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The Relationship between Socio-economic Status and Academic Achievement in an EFL Classroom among Iranian University Students

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ABSTRACT

The problem of socioeconomic status is getting more and more tangible in universities due to its impacts on the students' academic achievement. Thus, it is important to have a clear understanding of what benefits or hinders university-age students' educational attainment. As such, the present research aims to investigate the effects of the socio-economic status on EFL sophomore learners' academic achievement in the national university of a town in Iran named Rafsanjan. Pearson Product Moment correlation showed that the relationship between SES and GPAs for the participants of this study was so that SES had remarkable relationship with GPAs. However, the direction of this relationship shows that the participants with a mid/high SES had significantly lower GPAs than the participants with a low SES. This finding of the study which is as opposed to the research conductors' expectations has valuable implications for the educational programs and families.

Key Words: Socioeconomic status, Academic achievement, EFL learners, Grade point average

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that the socioeconomic (SES) achievement gap is the main cause of inequality of students in schools and other educational systems (Bourdieu 1989; Carnoy, 2007; Shavit & Blossfeld 1993, as cited in Doren, 2013). The most significant reason of this finding according to Battle and Lewis (2002) might be the fact that a person's education is clearly linked to their life chances, income and well-being.

The low status students compared with the mid/high status students are often more depressed and they are concerned about their financial problems and sometimes they do not have enough time for studying and other academic activities. As such, in addition to providing the educational materials and facilities to promote learning and achievement in academic settings, the socioeconomic status of the students or their family could be a factor which impacts their emotional state and motivation for their learning. Stern (1963, as cited in Burstall, 1975) also stated that there is a serious need to study motivational factors which may result in the students' development of positive or negative attitudes toward foreign language culture, language itself, and people of the foreign country, which may have hindering or facilitating results on the foreign language development.

As some researchers such as Gayton (2010) also have recognized, while the influence on language-learning motivation of other macro -level factors, such as gender, have been extensively investigated, there has been comparatively little written about an association between SES and language- learning. Particularly, in Iran and even more evidently among the university students, differential achievement along the lines of SES has not been central to investigation in the realm of educational attainment. This is while the problem of socioeconomic status is getting more and more tangible in universities due to its impacts on the students' academic achievement and even sometimes it causes some students to put aside their education. Thus, it is important to have a clear understanding of what benefits or hinders Iranian university-age students' educational attainment. As such, the present research aims to investigate the effects of the socio-economic status on EFL sophomore learners' academic achievement in the national university of a town in Iran named Rafsanjan.

2.1. Socio-Economic Status

According to American Psychological Association (APA), socioeconomic status is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group, and it is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation.

In the present study also, students' socio-economic status is identified by the information provided by a questionnaire about the participants' parents and/or spouses' job, educational degree, average of the income and also about the number of their families' members. They are classified into two groups. The first group includes students with a mid/ high socio-economic status, and the second group contains students with a low socio-economic status.

3.1. Academic Achievement

The importance of adolescents' grade point average in relation to their overall academic accomplishment has been highlighted by a body of literature (e.g. Khatib, Sarem, & Hamidi, 2012) on academic achievement, and academic achievement is seen as adolescents' grade point averages in many academic settings. In this study also academic achievement is defined as the grade point averages of sophomore students in English language and linguistics program. These grade point averages are for the same term for all the participants of this study.

2. Literature Review

Few studies have seriously examined socio-economic status for its influence on academic achievement and the number of them is even smaller in the field of foreign language learning.

Hamid (2011) examined the relationships between secondary school students' family socio-economic characteristics and their academic achievement in English in a rural sub-district in Bangladesh. The results revealed that the rural students had low levels of academic achievement in English and within this overall low level of achievement, there were patterned relationships between the students' family income and parental education and their academic achievement in English. Students who had higher levels of parental education and family income were more likely to obtain higher scores on the proficiency test as well as higher grades in English in the Secondary School Certificate examination.

Shamim (2011) in his study compared learners' socio-economic status with their English language scores in the most recent public examination. He found that learners in the higher income bracket consistently outperformed learners in the lower income bracket. He suggested that the positive correlation of high family income with students' higher levels of proficiency in English may be attributed to their earlier education in private English medium schools compared to students in the lower income bracket.

Aikens and Barbarin (2008) recognized in the process of their investigation that children from low-SES environments acquire language skills more slowly, exhibit delayed letter recognition and phonological awareness, and are at risk for reading difficulties.

In a study by Palardy (2008), Students from low-SES schools entered high school 3.3 grade levels behind students from higher SES schools. In addition, students from the low-SES groups learned less over 4 years than children from higher SES groups, graduating 4.3 grade levels behind those of higher SES groups.

Honea (2007) in a study examined the influence of diligence, diligence support, family socio-economic status and some other variables on academic achievement. 315 high school students, 215 parents, and 46 teachers in the rural South made the sample of his study. The relationship between family socio-economic status and academic achievement was statistically significant in this investigation.

Ghani (2003) investigated the effect of SES on EFL learning in Pakistan. She measured the language proficiency of the learners in three ways: by administering a past Cambridge First Certificate exam (1995) and a cloze test (Lapkin & Wsain 1977) and from the scores they had obtained in the most recent intermediate annual examination in English which the subjects had taken covering composition, grammar, translation and set texts. She found that SES has an overwhelming effect on English learning success in this country.

Tang (2003) in a study of examining the effects of twelve variables such as self-concept, LOC, SES, and prior achievement on educational attainment found that SES and prior achievement had the largest effects on it for all ethnic and gender groups. In a study of middle school sixth grade students by Heck (1998) also students' ACH was identified to be related to their SES and LOC and can be predicted by these variables. Luster and McAdoo (1991) in a study of the

adversity of achievement among Black children found that overall high achievers came from smaller families, were financially higher, and had relatively intelligent and educated mothers and a more supportive home environment than low achievers. Making a risk index for the children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes, the researchers found that those children whose family situations were positive had better cognitive and social outcomes while children who experienced multiple risks were more likely to face up to academic and adjustment problems.

In a study by Coley (2002), children with higher SES backgrounds were more likely to be proficient on tasks of addition, subtraction, ordinal sequencing, and math word problems than children with lower SES backgrounds.

Pursley (2002) in the first study of dropout students tried to explore the development of the personal characteristics of Mexican-American dropouts during the transition to high school, discover which personal characteristics differed between those who dropped out by the 12th grade and those who graduated, and explore differences in the development of the personal characteristics of the dropouts and graduates between the 8th and the 10th grades. The independent variables were socio-economic status and time. He controlled for dropout-related family and school variables and explored longitudinal pattern differences in the theoretically selected personal characteristics. The sample for his study included 310 students that were selected from 1952 subjects in the existing database of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 that reported being Mexican American. Effects of SES and time on the dependent variable were examined. Results showed that socio-economic status had main effects for academic achievement. Socio-economic status and time had also main effects for educational aspiration.

Miller (1999) designed a study to examine the relationship between socio-economic status, age, gender, education and locus of control (LOC). No significant correlations occurred between socio-economic status, age, education and LOC.

Davis (1998) conducted a research to examine the relationship of family demographic factors and some other variables with academic achievement in college students from single-parent and two-parent homes, and academic differences between these two groups. The results of the statistical analysis of this study indicated no relationship between SES and achievement, and the results also offered support for the assumption that individuals adapt and compensate over

time to any disadvantages incurred from being raised in a single-parent home in lower SES environment.

The effect of SES on academic achievement was also investigated by Khayyer (1994). Six primary public schools, in the Illawarra region, New South Wales, were selected by satisfied random sampling. A demographic and family background questionnaire was used to determine the students' SES. The instruments used for identifying the students' academic achievement were a reading comprehension test (TORCH), and a mathematics test (PATMATHS). Socioeconomic status had significant direct effects in determining academic achievement in this study.

In 1987, Boardman, Herrington, and Horowitz did a study on 49 successful Black and White women. 29 of these participants grew up in poverty and their parents were high school dropouts. They reported to try harder than the rich participants. They were also more willing to help others get ahead in their careers.

Turner (1978) conducted a study on control in rural Appalachian Follow Through participants. The IAR was administered to 249 first-, third-, and sixth-grade children along with standardized achievement tests. No social class differences were revealed in participation in Follow Through.

3. Methodology

1.3. Design of the Study

This study used a correlational design to address the problem under study. In other words, it intended to examine the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement of students studying English Translation. And if there is any relationship, identify the positive or negative direction of this relationship.

2.3. Participants

This study was conducted on 120 students studying English Translation at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics of the national university of Rafsanjan. The participants were chosen conveniently as going through probable sampling was not possible. They were selected on a voluntary basis from the learners who were in the second year of their study

(third and fourth semesters), and they were only of the female gender. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 29. The GPAs used in this study were all for the latest semester of these students. Many of these students had high GPAs.

3.3. Instrumentation

The questionnaire which was used to realize the socio-economic characteristics of the participants was the demographic questionnaire. The questions were about the job of the participants' mothers, fathers and spouses, and the participants' mothers' level of education and income, their fathers' level of education and income, and their spouses' level of education and income.

Students' grade point averages of the same semester were utilized as their level of academic performance.

4.3. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were filled in 15 minutes by students and were delivered to the researcher. It took three days to collect data by questionnaires. Based on these demographic data, participants of the study were classified into two groups: the mid/high socio-economic status group and the low socio-economic status group. Then, permissions were sought to gather participants' GPAs. The GPAs included the participants' GPAs for the second semester of the year 1391 (2012).

5.3. Data Analysis Procedure

In order to answer the research problem posed earlier, the obtained data were put into the statistical software SPSS. First, Descriptive Statistics was run. Using Pearson formula, correlational analysis was conducted on the data to analyze the problem of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

1.4. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for SES and GPA

		SES	GPA
N	Valid	0	120
	Missing	0 1.3917	0
Mean		.49017	016.8095
Std. Deviation		1.00	1.49147
Minimum		2.00	12.43
Maximum			19.67

By virtue of the above table, the mean, the standard deviation, the minimum, and the maximum for the two study variables are revealed clearly.

2.4. Participants' SES

Number 1 presents the students with a mid/high socio-economic status, and number 2 presents the students with a low socio-economic status in figure 1. This figure shows that 73 members (60.8 percent) of the sample had a mid/high socio-economic status and 47 members (39.2 percent) of the sample had a low socio-economic status. As table 1 and figure 1 reveal, the standard deviation is .49 and the mean is 1.39 for this variable.

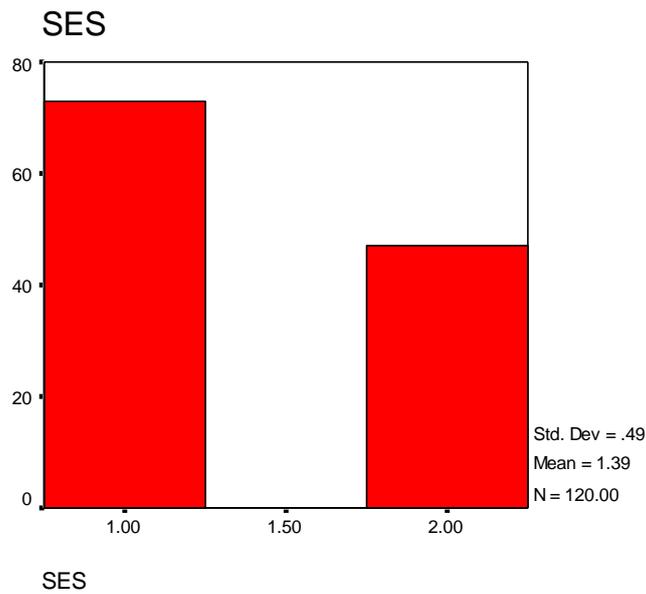


Figure 1: Mid/High SES-Participants and Low SES-Participants Compared

3.4. Participants' GPAs

Figure 1 reveals the participants' GPAs for the final exams of the second semester of the year 1391 (2012). The GPAs ranged from 12.50 to 19.50. The mean of GPAs is 16.81 and the standard deviation is 1.49 that is small. This small standard deviation shows that the students are convergent in terms of their GPAs. There are 104 different GPAs for these participants on the whole. The GPAs are negatively skewed. This means that most of the students had high GPAs.

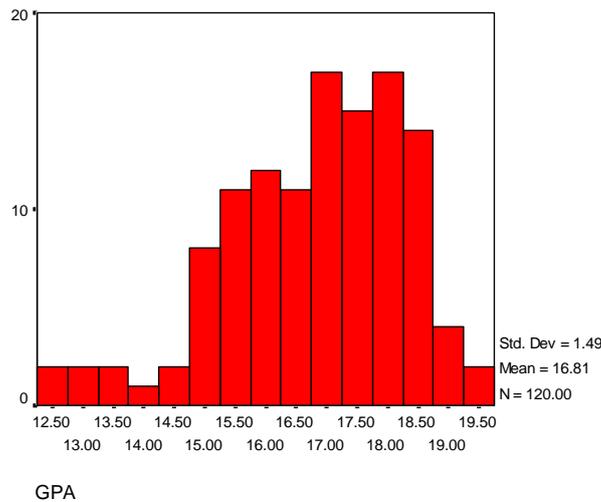


Figure2: Frequencies of the Participants' GPAs

4.4. The Relationship between SES and GPA

The number of studies that investigated the relationship of socio-economic status and academic achievement is so few that a conclusion cannot be made about the relationship of these two variables.

The relationship between SES and GPAs was investigated among the participants using Pearson product-moment correlation. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. As table 2 reveals, there was a significant negative correlation coefficient of SES and GPAs [$r = -.386$, $n = 120$, $p = .01$], with mid/high SES was associated with significantly lower GPAs than low SES.

A conclusion that can be drawn from this correlation is that the relationship between SES and GPAs for the participants of this study was so that SES had remarkable relationship with GPAs. It shows that the participants with a mid/high SES had significantly lower GPAs than the participants with a low SES. This finding of the study is in line with the results of some previous investigations such as those done by Tang (2003), Pursely (2000) and Heck (1998) in that socio-economic status had main effects for academic achievement.

Table 1.2: Correlation between SES and GPA

		GPA	SES
GPA Pearson Correlation		1	-.386(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.009
	N	120	120
SESPearson Correlation		-.386 (**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.
	N	120	120

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. Conclusions and Implications

Numerous factors can directly or indirectly affect the academic achievement of the learners, some are positively and some are negatively related (Khatib, Sarem, & Hamidi, 2012). The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement in an EFL classroom among Iranian university students. From the findings of this study it was concluded that there was negative relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement among university junior students. The result of the study is opposed to the assumptions of its conductors. This may be due to the fact that the mid/high SES-students have welfare in their life, so they may not have many motives or

purposes to spend time and effort for learning, and thus, they achieve lower GPAs than the low SES-students who wish to have a good life, have stronger motivations and so may try to learn and get higher GPAs than them.

The finding of the study as reported and discussed in the previous sections, should, however, be interpreted in the light of its limitations. This study was conducted only on the students of one year of study (sophomores). This limited scope of the participants of the study may limit generalizability of its finding. The recommendation of the study is that the relationship of socio-economic status and academic achievement of the students studying at other years of their academic education and also the students at private institutions may also be studied to create the stronger possibility of generalizing the results.

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