



HOW DOES THE INCOME INEQUALITY and FAMILY INCOME LEVEL AFFECT STUDENTS' ESL SCORES IN THE COLLEGE?

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between income level and students' academic performance in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses is an intriguing topic among social scientists. Many researches have been conducted on this issue. This literature review analyzes these researches and their findings about the close relationship between income level and student achievement in learning English. The research paper emphasizes the effects of income inequality on cognitive, emotional and social development of people, and its effects on unequal distribution of resources. The paper explains the differences between the parental investments on education and the results in the process of acquiring second language skills. This study points out the poverty related problems for ESL learners and suggests the necessity for inclusive and contemporary solution to this problem.

Keywords: Income inequality, Family income level, Academic success, ESL

JEL-Classification: I21, J15

GELİR EŞİTSİZLİĞİ ve HANEHALKI GELİR DÜZEYİ KOLEJ ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN ESL PUANLARINI NASIL ETKİLEMEKTEDİR?

ÖZET

Gelir düzeyi ile ESL kurslarında öğrencilerin gösterdiği akademik performans arasındaki ilişki sosyal bilimciler açısından oldukça ilginç bir konudur. Bu konuda birçok araştırma yapılmıştır. Çalışmada literatür incelemesi bağlamında gelir düzeyi ile İngilizce öğrenme başarısı arasında yakın bir ilişkinin olduğu görülmüştür. Araştırma, kaynakların eşit olmayan bir biçimde dağılımının gelir eşitsizliğine yol açtığını ve bunun insanların bilişsel, duygusal ve sosyal gelişimi üzerinde etkisinin olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, ebeveynlerin eğitime yönelik yatırımlarını ve bunun ikinci dil öğrenme becerisi edinme sürecine etkilerini açıklamaktadır. Bu çalışmada ESL öğrencilerinin yoksulluk ile ilişkili problemlerine dikkat çekilmekte, kapsayıcı ve çağdaş bir şekilde sorunun çözülmesi gerekliliği belirtilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gelir eşitsizliği, Evhalkı gelir düzeyi, Akademik başarı, ESL



Introduction

There are many factors affecting students' achievement in learning English as a second language and their success in ESL courses. Ethnic background, culture, parents' education, years of study and motivation are some of these factors (Wu, 2013: 202-208). Last but not least, economic factors are also crucial in second language acquisition due to people who have enough family income find it easy to succeed in ESL courses rather than people who have financial problems.

Income inequality is defined as an unequal distribution of income among the society (OECD 2014). Number of poor people in the society increases as the income inequality rises. According to "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014" report of U.S. Census Bureau, the official poverty rate in US was 14.8 percent in 2014. Nearly 46.7 million Americans fall into this category. One quarter of the population can be classified as poor when the poverty line is considered to be below the 50 percent of median disposable income, as it is commonly used in economics. When it comes to income inequality data in the US, the same report shows that income inequality is also increasing. While people from the lowest quintile had annual incomes of \$21,432 or less, to be in the highest quintile one should had income of \$112,263 in 2014. These numbers and percentages belong to the richest country in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising to confront with lower income levels and more unequal income percentages in the rest of the world. Low family income level and income inequality have important effects on living conditions of people, as well as educational opportunities and ESL learning.

The relationship between family income and educational success has been analyzed by various disciplines. Economists, sociologists and psychologists have conducted many researches to find out the impacts of family income and income inequality on students' academic achievement. Psychologists and sociologists are mainly interested in the effects of poverty on psychological and sociological development of people. Miller, Chen & Parker (2011: 962-963) points out that poverty negatively influences psychical health of people throughout their life. Students with psychological problems will have difficulties in the challenging college environment. On the other hand, economists give emphasis on the relationship between family income and educational attainment. Dahl & Lochner (2012: 1930) argues that there is a close relationship between income level and children's reading and math success. Roseberry-McKibbin (2013: 76) also explains the high correlation between income level and students' success on tests. On the basis of these studies, it can be concluded that there is a close relationship between poverty and academic success.

1. Poor Socio-Economic Conditions Are Not Conducive to Development

Poor socio-economic conditions affect the development of people through its effects on nervous system. Poverty suppress the formation of skills. According to Hackman, Farah and Meaney (2010: 651-654), socio-economic conditions affect brain development through several factors such as parent-child relationship, fetal factors, intellectual activation, and other factors such as nourishment, stress and vulnerability to harmful substances. As pointed out in this study, poverty causes stress in children. It is more likely that children growing up in poor economic conditions have emotionally hard times. Poor families generally live in small apartments and in poor neighborhoods of cities, where crime rates also tend to be high. In addition, noisy and overcrowded living spaces in which poor people are generally forced to live make the situation worse. Moreover, it can be claimed that poor parents find it difficult to spend much time with their children because of extra working hours and they cannot show their emotions to their



children much because of mental discomfort due to financial problems. All of these factors cause stress for children and affect their cognitive development.

Poverty has long lasting negative effects on development of mind. According to a study conducted by Duncan, Gunn and Klebanov (1994: 311-312), income of family has stronger effects on IQ of 5 years old children than mother's education, family origin and other effects. This study explicitly shows the importance of income inequality on cognitive development of people. Another important point about the effects of poverty is made by Miller, Chen & Parker (2011: 980). They argue that people who have stress in childhood will have social problems later in their life. Therefore, it can be concluded that poverty in childhood causes stress, and stress causes long lasting problems throughout life.

In addition to its negative effects on cognitive development, poverty has also strong negative effects on social and emotional development of people which are important key factors for educational attainment. People who are weak in socially and emotionally cannot be successful in academic environment. In the sociological research of Moore, Glei, Driscoll, Zaslow and Redd (2002: 218) it is found out that anti-social behaviors such as anxiety, depression and aggression are closely related with poverty. It is obvious that these people will have emotional problems in the future because there will be long term consequences as discussed in the study of Miller, Chen & Parker (2011: 959-997). As a result, cognitive, emotional and social development of people are directly affected by income level which also affects learning a second language as it requires strong skills.

2. Poverty and Education

Poverty limits the resources of people. Due to lack of resources poor students face many challenges. A student who has grown up in a poor family and poor economic conditions does not have similar opportunities for being successful at school when compared with a student coming from a rich family and having plenty of resources. For instance, educational expenditures for students will be quite different among low income and high income families. High-income families can spend more money on their children's development. Books, tutorials, course-related materials are usually expensive for poor students. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between family income level and children success and outcomes. Blau (1999: 262), explains these outcomes that are related with income as "a utility function that contains child outcomes as arguments; a production function for the child outcomes with inputs including the time of family members and purchased goods and services (e.g., child care, health care, books, etc.); budget and time constraints; and a specification of the information structure and the formation of expectations." The outcomes definitely help to succeed in academic environment.

As the income inequality rises in the society, people will have problems to finance their expenses on education which results in an increasing difference between rich and poor students in terms of educational attainment. In a study by Sean Reardon (2011: 5), professor of education and sociology at Stanford University titled, "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations", it is found out that as the income inequality increases, the accomplishment difference between children in high and low income families also rises. The strong relationship between income and student success is explicitly shown by Dahl and Lochner (2012: 1930). Based on their econometric study, they point out that as the family income increases by \$1,000, children's reading and math scores rise



by 6%. All these studies make it certain that there is a direct relationship between income level and academic success of students, which is also true for ESL learners in the college.

3. The Role of Socio-Economic Factors in Learning English as a Second Language

In our integrated world, people learn English as a necessity in their business and social life due to its being the most common language and the language of modern culture as well. Mauranen&Ranta (2009: 1) explains this necessity through these words: “English has established its position as the global *lingua franca* beyond any doubt; along with this status, it has become one of the symbols of our time, together with globalisation, networking, economic integration, and the Internet.”. People around the world desire their children to learn and speak the most common language, English. However, ESL education requires spending a large amount of money. Expenditures on learning a second language of children is related with financial conditions of parents (Li, 2007: 730-731). There are several effects of wealth on learning language. Wealth determines the investments, and the investments determine the age at which the child starts learning English as a second language. Children from rich families can start learning it at early ages. Since they are exposed to English when they are young, they can easily gain proficiency in language skills. They can quickly acquire the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, listening and speaking skills which are difficult to obtain for old-age English learners. Some researchers argue that amount of time spent on learning the language is more important than starting age. According to results of the study held by Muñoz (2010: 47), although starting age is crucial, time spent on learning a second language is more significant. It is obvious that time spent on learning the language also depends on family income as it requires spending for learning.

Income level determines the resources available for learners. Learning English as a second language requires practice and ESL learners generally live in non-English speaking countries. According to Latu (1994: 49), exposure to second language is crucial due to its important contribution to gaining the necessary skills for learning it. Therefore, learners need English books, movies, novels etc. to get the exposure and gain the proficiency in the language. However, students who can easily reach these resources mostly do not have low level of income. Imported books and other learning materials are generally expensive because of copyrights and transportation costs. Tutorials are also expensive which help a lot in learning a second language. Moreover, students with high family income can have the opportunity to learn English in formal courses or even they can study in an English speaking country whereas poor students cannot afford these because of financial constraints. All these factors set unavoidable constraints on learning English for low income students.

Income level has also effects on language skills of parents who are the first teachers of children. Parents who are financially secure will have stronger second language skills than poor parents. It can be concluded that the place of English in the modern world motivates parents to teach English to their children, and provide the resources for their ESL learning. However, income inequality does not allow all families to turn this motivation into reality since low income families face financial constraints. Li (2007: 729-735) explains that students from higher income families have higher academic achievements when compared with lower income families. Additionally, the author also argues that parents who are more educated and wealthy can help their children in their studies and improve their children’s skills. In the light of these observations, it can be concluded that high income provides people to learn English as a second language, and then transmit it to next generations. Therefore,



students coming from wealthy families already have the exposure to English which directly affect their ESL scores later in the college.

Conclusion

Factors affecting students' success in learning a second language have been analyzed for several decades. Researchers from the fields of psychology, sociology and economics focused on the effects of income level on educational attainment. When it comes to ESL learning, there is also a strong correlation between the income level and academic achievement in ESL courses in the college. There are many reasons for this correlation.

Poor economic conditions inhibit the cognitive, emotional and social development of children. Income level also determines the starting age for learning English as well as its quantity and quality. Inequality in distribution of resources due to poverty and income inequality also causes poor people not to be able to afford for educational expenses. When the moral and material resources available for students are limited, their chance for achievement in learning a second language will be suppressed. Effects of poverty are not only limited with childhood. According to researches, poverty-related effects can last throughout the life.

Increasing gap between low income and high income families threatens not only the ESL learners but also all the education system as well. Policymakers should think about the low income families. While it does not seem possible to create the same socio-economic opportunities for all students, policymakers can use the advantage of technology. As the technological devices such as smart phones and online language tools are being common in the society, delivering free services for ESL learners may be a solution to decrease this achievement gap.

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