QUEER LEARNER IDENTITY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A THAI CONTEXT

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Abstract:
This study examined the identity construction of queer learners in English language learning and its influences on English language learning. The four participants were male, queer and studied in English majors and English language teaching in a Thai university. Two of the participants were known to the researcher. Semi-structured interviews, field notes, and a digital sound recorder were used for data collection and qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that queer characteristics and marginalized and unequal positions based on gender identity and sexual orientation were two main factors constituting queer learner identity in English language learning. The majority of the participants shared that their queer characteristics were conducive to their speaking skills. Additionally, it was shown that the heteronormative Thai context motivated the participants to pursue English language proficiency. The participants reported that English language proficiency was advantageous for their future success and helped them gain parental and societal acceptance. Moreover, the participants stated that learning the English language would allow them to migrate to English-speaking countries that are welcoming to queer people. The results also indicated that some participants who desire a Western partner viewed English as beneficial to finding a Western man, whom they thought would be more open to gender diversity than Thai men. These findings provide a better understanding of the identity construction of queer learners and its influences on English language learning.

Keywords: queer learner identity, positioning, English language learning, Thai EFL context

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1. Introduction

Learner identity plays a significant role in language learning and has received much attention in foreign language learning research over the past decades. Every learner has a unique identity that influences their behavior and the language acquisition process. Understanding learner identity may help to explain why some learners are successful in language learning, whereas others struggle to develop their language proficiency even at a beginner's level.

Recently, there has been a growing body of research on learner identity in language education, including the role of sexual identities in the language classroom (Beebe, 2002; Courtney, 2007; Nelson, 2009, 2010, 2012; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; King, 2008; Nguyen & Yang, 2015; Paiz, 2015). A number of studies have found that social discourse in the classroom, including the language classroom, were mainly heteronormative (Courtney 2007; Dalley & Campbell 2006; Kappra & Vandrick 2006; Liddicoat 2009; Nelson 1993, 1999, 2009, 2010; O'Mochain, Mitchell, & Nelson 2003; O'Mochain 2006) and queer learners are taunted in a classroom (Anderson et al., 1997; Moita-Lopes, 2006; Saint Pierre, 1994). When learners come out as gay or are called gay by others in the classroom, they face an adverse reaction from their classmates. Moreover, the teachers are unsure how to deal with it and often keep silent (Moita-Lopes, 2006; Nelson, 2009). Rondón (2012) found that queer learners were uncomfortable revealing their sexual identity in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, which directly affected students' participation in classroom activities and the development of language proficiency. Norton (2000) suggested that some queer language learners may refrain from the classroom due to its heteronormative nature or instructors or friends' stereotypes about their sexual orientation. While queer learners' freedom and rights in the classroom may be discouraged, the heteronormativity of the classroom may impact their impetus for and investment in acquiring English language proficiency. Indeed, the English language is seen as a sort of gay lingua franca that helps them gain access to more welcoming and wider queer communities (Beebe, 2002; King, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Moore, 2013, 2016).

Although queer issues in ELT have recently received increased attention, studies examining queer learner identity and English language learning have been overlooked (King, 2008). As such, this study explored the identity construction of queer learners in English language learning and its influences on English language learning in a Thai EFL context. The following research questions were formulated to guide the study as follows:
1) How do queer learners constitute their identity in English language learning?
2) How does queer learner identity influence English language learning?

2. Literature review

In the field of language education, the term "*identity*" is generally understood as a learner's identity as a second or foreign language learner (García-Pastor, 2018b). A learner's identity in language learning refers to "*the different subjectivities and subject*

positions they inhabit or have ascribed to them within particular social, historical, and cultural contexts" (Block, 2013, p. 18). In addition, identity theory states that identity is a sense of self that is socially situated and constrained and "*dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place*" (Norton, 2006, p. 502). Identities are imposed by the contexts in which people are born and the person's life experiences and, as such, people cannot freely or easily select who they want to be (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) and must negotiate their identity through the broader economic, historical and social context in which they live.

Before discussing the research on learner identity and language learning, the word queer will be described first. Queer is generally understood as an umbrella term for non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) (Gray, 2016). Therefore, a sexual identity of male participants, who desire and are desired by men, in the current study will be under the umbrella term of "queer." Queer gender identity is viewed as marginalized and unequal; queer people are thus denied 'the cultural rewards afforded those whose public performances of self are contained within that narrow band of behaviors considered proper to a heterosexual identity (Cameron & Kulick, 2006).

2.1 Role of gender in language learning

Sex is assigned at birth and is determined as a biological fact. By contrast, gender identity is "a person's own feelings about their gender – whether they are male, female, both or neither" (Paechter, 2001, p. 47). In addition, Paechter (2001) states: "*Gender identity is a private matter; we demonstrate our gender identity, by and large, by the playing out of gender roles, and these roles are learned – usually unconsciously, and usually in early childhood and in adolescence*" (p.49).

Educational research has revealed that gender differences play a significant role in students' academic interests, needs, and achievements (Halpern, 1986; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2000). Many studies have revealed that gender differences in language acquisition are due to social factors (Sunderland, 2000). Specifically, women and men are aware of the appropriate behaviors and attitudes dictated by social norms and their families. As such, non-physical gender differences are constructed by socialization (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002). In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), women are superior to men in the second language learning process (Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987; Ehrlich, 2001). According to Ellis (2012), women might acquire a language better than men because they are more open to learning the new language structures and tend to use the correct forms of the target language. Also, a language classroom represents a specific socio-educational environment where students have to speak or interact with their peers or teachers. This environment has been described as a "*girls' domain*" (Sunderland, 1998). Thus, it is believed that studying language is traditionally considered a female activity, which may have psychological and social implications for both women and men. This may explain why language acquisition is faster for women than men (Logan & Johnston, 2009).

Several studies have examined queer gender identity in the field of language education. These studies have found that queer learners have cultural, including queer beliefs, ideologies, knowledge, and linguistic repertoires that are employed in the queer communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There are discursive practices in conversations between queer people that often include certain lexical items, speech patterns, grammatical forms, and conversational styles (e.g. Abe 2006; Barrett 1997; Coates & Jordan 1997; Podesva, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler 2006). Moreover, it has been extensively shown that social interactions in the classroom are likely to be heteronormative (e.g. Courtney 2007; Dalley & Campbell 2006; Kappra & Vandrick 2006; Liddicoat 2009; Moita-Lopes 2006; Nelson 1993, 1999, 2009, 2010; O'Mochain, Mitchell, & Nelson 2003; O'Mochain 2006) and heteronormative conversations may result in negative words about homosexuality (Courtney 2007). Queer people are denied the cultural rewards (Cameron & Kulick 2006) and are often embarrassed in class (Anderson et al., 1997; Moita-Lopes, 2006; Saint Pierre, 1994). It is common for queer learners to face negative reactions from their classmates when coming out as gay or being called gay (Moita-Lopes, 2006; Nelson, 2009). They may choose to conceal their queer identity in order to avoid discrimination from their friends or teachers (Vandrick, 1997). Moreover, some queer language learners reported that the classroom content did not fit their personal information, and this marginalization may also create an undesirable learning space for queer language learners (Moore, 2016) and impact students' motivation and investment. When disconnection between the content of the classroom and learners' identities appear, the learners may struggle in their learning (McKay & Wong, 1996), resist teaching (Talmy, 2009) or ignore classroom participation (Norton 2000). Overall, queer learners may face numerous inequalities or issues in the classroom and may not find a preferred identity in a language classroom.

Although some studies have started to examine how queer learners' gender identity is constructed or constrained by the experience of discrimination in the social context and how a queer learner identity affects language acquisition, the problems related to identity and language acquisition have not been adequately solved. A gap, therefore, remains in the study of queer learner identity in language education (King, 2008).

2.2 Positioning theory and the analysis of identity in discourse

The positioning theory of Davies and Harré (1990) is a theoretical framework and a method to analyze identity construction and language learning experience inside and outside the classroom (Kayi-Aydar 2013; Menard-Warwick 2008; Wortham 2004). Positioning Theory has been used in many educational fields for several decades and remains influential (Davies & Harré 1990; van Langenhove & Harré 1999). Positioning is related to how individuals construct themselves and others through discursive practices, including speech, oral and written discourse, language use, and other acts (Davies & Harré 1990). Langenhove and Harré (1999) revealed the impact of positioning in a conversation that "*one can position oneself or be positioned as, e.g., powerful or powerless, confident or apologetic, dominant or submissive, definitive or tentative, authorized or*

unauthorized" (p. 17). However, people may accept or reject certain rights or duties that they are assigned.

Positioning theory can be divided into two modes: reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself, and interactive positioning in which one positions others and is positioned by others (Davies & Harré, 1990). Importantly, reflexive positioning may be deliberate (individuals choose to express their personal identity) or forced (individuals are asked to position themselves by others). Another distinction that is important for the current research is the distinction between first-order positioning and second-order positioning. First-order positioning refers to the way individuals locate themselves and others in discourse. In contrast, second-order positioning occurs when the first-order positioning is questioned and challenged or is not taken for granted by others involved in the discourse (Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Positioning plays a significant role in constructing one's identity. This theory helps to illustrate how positioning creates one's identity and behavior and identifies how students shape and show literacy identities and how instructors can support learners' identities (Vetter, 2010).

2.3 Related studies on queer issues in language education

Recently, the importance of sexual identities in the classroom has been recognized in the field of language education (Nelson, 2012). A number of studies have found that discourse in language programs and classrooms were mainly heteronormative (e.g. Courtney 2007; Dalley & Campbell 2006; Kappra & Vandrick 2006; Liddicoat 2009; Moita-Lopes 2006; Nelson 1993, 1999, 2009, 2010; O'Mochain, Mitchell, & Nelson 2003; O'Mochain 2006). For example, Paiz (2015) investigated 45 ESL reading textbooks and found that most of the samples promoted heteronormative worldviews that tended to avoid issues related to queers. Therefore, textbooks may negatively impact queer learner voices and restrict queer learner identity in the classroom. Dalley and Campbell (2006) also investigated peer discourses among youth at a bilingual high school in Canada. The researchers used data from a 4-year ethnographic study of student interactions for analysis. The findings revealed that although school promoted sexual diversity, social interactions in the classrooms and school were dominantly heteronormative.

Another main focus of current research efforts is the relationship between queer learners and English language learning (King, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Rondón, 2012; Nguyen & Yang, 2015; Moore, 2013, 2016). Rondón (2012) examined how EFL LGBTQ+ students navigate their gender in the classroom using Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis. This study consisted of six short-range narratives that showed unstable discourses of LGBT individuals when challenging or resisting heteronormative classroom discourse. The findings showed that queer learners felt uncomfortable in an EFL classroom because they were concerned about revealing their sexuality. This directly affected queer learners' participation in activities and their development of language proficiency. This marginalization may also damage the desirable learning space for queer language learners.

King (2008) also investigated learner identity and the language learning experiences of three Korean gay men. The participants were asked to write about a

negative experience they faced while speaking a second language and were also interviewed. The findings showed that marginalized sexual identities motivate learners to choose to study English in a liberal city in the USA in order to enter a broader queer community where they can more easily find legitimacy. Similarly, Moore (2013) investigated the relationship between the sexual identity of five Japanese gay male English and second language acquisition learners. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were used for data collection. The findings found that the Japanese gay men had a conflict between their sexual identity and their options in a Japanese context. Thus, participants stated that their motivation to learn English was to embrace their gay identity and look for a welcoming place.

In 2010, Nelson conducted a study on gay immigrants who have been largely missing from the language education literature. An interview was conducted with the participant, who was a gay man from Mexico studying English in the United States. This case study showed that gay topics were unspeakable in the language classroom. The findings also revealed that the participant (Pablo) perceived that his gay identity was important in his social discourses in an English-speaking country, both inside and outside the classroom. This motivated him to improve his English language proficiency and move to an English-speaking country. As a gay man, the English language was the lingua franca that helped Pablo gain access to a global gay community. Similarly, Nguyen and Yang (2015) investigated the English classroom participation of a Korean queer learner who identified herself as a transgender woman. This study focused on how the participant constructed gender identity in her discourse and her learner identity positioning both inside and outside the classroom. Data were collected in field notes, interviews, classroom recordings, postings on a social media network and a video recording of the participant's interactions with friends outside the classroom. The findings showed that the participant's aim was to gain access to queer communities rather than the classroom community. The participant also mentioned that learning English was essential to her transition since it could allow her to live in a wider LGBTQ+ community.

Based on the literature review, the nature of language learner identity and its roles in English language acquisition are needed for further investigations, especially in a Thai EFL context. As such, the current study aimed to explore queer learners' identity formation in language learning and its influences on English language learning. Understanding the nature of learner identity and its influences on language acquisition will shed lights on the roles of learner identity in the development of English language acquisition.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants
Participants in this study were queer men who studied in an English major and English language teaching at a government university in northeastern Thailand. To counter biases in collecting the data, four male participants were separated into two equal groups:

known and unknown to the researcher. The participants were male queer language learners who experienced marginalization and inequality based on gender identity and sexual orientation in a Thai EFL context.

3.2 Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews were employed and the interview questions were based on second language acquisition (SLA) theory. The researcher interviewed one-on-one with each participant three times to be more familiar with the participants and gain in-depth information. The interview session for one participant was approximately two hours. The researcher conducted interviews at a café in the northeastern region of Thailand, where the participants would be more relaxed. Follow-up questions were used if additional information was required. For recording the interview, a digital sound recorder and field notes were also used.

3.3 Data collection procedure

Before collecting data, the participants were informed of the objectives of the study. The interviews were conducted in Thai to elicit information from the participants. Before the interview, the researcher provided them with a copy of the interview questions. Therefore, the participants could give better and more focused answers. In addition, the researcher informed the participants that they could skip any question they felt uncomfortable answering. The researcher conducted interviews with each participant over three sessions (2 hours in total). The reasons for conducting interviews over three sessions have been described by Seidman (1991). The first interview was an ice-breaking session for the unknown participants that helped establish a relationship between the interviewer and interviewees. Also, this session allowed both known and unknown participants to recall specific details about the research questions. For the second interview, the researcher stimulated and asked pertinent interview questions to gain in-depth information and more detail regarding the research questions. In the third interview, the researcher asked any questions and clarified any doubts to complete the research questions.

Field notes and a digital sound recorder were used to collect the interview data. After each interview, the researcher promptly checked the audio recording to ensure that it was ready for transcription. Then, the recording was transcribed, and the transcription was translated from Thai to English. The follow-up interview was used if some points needed to be clarified.

3.4 Data analysis

Positioning Theory was used to analyze how queer learners constitute their identity in English language learning and how queer learner identity influences English language learning (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999). The researcher transcribed the interviews and then read and used a thematic analysis, which included identifying themes and coding the interview transcript. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the study was designed to established trust and rapport with the research participants. The researcher

was well-known to two of the participants, and it was believed that this relationship would be advantageous to data collection as the trust can encourage the participants to talk openly about various and sensitive topics. For the unknown participants, before conducting the interview, the researcher invited the participants to meet at a café and restaurant to build friendships. The researcher started with small talk about light topics, injected humour into the conversation to break the ice, and avoided asking direct questions at this moment. The researcher was always open-minded, flexible, sincere, respectful, and empathetic.

To increase reliability and verify the research instrument's suitability, a pilot test was conducted before collecting data. Moreover, to collect accurate data, interviews were audiotaped and transcribed immediately after finishing each interview. To confirm the transcripts' accuracy, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts and provided them to each participant to verify their accuracy.

4. Results and Discussion

The current findings found that queer characteristics and marginal and unequal positions played significant roles in constituting queer learner identity in English language learning in a Thai context. The following sections outline the findings obtained from the interview and discuss these findings within the conceptual framework to better understand the construction of queer learning identity and its influences on English language learning in a Thai EFL context.

4.1 The constitution of queer learner identity in English language learning
4.1.1 Queer characteristics and English language learning
The four participants stated that queer learners were naturally outgoing and often overacted more than typical straight persons. Indeed, the majority of the queer participants revealed these attributes through their primary discourse patterns. Most participants shared similar English language learning characteristics based on their queer gender identity; they produced exaggerated speech styles and used many gestures that animated their body language while speaking English. Thus, the findings revealed that some characteristics, including exaggerating conversational styles and using numerous gestures, contributed to the participants' queer learner identity in English language learning. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

> [1] *"I think confidence is a universal queer characteristic. We make things more fun with our queer characteristics…Saying something in a flat or bland tone like… "girl" (say in a flat tone), we say girllllll (high pitched and exciting tone)."* [Karn]

> [2] *"We have the confidence to make things more exaggerating than usual, including speaking English…When speaking English, I use dramatic expressions and gestures. It just comes naturally…Sometimes I just speak English out of nowhere…It is a part of queer identity."* [Tommy]

[3] "*As a queer, I can be as exaggerated as I want. There is no need to care about lady-like manners or gentleman manners. I can just mix everything up and be confident. We are not so tensed when speaking. Just let everything go with the flow. My queer characteristics actually help me to be more confident to speak English.*" [Yoya]

[4] "*Queers are more exaggerating, so when they practice speaking skill, they do it in such a dramatic way, so exaggerating (laugh).*" [Mike]

4.1.2 Marginalized and unequal positions in a Thai context

The qualitative data analysis revealed that queer people were considered unfavorable in a Thai context, in which a hostile social environment supported prejudices, stereotypes, sexual harassment, and bullying. Indeed, people, including their family, generally had negative stereotypes and attitudes toward queer people: they labeled homosexuals as abnormal, deviant, and offensive. Thus, the participants were positioned as marginalized and unequal because of sexual orientation and gender identity. This is shown in the following excerpts:

[5] "*Although people say that they are open-minded about LGBTQ+, it is not comfortable enough for queers. Transgender people are labeled as clowns or people who serve to be funny characters to other people in a school or a workplace.*" [Karn]

[6] "*I think Thai people do not really accept LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ is only accepted in some groups...Being queers or LGBTQ+ has made me really frustrated to reveal my identity…I need to hide my identity when I meet my relatives…Many times, I was bullied and looked down when I explained things to them. Since then, I gave up talking and explaining things to them.*" [Tommy]

[7] "*I was bullied and called E-Kathoey (E is a Thai swear word) (Kathoey is a transgender person) by people in my neighborhood…People also criticized my beauty and appearance and said how I could be a transgender because of my appearance and body shape.*" [Yoya]

[8] "*People bullied me just because of my gender identity…So, when I looked good, people liked to make fun of me…People might think that it was just kidding, and they did it again and again. For me, I think bullying is not funny.*" [Mike]

Also, the findings showed that schools were places that predominantly reinforced heteronormativity and all participants often faced oppression, bullying, homophobia, invisibility, and inequality because of their gender identity positioning. The participants revealed that they were often embarrassed and made fun of by the teachers and peers within the school context. They suffered from being treated differently from men and women and frequently experiencing disgusting physical, verbal and sexual harassment, as shown in the excerpts below:

[9] *"Even though we, queers, helped and volunteered many school's works, we were ignored by other people…The teacher then called me E-Yen (a slave woman name in Thai drama)…She explained that this name suited me well because I did everything others assigned to me."* [Karn]

[10] *"A male friend sexually harassed me. He peeked at me when I took a shower, and he then told everyone about my body…That was too much for me. At that time, I felt there had had inequality in gender diversity…I was sexually bullied many times by both words and manners when I was young."* [Tommy]

[11] *"At that time, I had acne and was late for the science class. Then, the male teacher embarrassed me by saying that my face was like an HIV-positive person."* [Yoya]

[12] *"Some male friends squeezed my butt, chest, and even my penis because they thought they could do this to every gay person. They always made fun of me…I did the gardening like other boys. Then, my teacher made fun of me that I did a boy's job. And then, every peer laughed at me."* [Mike]

As queer gender identity was considered unfavorable and conservative in a Thai sociocultural context, all queer participants in this study, who did not conform to the heterosexual norm, encountered several difficulties and feared coming out to their parents. Two participants (Tommy and Mike) stated that they have not yet come out to their parents. Although their parents probably perceived their gender identity, the parents avoided the topic of sexual orientation and still raised them as boys. However, the participants' parents never reacted negatively. Still, it was challenging for Tommy and Mike to officially come out to their parents. The two participants were fearful of coming out and concealed their gender identity from their parents because they were afraid of parental rejection and other unfavorable outcomes, as illustrated in the following extracts:

[13] *"Actually, my parents do not talk about this topic…But I think they have already known my gender identity. My parents raised me as a boy…One time, my boyfriend drove me home. My parents asked nothing but just peeped at us. Sometimes I was depressed, and I knew that I wanted to get over that hard situation."* [Mike]

[14] *"I have not come out yet. Actually, I am trying to make my life better…To prove to my family that they can depend on me…When I can do these things…I will come out. I am not sure that my parents know my gender identity. Anyway, I assume that they may know about my gender. I think they are waiting for me to tell them first."* [Tommy]

The other two participants, Karn and Yoya, whose sexual orientation and gender identity were known to their parents, also encountered many difficulties. After coming out to their parents, Karn and Yoya initially had to conform to gender norms since their

parents did not immediately and completely accept who they were as transgender people. Specifically, both of their fathers reacted negatively and showed denial, anger, blame, and other adverse reactions after learning their sons' gender identity. In fact, the relationship between the two participants and their fathers were terrible: Karn and Yoya were unlikely to talk with their fathers and avoided showing their gender expressions toward their fathers. The statements below support these claims:

[15] *"In the past, I could not express my gender identity…My father was so furious and harshly scolded me."* [Yoya]

[16] *"When I came out, I had a difficult relationship with my father. I could not be with my father. It was so quiet and weird. I felt frustrated. I knew that my father did not feel well at all…So, I decided not to talk with him and avoided facing him as many times as I could."* [Karn]

Moreover, the current findings revealed that the participants were judged incompetent because Thai people and even the teachers held prejudices and negative stereotypes of queer people's potentials and values. In addition, others often used negative words and questioned the participants' competency:

[17] *"The teacher believed that LGBT people could not be teachers and had no qualifications because LGBT people would teach others' kids being LGBT. They were likely to overlook my competencies and values."* [Karn]

[18] *"Other people often considered queer people incompetent who always hung out with men or only focused on the dressing."* [Mike]

[19] *"I was looked down on that being Kathoey (a transgender) was incompetent or could not do something like others."* [Tommy]

As mentioned above, being positioned as marginalized and unequal due to their sexual orientation and gender identity was an impetus for all four participants to be experts in English. Indeed, the participants believed that English proficiency was crucial for their job opportunities and future achievement, as well as to resist a marginal position and gain parental and societal acceptance. Additionally, the findings showed that most of the participants were motivated to acquire English in order to migrate to an English-speaking country, a more welcoming place for queer people in their opinion. Moreover, finding a Western partner, which was a way of earning respect and acceptance from others in their views and was a consequence of being treated negatively by Thai men, also motivated Karn and Yoya in their English learning. Most participants stated that their queer characteristics were positively intertwined with English speaking skills. Thus, the findings of the current study indicate that queer characteristics and marginal and

unequal positions were the major factors affecting the formation of learner identity as an English expert.

4.2 Influences of queer learner identities in English language learning in a Thai EFL context

4.2.1 Queer characteristics and English language learning

The findings of the current study also revealed some of the characteristics of queer learning identity that influenced English language learning. It was found that most participants (Karn, Tommy, and Yoya) were likely to use exaggerated discourses, expressions and gestures when speaking English. The participants also shared several characteristics, including self-confidence, outgoingness, and high risk-taking. The following excerpts support these claims:

> [53] *"I think being queer makes me more comfortable when speaking English. It helps with the accent and pronunciation…We make things more fun with our queer characteristics. Saying something in flat or bland tones like… "girl" (say in a flat tone), we say girllllll (high pitched and exciting tone)…Sometimes my queer characteristics do not only help with learning accent but also learning content…I use my creative queer words to help me remember the story…A fun word choice made a study more fun."* [Karn]

> [54] *"I do think my queer characteristics really help me improve my English-speaking skill. They really help with the accent and my word choices when I speak English…Other people may find it difficult to pronounce English words because they are shy…I think it is easier for LGBTQ to speak English smoothly and to sound like a native speaker…Sometimes I just speak English out of nowhere…It is more like a fun thing we do. We have the confidence to make things more exaggerating than usual, including speaking English."* [Tommy]

> [55] *"Queer characteristics were good because there is no need to care about lady-like manners or gentleman manners. I could just mix everything up and be a confident queer. When speaking English, I had more acting or gestures than other men and women…So, it was not difficult for me (speaking English)…I can be as exaggerating as I want…My queer characteristics help me to be more confident and fluent in speaking English…We are not so tensed when speaking. Just let everything go with the flow."* [Yoya]

> [56] *"We queers are more exaggerating and overreacting, so when we practice our speaking skill, we do it in such a dramatic way, so exaggerating (laugh)…However, I think good pronunciation depends more on an individual…more about practicing, learning, and using the language to be more native-like."* [Mike]

All participants revealed that queer people normally used exaggerated speech styles and expressions when speaking English. They believed that these were universal queer characteristics. Also, the majority of the participants was confident and fluent and

was also less worried about speaking English or pronouncing English words. For instance, examples 53 and 54 showed that Karn and Tommy produced various strange and exaggerated accents and created situations to engage in English conversation. Also, these two participants used creative words when communicating in English. Moreover, Karn, Tommy, and Yoya were outgoing and took risks when speaking English. Example 55 illustrated that Yoya was an English language learner who had self-confidence when speaking English because she did not conform to gender roles and stereotypes or what others considered appropriate as male or female. Also, Yoya did not act specifically masculine or feminine but instead embraced characteristics of both genders. These queer characteristics were conducive to the acquisition and development of English language proficiency, especially speaking skills.

The findings agree with many scholars (e.g. Abe 2006; Barrett 1997; Coates & Jordan 1997; Podesva, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler 2006) that queer people have certain lexical items, speech patterns, and conversational styles in discourses. Similarly, Lave and Wenger's (1991) claims showed that queer learners have a cultural capital such as linguistic repertoire used in social interactions. Also, the current study's findings supported Ely's (1986) research findings that risk-taking positively impacts second language proficiency because the learners attempt to practice vocabulary or expressions that they are not sure of. Similarly, Chastain (1975), Robinson et al. (1994), and Yamashiro & McLaughlin's (2001) studies showed that an outgoing personality (extroversion) and success in foreign language acquisition was positive. Unlike Beebe's (1983) research, it claims that successful second language learners are moderate risk-takers that they only use expressions or vocabulary they have acquired. Also, unlike Oxford & Ehrman's (1995) study, they illustrated no significant relationship between extroversion and introversion. In Tehrani et al., (2014) study, they showed that introvert learners did better on pronunciation when compared to extrovert learners.

4.2.2 Marginalized and unequal positioning and English language learning

The current study found that queer participants were often viewed as 'abnormal', 'weird', or 'offensive' mainly because they were queer. The participants were positioned as marginalized and unequal based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. Therefore, people, in general, looked down on and had negative attitudes toward the participants. All participants revealed that they were considered incompetent and undervalued because of their gender identity positioning. Others often overlooked the competencies of the participants. However, these negative stereotypes and prejudices motivated the participants to study English to resist the social ritual and the marginal positions others bestowed upon them. As all four participants were interested in English, they thus enthusiastically studied English to negotiate their positions in order to gain legitimacy and parental and societal acceptance of their sexual orientation and gender identity

[42] *"I tried to prove myself by studying English hard and participating in competitions in school so that teachers, peers, and peers' parents accepted me. Then they would inform my parents about my potential…I was not incompetent because of my sexuality…I tried to prove that being Kathoey (a transgender) could be good at learning…"* [Karn]

[43] *"I was looked down on by others that I did not have the potential to do or achieve something like others…So, if I could do it, I would not be undervalued like other thought…It was a drive (being gay) that helped me improve my English proficiency to be a successful and gain acceptance from society."* [Tommy]

[44] *"I suffered from being looked down on, but it motivated me to be better than men and women. So, I would be accepted. If I could not study well, others would aggravate me…As my queer gender identity made my parents disappointed, it greatly inspired me to improve my English skills."* [Yoya]

[45] *"People, in general, had stereotypes toward queer people that we were disabled and not interested in studying that always went out with men or wasted time in dressing...I attempted to prove myself to them by developing English and acquiring a good job."* [Mike]

Also, the current findings also showed that the participants focused on their English language proficiency to acquire better employment opportunities and future success. Indeed, having a well-respected career could help the participants negotiate their positions and gain parental and societal acceptance and legitimacy. Thus, the participants were extremely motivated and dedicated to developing and improving their English proficiency as much as possible. The following excerpts illustrate these findings:

[46] *"Coming to my parents is my ultimate dream. It directly motivated me in learning. In order to come out, I must have a good job or be a successful person…Having high English proficiency can help achieve my dream…I do everything to improve my English proficiency, i.e., makes me watch English video, talk to native English speakers, and so on to make it happen and gain acceptance and come out to my parents."* [Tommy]

[47] *"I wanted to improve my English proficiency in order to overcome those bullying… make my family accept me…I must be successful. It was an inspiration to acquire English…I try to prove myself to have good jobs or make more money."* [Mike]

The excerpts above illustrate that queer participants attempted to reposition themselves through English language learning. Often viewed as incompetent or undervalued, queer participants made a great effort to develop their English language ability to be valued and widely respected as a community member by others, including teachers, classmates, and family members. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977a) suggestion that in unequal situations of social interaction,

language is "*an instrument of power*" (p. 648), and "*some persons are not in a position to speak or must win their audience, whereas others effortlessly command attention.*" (p. 650). Also, Norton (2016) argued that dreams and hopes for future achievement acted as motivators for learners to acquire English language proficiency. Darvin and Norton (2015) also argued that students "*may not be invested in the language practices of a given classroom if the practices are racist, sexist, or homophobic*" (p. 37). However, the findings are inconsistent with Darvin and Norton's (2015) claim that students "*may not be invested in the language practices of a given classroom if the practices are racist, sexist, or homophobic*" (p. 37). Also, unlike Howie's (1999) findings, positioning a learner as inferior probably affect learners' interaction negatively.

Another motivation for most participants to learn English was to flee persecution in a Thai context and to gain freedom of gender expression. Indeed, the participants were seen as abnormal and offensive by others in society and often experienced negative treatments and other barriers to gender equality because of their gender identity positioning. Karn, Tommy, and Yoya expressed the need to immigrate to an English-speaking country, as they believed western cultures to be more liberal and welcoming for queer people:

[48] "*I felt that in the Western countries, being queer was not weird…So, I have much motivation to learn English in order to experience and live there.*" [Karn]

[49] "*I needed to study and live in western countries because they may be more open about gender diversity than Thailand and Asia…It inspires me to struggle to learn English.*" [Yoya]

[50] "*I wanted to live in western countries because I like technologies, quality of life… I want to live in an environment that was more welcoming for LGBTQ+, and most people are more open to LGBTQ+ people than Thais…They see LGBT people as usual and coming out was more freedom…Which is highly different to Thailand.*" [Tommy]

The results of the study are consistent with several other studies. For example, Barrnet (2006) argues that "*imagined communities can help students to invest more in the learning*" (p. 4). Also, people are motivated to achieve things they hope for and avoid the things they fear. Past experiences and hope for the future can impact how people interpret and respond to stimuli differently and "*possible selves can provide an effective bridge between motivation and cognition*" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Indeed, language learners can use the target language to help their future success. In addition, Kappra (2003) showed that students who were non-heteronormative and often victims of harassment were likely to leave their countries because of being afraid of their own safety, and Nelson (2006) reported that some gay students are motivated to move countries (Nelson 2006, 206). Similarly, Carrillo (2004) indicated that several gay men migrated to different countries due to a desire to live in a less oppressive environment in terms of sexual identity.

In addition, the findings showed that a Western partner was the ultimate goal for Karn and Yoya in English language learning. These two participants preferred a Western partner because of their negative experiences with Thai men. Also, they stated that Thai men do not accept gender diversity. Moreover, they believed that it would be more socially acceptable to have a Western partner, and this would also gain respect and praise from other people in their neighbourhood:

[51] *"I think Thai men will not accept me…I feel that Western men are more open about diversity…It was another ultimate inspiration in learning English…It motivated me to learn a lot to be more attractive and flirt with them…Also, having a Western husband can help me gain acceptance from other people in my neighbourhood…Acceptance is what I need."* [Karn]

[52] *"It was my ultimate goal (having a Western partner) in learning English…I do not prefer Thai men because they have not been open to my gender…Also, my mom told me that it would be acceptable to have a Western boyfriend. She and other people in my hometown thought having a western husband was good…If I have a Western husband, others would adore me."* [Yoya]

The findings of this study are consistent with Norton (2016), who believes that language learners are encouraged to acquire the target language if they want to gain a broader range of material and symbolic resources that can help them enhance the value of their "*cultural capital and social power*" (476). The current findings revealed that most participants had a passion for studying English as they wanted to live in more welcoming communities and have a Western partner. Norton (2016) argues that the learners' dreams and hopes for the future will motivate their English language learning in the classroom and improve language learning. Ellwood (2006) also showed that a young Japanese man desired an Australian partner, so he studied English and became an international student. Additionally, Carrillo (2004) found that many gay immigrants migrated to other countries because they were less oppressive and provided opportunities to find a partner, be with their partner, or have romantic relationships.

5. Conclusions

The current study investigated how queer learners constitute their identity in English language learning and how it influences English language learning. The findings revealed that there were two main factors, queer characteristics and marginal and unequal positions in a Thai context, constituting queer learner identity in English language learning in a Thai context. The current results showed that the participants had unique English language learning characteristics, inflated speech styles, and exaggerated expressions and gestures in speaking English. When speaking English, the participants used characteristics that were more exaggerated than typical male and female

characteristics. Moreover, most participants tended to be confident, outgoing, and less concerned when speaking English.

Also, the current study showed that the participants occupied marginal and unequal positions as queer gender identity was conservative and unfavorable in Thai society. As such, the participants often faced adverse treatments, prejudices, and stereotypes: they were considered incompetent and worthless. However, these negative positions could partially account for queer language learner identities. As all four participants were interested in English and viewed English as a linguistic tool, the participants tried to constitute the identity construction of an English expert to resist the social ritual and marginal position associated with others' first-order positioning. Having high English proficiency was advantageous for the participants in acquiring employment, gaining access to a more welcoming queer community, and having a Western partner that could help them negotiate their positions and gain parental and societal acceptance and legitimacy. Thus, the participants strived to learn English as much as possible.

6. Recommendations for future studies

This study was conducted in a Thai EFL context and was restricted to a government university in northeastern Thailand. A similar study could be undertaken in another context to obtain more insight into queer learner identity in English language learning. Studies on queer learner identity and language learning remain scarce in the field of SLA (King, 2008). Thus, more studies related to queer learner identity and language learning are needed to better understand queer learner identity and English language learning. This is particularly important in a Thai context, in which queer gender identity is more unfavorable and conservative, and people, in general, still have negative attitudes and stereotypes toward queer people. In addition, more studies on female learners who identify as queer are required.

Conflict of interest statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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