

# DESIRE, SEXUALITY AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF ASIAN GAY MEN IN BANGKOK

*Shih-Wei Cheng*

Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Email: urn123@gmail.com

## Abstract

This research explores the discursive construction of language desire of gay men in Bangkok by illuminating the intersection between English language learning (ELL) and sexuality. Although the fields of English Language Teaching (ELT) in general and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in particular have rigorously investigated learner motivation since the 1980s, literature has suffered from the discourse of heteronormativity (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; King, 2008; Warner, 1993). They have failed to address why gay learners aspire to learn English and how such aspiration is manifested in their linguistic practices and learning. Furthermore, research in the fields of Sexuality and Sociology has rarely academically engaged with the link between the much-explored Asian gay men's sexual fantasy for Western men and their linguistic practices. In order to bridge this gap, this study will adopt the notion of language desire introduced in the work of Piller and Takahashi (2006) and extend it by situating the intersection between Asian gay men's desire and linguistic practice at its heart. As such this research will make a sociolinguistic contribution to ELT literature on motivation and language learning by investigating the ways in which desire is constructed and how it is enacted in everyday life among Asian gay men in Bangkok.

**Key words:** access, desire, heteronormativity, identity, language learning, sexuality

## Introduction

Since I arrived in Thailand in 2011, I have visited a number of famous areas for gay people - the *Telephone Bar* or *The Balcony* on Silom Soi 4 (Soi

is the term used in Thailand for a side-street branching off a major street) and the always-packed *DJ station* on Soi 2 - in order to meet some friends, be they locals, travelers or foreign residents. While walking through those streets, I see many Asian men with foreigners, especially White men. When I see Asian and Western gay men interact in those places, the Asians not only speak good English but also appear to be highly confident and skilful in socializing with their Western interlocutors. These Asian men, with their high English proficiency and smooth communication skills, do not fit the stereotypes of Asians as “deficient second language users” or “shy communicators”, which are still in wide circulation in the fields of ELT and Intercultural Communication (Piller, 2011). Over time, I began to wonder what made them want to learn English in the first place. Did these Asian gay men start learning English because they fancied Western men and saw English as a means to gain access to these men? Or was it because they learned English first and then somehow developed romantic, if not sexual, desire for Western men? Apart from the initial reason for learning English, how did they manage to achieve such high proficiency and to gain confidence in socializing with Westerners?

Many questions such as those above emerged in my mind as I was increasingly introduced to Bangkok’s international gay scene. However, it was not until I came across the work by Piller and Takahashi (2006) on desire and second language learning that I considered my personal curiosity with the Asian gay men’s language use and their attraction for Western men to be an important site of academic inquiry. In their ethnographic study with Japanese women learning English in Australia, they investigated the ways in which these women developed *akogare* (desire) for English alongside their fantasies about Western masculinity. It was often the White Hollywood movie stars and Western singers about whom these women fantasized in adolescence and their fantasies led to increased desire for English and actual use of the language in the future. In fact, when these women, who confessed having developed *akogare* for White men in adolescence, arrived in Australia, they first and foremost considered White male native speakers of English to be both the most desirable interlocutors to socialize with and the most ideal romantic partners.

Keeping Piller and Takahashi’s work in mind, I then looked for similar studies with a focus on Asian gay men’s desire for English and the West. My literature review to date has revealed that the fields of Sexuality and Sociology have paid little attention to the language learning trajectory of Asian gay men who fantasize about Western men. At the same time, it became evident that heteronormativity, i.e. the idea that heterosexuality is the

norm, underlies the literature in the field of ELT (Ellwood, 2006; King, 2008). As Nelson (2005) writes, “even a brief mention of (homo)sexual identities in language education research was rare (and is only slightly less rare today)” (p. 316). According to King (2008), the majority of ELT studies have conceived language learners to be heterosexual, and this discourse also applies to Piller and Takahashi (2006). As such, the language learning trajectory of gay men remains largely invisible in the field. One of the purposes for King’s (2008) research was to problematize heteronormativity in the field of SLA. While King’s study is insightful, it remains to be seen if Asian men in Bangkok’s gay communities are positioned in the same way as his gay male participants in Korea; while homosexuals in Korea find it difficult to reflect on and act upon homosexual identity (Seo, 2001), Thailand thrives on its gay friendly image (Jackson, 1999). Furthermore, King’s (2008) study did not address the ways in which the Korean gay men developed desire for White men and how such desire intersected with their language learning trajectories within their own country. Instead, his participants left Korea for different English speaking countries to pursue more freedom. My study thus sets out to fill this gap in literature on Asian gay men’s desire for English and Western men, and how their desire may mediate their access to opportunities to practice English in Bangkok.

In sum, this research is a critical investigation of the discursive construction of Asian gay men’s desire for English and Western men, and their experience of socializing in Bangkok’s international gay communities. This study aims to illuminate the intersection between language learning and sexuality, an underexplored area of research in the field of ELT.

By expanding Piller and Takahashi’s (2006) heterosexually-oriented work to the gay context and by following the critical stance of several researchers (Ellwood, 2006; King, 2008; Nelson, 1993), I hope to make two types of contributions. First, this study will better inform the field of ELT of the problem with its prevalent heteronormativity, and of the importance of the link between identity, sexuality and second language learning as a research agenda. Second, by focusing on the lived experience of Asian gay men, this study will demystify their image and make their voices heard. In order to explore the discursive construction of language desire of gay men in Bangkok, this study sets out to address the following research questions:

- I. What does it mean to “desire English” from the perspective of Asian gay men in Bangkok?
  - What made them want to learn English in the first place?

- How did they study English?
- 2. How does their desire for English play out in their current private lives?
  - Whom do they want to socialize with, why and how?
- 3. What kinds of ideologies are implicit in their desire for English and Western men?

### From motivation to desire

Since the 1980s, Gardner's (1985) notion of motivation has enormously influenced the direction of research in SLA and ELT. However, his theory has been criticized since the 1990s. For instance, Norton Pierce (1995) and Norton (2000) point out that Gardner's theory of motivation (1985) fundamentally considers motivation as "internal" to learners, and sees them as either motivated or unmotivated. According to this conception, if learners are not motivated and do not acquire high proficiency, the fault is entirely placed on the shoulders of the learners. Criticizing these aspects of Gardner's work and similar conceptualizations of motivation in the field of SLA, Norton Pierce (1995) argued that theorists have not adequately conceptualized the relationship between the language learner and the social world. Furthermore, SLA theorists have paid little attention to how relations of power affect interaction between language learners and target language speakers. To this end, Norton (2000) argued for the notion of investment rather than motivation to capture the complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it. The notion of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires.

Piller and Takahashi's (2006) work extends Norton's (2000) work. The researchers argued that while Norton's conception of investment is insightful, it has a strong focus on economic advancement (i.e. learning English to get a better job). They thus proposed a more nuanced understanding of how people develop their desire for learning languages, by examining Japanese women's *akogare* (desire) for English and Western masculinity. The way Piller and Takahashi (2006) conceive desire responds to Cameron and Kulick's (2003a, 2003b) call to move the study of language and desire beyond theories of "inner states" to investigations of the ways in which a variety of desires are discursively accomplished.

They follow Foucault (1977; 1980) in arguing that power is intricately



linked with the negotiation of identity and desire. As these women in their study capitalized on their positive image of “Asian women” in romantically-charged contexts, they were often able to take control of who could talk to them, for how long and what they could discuss, in English.

There is no doubt that the notion of language desire has advanced our understanding of how individuals become interested in learning a particular language, how such desire becomes gendered or sexualized, and in what ways it might be played out in social contexts. However, as their participants are all heterosexual women interacting with heterosexual interlocutors, the theme of homosexuality and its link to language learning remains largely invisible in their theorizing of desire. With this limitation in their work in mind, I then turned to literature on gay language learners in the field of SLA. King (2008) points out that much research on language learning has operated on the basis of heteronormativity. Most of the previous work to date in the field indeed tends to reify the so-called sexual minorities as something exotic while underscoring heterosexuality as an unmarked norm. As King (2008) clearly points out, literature about the link between homosexuality and language learning is limited and it has not been adequately addressed in the previous research. This is a serious oversight as both sexual desires and identities are key to our lives (Cameron & Kulick, 2003a, 2003b) and are likely to influence our language learning as partially demonstrated in the work of Piller and Takahashi (2006) and King (2008). This study thus aims to bridge this gap through a critical investigation of Asian gay men’s experience in Bangkok, focusing on the construction of desire and how it may play out in everyday lives of Asian gay men.

In sum, this study will draw on language desire introduced in the work of Piller and Takahashi (2006), the notion of access introduced in Norton (2000) and King’s (2008) and, Bourdieu’s (1991) model of capital to explore the intersection between Asian gay men’s desire and linguistic practices and the ways in which desire is constructed and how it is enacted in everyday life among Asian gay men in Bangkok.

### **Data collection**

Both micro-domain and macro-domain data were gathered between April to September 2012. The macro-domain data consist of discourses of desire for the West and for Western sexual and romantic partners, circulating in Thai media. The media data are mainly fliers, brochures, and magazines in English and English-related digital applications mainly from *Surawong’s*

*Boys' Town* and *Thanon Silom*. The micro-domain data which main focused of this article are semi-structured interviews and fieldwork with three gay users of English-as-an-additional language in Bangkok. My three participants are two Thais, Nicky and Anthony, and one Filipino, Erick (all names are pseudonyms. See below for a brief description of each participant). All the interviews were held in coffee shops in Silom. Fieldnotes were carried out for the period of 6 months from April to September 2012 at *The Balcony* on Silom Soi 4 and *DJ station*.

At the age of 18, Nicky (25 years old at that time of data collection) arrived in Bangkok from Issan in 2005 for his tertiary education in Business English. He chose to study Business English because he had a positive image that high proficiency in English would bring him better job prospects and give him more opportunities to talk to White men. He initially became interested in White men through his first romantic relationship with a Swiss man; he went out with him for two years during which he became more familiar with Caucasian men. His university education was to be funded by his parents until graduation in early 2009. After graduation, he was offered a job in the tourism sector in Bangkok, and he was working as a customer representative in a hotel at Asoke during my research.

Anthony was 31 years old at that time of data collection. He was born and raised in Bangkok. He started to learn English when he was 4 or 5 because his stepfather is French, and they needed a lingua franca at home. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Dentistry in Bangkok, and he obtained his Master's degree in 2011 in Cosmetic Dentistry at Georgia University in Georgia, USA. In between his two degrees, he studied basic science in France. In America, he had a boyfriend from Portland, and they broke up because Anthony had to come back to Thailand due to his visa restrictions. At that time of the data collection, Anthony was a dentist working for a large dental clinic on Sukhumvit Soi 24. He is a confident speaker of English and is good at socializing with Westerners. I highlight data from only two of the participants—Nicky and Anthony—to analyze the relationship between language learning, sexuality, and access.

In my analysis, I follow Bourdieu's (1991) notion of capital and apply it to examine many participants' experience in using English. I analyzed the contexts in which Asian gay men can or cannot transform English (linguistic resources and practices) into other forms of capital in their negotiation of identity and power. Although English is increasingly given prestige as a global language, it remains to be seen as to how Asian gay men are capable of capitalizing on their English proficiency in socially, romantically or sexually

complex contexts. I also drew on King's (2008) discussion of access to a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to analyze how my participants gain access to language practice in their everyday life.

In sum, my participants are invested tremendously in gaining access to the target language speakers and symbolic and material resources. Once they are in the gay community in Bangkok, they actively socialize with farangs for a wide range of reasons. With the analysis of their desire for the English language and for Western men, this study will illuminate the intersection between ELL and sexuality.

## Findings

In this section, I will present findings from the interviews and field-notes collected from my two participants, Nicky and Anthony respectively, in the next two sections.

### Nicky:

Nicky is 25 years old and working as a marketing and sales representative in a 4-star hotel in Bangkok. He was born in Isan and came to Bangkok when he was 18 years old to start university study in Business English. Nicky's initial interest in learning English was closely linked to his emergent desire for White men while he was in middle school. Excerpt I demonstrates that he developed his desire for English and White men when American missionaries came to his primary school to evangelize or provide ministries of service, such as education, literacy and health care.

#### Excerpt I:

**Nicky:** [...] when I was young, some foreigners came to my school. I just said to myself I have/want to speak English someday. Now I can speak English and contact them. It's like dreams come true.

**Willie:** so you said these foreigners made you want to learn English?

**Nicky:** yes, I only wanted to learn English because I love Caucasians. @@@@. I think English is the second language. If I can speak it, I can speak to other people from other countries.

Excerpt I indicates that Nicky's investment in English intersected with the desire that he had for White men since the first time Western men/missionaries visited his school. It was important for him to learn

English so that he could communicate with those foreigners he met in his primary school. Therefore, he became invested in English because he saw White men as his “type” (he is attracted to them). English was seen as a tool for Nicky to approach this object of desire, i.e. White men. In Excerpt 2, Nicky also reveals how he has been drawn to English. In particular, he speaks about the fact that although he was highly motivated to learn how to speak English, he faced a particular difficulty in achieving his goal.

**Excerpt 2:**

**Nicky:** I started [learning English] in secondary school when I was thirteen, just like basic English like A B C...something like that. And in high school, I was studying English. It was very difficult for me. I think I cannot speak English when I finished high school. Then I chose to study in Business English because I want to speak English. And in the university, I only want to speak English. As you know, in the first year, I cannot speak English; it's like very difficult for me. I just read some books, but it's not helpful for me. It's not conversation.

Nicky was unsatisfied with English classes in his high school and university. The quote above also indicates that his initial interest has lasted through difficult times at school. The English teaching in his high school did not help him improve his speaking ability, but his desire to learn how to speak English did not decrease (i.e. he went on to study English at university). However, the textbooks used in his Business classes at university turned out to be excruciatingly dull to him. He felt unable to fulfill his dream of becoming a fluent speaker of English. Therefore, Nicky made extra effort to increase his opportunity to use English and meet foreigners by, for instance, joining church activities in university as mentioned in Excerpt 3.

**Excerpt 3:**

**Willie:** you said you chose Business English because you want to speak English. Did that help?

**Nicky:** it helped. If you love something and it's like your dreams. You want to speak English and you have to speak...because in that year, I had some Christian friends from America. They came to my university, and they just invited me to the church. And they speak English with me, and I hang out with them. I had to improve my English at that time.

Excerpt 3 shows how Nicky actually learned English in a naturalistic setting (non-classroom and uninstructed). In Excerpt 2, Nicky complained that the textbooks did not help him learn how to communicate with others in English. Although it was initially a random opportunity that he was invited to the church, he became more interested in using English for communication and his access to English increased over time in his university. His Christian friends (Western men) provided a much-needed sense of legitimacy to Nicky. By attending church and hanging out with his Christian friends, Nicky not only improved his English, but also gained a sense of acceptance and admiration for Western men. In Excerpt 4, Western men were also talked about as a symbol of romance that correlates to Nicky's desire for Western men mentioned in Excerpt 1.

**Excerpt 4:**

**Nicky:** I like only Caucasians because they are sweet@@@. Things are different between Asians and Caucasians. It's like if I want to choose someone, I want to choose someone White. They are sweet and kind with good hearts.

**Willie:** where did you get this kind of idea that White people are sweet and gentle?

**Nicky:** I was together with my ex and I can feel that. And this one is the way I want. Before that I knew many, many Asian guys. I also had some, some sex with Asians. It was okay. For Asians, they only think about sex, and they are not gentle. Besides, I have some feelings with foreigners. Together with my ex, I kinda feel this is what I want. What I want is Caucasians, gentle, sweet, smart and kind. Also I like the pheromones from them.

In Nicky's account, his desire to meet a White man is stronger than the desire to meet an Asian gay man. His first romantic relationship with a White man, his ex-boyfriend from Switzerland, Arthur, made him desire more interaction with White men. Nicky confessed that his sexual experience with his ex-boyfriend was something he never had with Asian gay men and a foreigner is his ideal romantic partner. The assumption that a Western romantic partner is the ultimate "method" to improve one's English fits Nicky's situation. An English speaking partner is seen as good for ELL because romance creates a relaxed atmosphere for the use of English on a regular basis, which Nicky reveals in Excerpt 5.

**Excerpt 5:**

**Willie:** do you think your progress in English helped you talk to him?

**Nicky:** yes, because together with he, I speak English only.

**Willie:** how did it help?

**Nicky:** [...] and in the time, there was the yellow shirt situation, he just asked me about the news in Bangkok and something like that. I had to report the news for him everyday. And then he said okay. We just kept in contact. Then he just came to Bangkok to Thailand. The first day he arrived Bangkok, I just met him for 20 minutes. Just talked like friends. Then he left to another province. Two days later, he wrote back to me and said he was interested in me.

In Excerpt 5, Nicky talked about how his boyfriend actually helped him develop his English proficiency. When Nicky was with the Swiss man, Arthur, he only spoke English. Nicky made progress in his speaking ability by talking to the Swiss man. Nicky improved his writing skills by having to report to Arthur on the yellow shirt coup situation before his ex-boyfriend made his first visit to Thailand. Arthur as a linguistic resource has provided more opportunities for Nicky to practice English and made Nicky want to learn more English in order to talk to him. Apart from the relationship with his ex-boyfriend, Nicky often goes to look for White men to chat with or hang out with. After the first interview with Nicky, he was going to meet a man, Lucas, from Romania with whom he regularly hangs out in Silom Soi 4. Nicky said that every time Lucas feels bored, he asks Nicky to go to *Telephone Bar* and *DJ Station*. The lingua franca between them is English, too. Therefore, by socializing with White men, Nicky gains access to English and also sees them as a linguistic source although both of them are not from English-speaking backgrounds.

In addition, Nicky is now going out with a Russian man, Daniel, who works as a lecturer in an international university in Bangkok. Instead of finding a White man from an English speaking country, Nicky explains in Excerpt 6 why he prefers Europeans.

**Excerpt 6:**

**Willie:** why do you always find a Caucasian man from non-English speaking countries?

**Nicky:** I prefer Europeans @. I don't like Americans and British. They always have very big ego.

**Willie:** are most of Daniel's friends Russians?

**Nicky:** yeah, but we speak English all the time.

In Excerpt 6, Nicky indicates that he is not into all White men. Instead of hanging out with people from English speaking countries such as the US, the UK and Canada, he prefers Europeans who speak English as a second language. Nicky dislikes Americans and British and distances himself from them as he considers them arrogant and egotistical. In his case, the desire to meet a White man was stronger than the desire to meet a native-speaking partner. Here, Nicky challenges the essentialist dichotomy between White native speakers as desired and powerful, and non-native speakers as desiring and powerless. As Jackson (2000:184) puts it, “[W]ithin the dominant Caucasian-focused gay sexual ideology, Asian homosexual men are simply ‘not worth a fuck.’” However, as an Asian gay man in Bangkok, Nicky seems to be able to position himself as a desired *Other* who makes the decision in terms of whom he wants to socialize with.

Finally, apart from the desire for romance with Western men, English proficiency is regarded as a door to better employment and a better future. In Excerpt 7, Nicky talks about how his English ability not only got him a better job but also got him some benefit from his former job. English here is considered as a boost for career development and economic gain, and Nicky also indicates that English may give him an opportunity to live in other countries.

**Excerpt 7:**

**Nicky:** ...another point is also for job. If someone can speak English, it's useful for job. ... I was a staff before. I had to take people to other countries. Two years ago, I was in Shanghai with a tour. I had to take care of them. It's like I was the tour guide/guide leader or the organiser to them. They just looked for who can speak English and who can help them, and they chose me.

**Willie:** so far what do you think about your proficiency? Will it help you reach another level or get other friends? To a better job or a better [...]

**Nicky:** my English, I can get another job. Because I can speak English well now but not like the professional, native English speakers but can contact with another country who uses English. Because with friends,

with job and whatever, I speak English. With English, I might be able to live in other countries @@...

In Excerpt 7, English is viewed as linguistic capital for Nicky, one form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). His linguistic ability brought him great symbolic capital (Norton, 2000) at his previous workplace - he was sent to Shanghai as a tour guide because he could speak English. His investment in English brought him some benefits that could be transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). This symbolic capital may also give him opportunities to live in other countries; in Nicky's case, he also regards English as a way to gain direct geographical access to the West. In Excerpt 8, Nicky talks about how he uses English in his everyday life and shows that he actually is an English language user.

**Excerpt 8:**

**Willie:** how often do you use English everyday?

**Nicky:** my job, I have contact the travel agency. I have sent the quotation, and it's only in English. Writing for my guests who complain about the hotel or whatever. Then I have to explain to them also use English in everything like my letter, my paper or whatever. And my friends have to contact me, I use English everyday.

In this case, Nicky has transformed from an English language learner into an English language user. For Nicky, English has become the language he uses every day, whether it is for his job or with his friends. Nicky has to deal with different situations like contacting travel agencies, writing emails, dealing with quotations and different kinds of enquiries and complaints. Even when his friends contact him through smart phones applications such as *Line* or *Whatsapp*, they communicate in English. "I use English every day," demonstrates that Nicky sees himself as an English user, who actually does the same thing as what a native speaker does in the same position. Furthermore, he speaks about the fact that English is a language in which he can express himself better, or as shown in Excerpt 9, when he speaks English, it is from his heart.

**Excerpt 9:**

**Willie:** do you think your English allows you to know other guys?

**Nicky:** yeah. It's like if like only Caucasians and they speak English and they have to speak English. It's like everything is from my mind/heart.



**Willie:** you think when you speak English, it's from your heart? When you speak Thai, sometimes you are lying?

**Nicky:** it's not like that. It's like different, different. Thai language is like different to English.

**Willie:** you are saying that when you speak English you can express yourself better?

**Nicky:** yeah, better.

English has become the most common language for communication between self-identified gay Thai men and farangs, and communicating in English is perceived as an essential component to financial success (Enteen, 1998). Nicky feels that when he speaks English, it comes from his heart. English for Nicky is thus a symbol of wealth, education, upward mobility, as well as sincerity. Also, in Allyn (1992), some stories depict that English as a second language increases the possibilities for expressing sexual pleasure. Furthermore, Nicky's skills in English and increased self-confidence have enabled him to qualify as an official tour guide, which landed him a high salaried job as mentioned in Excerpt 7. Therefore, the English language to Nicky is the key to his desires for modernity, education, jobs and farangs.

In sum, Nicky's teenage desire for Caucasian men inspired him to invest in English as a second language. His access to English increased over time by socializing with White men. Nicky's English speaking and writing abilities are improved by hanging out with farangs and communicating with them through social media. It is still the main method Nicky uses to improve his English at present. Although his farang friends and acquaintances are mostly from non-English speaking countries, English is always the lingua franca between them. His identity as a Thai gay man and the desired *Other* also gave him the legitimacy to chat with or flirt with farang on Grindr and then hang out with them in Silom Soi 4 and *DJ Station*. Although Nicky's initial investment in English was to be able to communicate with White men, the opportunities for Nicky to build a relationship increased because of English as the lingua franca between him and his Swiss or Russian boyfriends who, together with English, also symbolise a hope to live in the West in the future.

Next, I will move on to discuss the case of Anthony.

**Anthony:**

Thirty-one-year-old Anthony is a dentist in a dental clinic in Asoke.

He is a fluent speaker of English and French, and he has an extensive social network which consists of many White men in Bangkok's gay scene. Anthony's initial interest in learning English emerged when his mother married a French man when Anthony was a small child. To be able to communicate with each other, English was chosen as a home language. In Excerpt 10, Anthony described why English was chosen as a home language and how his stepfather placed stronger emphasis on learning English than on French for Anthony:

**Excerpt 10:**

**Willie:** why did you want to learn English in the first place?

**Anthony:** I have a French stepfather. My mum, she remarried with a French guy, her second marriage. So in the family, we have to speak one more language. Adding up after Thai, either French or English. One day, my father said to me if you just study French, you are not going anywhere else. So you'd better study English and improve it. And he is a quite good English speaker.

As a multilingual speaker in French and English, his stepfather saw the importance of English and how Anthony would benefit from it in the future. Therefore, the idea of English as a key resource to improve one's life was instilled in Anthony by his French stepfather from early on. As a consequence, Anthony started learning English earlier than others and also had more opportunities to use English for communication. His access to English was increased over time in his stepfather's social network. Anthony's stepfather sent him and his brothers to his friends' places in the United States every summer. As a stepson of a French father, he grew up feeling comfortable in interacting with Westerners. Frequent access to his stepfather's social network provided him with opportunities to practice English in everyday life. Because of his stepfather, he went to France to study science after he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Dentistry in Bangkok.

It was not until he went to France for high school at the age of 16 that he fully became aware of his sexual identity. In Excerpt 11, he speaks about his first boyfriend and how he "discovered" his desire for Western men.

**Excerpt 11:**

**Willie:** can you talk about why you are only into White guys?

**Anthony:** @ that's interesting. I don't know.

**Willie:** when did you realize that...

**Anthony:** started it? I had my first puppy love at 16 in high school in France. Probably, because of the first one. And since then I am like having the interests in White guys. I particularly like tall White guys with blond hair and blue eyes...

In Excerpt II, Anthony described his first romantic relationship with a White man in France. This is where he discovered that he was attracted to White men and he started to have a romantic obsession with them. When he went to the US to pursue his Master's Degree in cosmetic dentistry, he fell in love with a Polish student in the same school.

In the US, Anthony was not only able to form a romantic relationship with the Polish man, but also able to find work as a salesman. Working as a door-to-door salesman required a lot of training on how to talk to people and sell products to them. He was trained by the company on how to talk to customers, socialize with them, and make them comfortable enough to buy the products. The socializing skills he learned in the US remain great assets to Anthony as will be discussed in Excerpt 12.

In Excerpt 12, he speaks about reasons for his investment in Bangkok's English-speaking gay community and how his identity as a Thai gay man grants him legitimacy among those White men in the Bangkok gay scene.

**Excerpt 12:**

**Willie:** so you are here (Silom Soi 4) for the chat or for your patients (in English)?

**Anthony:** there is sometimes as well. You know. People just know each other. They recommend me the other people for just coming for cleaning, whitening, or some cosmetics stuff cause it's much cheaper here in Bangkok.

**Willie:** yeah, this is the place you can meet them and socialise with them.

**Anthony:** yeah, socialise with them. If they have problems or they wanna introduce people to me, recommend people to me, it would be easier. This is a strategy because you know gay men have more money for you more like paying for cosmetics things in my field.

In Anthony's case, he learned how to socialize with customers while

studying in the US as mentioned earlier. His socializing skills coupled with his English ability allow him to communicate with and introduce his dental business to farangs in Silom Soi 4 and widen his social network. Therefore, his investment in the English-speaking gay community in Bangkok is both for economic and romantic purposes. His gay identity, English proficiency and conversational skills brought him great benefits both for his business and romantic life. He has been able to transfer his linguistic capital into social capital (wider social network) and further into economic capital (more clients) (Bourdieu, 1984). With the symbolic capital that Anthony has, he socializes confidently when meeting with his friends or strangers, many of whom are White men. Although Anthony was seeing a British man who rented a condominium in Silom for him at that time of the data collection, he still went to *The Balcony* and *DJ station* to flirt with White men in search for future clients. In Excerpt I3, Anthony talks about why he prefers to hang out with White man and his responses to the rumors.

**Excerpt I3:**

**Willie:** do you feel confident and skilled in socialising with White people?

**Anthony:** yeah, but people here just think I am a slut @@.

**Willie:** but the point is that you never went in with anyone. Why would they think you are a slut?

**Anthony:** well, they have a rumor. You know rumor has it.

Excerpt I3 shows that Anthony is good at socializing with those farangs in Soi 4, but Thais think that he is a “slut.” Silom Soi 4, *DJ Station* and *Babylon* are full of international tourists, especially White men, and Anthony’s purpose to hang out there is to find potential clients or to simply flirt with White men who are interested in him. These White men are easier to “play with” as their time and social network in Thailand is limited in comparison to those Thai gay men who envy Anthony’s fluency in English and good socializing skills and spread gossip about Anthony.

In Excerpt I4, Anthony speaks about the fact that English is important for his current job and for a better life.

**Excerpt I4:**

**Willie:** so in what way is your English proficiency useful?

**Anthony:** ooh! Work, business, and also that in the relationship. Because it will be difficult if you couldn't speak or communicate with each other. You know like how do I know what does he want.

**Willie:** if you didn't have patients or your boyfriends, would you still practice English everyday?

**Anthony:** ummm... probably yes. Because right now English is kind of an important thing in this city. If you could not speak English, you probably are not gonna get a good job. [...], besides, I read the researches of Dentistry in both English and Thai, the new technology just like coming every two or three years.

Overall, Anthony's investment in English came originally from his French stepfather. His access to and legitimacy as a competent speaker of English among native speakers increased through his father's social network. His desire for Western men and the West brought him to the US to pursue higher education; meanwhile, he was working as a salesman, which gave him unlimited access to practice English in real life contexts. The socializing skills he learned when he was a salesman in the US help Anthony socialize with Western men both as romantic partners and potential clients in the international gay scene in Thailand. Therefore, his desire for Western men, English language learning, and sexuality are closely intersected.

So far, I have presented my case analyses of Nicky and Anthony. In the next section, I will explore ideologies implicit in macro and micro data.

## **Ideologies of language and sexuality**

In the previous sections, I have discussed my participants' initial desire for English and for Western men, as well as their attempts to improve their English at different stages in their lives. Based on the two case studies above, I have identified three ideologies implicit in their experiences. These are (1) Ideology of English as access to the West or Western men, (2) Ideology of transnational romance as social capital, (3) Power relations and ideology of Asian as language learners.

### Ideology of English as access to the West and Western men

First of all, the ideology of English as access to Western men and the West has emerged from the findings of both the macro and micro data. As Asian gay men in Bangkok, being able to read the fliers and magazines

printed in English gives them knowledge of what is going on in the international community of gay men and hence allows access to Western men as potential romantic partners. The most popular gay application for smart phones around the world, *Grindr*, is available only in English interface. As with Nicky's experience on *Grindr*, he mostly goes on to check *Grindr* and see if there are any White men around him. Nicky became friends with a Romanian man, Lucas and found his boyfriend Daniel through *Grindr*. Nicky also believes that dating a White man will give him opportunities to move to the West.

#### Ideology of transnational romance as social capital

According to my micro data, there is a widespread view of an English speaking Western gay partner as social capital. It is interesting to point out, however, that Nicky's ideal partners are actually Europeans who speak English as an additional language (see Excerpt 6). He does not like people from the US and the UK because of their arrogance. His current boyfriend is Daniel from Russia and the mutual language between them is English. Nicky's access to English also increased in Daniel's social network. Although Daniel's friends are mostly Russians, they speak English to Nicky. His linguistic ability also transferred into social capital with his Russian speaking Western gay partner.

#### Power relations and ideology of Asian as language learners

There is a widespread view that Asian men play a submissive role to please Western men (Ayres, 1999; Chuang, 1999; Han, 2005; Kong, 2002; Poon & Ho, 2008). In such a discourse of homosexuality, Asian men are stripped of any agency or capital. However, Poon and Ho (2008:251) state that "(G)ay Asian men can never freely negotiate power, and the ways in which they resist oppression are always bound by their socio-economic characters such as ethnicity, class and sexual orientation". Within these constraints, they continuously (re)position themselves against the hardship of oppression and seek control over their life (Davis, 2002; Scott, 2001). Indeed, my participants' experiences challenge the essentialist dichotomy between White men as powerful and Asian men as submissive. As we have seen in Excerpts 6 and 12, they were able to position themselves as the desired *Other* and to negotiate the power balance to their advantage. As I observed my participants socialize in various gay venues in Bangkok, they indeed struck me as skilful socializers with firm control over their interlocutors. I never saw any of my participants playing a passive role in conversational contexts. They were able to assert themselves, make witty jokes

and tease their friends and strangers in English, and they performed all these speech acts effortlessly.

In existing TESOL and ELT literature, Asians appear almost always as English language learners, and as a result, no matter how good their English is, individuals from Asian backgrounds are often assumed as ESL learners in real life contexts. All my participants can be considered as past the learners' level and having become English language "users". In addition to what my participants are like in social scenes, they are also effective English users in their workplace and study. Excerpt 8 exemplifies that Nicky uses English every day for his job, including contacting agencies, dealing with customers and listening to their complaints. For Anthony, English is the language he uses to broaden his horizons, i.e. dental knowledge, technology in dentistry and making friends with White men from different countries, exemplified in Excerpts 12 and 14. Either in the social or workplace contexts, my participants' experiences indeed challenge the discourse of Asian men as passive and permanent language learners.

In sum, I have identified three ideologies implicit in the experiences of my three participants. Each of the ideologies about Asian gay men can be a site of dilemmas, particularly when they do not see themselves as fitting into stereotypes that have existed for a long time. My findings shed light on the gap that exists between academia and real lives of Asian gay men who are both desirer of and desired by Western men in Bangkok.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I have examined the intersection of language learning and sexuality in Bangkok in my attempt to understand the ideology of desire for English and sexuality from macro and micro data. The key aim that I set out to achieve in this paper was to explore the discursive construction of language desire of gay men in Bangkok.

There are a number of limitations of this study. For instance, these findings may be seen as limited as the number of participants was relatively small and that I was selective in extracting these data from the broader interviews. As far as the small number of the participants is concerned, my intention was to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, and not to generalize the findings to a larger population of Asian gay men in Bangkok. My findings can provide a framework for a much larger study and future research. Future research should explore how Asian gay men articulate with other aspects of desire. Desire is multifaceted and

dynamic, rather than static. This interview study provides only a “snapshot” of these particular men over a short period of time. Longitudinal studies, in-depth narratives, and ethnographic accounts of language learning by queer Thais, queer Filipinos and other Asian men in Thailand are promising directions to pursue in order to further explore the intersections between desire, sexuality and language learning. Such research will broaden our understanding by exploring how experiences and learning vary across time and space both within and between individuals from diverse national, sexual, and linguistic backgrounds.

Finally, more research is needed to challenge heteronormativity and counter the normalized status of heterosexuality, which has been, as Wilchins (2002) has aptly put it, “aged in the keg, and widely enough accepted, [to be] promoted to common sense” (p. 33). By challenging the common-sense status of heteronormative attitudes in SLA, enquiries into the social nature of language learning can be enriched and extended (King, 2008). In this study, I have demonstrated that the notion of language desire is a powerful tool in pursuit of this goal.

## References:

- Allyn, E. (Ed.). 1992. *The Dove Coos: Gay Experiences by the Men of Thailand*. Bangkok: Bua Luang Publisher.
- Ayres, T. 1999. China Doll – *The Experience of Being a Gay Chinese Australian*. *Journal of Homosexuality* 36(3-4), 87-97.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cameron, D., & Kulick, D. 2003a. Introduction: *Language and Desire in Theory and Practice*. *Language and Communication*, 23, 93-105.
- Cameron, D., & Kulick, D. 2003b *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Chuang, K. 1999. Using Chopsticks to Eat Steak. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 36(3-4), 29-41.
- Dalley, P., & Campbell, M. D. 2006. Constructing and Contesting Discourses of Heteronormativity: An Ethnographic Study of Youth in a Francophone High School in Canada. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 5, 11-30.
- Davis, K. 2002. Critical Sociology and Gender Relations. In M. Haugaard (Ed.), *Power: A Reader* (pp. 209-224). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ellwood, C. 2006. On Coming Out and Coming Undone: Sexualities and Reflexivities in Language Education Research. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 5, 67-84.
- Enteen, J. 1998. "'Whiskey is Whiskey. You Can't Make a Cocktail from That': Self-Identified Gay Thai Men in Bangkok." *Jouvert: A Journal of Post-Colonial Studies*, 2(1).
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Norton.
- Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gardner, R. C. 1985. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Han, C.-S. 2005) Gay Asian-American Male Seeks Home. *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, 12(5), 35-36.
- Jackson, P. A. 1999. The Myth of a Thai 'Gay Paradise'. In P. A. Jackson & N. Cook (Eds.), *Gender and Sexualities in Modern Thailand* (pp. 226-242). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Jackson, P. A. 2000. That's What Rice Queens Study! *White Gay Desire and Representing Asian Homosexualities*. *Journal of Australian Studies, Australian Cultural History; Special Joint Issue: Diaspora: Negotiating Asian-Australia*, n/a, 181-189.

- King, B. W. 2008. "Being Gay Guy, That is the Advantage": Queer Korean Language Learning and Identity Construction. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 7(3), 230-252.
- Kong, T. S. K. 2002. The Seduction of the Golden Boy: *The Body Politics of Hong Kong Gay Men*. *Body & Society*, 8(1), 29-48.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nelson, C. 1993. Heterosexism in ESL: Examining Our Attitudes. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 143-150.
- Nelson, C. 2005. Crafting Researcher Subjectivity in Ways that Enact Theory. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4, 315-320.
- Norton, B. 2000) *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- Norton Peirce, B. 1995. Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 29(1), 9-31.
- Piller, I. 2011. *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Piller, I., & Takahashi, K. 2006. A Passion for English: Desire and the Language Market In A. Pavlenko (Ed.), *Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experience, Expression, and Representation: Multilingual Matters*, pp. 59-83.
- Poon, M. K., & Ho, P. T. 2008. Negotiating Social Stigma Among Gay Asian Men. *Sexualities*, 11, 245-268.
- Scott, J. 2001. *Power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Seo, D. J. 2001. Mapping the Vicissitudes of Homosexual Identities in South Korea. In P. A. Jackson & G. Sullivan (Eds.), *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community* (pp. 65-79). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Warner, M. 1993. Introduction. In M. Warner (Ed.), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (pp. vii-xxxi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilchins, R. 2002. A Certain Kind of Freedom: Power and the Truth of Bodies – Four Essays on Gender. In J. Nestle, C. Howell & R. Wilchins (Eds.), *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.