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The moderating role of socioeconomic status on motivation of adolescents' foreign language learning strategy use

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has amply established the link between motivation and learning strategy with regards to language learning. However, there have been few investigations into the role of socioeconomic status (SES) in second or foreign language learning. Using questionnaire data on an 8th grade cohort ($N = 203$, female = 110) from a large urban community in South Korea, we investigated SES as a moderator of the relationship between motivational orientation and language learning strategy use among adolescent students. A series of hierarchical linear models provided empirical evidence that, when drawing only on intrinsic motivation, low-SES adolescents tended to make relatively high use of social strategies. High-SES students, on the other hand, generally showed higher levels of effort, mastery goal orientation, and internal control, and they made greater use of cognitive, metacognitive, compensatory, and social strategies. These findings suggest that an adolescent's SES does affect the relationship between motivation and the use of various language learning strategies; they also suggest the need for greater fostering of low-SES students who are learning foreign languages.

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1. Introduction

A large body of literature has investigated the strategies used in successful second language learning, and various explanations for differences in strategy choice and use have been proposed (e.g., Chamot, 2008; Cohen, 1998, 2011; Griffiths, 2008b; Oxford, 2011). Among individual learner characteristics that could be related to strategy use, learner motivation is the one that has been investigated most (Pawlak, 2011). Another variable that may be associated with language learning strategy is *socioeconomic status* (SES). SES has been described as the social prestige among individuals or groups, typically indicated by parental income, parental education, and parental occupation. It is widely recognized that children born to parents of higher SES tend to benefit from a greater range of resources¹ than children born to parents of lower SES (e.g., Bornstein & Bradley, 2003); in particular, social class has been shown to be a major predictor of educational attainment (e.g., Kim & Quinn, 2013; Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). Most research investigating this trend, however, has looked primarily at academic achievement among language minority² learners where English is the dominant language (e.g., Sirin, 2005; White,

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¹ "Resources" can be taken to mean many things, including human, cultural, and social capital (Engberg & Allen, 2011).

² Language minority learners are language learners from underserved populations, typically of color and from lower SES backgrounds.

1982). Few studies have addressed how socioeconomic background influences academic achievement when studying a foreign language (FL) (Butler & Le, *in press*; Huang, Chang, Niu, & Zhi, *in press*), and fewer studies have explored the influences of SES on the relationship between motivation and learning strategy. The present study seeks to fill this gap, by exploring how SES underlies motivational orientations in language learning strategy use.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language learning strategies

Language learning strategy centers on a learner's consciously chosen behaviors or actions for the purpose of improving and regulating his or her own language learning (Griffiths, 2008a, 2008b, 2013). When defining language learning strategies, some authors focus on the techniques or devices used to acquire knowledge (Rubin, 1981), while others highlight the behaviors or actions toward task (Oxford, 1990, 2011), or the role of consciousness (Cohen, 1998, 2011; Cohen & Macaro, 2007). Second language (L2) researchers have not yet agreed on a comprehensive definition of "language learning strategy" (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003), but most distinguish between four types of strategy: (a) cognitive (i.e., specific to distinct learning activities), (b) metacognitive (i.e., knowing or reflecting about learning), (c) social/affective (i.e., involving interaction with others) (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985), and (d) compensatory (i.e., when encountering unfamiliar words or phrases) (Oxford, 1990).

Extensive research converges on the conclusion that strategy use plays an important role in language learning (e.g., Chamot, 2008; Cohen, 2011; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2008a, 2008b). For example, Plonsky (2011) conducted a research synthesis of 61 primary studies, which revealed that the use of any learning strategy had a general positive effect on language learning ($d = 0.49$), as measured by skill-specific outcomes (e.g., reading, writing). Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is a self-report instrument that taps into a range of strategy choices and current understandings of language learning strategies. This instrument has provided researchers with encouraging psychometric features for assessing language learning strategies, with internal consistencies typically ranging between 0.93 and 0.98 (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The present study incorporates items based on this SILL taxonomy.

2.2. Motivational orientations

According to Griffiths (2013), the effectiveness of a learning strategy would seem to depend on how appropriate it is for an individual student's circumstances, needs and goals. In other words, a learner's individual characteristics must be taken into account, and those characteristics include motivation.

Gardner (1985) posits that motivation can be conceptualized as having three dimensions: integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, and motivations. Students who are motivated (1) monitor their own progress and therefore are able to reflect on their learning approaches (i.e., integrativeness), (2) view the learning task as interesting (i.e., attitudes), and (3) engage in behaviors that maximize learning (i.e., motivations). The present investigation utilizes this construct as the basis for measuring students' motivation to engage with course material and language learning. The instrument used to measure this construct is the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991). It is a widely used instrument, consisting of 31 items and 50 statements, that captures three theoretical components of motivation: value beliefs, expectancy, and affect (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005). In a meta-analytic search performed by Crede and Phillips (2011) involving 67 primary studies, the MSLQ subscales were meaningful predictors of academic performance. Following Booney, Cortina, Smith-Darden, and Fiori (2008), and the claim that it is valid and reliable (Crede & Phillips, 2011), the present study employed this well-established instrument to assess motivational orientations in L2 learning.

2.3. Strategy use and motivational orientation

There is general agreement that extensive use of language learning strategies has a strong link with motivation (Booney et al., 2008; Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). This would seem unsurprising: more motivated learners are more likely to expend the effort required for strategy application. It is interesting to discover, however, that there is limited empirical evidence regarding the relationship between language learning strategies and motivation. Only two past studies have examined the issue with mixed target languages and populations. Both were undertaken in the Midwest region of the United States: Oxford and Nyikos's (1989) study consisted of undergraduates studying five different languages (French, Spanish, German, Russian, Italian) and majoring in a wide range of fields, and participants in the sample of Booney et al. (2008) were adolescents studying French, German, Latin, or Spanish as a foreign language. Both studies did find that highly motivated learners are likely to use a wide variety of strategies, thus increasing their chances of language learning success. The present study examines this issue by collecting data from adolescent learners of English as a foreign language in South Korea.

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