

Socio-economic status, young language learning, and the weapon to change the world

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The history of all previous societies has been the history of class struggles – Karl Marx

Introduction

Traditional models of Education might see the process as being one of transference of knowledge.

The student is the empty vessel and the educator's role is to fill up the student with knowledge - an idea which has held sway with some of history's greatest thinkers such as Locke and Aristotle (it was Aristotle after all who first talked about the blank tablet, later described as the *tabula rasa* by Henry More in the 1600s). Clearly, this kind of education is important in that societies generally need our citizens to have basic knowledge of subjects such as literacy, maths and science.

However, this traditional model presents a rather limited view of what education can be, and indeed many have argued that beyond the accumulation of knowledge, education is a powerful force for social change. Nelson Mandela, for example, is attributed as saying that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world¹". Clearly he believed that an important function of education was as a force for social change and indeed there are many examples of precisely how education has been a powerful positive influence. A brief view of the *Global Partnership for Education* website highlights a few examples

(<https://www.globalpartnership.org/education>). Education is one of the most effective ways of reducing poverty, it can improve children's nutrition, reduce health risks, help bring about equity between boys and girls/men and women, and is one of the strongest drivers of economic progress and prosperity. It can also help individuals from different societies learn about the environment thus helping future generations to be better custodians of our planet than perhaps we have been.

¹ Quote from Nelson Mandela's speech at the launch of *Mindset Network* 16.07.2003, Johannesburg, South Africa

Importantly, education can also be an important precursor to peace and resolution of conflict.

Confucius said that “Education breeds confidence, confidence breeds hope, hope breeds peace²”.

Another aspect of education and its role in society that is entrenched in some countries’ educational policies is the ideal of education as the greater leveller. The idea is that whereas children may come from many different socioeconomic backgrounds, and have a wide range of differences that may advantage or disadvantage certain students, once the child walks through the door of their school they can all be treated equally, and importantly equally benefit from what education has to offer and consequently what the world has to offer the educated citizen. In other words, two individuals with the same educational qualifications should (in theory) have equal probability of success in the labour market, regardless of their social class or socioeconomic status (SES). The reality, unfortunately, is that this is often not the case. A number of studies carried out within the context of European Union countries, as well as the US, have shown that individuals who come from higher social class brackets tend to have the advantage (in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds) when compared to individuals with the same level of education but from a lower social class (Bernardi & Ballarino 2016; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2011; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001). In essence, studies like this confirm the idea of ‘the rich get richer...’ or at the very least ‘the poor don’t catch up to the rich in economic wealth’. These studies demonstrate that education, then, often fails in the remit of levelling out social inequity. This is an important issue highlighted by a number of papers in this volume (e.g., Sayer; Kuchah).

The importance of a volume on SES and young language learners

These issues are for me one of the reasons why this volume is so important. Researchers from a range of disciplines have for some time been studying how individuals develop knowledge of more

² Quote taken from *The Open University* <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/12-famous-confucius-quotes-on-education-and-learning>

than one language, and yet, a widespread finding throughout educational research, that contextual factors such as SES are powerful influencers in a child's academic achievement, has up until very recently been somewhat neglected within an L2 perspective. Furthermore, as the field of young language learners is itself somewhat in its infancy, this is an issue that demands greater scrutiny from the young learner perspective. As governments around the world are developing educational programmes and curricula to ensure an early start to foreign language (FL) learning in school (often driven by the uninformed belief that 'younger is better' (see Murphy, 2014 for a more detailed discussion), it is all the more important for educators, parents, policy makers, and curriculum designers (for a start) to better understand the role that these contextual factors play in shaping FL/L2 outcomes in younger learners. This volume makes a really significant contribution to helping us better understand this complex set of inter-relationships.

There are a number of different reasons why this volume represents an important step forward in uncovering the inter-relationships between SES (and related factors) and young language learner's language and academic outcomes. First, the papers in this volume come from a range of different geopolitical contexts, allowing the reader to begin to understand the ways in which SES influences learner outcomes across different contexts. This is critical because to generalise across contexts is ill-advised and leads to inaccurate assumptions (e.g., such as the younger is better debate, see Murphy, 2014). Papers in this volume represent research carried out in China, Taiwan, Spain, Hungary, Mexico, South Korea and Cameroon. Thus we have interesting differences in terms of culture, language (of the L1) and SES differences. Some of these countries are first world, others developing, some have strongly capitalist histories and social infrastructures, others less so. These differences allow us to gauge how sensitive the role of SES is in shaping L2 outcomes across these different geopolitical contexts. Theoretically it might be possible, for example, that SES would fail to exert much of an influence in countries that were more socialist in their political leaning.

Interestingly, this is not what we see in the papers here. Rather, each paper, regardless of geopolitical context, illustrates an important interaction between SES, social class, and educational provision, implementation and outcomes. This finding is not to suggest that the nature of those inter-relationships is identical across contexts. However, given that the literature has not always presented a uniform picture of whether SES impacts on L2 outcomes (as identified for e.g., in Huang et al this volume), it is important to see how it does so across a range of different geo- and socio-political contexts.

Related to this issue is the notion of different conceptualisations of how to define SES. A number of papers here define SES as some combination of parental level of education and/or household income, sometimes identified by whether the family requires financial assistance from the government, and/or parental occupation and home resources (e.g., Kuchah). Importantly, other contributors take a different approach, discussing the construct of 'social class' over SES highlighting the notion that the variable of interest cannot easily be reduced to one simple index (e.g., parental education) but rather encompasses a range of different features characterising an individual's social standing or 'social positioning' (Sayer). As highlighted in the introduction to this volume, defining, and even just naming the construct in question is difficult. The editors ask whether it is 'social class' or 'SES' in their introduction and, quite rightly for a volume of this type, they chose to include different conceptualisations of a broader concept(s). Authors within the volume have opted for their preferred term which reflects the focus their respective studies. Furthermore, the editors also note that historically research in applied linguistics has tended to only briefly reference SES as an 'unproblematic' variable. One of the strengths of this volume then is that it highlights the complexity of what the construct in question actually is and how it can be defined and operationalized in different research contexts. Of course, this means then that some of the papers are not necessarily measuring like-for-like but as already noted, this is a strength,

highlighting the complexity of the construct itself in identifying how it might influence learners' experiences with an L2 both in and outside the classroom context.

The papers here also represent different research methodologies, offering quantitative and qualitative approaches, studies of children's learning in classroom contexts, outside the classroom (e.g., home contexts) and in study abroad. The variability of methodological approach serves to enrich the general contribution of this volume in highlighting the differences and similarities in findings across different studies. Many quantitatively oriented studies adopt a survey-based approach, sometimes including the administration of language assessment tasks to investigate the link between SES and L2 learning. For example, Butler and Le identify proportions of students in different SES brackets, and links the child's SES to student motivation, self-perceived competence, and anxiety. Similarly, Huang et al take a quantitative approach and examine the relationship between SES, experience with language input and speech production. Nikolov and Csapó adopt a similar type of survey-based design examining the inter-relationships between SES, reading comprehension (in two different L2s, English and German) and cognitive skills (i.e., inductive reasoning). Shin and So also adopt a survey-based approach to investigate SES, motivation and self-reported language learning strategy use. Additionally, Sanjurjo et al use a quantitatively oriented questionnaire-based study to identify whether SES impacts on Science attainment in CLIL and non-CLIL classrooms. Other contributions in this volume take a more qualitative approach, observing teaching and the structure of classrooms and carrying out interviews. These were the approaches favoured by Sayer, Song, and Kuchah, each of which offer a rich picture of characteristics impacting on learners' behaviours, beliefs and ideologies, as well as educational provision and context, papers which provide a nice complement to the more quantitatively oriented studies. Through this complementary range of studies we begin to see the complexity of how SES impacts educational provision and learning. A simple one-to-one correlation it is not. Rather, many variables are

implicated such as motivation, strategy use, cognitive skill, language and social ideology, and the role of input, among others. All of these too are implicated in, and interact with, the educational provision the child experiences, be it a traditional foreign language learning context (e.g., Butler & Le), a CLIL programme (e.g., Sanjurjo et al), or English Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts (e.g., Kuchah). We also see a range of language outcomes represented in these studies (e.g., speech production and reading comprehension), again adding to the richness of the contribution offered here.

Insights into how SES impacts L2 learning in young learners

The papers within this collection offer us new insights into the variables that influence, or even predict, L2 learning outcomes in young/beginner learners. Crucially, studies like these demonstrate that we are beginning to learn about the considerable complexity of SES starting at how to define it, through to examining how the effectiveness of different educational provision is mitigated by it. We can see from these papers how SES interacts with a range of different variables, and mediates a range of different L2 outcomes (e.g., motivation, strategy use, literacy skill, cognitive reasoning) and how SES impacts the effectiveness of different educational provision (CLIL/EMI). We are only at the beginning stages of examining these relationships and it is no doubt the case that this volume will serve as inspiration for further studies to examine these issues with yet other unstudied variables and in ever more intricate and complex research designs. Importantly, however, we are learning valuable lessons which are already beginning to have an impact on how we reflect upon the success of different educational provision. These lessons are evident in each paper, but I'd like to highlight just a few here.

Sanjurjo et al's discussion of Science learning through CLIL represents an important illustration of lessons learned and to be learned. Their paper focused on identifying how SES modulates access to

CLIL in Spain which they rightly argue is critical as it helps educators plan and implement appropriate bilingual programmes across all of society (i.e., a wide spectrum). Bilingual programmes such as CLIL are often self-selecting where children from middle to upper class families self-select to participate in these voluntary forms of bilingual education (e.g., Murphy, 2014). Examining the effectiveness of immersion with only a sub-section of society is less informative than with a wider representation. Importantly, CLIL (and other bilingual education programmes) is meant to be inclusive and egalitarian. However, how it actually is implemented and what the findings for both L2 and academic outcomes are from programmes like CLIL might suggest otherwise. This is an important issue that needs greater empirical scrutiny. In Sanjurjo et al's study Spanish students in grade 6 were compared from higher and lower SES backgrounds and crucially, their performance in an academic subject (Science) was compared. It has long been an important characteristic of bilingual education that participation should not preclude excellence in academic standards. As mentioned earlier, a long-standing finding in educational research has been the powerful and predictive role of SES in influencing academic achievement. This finding is no different in CLIL as evidenced by Sanjurjo et al's findings. Students in non-CLIL programmes obtained higher results in Science than in CLIL, and students from middle to higher SES brackets also tend to have higher scores in Science than lower SES students (regardless of whether they are in CLIL or not). We need to know about findings like this so we can continually refine and improve the nature of education generally, and bilingual provision specifically, to try to render them more effective for all students, regardless of their background.

Kuchah's paper is another powerful example of how SES is an important predicting factor that policy makers should consider in developing and implementing bilingual programmes. The context of his paper is Cameroon, where unacceptably high proportions of state schools do not have electricity, water or sanitary provision. Despite these basics not being met, the government has

implemented English Medium of Instruction (EMI) programmes as part of francophone students' 'human right' to have access to the world's lingua franca (English). Kuchah's analysis illustrates the power of the parentocracy (c.f. Enever, 2004) as parental motivation was identified as being largely instrumental in francophone children's experiences with EMI in Cameroon, where the perceived economic advantages of English, and the belief that an early start will lead to high English proficiency, drives decision making at parental and policy levels (see also Song (this volume) for a discussion of similar issues but in a very different context). Kuchah points out that despite these ideologies, the opportunity to enrol their child in EMI programmes does not guarantee the child will become proficient in English, nor does it guarantee any quality of educational experience. Indeed a common theme throughout the papers in this volume is that existing social injustices are often perpetuated throughout the educational system (also clearly demonstrated in Sayer's paper for example). These papers highlight the tension between the intention of the educational provision (i.e., providing children with their basic human right, access to quality education, and access to the opportunities that learning English affords) with the reality that schooling through EMI, (or CLIL) may not be providing the quality education children deserve if not implemented appropriately and with due consideration of all the mitigating variables (like SES) that influence learning outcomes. These tensions and challenges are discussed directly in a recent position paper (Simpson, 2017) published by the British Council. After reviewing evidence for the challenge of learning English and learning academic content (through English) in EMI contexts in low and middle-income countries, the British Council has reached the conclusion that "There is little or no evidence to support the widely held view that EMI is a better or surer way to attain fluency in English than via quality EaS" (pg. 7 – where EaS is 'English as Subject'). They go on to conclude that the early introduction of EMI actually impedes learning of academic content because young learners have not had the requisite foundation in English to benefit from EMI programmes. This is a strong pronouncement and no doubt will be an important influence on future work.

It does not have to be the case that EMI programmes might impede children's learning of academic content, even those from low or middle socioeconomic backgrounds. We know from a considerable amount of research in childhood bilingualism that children have the cognitive capacity to learn multiple languages simultaneously (Murphy, 2014) and that children can participate in bilingual education at no cost to academic achievement, within the right environment and with the right level of input and support. However, developing and implementing programmes appropriately, with due consideration of the needs of the stakeholders (students and families), is key. One of the reasons that EMI programmes at all levels of education have proliferated throughout the world no doubt stems from the success of immersion programmes, such as French immersion developed by Lambert and Tucker (1972) in Montréal, Canada. The children in these programmes were from middle to higher SES brackets, and spoke one of the official languages of the country (English) and were learning a second, high-status official language, present often in the child's ambient environment. A critical feature of these immersion programmes (and successful two-way immersion programmes designed to support bilingual proficiency in both minority and majority language speakers) is that the child will have language arts instruction in their home language as well as the target language (see Murphy, 2014 for a review). In the fever to learn English, one fears that all too often policy makers and programme developers forget this important element. Furthermore, and as articulated by Simpson's (2017) report for the British Council, children need an appropriate foundation upon which learning proceeds. In other words, learning takes time, another notion embedded in the principles of effective immersion education. To thrust a child into an educational context where suddenly important academic subjects are taught through a language with which the child has had minimal experience not surprisingly leads to lower than desirable academic results. If, however, such programmes were more carefully considered and developed, where the target language was introduced incrementally throughout the primary

years (as with some immersion models), it could be possible for the child to gain sufficient mastery of English to benefit from content-based instruction through English, regardless of their social class. As we uncover the precise ways in which SES influences child L2 (and academic) outcomes both in and outside the classroom, we can further refine educational programmes taking these research findings into account.

Another important educational implication that stems from the work presented in this volume is the notion of ‘class sensitive teaching’ (e.g., Song, this volume). All contributors speak to the issue of re-considering either how we teach the L2 (in FL contexts) or how we introduce and implement bilingual education (in the case of CLIL and EMI). If we cannot change the SES of the families to which the students belong, what we can perhaps do is factor in the findings of research such as presented here in this volume to develop more effective teaching programmes for children from different SES backgrounds. In order to achieve this goal we need more research – more research on how SES affects learning in different educational and geopolitical contexts, but also more research on how provision can be best modified to be more effective for different learners. It is worth noting that governments could, of course, work hard to reduce social inequity in our respective societies in the first place. No doubt developing pedagogy that is informed by research on SES differences is a more realistic goal, unfortunately.

Conclusion

This volume represents research investigating the role of SES and young language learners. It is important, therefore, to consider the impact of this research on how we conceive of young language learners’ development. As previously identified, governments around the world are lowering the age at which they are requiring children to learn foreign (or second) languages through some form of educational provision. Also already mentioned is how, in many respects,

these decisions are motivated in part due to the widely held belief that ‘younger is better’. We know from many studies within the L1 domain how children’s language development is influenced by the socio-economic variables related to domestic contexts (i.e., levels of parental education, parental occupation, and household annual income) (e.g., Arriaga, Fenson, Cronan & Pethic, 1998; Feldman, Dollaghan, Campbell, Kurs-Lasky, Janosky & Paradise, 2000; Hoff, 2003). Within the sphere of L2 development, we need much more rigorous empirical work to best understand the nature of these variables and how they impact L2 outcomes. As but one example, an area of concern for many educators is to identify the precise age at which we should introduce FL learning. Some governments have been convinced that an early start is better and will lead to higher L2 outcomes, despite the fact that studies comparing younger vs. older learners in taught FL settings have indicated older is better in predicting a range of second language skills (e.g., Muñoz, 2006). Nonetheless, there may still be advantages to starting young, ranging from the development of inter-cultural awareness (Enever, 2011), enhancing L1 literacy (Murphy, Macaro, Cipolla & Alba, 2015) or laying the foundation upon which more rapid L2 learning might proceed (Murphy, 2014) to name a few. The research in this volume requires us to consider the role SES plays in all of these (and other) findings. It would be interesting, for example, to examine the role of SES in considering an ideal starting age, particularly given the notable relationship identified by Huang et al (this volume) on the role of age and input. They argue that SES is statistically associated with accuracy but less so with fluency and complexity. Importantly, the difference in accuracy (between lower and higher SES students) derives mainly from differences with English in preschool and kindergarten (i.e., early exposure) rather than SES per se, a finding which reminds us that SES is no doubt a correlated variable with L2 outcomes but not likely to be a causal one. As Huang et al conclude, while we cannot intervene with the SES of students’ families, we can provide educational interventions for different linguistic variables and aim to provide equal access for students across a

range of SES backgrounds. It would be most informative were we to be able to examine these relationships further.

Research in early childhood education generally has identified the importance of the beginning years of a child's formal educational experience. Indeed, the early years have been argued to be 'the most important grade' (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003) because children's experiences at this early educational level have been shown to be statistically correlated with, and predictive of, children's later academic achievement. This finding makes Huang et al.'s (this volume) focus on the nature and quality of early input particularly important. We need to understand these issues more comprehensively in order to ensure that we develop the best possible programmes and provision for children across the world and across a range of backgrounds and experiences. If education is to be an effective 'weapon to change the world', we need to get it right so as to maximise its positive influence.

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