EFL classroom learning environment at a Thai university: What variables matter for low-proficiency students?

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigated the EFL classroom learning environment at a university in Thailand from the perspective of low-English proficiency students. Using structural equation modelling, five hypotheses involving variables generated by students and teachers were investigated (SEM). According to the findings, task orientation in low-proficiency students was the key to boosting students' English course grades. In the case of low-proficiency students, equity, teacher support, and student cooperation were not found to be important. Student cohesion was also found to be an unreliable predictor of students' English grades. Because research on the classroom learning environment engaging low students is still limited, these findings suggest future investigation.

While interest in the variables that shape classroom learning environments and their effects on learning outcomes began in the 1970s (Byrne et al., 1986; Moos, 1979), research on the English classroom environment is still in its initial stages. Previously conducted research has concentrated on a small number of nations, including Iran, China, the United

States of America, Jordan, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Korea, with a total of 20 studies (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Recent research has also centered on the topics of digital EFL learning environments (Wang et al., 2021) and the integration of technology into EFL teaching and learning (Ztürk & Akrolu, 2021), which was likely sparked by the current massive online learning implementation in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

In Thailand, several studies have examined students' perceptions of biology and physics classroom learning environments (Koul et al., 2012) and the effects of a specific classroom approach, such as the flipped classroom, on language accuracy and active learning environments (Thaichay & Sitthitikul, 2016) and on engaging 21st-century learners in English classrooms (Sakulprasertsri, 2017). Prior studies have also examined teachers' perceptions of the learning environment for second language acquisition (Kiatkheeree, 2018) and its influence on the English L2 vocabulary depth of Thai speakers (Supasiraprapa, 2019). All the findings urge the identification of essential variables that can potentially enhance and improve the learning experiences of Thai students and facilitate the attainment of the intended learning objectives. However, very little research has been conducted in the context of Thai EFL classroom contexts incorporating English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses taught by foreign English lecturers, both native and non-native speakers from other countries. It is necessary to conduct research in this learning context to gain a deeper understanding of the variables that students perceive to be most important for their English learning and to determine if there are any differences between this context and other contexts of EFL learning in Thailand across educational levels, as explored in previous research. Thus, the current study addresses this research gap by studying the relationships between students and teachers' classroom variables and their effects on students' English learning outcomes at a Thai university.

A classroom is simply a site where formal education occurs. Individuals' interpersonal relationships, conversations, and actions, whether as teachers or students, all contribute to the creation of classroom learning environment (van Compernolle & Williams, 2013). At the university level, all variables that emerge as a result of teaching and learning in a classroom can influence students' progress and success in learning (Aluri & Fraser, 2019; Lerdpornkulrat et al., 2018), and understanding the interactions of classroom variables can help improve learning instruction. There are numerous variables that influence the learning environment in a classroom, but the current study focuses exclusively on those that originate with students, such as student cohesiveness, task orientation, and cooperation, and on those that originate with teachers, such as teacher support and equity. These variables have been confirmed to exist in EFL university courses in Thailand (The

author & Tuan, 2021), as well as in non-English subject classrooms (Smalley & Hopkins, 2020).

The development of the questionnaire "What is Happening in This Class" (WIHIC), first published by Fraser et al., is one of the driving forces behind the rising research on the classroom learning environment (1996). Much research in various contexts and levels of education (from elementary to university level) have re-examined and validated it (Charalampous & Kokkinos, 2017). The questionnaire, which included seven scales, was designed to address modern educational concerns that arise during classroom learning. They were as follows: student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, and equity. There have been a significant number of research in the literature that have examined and adapted this questionnaire, demonstrating support for its psychometric qualities (Skordi & Fraser, 2019). It has also been utilized as a model for developing another form of questionnaire to better understand the online learning environment (Rahayu et al., 2022).

The popularity stems from its importance in assisting us in understanding how students view the classroom learning environment. However, one topic that has not been fully researched among the extant studies is how students' views of classroom characteristics effect their English course grade, especially from the perspectives of low-proficiency EFL students. Furthermore, the seven scales should be separated into two categories: student-derived classroom variables and teacher-derived classroom variables, even though all the variables are based on students' opinions. Student cohesion and task orientation, for example, are undoubtedly influenced by students, whereas teacher support and equity are influenced by instructors' teaching styles and behaviors in the classroom. To address this concern, this study investigates the EFL classroom learning environment at a university in Thailand from the perspective of low-English proficiency students. Using structural equation modelling, five hypotheses involving variables generated by students and teachers were investigated (SEM).

The first student-derived classroom variable is student cohesiveness. It is defined as the relationships between students and their ability to assist and support one another during their classroom studies (Fraser et al. 1996). Student cohesiveness research is typically focused on determining the nature and intensity of students' personal relationships within the classroom environment and on assessing the extent to which students engage in the environment and support and assist one another, which is referred to as the social dimension of the learning environment on the students' part (Chang et al., 2015). Early research has indicated that student cohesiveness has a substantial influence on the interaction and learning that occurs in an EFL

class, and a cohesive group of students can considerably inspire individual students to study and accomplish learning tasks (Clement et al., 1994; Peng, 2009). As demonstrated by quantitative and qualitative research data, EFL students perceive their peers to be vital to their learning since associating with more motivated classmates and classmates with whom they get along positively influences their own motivation (Chang, 2010). More current research has looked at student cohesiveness as an affective determinant of EFL students' propensity to communicate in English (Khajavy et al., 2016), academic self-efficacy beliefs with an emphasis on studying, exam preparation, and note-taking (Daemi et al., 2017), and emotional involvement (Han et al., 2021). In a hierarchical regression study, student cohesiveness explains 4% of the variance in students' English proficiency, with an effect size 50% lower than the mean (Cohen's $f2$ =.042) (The author & Tuan, 2021), however additional empirical data is required.

Hypothesis 1: Student cohesiveness in an EFL classroom positively affects students' course grades.

The second variable is task orientation. The degree to which students value completion of specified activities and staying on topic in class is referred to as task orientation (Fraser, 1998). Task orientation, along with teacher support and equity, was positively associated to EFL students' attitudes about the English language, and female students were more task-oriented than their male counterparts (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Students with a high level of task orientation can help to foster a positive classroom environment (Gabry-Barker, 2016). Students with a high level of task orientation can help to foster a positive classroom environment (Gabry-Barker, 2016). Therefore, students in an EFL class who are less task-oriented are more prone to suffering from anxiety in their English learning, and vice versa (Li & Dewaele, 2021). One of the most significant research subjects in English Language Teaching (ELT) concerning the importance of task orientation in student English learning is the implications on students' willingness to communicate in English. Students that are more task-oriented are more likely to use English in communication, according to studies done in Iran (Khajavy et al., 2016) and China (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). It has also been discovered that task orientation plays a role in students' comprehension and creation of lexical collocations (Naserpour & Zarei, 2021). Nonetheless, research that establishes a direct link between students' perceptions of their task orientation and their English learning outcomes is lacking, which the current study aims to fill.

Hypothesis 2: Task orientation in an EFL classroom positively affects students' course grades.

Student cooperation is the next variable. The term "cooperation" refers to the extent to which students collaborate rather than compete on learning assignments (Gupta & Fisher, 2012). Early research has shown that increasing

student cooperation, participation, and support can produce a useful and encouraging classroom atmosphere for learning English by reducing anxiety among students (Price, 1991) and making the classroom environment more comfortable and pleasurable (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). Cai et al. (2021) recently investigated Chinese EFL students' perceptions of their English classroom environment and discovered cooperation as one factor shaping the learning environment, with girls more inclined to cooperate with their classmates, with group cooperation significantly improving their ability to use English. Wang et al. (2017) previously said that students scored relatively higher on cooperation, implying that a positive interpersonal relationship might be recognized in teacher–student and student–student interactions. However, still little is known how student cooperation in English classroom affects their learning outcomes directly.

Hypothesis 3: Student cooperation in an EFL classroom positively affects students' course grades.

Teacher support comes first when it comes to teacher-derived classroom variables. Teacher support entails a teacher's assistance, friendliness, trust, and interest in pupils to help them reach their learning objectives (Fraser, 1998). Teachers may use a variety of strategies to provide support, ranging from traditional approaches, such as the teacher moving around the classroom more to mix with students, assisting students, and talking with them more than previously, to technology-assisted approaches, such as virtual learning environments, social media, or online message applications. Students' impressions of teacher assistance received in the classroom influence their attitudes toward English learning, and students from different countries may have varying degrees of positivity in their perceptions (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Teacher support, along with student cohesiveness and task orientation, has been highlighted as key components in building an effective English learning environment in the classroom, as they represent teacher-student interaction toward the completion of learning tasks (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Teachers have a strong influence on their students' behavior in the classroom. Teachers have a significant impact on the tasks, classroom atmosphere, students' motivation, themes, and pair/group work, in addition to their teaching style and timeliness (Cao, 2013). While the preceding research has identified the logical process through which teacher support influences student English learning in the classroom, empirical evidence on the effect on student learning achievement is still lacking.

Hypothesis 4: Teacher support in an EFL classroom positively affects students' course grades.

Equity is the other factor affected by teachers. The extent to which students are treated equally by the teacher is referred to as equity (Dorman, 2003). It can, for example, alter students' academic efficacy during classroom

learning (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Arigusman (2017) discovered that Indonesian EFL students had a good perspective of equity in their English classroom, which may or may not be mirrored by other Southeast Asian EFL students. Similar findings were found among Iranian EFL students, where their opinions of equity scored highest among other classroom characteristics (Daemi et al., 2017). Furthermore, the findings of Saeed et al.'s study (2015) reveal that students' foreign language anxiety can be controlled by fostering conducive psychosocial learning, particularly with teachers' support, equity, and cohesion among students in an English language classroom. Nonetheless, there is a need to investigate how students' perceptions of equity in an EFL classroom affect their English course grades.

Hypothesis 5: Equity in an EFL classroom positively affects students' course grades.

METHOD
Research Design
This study used a quantitative research design with a structural equation modelling (SEM) approach to examine the effects of each student and teacher's variable on students' English course grades. SEM fits the objective of the study, which is to examine the variables within one model of the classroom learning environment. With this approach, the created hypothesis can be answered and direct effects of the variables on the outcome variables can be observed (Ullman & Bentler, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates the research design and involves variables.

Participants
The participants were 402 undergraduate students (21.9 % male, 77.9 % female) from an autonomous university in southern Thailand. They came from different faculties, including Health Sciences, Liberal Arts, Nursing, Medicine, Engineering, and Law. They were enrolled in an academic English course at the time of the study. They were between the ages of 18 and 21, with a mean of 19.78 (SD =.708). According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), students' English proficiency levels were A1 (41.8%) and A2 (58.2%), which are regarded to be basic users of the language. The participants were selected using a purposive sample technique (Bernard, 2017) based on two predefined criteria. Participants were required to be undergraduate students enrolled in an academic English course.

Ethics concern. Prior to collecting data, researchers received ethics training and obtained legal authorization to perform the study. Additionally, researchers ensured that participants were informed of the study's objectives and that the data collected would be kept anonymous. Also, the study has

been approved by Walailak University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee.

Instrument and Procedure
Survey questionnaire

Students responded to a two-part online survey questionnaire administered using Google Form. The first section gathered background information, such as the student's identification number, gender, and age. The second section collected data on students' perceptions of student cohesiveness, task orientation, cooperation, teacher support, and equity in their EFL classroom. Each scale contained five items. The survey items had responses ranging from "0" for "Never" to "4" for "Always". Table 2 contains the details. The survey questions were derived from a recent study report published by Smalley and Hopkins (2020). The findings of the internal reliability study indicated that the survey items within each scale had a high degree of internal consistency (>.70), as shown in Table 1. These scales are used in the analysis as independent variables.

Table 1. Sample items and Cronbach's alpha

	Sample Items (All start with "In my GE classes, ….)	α
Student Cohesiveness	1. I am friendly to members of my class. 2. I work well with other class members. 3. I help other class members who are having trouble with their work. 4. Students in my GE classes class like me. 5. In my GE classes, I get help from other students.	.833
Cooperation	1. I cooperate with other students when doing assignment work. 2. I share my books and resources with other students when doing assignments. 3. When I work in groups in my English class, there is teamwork. 4. I learn from other students in my English classes. 5. I cooperate with other students on class activities.	.851
Task Orientation	1. I try to understand the task in my English class. 2. Getting a certain amount of work done is important to me. 3. I am ready to start the class on time. 4. I know what I am trying to accomplish. 5. I pay attention in my class.	.805
Equity	1. The teacher gives equal attention to my questions and other students' questions. 2. I get the same amount of help from the teacher as do other students 3. I have the same amount of say in my class as other students	.890

	Sample Items (All start with "In my GE classes, ….)	α
Teacher Support	4. I receive the same encouragement from the teacher as other students 5. I get the same opportunity to contribute to class discussions as other students 1. The teacher personally knows that I need help. 2. The teacher goes out of his/her way to help me. 3. The teacher helps me when I have trouble with the work. 4. The teacher takes the time to talk with me or call me to her office. 5. The teacher's questions help me to understand.	.798

Course grade

As a measure of English learning outcomes, this study collected students' grades from the English course that they assessed using the survey questionnaire at the end of the academic term. The grade mean was 76.67 (+SD = 7.69). The use of English course grade has been applied by preceding research in the body of the literature (e.g., The author & Panmei, 2021), confirming its applicability as an outcome variable.

Data Analysis

This study used structural equation modeling (SEM) to evaluate students' and teachers' classroom variables to verify the given hypotheses based on the results of the literature review. All hypotheses have been presented in this article's literature review section. The examinations of each hypothesis involved both the collected survey data encompassing students' perceptions of student cohesiveness, cooperation, task orientation, equity, and teacher support as well as the students' course grades. Furthermore, descriptive data from the collected data were analyzed to gain insight into the levels of perceived classroom variables encountered by students studying academic English at a Thai university.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

As the survey items were coded from 0 to 4, this study interpreted the means in two levels: Low (<2.0) and High (>2.0). Based on the results, the students reported high levels of task orientation, student cooperation, equity, teacher support, and student cohesiveness in their EFL classroom, as presented in Table 2. The values of Skewness and Kurtosis were also within -2 and +2, indicated a normal distribution. Thus, the analysis was continued with SEM.

### Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the students' perceptions

	Mean	SD	Perception Level	Skewness	Kurtosis
Student Cohesiveness	2.985	0.634	High	-0.646	0.714
Teacher Support	2.752	0.688	High	-0.269	0.258
Task Orientation	3.296	0.533	High	-0.587	-0.250
Student Cooperation	3.180	0.596	High	-0.508	-0.188
Equity	3.061	0.627	High	-0.199	-0.781

Structural Equation Modelling

The evaluation of the research model (Figure 1) was considered marginal fit to the data as the values of the indices are lower than the good fit cut-off values: Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) >.90 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The results showed the values of TLI = .627 and CFI .685, with X^2 (296) = 1968.468, p < .001. It was regarded acceptable for this study given that main objective was to prove the stated hypotheses.

Except for student cohesiveness, significant results were observed. The more oriented students to their task completion, the better their English grades would be (β = .938, p < .001), proving hypothesis 2. Students' English grades would likely increase by .938 for one unit increase in their task orientation. However, high levels of equity (β = -.207, p < .001), teacher support (β = -.138, p < .001), student cooperation (β = -.240, p < .001) predicted low grades. These negative predictions disapproved hypotheses 3, 4, and 5. As well, non-significant results for student cohesiveness disapproved hypothesis 1.
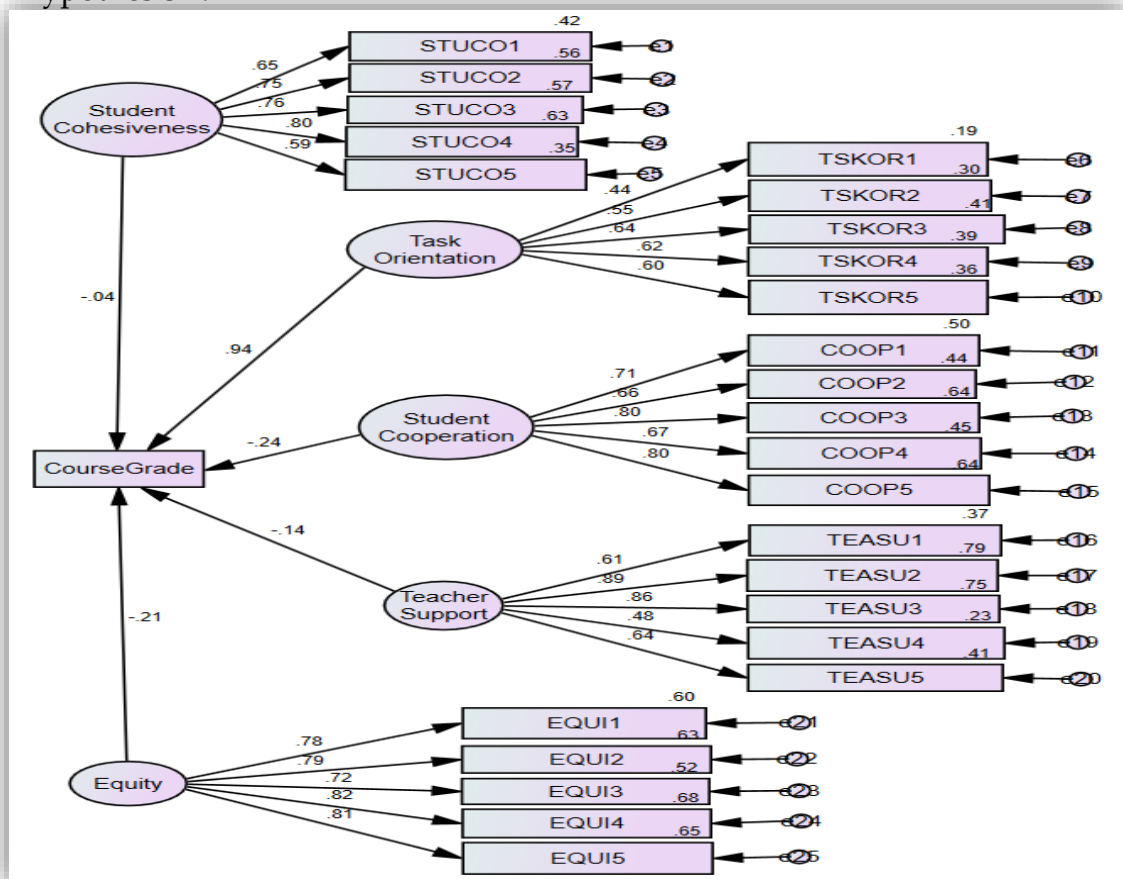
DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to explore the EFL classroom learning environment at a university in Thailand by exploring the structural relationships between students and teachers' classroom variables from the perspectives of low-proficiency students. Five hypotheses have been examined. This section presents three points worth discussing, along with the pedagogical implications of the study's findings.

Students' Task Orientation is Influential to their English Learning Outcomes

The first finding of this study confirms earlier research indicating that task orientation has a significant impact on students' English learning outcomes (e.g., Fraser, 1998; Lim & Fraser, 2018). More precisely, this study sheds light on the case of low-proficiency Thai EFL students. Task orientation is critical because it contributes to the development of a pleasant classroom environment (Gabry-Barker, 2016), and task-oriented students in an EFL class are less likely to experience anxiety during their English learning, and vice versa (Li & Dewaele, 2021). Nonetheless, it is critical to keep in mind that female students may be more task-oriented than male students, which may influence their approach toward English learning (Lim & Fraser, 2018). Koul et al. (2012) conducted a study on secondary students' perceptions of their biology and physics classroom learning environments, and gender and found that the perceptions were gender-dependent and could vary across subject areas, yet the present study could not confirm such findings in the contexts of EAP classrooms. Hence, it is assumed that differences in task orientation levels contribute to variation in students' English grades, which are used to assess learning outcomes. However, additional empirical evidence is required to verify this claim.

Equity, Teacher Support, and Student Cooperation have Potential Negative Effects

Unexpectedly, equity, teacher support, and student cooperation all had a slight detrimental effect on students' English learning outcomes. Previous research has focused on determining whether these variables exist in an EFL classroom (e.g., Cai et al. 2021; Fraser, 1998), but little is known about how they affect learning outcomes. A few studies have found that students consistently score highly on these aspects in self-reported surveys (e.g., Daemi et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017), which may reflect their natural predisposition to have a favorable attitude toward them in the classroom, but the direct effect remains unknown. The second finding of this study confirms that, while low-proficiency students in the research site valued high levels of equity, teacher support, and student cooperation in their EFL classroom, they did not

experience a significant positive effect on their English course grades as a result of the classroom conditions. While it is assumed that these factors contribute to the development of meaningful teacher-student interaction and the construction of the classroom atmosphere and students' motivation to learn, as Cao (2013) and Peng and Woodrow (2010) advise, other unobserved factors appear to be more influential in assisting low-level students in achieving higher English course grades. Kiatkheeree's results (2018) imply foreign instructors may not be a good fit for a Basic English course because they cannot incorporate Thai tradition and culture into learning and their personalities hinder a healthy classroom atmosphere. The findings of the regression analysis showed that students' previous length of English education in Thailand did not significantly predict their English vocabulary depth; however, their length of stay in the US, which followed their English education in Thailand, significantly predicted the depth (Supasiraprapa, 2019). This helps us understand that something is not working properly within the environment of Thai EFL classrooms, and the present study has identified the negative effects of equity, teacher support, and student cooperation among low-proficiency students.

Student Cohesiveness has No Effect on English Learning Outcomes
Another intriguing finding is that student cohesiveness had no effect on the English grades of low-proficiency pupils. If we combine this finding with the previous suggestions, we can conclude that even when students have positive relationships and are supportive of one another (Chang et al., 2015; Fraser et al., 1996), the degree of student cohesiveness cannot help but result in higher English grades for low-level students. This may result in the realization that further efforts beyond establishing student-student interactions are necessary if the goal is to enhance students' English scores.

Pedagogical Implications
English teachers should strive to increase students' task orientation levels throughout classroom learning with low-proficiency students. Their grades will almost certainly improve as they become more task oriented. Prior research indicates that when students are more task-oriented, they are more likely to communicate in English (Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Additionally, it was revealed that task orientation influences students' comprehension and the development of lexical collocations (Naserpour & Zarei, 2021). While task orientation is one of the characteristics derived by students, teachers can facilitate improvement during the classroom study. One approach to accomplish this is to direct instruction and materials for teaching and learning toward task-based learning. Willis (1996) defines "task" as a goal-oriented activity in which learners utilize all of the target language's

resources; they must solve a problem, play a game, complete a puzzle, share and compare their experiences; it is designed to help learners achieve a real outcome through the use of the target language for interactive communication. When students complete a task, they engage in semantic and pragmatic meaning processes, communicating information, expressing an opinion, and inferring meaning, all while relying on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources (Ellis, 2009). At this point, the chosen tasks must facilitate learners' communication in the target language through interaction, incorporate authentic texts into the learning situation, recognize the critical contribution of the learner's own personal experiences to classroom learning, and, most importantly, establish a link between inside classroom language learning and outside classroom language use (Nunan, 1991).

Furthermore, even though equity, teacher support, and student cooperation were found to have a direct positive effect on students' English grades, this study emphasizes their value in an EFL classroom learning environment. This component may have indirect impacts, which this study did not investigate. Additionally, teachers may wish to develop a unique teaching strategy to aid low-level student learning. For example, images can aid low-level foreign language college students in interpreting both simple and complex texts (Yi-Chun & Yi-Ching, 2009). Teacher assistance can be oriented toward the use of images in group work. Additionally, it is critical to emphasize that the students in this study were taught by international English-speaking lecturers and engaged in classroom learning activities entirely in English. There has been some discussion concerning the effectiveness of utilizing full English with EFL students, and some reservations have been voiced about its efficacy.

CONCLUSION

From the students' variables, task orientation was found to be influential for low-proficiency Thai EFL students' English grades, while student cohesiveness was not. Student cohesiveness has a significant effect but is detrimental to students' grades. Meanwhile, none of the teachers' derived variables had positive effects on the students' grades. Several limitations, nonetheless, are acknowledged. This study engaged low-proficiency Thai EFL students, which might have different characteristics from those with high English proficiency. This study also did not collect qualitative data due to language barriers. Therefore, individual insights were missing, and the rationales were based on the findings from previous studies merely. It is recommended that future studies apply a mixed-method design while using SEM to compare the results.

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