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 2001). Integrativeness also implies openness and respect to other cultural groups and ways of life (Gardner, 2001).

Direct contact. This refers to the attitude toward actually meeting and be in constant association with English language speakers and traveling to their countries. Direct contact with English language speakers enhances language assimilation and acquisition and creates an opportunity for the desire to learn a new language to grow (Arnett, 2002; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). The literature suggests that an individual's interest in coming closer and directly contacting English-speaking people enhances their attitudes towards learning English (Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 2001).

Cultural interest. This is defined as an appreciation of cultural products from English-speaking countries conveyed by the media, such as films, magazines, TV programs, and pop music (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Since language and culture are inseparable and closely related (Jiang, 2000), it is not a surprise that these cultural products significantly impact the attention and interest in learning the English language, creating a subconscious desire in non-English speakers to learn and adapt to such culture and language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Tremblay and Gardner's (1995) Model of Second and Foreign Language Motivation

Tremblay and Gardner (1995) speculated that positive attitudes toward speakers of a target language increase motivational behavior to learn the language, which increases the likelihood of acquiring or improving language skills, and ultimately achieving the goal of learning the language. This model

is based on the premise that motivational and attitudinal constructs can affect language achievement and readiness.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, four independent variables and one dependent variable were addressed. The independent variables were ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest, whereas the dependent variable was the participants' English language readiness for the AEC. For the purpose of this study, it was hypothesized that all independent variables significantly and positively affected the students' English language readiness for the AEC. Since a predictive relationship from a combination of multiple independent variables to a single dependent variable was hypothesized, multiple linear regression was used to test the hypothesis empirically. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the current study.

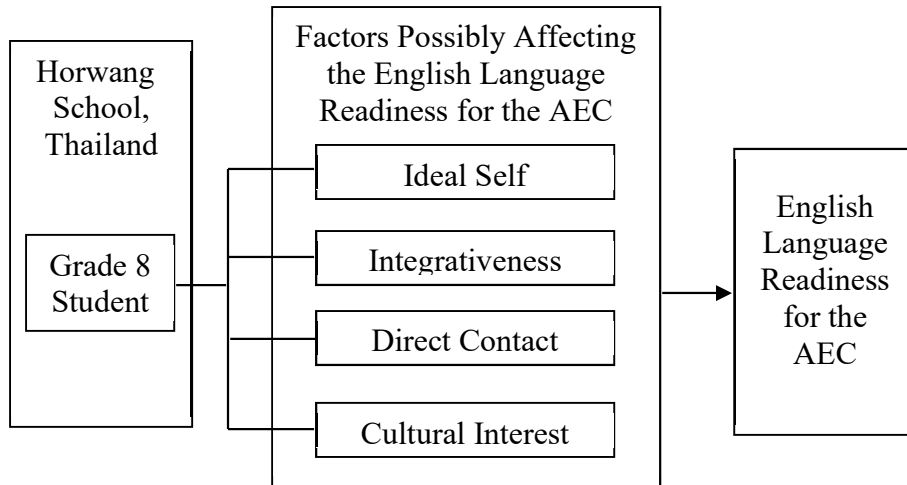


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Present Study.

Methodology/Procedure

Population

The study was carried out in Horwang School, a Thai government school under the authority of the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC). Horwang School was purposely chosen for this study to gain a deeper insight into the English language readiness for the AEC held by Grade 8 students enrolled in the academic year 2018-2019. By the time of data collection, there was a total population of 620 Grade 8 students at Horwang School, distributed in 15 sections.

Sample

The present study used a purposive sample consisting of three classes of Grade 8 students at Horwang School (Classes 11, 12, and 13). The first author was their English language teacher. The total number of participants from these three classes was 134. The study was conducted in the second term of the academic year 2018-2019.

Research Instruments

This study was conducted based on the administration of the following two research instruments: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) English Language Readiness Model Questionnaire (AECELRMQ) and the TOEFL Junior Tests.

ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) English Language Readiness Model Questionnaire (AECELRMQ)

This study's independent variables (i.e., ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest) were measured using items developed by the researcher based on the literature (e.g., Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). All items corresponding to the four variables utilized a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An expert panel of 2 independent experts examined and approved the content validity of the items before administering a pilot test. Upon the approval of the panel, a pilot study was conducted. In order to carry out this pilot study, 15 students were randomly chosen from the available 134 Grade 8 students enrolled in Classes 11, 12, and 13 at Horwang School during the academic year 2018-2019. The collected data were analyzed to test each construct's reliability. The Cronbach's alphas for the four constructs ranged from .70 to .85, with the construct integrativeness showing the smallest reliability alpha of .70, while cultural interest had the highest alpha at .85. The variables integrativeness and direct contact showed Cronbach's alphas of .71 and .73, respectively. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the AECELRMQ pilot study was .92.

There were 116 students who participated in the main study. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the AECELRMQ was .86, showing a .68 Cronbach's alpha for the sub-scale ideal self, a .66 Cronbach's alpha for the sub-scale integrativeness, a .50 Cronbach's alpha for the sub-scale direct contact, and a .74 Cronbach's alpha for the sub-scale cultural interest.

TOEFL Junior Tests

TOEFL is an acronym that stands for "Test of English as a Foreign Language." The TOEFL Junior Tests measure the degree to which junior high school

students have attained proficiency and readiness in the academic and social English language skills representative of English-medium instructional environments. Not based on or limited to any specific curriculum, the TOEFL Junior Tests are designed to measure listening comprehension (42 questions), language form and meaning (42 questions), and reading comprehension (42 questions) in order to support decisions to place students into programs designed to increase English proficiency levels, or measure student progress in developing English language proficiency over time (ETS, 2017).

Concerning the validity of the TOEFL Junior Tests, its provider, the ETS, has been known worldwide as the primary creator of standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL and TOEIC). The ETS uses up-to-date methods for language testing, and their tests are fair, reliable, and valid for their intended purposes; hence, the use of TOEFL Junior Tests to evaluate the English language readiness was expected to produce valid and reliable results (ETS, 2017).

Research Findings

In the following sub-sections, the findings regarding each research objective are summarized.

Findings from Research Objective 1

The analysis of the descriptive statistics results revealed that the overall mean scores of the four factors hypothesized to affect the English language readiness for the AEC of Horwang School's Grade 8 students were all close to 4.00, which can be interpreted as having a strong ideal self, a strong integrativeness, a strong direct contact, and a strong cultural interest in relation to English language use.

Findings from Research Objective 1.1. The level of Grade 8 students' ideal self in relation to English language use was strong, $M = 4.04$, $SD = .85$.

Findings from Research Objective 1.2. The level of Grade 8 students' integrativeness in relation to English language use was strong, $M = 3.84$, $SD = .89$.

Findings from Research Objective 1.3. The level of Grade 8 students' direct contact in relation to English language use was strong, $M = 3.97$, $SD = .81$.

Findings from Research Objective 1.4. The level of Grade 8 students' cultural interest in relation to English language use was strong, $M = 3.61$, $SD = .86$.

Findings from Research Objective 2

Regarding this research objective, it was found that the participants' mean scores in the Listening Comprehension, Language Form and Meaning, and

Reading Comprehension sections were 23.73 ($SD = 4.30$), 24.78 ($SD = 4.67$), and 25.66 ($SD = 5.82$), respectively. From these results, it can be inferred that the respondents' level regarding each of these three sections could be interpreted as advanced on a scale of 1-42, with 42 being advanced high. Finally, the participants' mean item score of all the 126 items comprising the TOEFL Junior Tests had an equivalent mean total score of 791.09 ($SD = 45.40$), from which it can be inferred that, overall, in terms of their English language readiness for the AEC, participants were very ready on a scale of 600-900, with 900 being extremely prepared.

Findings from Research Objective 3

Regarding this research objective, the correlation analysis revealed that, from the four independent variables considered in this study, only integrativeness did not significantly correlate with English language readiness for the AEC ($r = .16, p = .089$). Ideal self was found to be significantly, weakly, and positively correlated with the respondents' English language readiness for the AEC ($r = .28, p = .003$), at a significance level of .05. Direct contact was found to have a significant, weak, and positive correlation with English language readiness for the AEC ($r = .21, p = .026$), at a significance level of .05. Cultural interest was also found to be significantly, positively, and weakly correlated with English language readiness for the AEC ($r = .27, p = .003$).

These findings suggested that further correlational analysis using multiple linear regression could be performed. The correlational analysis revealed that the overall regression was significant. There was a significant but weak multiple correlations between the combination of independent variables (i.e., ideal self, direct contact, and cultural interest) and the dependent variable (i.e., English language readiness for the AEC), $R = .33, R^2 = .11, F(3, 112) = 4.63, p = .004$. However, the results indicated that the predictor variable "direct contact" did not have a significant, predictive linear relationship with the dependent variable ($p = .416$), whereas "ideal self" ($p = .042$) and "cultural interest" ($p = .027$) were found to have a significant, positive predictive linear relationship with the dependent variable.

Findings from Research Objective 4

Due to the fact that the predictor variable "direct contact" did not have a significant, predictive linear relationship with the dependent variable, the multiple linear regression equation to be estimated here was comprised of only two predictor variables: ideal self and cultural interest. Then, the resulting multiple linear regression equation for predicting English language readiness for the AEC of Grade 8 students at Horwang School would be written as follows: Predicted English language readiness for the AEC = $38.90 + 4.28 \times$

(ideal self) + 4.26 × (cultural interest). From this result, it could be said that, on average, the English language readiness for the AEC of Horwang School's Grade 8 students could increase by 4.28 for each one-unit increase in ideal self, holding cultural interest constant, or their English language readiness for the AEC could increase by 4.26 for each one-unit increase in cultural interest, holding ideal self constant.

Discussion

The investigation findings revealed that Grade 8 students at Horwang School scored satisfactorily in the TOEFL Junior Tests, suggesting that they were ready for the AEC as far as English language readiness was concerned. The findings from the descriptive statistics analyses also revealed that in relation to the variables hypothesized to have a significant, positive predictive relationship on English language readiness for the AEC (i.e., ideal self, integrativeness, direct contact, and cultural interest), the respondents had a strong tendency to behave in a favorable way toward the particular situations involved by each of the statements in the items measuring the aforementioned variables. Thus, the results suggest, in general, that the respondents strongly believed that the attitudinal and motivational factors set as independent variables positively affecting English language readiness for the AEC are essential in helping them improve their English language readiness. However, only two of these four variables (i.e., ideal self and cultural interest) were found to have significant positive predictive effects on English language readiness for the AEC.

This is the first empirical study that linked the ideal self and English language readiness of Thai students in Thailand to the researchers' knowledge. Hence, earlier theories, concepts, and studies on the self were used to justify the findings that the students somewhat agree with the advanced notion that the ideal self as a motivating factor in learning English positively affects English language readiness. The concept of ideal self was originally proposed to describe an individual's ideal future self. According to Markus and Nurius (1986), the ideal self facilitates a conceptual link between cognition and motivation, indicating that individuals who see themselves successful in the future are motivated to work hard to achieve that aimed success. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) suggested that this psychological assumption could also be applied in learning a target language. They theorized that the ideal self could be a potent motivator to learn a new language because of the innate psychological nature of the individual to reduce the discrepancy between his or her current self and future ideal self. Therefore, based on the results of the study and the theories and concepts relating to the ideal self, the Grade 8 students at Horwang School who had high expectations for their future in the

context of using English in the AEC also developed a higher level of motivation in learning the language to achieve balance between their current proficiency and ideal proficiency of the English language.

Similar to the justification of the finding on the significant positive effect of the ideal self on English language readiness, earlier theories and concepts were also invoked to justify the positive relationship between cultural interest and English language readiness. Sociolinguistics studies presumed that language and culture are inseparable and closely related (e.g., Jiang, 2000). Hence, it is highly possible that cultural interest toward a community of people also includes a desire to get oriented to their language. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) implied, a positive attitude toward speakers of a target language increase motivational behavior to learn the language, which ultimately increases the likelihood of achieving the goal of learning the language. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) further proposed that cultural interest is influenced by the cultural products delivered by the mass media (e.g., films, TV programs, magazines, and pop music). In the context of the Horwang School's Grade 8 students, their appreciation of the cultures of the English-speaking people from ASEAN countries as presented by the mass media could have motivated them to learn the language and, as such, made their English fluency ready for the AEC.

As for the findings that integrativeness and direct contact had no significant impact on the English language readiness, the results provided insightful information into the insufficiencies of the variables improving English language readiness of Horwang School's Grade 8 students for the AEC. However, it is worth noting that the respondents' levels of integrativeness and direct contact were over the means, suggesting that, on personal levels, they somewhat agreed with the importance of the variables in learning English in the ASEAN context. Hence, the current study inferred that integrating themselves in AEC and the prospect of having more direct contacts with English-speaking ASEAN citizens, though viewed as necessary, did not have a significant impact on their English language readiness.

Overall, the results of the analyses indicated that the four posited predictor variables of English language readiness for the AEC were somewhat agreed by Horwang School's Grade 8 students to be necessary for improving English proficiency. However, only two of those predictor variables significantly affected their English language readiness for the AEC. The two were the ideal self and cultural interests, suggesting that combining them could explain the variance of English language readiness. As for the variables integrativeness and direct contact, the results indicated they did not have any effects on

English language readiness; however, the respondents reported strong levels of such variables.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study support that the ideal self has a positive predictive effect on English language readiness for the AEC, it is concluded that Grade 8 students at Horwang School had high expectations for their future in the context of using English in the AEC. The literature proposed that as a motivator of learning a foreign language, the ideal self has a potent effect on English language learning (Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). The confirmation in the current study that this is true implies that high school educators at Horwang School and even in other high schools in Thailand may include education-related programs that can encourage their students to develop a positive perception of the ASEAN, especially on the aspect of being successful business leaders or workers in the future because of their proficiency in the English language. As inferred from the finding, Thai students who perceive that their potential future self or ideal self will be successful because of their proficiency in the English language are likely to be motivated to exert more effort in improving their English to reduce the discrepancy between their current and future ideal self.

Another implication can be drawn from the finding that cultural interest positively affects English language readiness for the AEC. Language and culture are inseparable (Jiang, 2000). According to the literature, positive attitudes toward speakers of a target language, including their cultures, increase motivational behavior to learn the language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Therefore, if educators in Thailand can modify their curriculum and include a subject focusing on the studies of the cultures of the other ASEAN countries, especially those that use English as the first or second language, it may help improve the student's English proficiency. School assignments that include research through the mass media about the cultural products of the English-speaking ASEAN countries can also increase the students' cultural interests in those countries. School facilities and equipment that can help expose Thai students to the cultural products of the English-speaking ASEAN countries may also help. As the literature indicates, interest in English-speaking countries' cultural products motivates the learners to learn English (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Hence, exposing the students to the cultural products of the English-speaking ASEAN countries is helpful. One way of facilitating such exposure is by installing television sets that show pop culture shows, current events, and the latest trends in English-speaking ASEAN countries. The television sets can be installed in areas around the school campus where students spend much of

their free time during breaks.

Methodologically, the study can be improved in the future by utilizing a longitudinal approach. In a longitudinal study, each participant is observed at multiple time points, thereby allowing trends in an outcome to be monitored over time (Sedgwick, 2014). As a result, a longitudinal study may be able to pinpoint the magnitude of the roles of the variables in the English language readiness model as the detection of the developments or changes of the effects with respect to time is made possible and, therefore, provide results with higher levels of validity and accuracy.

Furthermore, future research may consider a survey that includes many high schools in Bangkok and other provinces in Thailand. A national randomized study is expected to give better and more accurate results regarding the state of the English language readiness of high school students in Thailand. A national survey with a larger sample size will also have more statistical power and more value when it comes to the generalizability of the results. A comparative study between Thai high school students in cities where there are many tourists (e.g., Bangkok and Pattaya) and their counterparts in the provinces and other rural areas where exposure to foreigners and their cultures is rare might also provide confirmatory support to the generalizability of the findings that contact and cultural interest have some degrees of influence on English readiness.

Future studies may also modify the English language readiness model of the current study. As the R^2 of the regression analysis indicated that the combination of two predictor variables (i.e., ideal self and cultural interest) of English language readiness for the AEC in the present study explain only 11% of its variance, future researchers may include other psychological latent variables that were not included in this study's model. Some of the latent variables that can be included are attitudes towards the use of the English language in the AEC and perceptions of the economic incentives because of English proficiency in the AEC. The addition of such variables can provide a more thorough understanding of Thai students' EFL acquisition. The results can help explain the roles of personal-level attitudinal attributes and perceptions of economic gains as English language learning motivators in the context of the AEC.

Lastly, the current study provides original acumen on the significant effects of ideal self and cultural interest on the English language readiness of Thai high school students. However, the measurements of the variables may have had validity issues as they have not been used outside of the current study.

Therefore, future studies in Thai high schools may also use the variables and the measurements in different research contexts in order to test their replicability. The fulfillment of the expected outcomes will solidify the involvement of the variables in impacting English language readiness. Still, it will also help establish and ensure the stronger reliability of the research instruments used in this study.

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