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A longitudinal investigation of parental social-economic status (SES) and young students' learning of English as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing tendency worldwide to lower the starting age of English education, our knowledge of how young students learn English over time remains limited. Particularly limited is our knowledge of how parental socio-economic status (SES) influences their children's English learning. This study investigated the role of parental SES in Chinese middle school students' English learning over time. The participants were 189 middle school students and their parents who were drawn from two distinct socioeconomic areas. Students were followed for three years from the seventh to ninth grade (ranging in age from 12 to 15). Each year, students took the Cambridge ESOL tests and filled out surveys concerning their English learning and motivation. Their parents also filled out extensive surveys regarding family background, resources, and parenting styles and beliefs. We found significant relationships between SES and parents' attitudes towards the role of English, parenting styles, Chinese books available at home, parental involvement in children's English learning, and parental beliefs and expectations toward their children's English learning ability. We also found that SES, parenting styles (autonomous style rather than controlled style), and parental beliefs and expectations were positively associated with students' English performance.

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1. Introduction

As English is increasingly recognized as an international language, it is being introduced at younger grade levels as part of the formal education system in many countries where it has been traditionally taught as a foreign language (FL). Despite the growing popularity of this practice, however, we still do not know much about how FL learners who started learning English early develop English proficiency over time. Longitudinal analyses remain limited.

In addition, we can no longer assume that English learning is taking place solely in classrooms (Nunan & Richards, 2015). Research on FL education has predominantly focused on teaching and learning in classroom settings, assuming that FL learners have limited exposure to the target language outside of their classrooms. However, such an assumption no longer holds true in the case of English, a powerful lingua franca. Contextual factors outside of the classroom, such as parental and peer factors, need to be considered in order to have a comprehensive understanding of young students' English learning.

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Among various contextual factors that may influence young students' English learning, this study focuses on parental factors as a function of their socio-economic status (SES). There are growing concerns about socio-economic disparities across the globe. As discussed below, previous research in education indicates that there are significant correlations between students' SES and their academic achievement. However, SES has received relatively little attention among researchers of FL education until recently. This paucity of research is surprising considering that English fever—a phrase describing an excessive zeal for English learning, and which is spreading even among young learners—can largely be attributed to parents in the case of young learners. We can assume that English learning is uniquely influenced by the learners' SES because (a) English is often associated with global economic power; (b) although second language (L2)/FL pedagogy has undergone various innovations in order to develop communicative competence in recent years, the accessibility of newer methods and resources to develop such competence appears to vary substantially by SES; and (c) English is often treated as a major high-stakes academic subject within a given educational system, and one's English achievement has a potentially large impact on access to higher education and future career opportunities (Butler, 2015a; Graddol, 2006).

Therefore, as part of a larger project investigating the role of various contextual factors in the development of young learners' English proficiency over time, the present study examines the role of parents, while paying special attention to their SES. The data came from an eastern coastal city in China that has experienced the same rapid economic expansion and substantial SES disparities that have occurred in many parts of China. China provides an interesting case study because, in addition to substantial gaps in access to English education by region and SES (e.g., Feng, 2012; Zou & Zhang, 2011), researchers have observed that Chinese parents are heavily involved in their children's English education (Gao, 2012; Kyriacou & Zhu, 2008).

2. Literature review

2.1. Parental factors

It is well documented that parents have substantial influence on their children's academic achievement and motivation. In their review of the literature, Wigfield, Essoles, Schiefele, Roeser, and Davis-Kean (2006) identified four major influential parental factors: (a) parent, family, and neighborhood characters; (b) parents' general beliefs and behaviors; (c) parents' child-specific beliefs; and (d) parent-specific behaviors. Parent, family, and neighborhood characteristics include parental education, occupations, household income, and race/ethnicity, all of which are typically used as indicators of SES. Parents' general beliefs and behaviors refer to child-rearing beliefs, parenting styles, efficacy beliefs, and so forth. Parents' child-specific beliefs include parental expectations for their child's performance as well their perceptions of their child's abilities and talents. Finally, parent-specific behaviors refer to the time they spend with the child, teaching strategies, provision of toys and equipment, and other educational guidance. In addition, the number of books at home is often identified as a predictor for children's language and literacy development (e.g., Goldenberg, Rueda, & August 2008). It is important to note that, according to Wigfield et al. (2006), all four parental factors interact with each other and influence their child's motivation and achievement.

It has been argued that there are cultural variations with respect to the strength of associations among these factors. Regarding the association between parenting styles and children's achievement, for example, it is generally suggested that a parenting style that is optimally balanced between parental control and support for children's autonomy has a positive influence on children's achievement and motivation (Wigfield et al., 2006). However, the "optimal balance" may vary depending on factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and SES. Cao (2001) found that authoritative parenting (more moderate and autonomy-oriented than authoritarian parenting) had stronger associations with academic achievement among European American adolescents than among first-generation Chinese American adolescents. Similarly, parental beliefs about the nature of efficacy (i.e., the extent to which one's academic success is attributed to one's effort or talent) are found to differ by race/ethnicity, SES, and gender. A frequently cited study by Steven and Stigler (1992) reported that relative to their American counterparts, Chinese and Japanese mothers held higher expectations for their children's success and were more likely to attribute success to effort. Steven and Stigler argue that, under such a strong effort-oriented belief system, children also tend to feel stronger obligations to meet their parents' expectations. We have to remember, however, that these cross-cultural comparisons tend to adopt a monolithic and static view of parental influence and may oversimplify reality.

2.2. Parents' socio-economic status (SES) and language learning and motivation

Because SES is one of the major parental factors identified by Wigfield et al. (2006), language education researchers have paid substantial attention to SES and its influence over children's first language (L1) and literacy development as well as immigrant children's second language (L2) development. Most of these studies have been predominantly conducted in English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. With respect to L1 development, SES was found to be influential at a very early stage of vocabulary learning and language processing. Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder (2013) reported that differences by SES in vocabulary and language-processing efficiency already existed at 18 months of age for U.S. children; by 24 months of age, a 6-month-gap was observed between high and low SES groups. In a larger-scale study conducted in the United States, Lee and Burkam (2002) showed that the highest-SES children scored 60% higher in cognitive skills than the lowest SES children before they entered kindergarten. Examining Japanese and South

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