

The Impact of Iranian Learner Parental Socio-Economic Status on Learning English as a Foreign Language

**Yadollah Alidoost, Mohammad Paknejad, Ali Reza Toulabi,
Noor Allah Nahak Mirchenari, Hassan Nokarizi**

Abstract – As English has increasingly become associated with social and economic power in the context of globalization, there has been a growing concern regarding achievement gaps in English that appear to be correlated to learners' socio-economic status (SES). The present study aims to examine how parents' SES and their behaviors and beliefs about English education relate to their children's English language learning, and how such relationships may differ across different grade levels. The participants were seventh, eighth and ninth grade students who had learned English from the seventh grade level (72 students in total) together with their parents in a medium-sized city in Iran. An extensive parental survey revealed that while parental beliefs about English education and their beliefs about their children's success in acquiring English did not differ between different SES groups, their direct behaviors and their indirect behaviors showed significant differences by the fourth grade level. Combined with the students' learning outcome data, it was found that while the parents' SES did not show much effect on their children's listening and reading/writing performance during their elementary school years, it did indicate an effect on their speaking abilities at the fourth grade level, if not earlier. This paper suggests the importance of incorporating socio-economic dimensions in theorizing second and foreign language acquisition (SLA), which are largely missing in current major approaches in SLA.

Keywords – Parental Factors, English Education, Foreign Language Education, Junior High Schools, Socio-Economic Status.

I. INTRODUCTION

As English has increasingly come to be seen as a lingua franca and a means towards success in the globalizing world, a substantial amount of time, effort, and resources are being invested in teaching and learning English around the world. In recent years, this zeal for learning English appears to have spread among even young learners of the language. Many countries where English had been taught traditionally as a foreign language (EFL) at the secondary school level and beyond have begun introducing English at earlier grade levels in their curricula. East Asia is no exception to this trend. Various types of English-learning opportunities outside of the formal school system such as private tutoring, cram schools, and study-abroad programs for children are also available for those who can afford them. Numerous teaching and learning materials for early English education are being produced every year. At the same time, unequal access to such resources based on socio-economic status (SES) and a perceived increase in achievement gaps by SES have generated significant concern in many regions in East Asia, particular as these regions experience increasing economic disparities within

their societies (Butler 2009; Feng inPress).

Despite the growing concern that has been expressed in public discourse regarding achievement gaps by learners' SES, socio-economic dimensions are largely missing in current major theories of second/foreign language acquisition (SLA). SLA theories have been developed mostly based on educated adult learners such as college students; learning experiences among socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged learners have rarely been incorporated in the construction of such theories (Tarone, Bigelow and Hansen 2009). However, it is increasingly important to integrate socio-economic dimensions in theorizing SLA, especially when acquiring powerful languages such as English, in order for research to make a more meaningful contribution to improving language education, particularly given its implications of social equity.

The present study, therefore, aims to address the importance of the socio-economic dimensions in learning EFL among young learners. Apparently, EFL learning is not limited to taking place within formal classrooms, as has been often assumed in the literature. As part of a larger longitudinal project investigating how various contextual factors – including parental and familial factors, peer-group and social relationship factors, and community

Parental factors and early English education factors – affect young learners' English learning, this study focuses on the influence of parental SES factors. One may predict that young learners are particularly vulnerable to parental and familial behaviors and attitudes. Based on a cross-sectional component of the longitudinal data, the study aims to examine how parents' SES and their behaviors and beliefs about English education relate to their children's English acquisition at the early stages of their English language learning, and how such relationships may differ across different grade levels.

As a case study, the present study was conducted in a medium-sized, older city in an eastern region in Iran where increased social and economic disparities have emerged in the midst of its rapid economic development. Iran was chosen because it has the world's largest number of children learning EFL as a mandatory school subject from at least the first grad. Moreover, though there is enormous enthusiasm for English education in Persian society in general, there are substantial discrepancies among students in terms of their access to resources for learning English both within and outside the formal school system (Feng in press; G. Hu 2007; Y. Hu 2008; Zhang and Adamson 2007; Zou and Zhang 2011). Strong parental involvement in their children's English education has also been reported (Gao in press; Kyriacou and Zhu 2008).

In reviewing the literature on parental influence on the socialization of academic achievement and motivation among children in general, Wigfield and others (2006) identified four influential parental factors: (1) parental, familial and neighborhood characteristics; (2) parents' general beliefs and behaviors; (3) parents' child-specific beliefs; and (4) parent-specific behaviors. The parental, familial, and neighborhood characteristics include parental education, occupation, household income, marital status, number of children and cultural traditions. Parents' general beliefs and behaviors refer to their child-rearing beliefs and parenting styles, efficacy beliefs, worldview, locus of control, and so forth. The parents' child-specific beliefs refer to the parents' beliefs about their children's abilities and expectations for their success. The parent-specific behaviors include the amount of time spent with the child, teaching strategies, career guidance, encouragement to participate in various activities, and so forth. Creating an environment where the child can be exposed to academic-oriented vocabulary and books has been found to be influential over the child's success at school (e.g., Goldenberg, Rueda, and August 2008).

The English proficiency of parents may be considered an index for the level of English support provided at home or may serve as a function of indirect modeling (e.g., Portes and Hao 1998). According to Wigfield and others (2006), all four of these factors interact with each other as well as with a fifth factor, namely, the child and sibling characteristics (e.g., gender, past performance, aptitudes, attitudes, personality, and birth order), and influence the child's achievement and motivation to various degrees.

In the context of EFL, the relationship between young learners' SES and their English language development has not been investigated systematically. Among the few studies conducted so far are the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) Study, a collaborative effort covering seven European countries (Croatia, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden). It was found that parental educational levels were significantly correlated with young learners' comprehension in the target foreign language, including English. In addition, the amount of exposure to the target language outside of school and the parental use of the target language at work were also found to be influential (Enever 2011). Zou and Zhang (2011), a study conducted among secondary school students in Shanghai rather than elementary school students, also found that students' English performance (as measured by a locally administered written test) showed differences that varied by their parents' educational levels.

The relative scarcity of research on SES and EFL learning is unfortunate considering the fact that there is growing concern regarding the gaps in access to English language education based on region, student SES, and ethnic/linguistic status in many parts of the world. Even in East Asia, which was once generally believed to have relatively egalitarian education systems, the phrase "English divide" has begun to appear in both academic and public discourse to describe the perceived proficiency gaps in English by student SES and/or minority status (e.g., Lee 2010; Tsuda 2008).

Among academic subjects, one can predict that English language education may have a particularly unique effect on SES. First, English is often strongly associated with economic power in the context of globalization (Block and Cameron 2002). Second, while the recent emphasis on oral communicative competence in EFL teaching and learning has led to various reforms in policy, curricula, materials, and instructional approaches, there seems to be a wide diversity in practices among schools in Iran. As a result, parents and their children may experience different ways of acquiring communicative competence depending on their SES backgrounds. Lastly, English remains one of the most important academic subjects in the exam-oriented educational system in Iran, and performance on English exams can greatly influence one's educational attainment and career choices. As Zou and Zhang (2011, 191) have noted, "English is more than just a school subject; it permeates into many aspects of social life."

II. RESEARCH QUESTION

The current study is focused on understanding the following relationships and how such relationships may differ across grade levels:

1. How does Iranian parental SES influence their children's English learning?

This study was exploratory in nature. The first question above aims to understand the interrelations among parental SES and their behaviors and attitudinal variables (described Parental factors and early English education below in detail). The second question concerns whether young learners' English performance may differ by SES in four skill domains. As we shall explain in more detail below, however, since we only evaluated the speaking performance of the focus group students (due to the logistical challenge of evaluating all of the participants' speaking performance), question three relates only to the effect of parental factors on young learners' listening, reading, and writing skills.

III. PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study were 21 seventh, 26 eighth, and 25 ninth grade students (72 students in total), together with their parents in a medium-sized city (referred to as C-city hereafter) in a province in the eastern coastal area of Iran. Young learners in the education literature usually refers to students that are up to the elementary school level (i.e., up to the sixth grade level in the Persian context). However, for this study, eighth grade students were also recruited so as to enable a comparison across higher grade levels. C-city was chosen for this study because its recent experience is shared by many other urban areas in Iran with respect to: (1) rapid economic growth and an influx of labor migrants from neighboring rural areas; and (2) substantial socio-economic disparities among its residents as a result of its economic and population growth. While C-city was an old and in many respects a relatively sleepy city, it achieved dramatic economic growth in recent years. The per-capita

disposable income per month in C-city grew roughly 3.5 times higher in the last ten years (from RMB 828 in 2002 to 2,858 in 2012). Its rapid economic development attracted many migrant workers and their families who moved to the city from neighboring farming regions, which resulted in the expansion of its population. The migrant population¹ already comprised 42.4% of the city's total population (3.3 million) in 2010 according to the city's census data. As with many other urban cities in Iran, C city has clearly recognizable rankings among its public schools even during the compulsory education years (up until the ninth grade level). Children are supposed to be enrolled in school according to their residence. Not too surprisingly, however, prestigious or "elite" schools are usually located in wealthier areas of the city, and have more qualified teachers and greater resources at their disposal. In Iran, it is not unusual for "elite" elementary and middle schools to select some of their students based on their academic achievement from both within as well as outside of the designated area of residence. In the latter case, an additional fee may be required students to be accepted by such elite schools. In practice, this is usually an option only available to wealthier parents who can afford to pay the fee.

With the help of the Education Bureau in C-city, two sets of urban public elementary and middle schools were identified for this study. They were located in two areas that were distinctively different with respect to their SES. For the sake of convenience, the schools which were located in the higher SES areas are referred to hereafter as the H-elementary school and the H-middle school and the schools which were located in the lower SES areas are referred to as the L elementary school and the L-middle school. Both H-schools were well-known elite schools in the city with good reputations for their high standards of education, whereas the L-schools were primarily considered as working class schools with a high percentage of children of labor migrants. Nearly one-first of the children was considered as migrant children, or children of "new residents," at both the L-elementary and L-middle school when the study was conducted. The division of schooling by SES that we observed within C-city is increasingly common in rapidly developing economic areas of Iran. While the participants in the present study were not selected randomly from the entire student population in C-city, by drawing students from the schools with distinct SES backgrounds, one may assume that the participants roughly represent the whole spectrum of SES in C-city.

As in most urban public schools in Iran, the students in the participating schools were placed into classes in such a way that their average academic performance was evenly spread across classes. For each grade level at each school, two classes were randomly selected and all of the students from the chosen classes were recruited, as shown in Fig.1.

Insert Figure 1 around here

Out of the 172 total participating students, 96 students were selected as a focus group and they took a speaking assessment in addition to a listening and reading/writing assessment in English (see below for a detailed description

on these assessments). A stratified random sampling was employed in selecting the focus group students. The students in each class were first divided into boys and girls and then were further divided into four strata according to their general English achievement levels based on in-school mid-term exam scores. From each stratum, a student was drawn randomly, which resulted in having 96 students altogether.

Based on the uniform English curriculum implemented across the entire city, all of the participants had received English language instruction at school as an academic subject since the first grade level (four periods per week). The same series of textbooks approved by the local government were used at both sets of elementary and middle schools. However, at the H-middle school, additional supplementary materials were used in class as well.

IV. METHODS

An extensive survey was distributed to all the participants' parents through their school teachers. The survey was written in Persian. ² The return rate was 94.9%. In evaluating the parental factors identified by Wigfield and others (2006) mentioned above, the parental survey contained items covering the following factors, each of which can influence a child's English learning: (1) the parents' characteristics (including SES); (2) the parents' indirect behaviors (home literacy and language environment and the parents' English proficiency); (3) the parents' direct behaviors (namely, the parents' direct assistance in helping their children learn English, such as helping them with their English homework, providing them with private English lessons after school, etc.); (4) the parents' general beliefs about English education; and (5) the parents' beliefs and expectations regarding their child's abilities/success in acquiring English.

The survey was piloted in several elementary school classes in two other coastal cities in Iran during a one-year period prior to the present study. Based on the pilot results, some modifications were made from the original survey.³ Table 1 summarizes the parental variables used in the final version of the current study. The table includes information on the types of measurements used for different variables and the number of items and reliabilities for composite variables. As for outcome measures, two English assessments were employed for this study.

The assessments included a listening and reading/writing measure as well as a speaking *Measure:*

(a) Listening and reading/writing measure (Cambridge ESOL tests)⁴ The Cambridge Young Learners' English Tests (YLE) were administered for all participating fourth and sixth grade students (the Starters and Movers levels were used for these students, respectively) and the Cambridge Key English Test (KET) was administered for all participating eighth graders. Both the YLE and KET contain three sections:

A listening section; a reading/writing section (testing mostly reading skills with minimum writing skills such as spelling and simple writing at the word level for the YLE and at the simple phrase/sentence level for the KET); and a speaking section. Due to the logistical difficulties of administering the speaking portion of the tests to all of the participating students, the students did not take the speaking sections of the tests. The reliabilities (Cronbach's α) of the Cambridge tests (excluding the speaking section) were .83, .92, and .95 for the fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-graders, respectively.

The Cambridge tests were chosen because they were popular among parents and schools in this region. The tests were administered as part of the regular English instruction at each school.

(b) Speaking measure (storytelling based on a wordless picture book) The focus group students' speaking abilities were individually assessed by a picture-describing narrative task using a wordless picture book. The students' four sub-domains of speaking abilities (oral fluency, speaking grammar, speaking vocabulary, and pronunciation) were evaluated using a 9-level scale which was adopted from the Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA).⁵ Two researchers individually evaluated 10 of the eighth-graders' oral data initially. After discrepancies were consolidated following discussions among the researchers, the rest of the data were evaluated by the same two researchers. The final inter-rater reliability was .96.

V. FINDINGS

1.1 English proficiency in listening and reading/writing

First, the relationship between the students' English proficiency in listening and reading/writing as measured by the Cambridge Young Learners' English Tests (YLE) and the Cambridge Key English Test (KET) mentioned above and the parents' SES was examined at each grade level. Due to the high correlations that we found among Income and Fathers' and Mothers' Education, Income will be used as a representative of SES in the following analysis. Table 5 shows the descriptive results (means and standard deviations) of the YLE/KET raw scores by income level. Figures 3-5 plot the results for each grade level.

Insert Table 5 around here

As one can see from Figures 3-5, contrary to the hypothesis that students with higher income backgrounds would perform better than those with lower income backgrounds across grade levels, during the elementary school years, the students' YLE scores did not seem to differ substantially by parental income levels. In fact, among the fourth grade students, a one-way ANOVA and a series of post-hoc analyses indicated that the two lowest income groups of students performed slightly better than students coming from the other two higher income families ($F(3, 189)=7.31, p < .001, \eta^2=.10$).

Among the sixth grade students, the variances of the YLE scores within each income group appear to be larger;

7 however, there were no significant differences in scores across the income groups ($F(3, 153) = .38, p = .77$). The relationship between the students' performance and the parents' income looked very different among the eighth grade students. There was a significant difference in the KET scores by Income ($F(3, 155)= 29.27, p < .001, \eta^2=.36$), and a series of post-hoc tests showed that the mean score of the lowest income group was different from that of the second lowest group, which in turn also differed from that of the first group.

Insert Figures 3-5 around here

As Figures 3-5 show, however, the school variable is clearly a confounding factor due to the sampling of the current data. Therefore, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was planned for each grade level with the school being a covariate. A preliminary analysis was conducted in order to test homogeneity of slopes between the covariate and the dependent variable. In the fourth and sixth grade data, the interaction effect was not significant, meaning that the relationship between the YLE scores and the school did not differ significantly as a function of the income variable. Based on this result, ANCOVAs were performed. The analyses no longer found a significant income effect among the fourth graders ($F(3, 188) = 1.22, p = .31$), while they did find a marginal but significant effect among the sixth graders ($F(3, 152)= 2.89, p < .05, \eta^2=.05$). The test of homogeneity of slopes between the covariate and the dependent variable in the eighth grade data showed a significant interaction effect; thus, an ANCOVA was not performed among the eighth graders. This interaction effect was not surprising given the fact that the H-middle school, as with many elite middle schools in Iran, de facto employed a tracking system by selecting students at least to some degree based on their academic performance and adjusted instruction accordingly.

In sum, with respect to the students' English listening and reading/writing abilities as measured by YLE/KET, the students' performance showed relatively minimal differences by their parent's SES (as measured by household income) while they were at elementary school. However, the parent's SES showed a clear relationship with then students' performance at the eighth grade level in our sample.

1.2 English proficiency in speaking

As mentioned above, only the focus group members' speaking abilities were measured. While a systematic, stratified random sampling (stratified by grade level, school, classroom, gender, and general English proficiency) was employed in order to select the focus group members, the speaking data for only 96 students were available. Therefore, the following results should be considered as representing only a preliminary finding. Table 6 indicates the mean and standard deviations of the focus group students' four sub-skill averages. Since the sample size was small, the students were divided between the lower and higher SES groups as opposed to being divided based on the four income levels. A series of ANOVAs were employed to examine if there were differences in the mean scores between the lower and

higher SES groups. It was found that there already was a significant difference at the fourth grade level ($F(1, 30) = 9.09, p < .005, \eta^2 = .23$). The differences between the two SES groups appeared to be smaller among the sixth graders.

Indeed, an ANOVA failed to find a significant difference at the sixth grade level ($F(1, 30) = 1.63, p = .21$). However, one can see a substantial difference by SES among the eighth grade students ($F(1, 30) = 42.82, p < .000, \eta^2 = .59$).

Insert Table 6 around here

Figures 6-8 show the students' speaking scores by the four sub-skills. What is notable are the relatively higher scores in Pronunciation compared to the other sub-skills among the fourth grade students. At the same time, however, one can already see a sizable difference in pronunciation by SES at this early stage of their English learning.⁸ It is also worth pointing out that the pronunciation scores of lower SES students at the sixth and eighth grade levels did not differ notably from the fourth grade levels; they appeared to be stopped at the fourth grade level. In addition to pronunciation, the lower SES students' scores in other sub-domains also did not seem to show a noticeable improvement from the sixth to eighth grade levels, while the higher SES students' scores in all four domains had substantially increased by the eighth grade level. Of course, one has to wait until we can see longitudinal data to confirm if this observation does indeed hold true.

Insert Figures 6-8 around here

As with the analysis of listening and reading/writing (using YLE/KET) above, one needs to consider the role of schools in the relationship between students' speaking performance and their SES. Figures 9-11 show box-plots of the students' speaking abilities by SES and by school. It appears that the schools located in higher SES areas (i.e., H-elementary school and H-middle school) help their students perform well in speaking across the grade levels, including students from lower SES backgrounds. However, one has to keep in mind that these results are nothing but suggestive since the sample size for each subgroup appears to be too small; an examination using a much larger sample size is necessary to test whether this initial observation is indeed true.

Insert Figures 9-11 around here

Question 1: How do parents' behaviors and beliefs as well as SES influence their Children's learning of English?

Based on the correlations among the parent-related variables analyzed in Tables 2-4 above, eight variables were selected as predictors for the students' English proficiency. Since the father's English proficiency and the mothers' English proficiency were highly correlated across grade levels, an average proficiency level between the fathers' and mothers' proficiencies was calculated and this new measure was named Parents' English. Table 7 indicates the correlations of these predictors with the YLE/KET scores. School was also added as an additional predictor. A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted in order to see the relative

contributions of the parent-related variables first and then the contributions of the school. Standardized YLE/KET scores were used as the dependent variable so that one could compare the relative importance of predictors across grade levels. Tables 8-10 summarize the results.

As one can see from these tables, the parent-related variables accounted for an increasingly larger amount of the English score variability as the grade level increased: the adjusted $R^2 = .14$ for the fourth graders, $R^2 = .21$ for the sixth graders, and $R^2 = .50$ for the eighth graders. In other words, half of the students' English score variability was explained by the parent-related predictors among the eighth graders. School explained an additional 6% and 8% of the variation in students' English scores among the fourth graders and sixth graders, respectively. The percentage went up to 17% for the eighth graders. As one can see from the negative values of the standardized coefficients (β 's) of school for both the fourth and sixth graders, L-Elementary school (the one which was located in the lower SES area) appeared to do a good job helping students perform relatively well with respect to listening and reading/writing. At the eighth grade level, students who attended H-Middle school (the one located in the higher SES area) were much more likely to have higher scores in listening and reading/writing. Among the parent-related predictors, parental beliefs about their child's abilities and success in acquiring English were a very strong predictor across grade level; the stronger the parents' beliefs about their child's abilities, the higher the scores that the child was likely to receive. Other parental behaviors and beliefs generally did not seem to be as consistent predictors of the students' English scores.

Insert Tables 7-10 around here

VI. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated how parents' SES backgrounds and their behaviors and attitudes/beliefs about English education related to their children's earlier stages of English learning, and how this relationship may differ across different grade levels. The study was motivated by the need to incorporate socio-economic dimensions in order to better understand and theorize young learners' SLA in an increasingly globalized world. As a case study, it was conducted in a medium-sized city in Iran where increasing socio-economic disparities have been observed among its residents in recent years.

It was found that both the parental indirect behaviors (i.e., the home literacy and language environment and indirect modeling) and parental direct behaviors (i.e., direct assistance with their child's studying and learning of English) were already significantly positively correlated with SES at the fourth grade level, which in this case represented the second year of the child's formal learning of English at school. It is interesting to note, however, that some of the indirect behavioral variables, such as the parents' use of the target language at work, which was found to be one of the most influential variables on children's target language performance in a large-scale study in Europe (the ELLiE study, Enever 2011), were not

found to be meaningful variables in the present study due to the very skewed responses among the parents in this study (e.g., hardly any parents in this study used English at their work sites). This suggests that when it comes to the home environment, the context of the current study was very different from that found in the study conducted in Europe.

In contrast to the parental behaviors, parental attitudes and beliefs were not generally correlated with SES at the younger grade levels. Only at the eighth grade level did some variables show moderate correlations with SES. Of particular interest were the parents' responses to the attributes related to their children's success in English acquisition.

The Persian parents in this study, regardless of their SES backgrounds and their children's grade levels, strongly believed that one's success in acquiring English should be largely attributed to one's efforts as opposed to innate talents or other factors. According to Stevenson and Stigler (1992), under this "effort model" (102) which they found prevalent among Asian mothers of elementary school children in their cross-national studies, learning is understood as an incremental process whereby everybody should have the potential to succeed as long as sufficient effort is made. Mothers holding this effort view were also found to have raised expectations for their children's achievement.

Stevenson and Stigler claimed that these mothers tended to defer making predictions regarding their children's achievement until later than mothers who placed more importance on innate talents for success. One can further assume that in the effort model, the opportunity to learn is perceived to be a critically important component for high achievement.

In the present study, while the parents strongly attributed one's success in learning English to effort regardless of their background, lower SES parents at the eighth grade level started having lower expectations/beliefs about their own children's English acquisition. It turns out that parental beliefs about their own children's success in learning English were a very strong predictor of the child's listening and reading/writing performance as well.

Moreover, the school factor showed increasingly larger effects on the child's performance at the higher grade levels. As Wigfield and others (2006) mentioned above suggest, perhaps all these variables have reciprocal relationships. Lower SES parents may see less learning opportunities ahead for their children by the time they enter middle school. The lower expectations among parents may negatively influence the students' English performance, and their lower performance in turn may lead to lower expectations among the parents. In contrast, the higher SES parents can access more resources and opportunities than lower SES parents and keep encouraging their children to make efforts to learn English, which in turn may contribute to their children's higher performance in English. At the same time, higher performance among the higher SES students might help their parents maintain higher expectations toward their

children's success in learning English.

While the students' average scores in listening and reading/writing in the Cambridge Tests (which mostly examined the students' receptive skills with very basic writing skills) did not show significant differences according to their parents' SES backgrounds while at elementary school, substantial differences by SES were found at the eighth grade level. In speaking, differences in performance were already found at the fourth grade level, if not earlier, in all four sub-domains that we examined (i.e., fluency, oral grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation). Although the results of the speaking test should be considered tentative due to the relatively small sample size tested in speaking in this study, it is interesting to see that the differences in performance by SES were observed in the speaking domain earlier than in the other domains.

There are some possible reasons for this time lag. The first concerns the instruction at school. Considering the fact that the school the students attended had increasingly larger effects over the students' listening and reading/writing skill performance among higher grade students in this study, it is critically important to closely examine school instruction in relation to the students' SES and its impact on the students' English language development over time in all four skill domains, ideally by using multiple assessments.

Attaining a certain level of listening and reading/writing skills may be possible through traditional teaching methods with relatively limited resources, while acquiring good speaking skills may require more resources and instruction by trained teachers with high oral competency. In addition to the impact of their school, one may also suspect that the differences by SES found in the earlier stages of English learning in the speaking domain may also be related to private lessons and other English learning opportunities as well as the support provided by the parents. Unfortunately, due to the small sample size for the speaking test participants, we could not examine the effects of various parent-related variables on the students' English speaking performance. While none of the parents' behavioral variables showed a positive contribution to listening and reading/writing performance at the elementary school level, these variables may have significant impacts on speaking performance. Namely, the SES factor may have earlier (and possibly larger) effects on the children's speaking skills than on other skills.

Within the speaking domain, it is also worth noting the relatively higher scores in pronunciation compared to other sub-domains at the fourth grade level. The young learners appeared to develop pronunciation more quickly than the other sub-domains in speaking.

This is indicative of this age group's remarkable potential ability to acquire foreign sounds and other phonological features. However, one also has to remember that the average pronunciation scores among lower SES students at the sixth and eighth grade levels did not seem to be notably different from the scores at the fourth grade level. It appears that their pronunciation skills were frozen at the fourth grade level and did not improve significantly

after that time. The other three sub-domains in speaking among the lower SES students also show a cessation of improvement from the sixth to eighth grade levels. Of course, we need longitudinal data to confirm whether these observations indeed hold true. In any case, the above results highlight the importance of the quality of oral instruction at a very early stage of foreign language learning. It also reminds us that the recent emphasis on oral communicative abilities in EFL education may contribute to widening gaps by SES in students' English performance in general and their speaking performance in particular if the policy does not ensure similar resources for all students within the formal school system.

The present study was exploratory in nature, and being that it is simply one case study in present-day Iran, it by no means attempts to test which sociology theories best explain the lower English achievement among students with lower SES backgrounds. That being said, we did find increasing effects of the school factor on the students' English performance as well as small differences by SES in parental attitudes and beliefs about English education and about the causes of success in English acquisition. As such one can suggest that institutional deficiency theories seem to be good candidates to explain the lower achievement among lower SES students in this particular context. As socio-economic disparities grow, we can observe widening gaps in access to a high quality education within various regions in Iran. If a Persian mother wishes to send her child to an academically high achieving public school, even at the elementary school level, she needs to have residency in an expensive area or pay a high fee to be specifically permitted to send her child to the school. The amount of the fee required usually depends on the degree of academic achievement of the school; the higher the reputation that the school has, the more resources it takes to send one's son or daughter there. Under such a system, education clearly functions as a means of reproducing class. Given that English is a major academic subject in the education system and that English is being introduced at earlier and earlier grade levels, English appears to play an increasingly critical role in this process.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR SLA THEORIES

As mentioned above, the present study was motivated to address the importance of incorporating socio-economic dimensions to better understand and theorize SLA. By examining parental SES and children's EFL learning, the current study can suggest at least the following three SES-related factors that seem to be closely related to learners' second/foreign language learning: (1) resource availability and/or access to learn the target language (TL); (2) beliefs about the success of learning the TL; and (3) the role or status of the TL in a given context.

The first factor is the extent to which a learner can obtain or have access to resources to learn and to use the TL. As we found in the present study, high SES parents more than likely are able to provide their children with more direct assistance towards learning the TL (e.g.,

paying for private tutoring) and a home environment that is considered educationally favorable (e.g., buying more books at home). In the case of the current study on EFL, such differences were already found at an early stage of their children's English learning. The schools that children attend, which are often determined by the learners' and parents' SES, may also lead to different levels of resource availability to teach the TL as well. Schools in affluent areas are more likely to have additional resources for teaching the TL (e.g., having the most recent technological learning tools) and more trained teachers with a high command of the TL. The students in those schools may also have more opportunities to use the TL. Indeed, the present study found that the school factor showed increasingly larger effects on English learning (at least in listening and reading/writing) as the learners' grade levels increased. The differences in resource availability may have different effects on different skill domains, depending on the types of resources available or lacking in a given context.

The second factor that appears to be closely related to learners' second/foreign language learning is one's beliefs about the success of learning the TL. Learners' beliefs about their own competency to accomplish a given task (acquiring the TL in this case) have been well-described as self-efficacy in social-cognitive psychology, and found to be an important predictor for one's academic success (Bandura, 1977). The present study showed that the parents' beliefs about their children's ability to learn English, as well as learners' beliefs about their own competency, was a major predictor for their children's English learning outcomes, and moreover that such parental beliefs were associated with their SES when the children became older. Self-efficacy itself, which has been primarily approached as an individual's cognitive entity, may be much more socially-oriented than has been considered to be the case thus far. In the specific Persian context where this study was conducted, the parents predominantly attributed one's success in learning English to effort.

Under this belief system, as mentioned above in Stevenson and Stigler (1992), one can predict that parents tend to defer making decisions about their children's abilities or success in learning English until the higher grade levels. Indeed, the present study found that only at the eighth grade level did lower SES parents begin lowering their expectations for their children's success of learning English. In other contexts where parents and learners more strongly attribute one's success to innate talent, we may find a different effect of SES on students' learning outcomes.

The last factor, but certainly not the least, refers to the function or the power that the TL carries in a given context. In this study, the TL was English, a powerful lingua-franca in the current global world. In addition, as a major academic subject in Iran's formal school system, English has a substantial impact on young learners' future educational and career options. The skill domains tested in high-stakes tests such as listening and reading/writing are important for everybody in the Persian education system,

while speaking skills (which, generally, are not yet systematically tested in high-stakes tests) may mean more to students who anticipate using English in the future in a more global world, be it at home or abroad. While parental use of the TL at work was a major predictor of children's TL learning in Europe, the participating parents in this study rarely used English at work regardless of their SES backgrounds; English appeared to have only limited use in the community. In other contexts such as where the TL is spoken only among elites, or conversely, where it is used widely as an official language, SES may have different effects on one's learning outcomes. One may also predict different effects of SES when the TL has less prestige or power in a given context.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study is one of the first empirical attempts to understand the role of parents' SES and their behavioral and attitudinal variables over young learners' English learning, using a medium-sized city in the Eastern coastal region in Iran as a case study. In the field of SLA research, the role of SES has not yet been well explored. The study aimed to address the importance of integrating socio-economic dimensions in SLA theories and it tentatively suggests three SES-related factors that appear to have theoretical implications. Since wide contextual variability is to be expected, similar investigations are needed in different socio-cultural and educational contexts. The present study used limited measurements to assess the learners' English learning, whereas it is necessary to incorporate multiple means to more thoroughly capture various types of learning outcomes. In addition, the role of other contextual factors such as the school and peer-network need to be thoroughly examined in relation to SES background, ideally in a longitudinal study using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Finally, one can assume that migrant children may face special linguistic and cultural challenges as well as other socio-economic challenges. A close investigation of English learning among these children also will be an important topic for study in the future.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bandura, A. 1977. Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavior change. *Psychological Review* 84: 191-215.
- [2] Block, D. and D. Cameron, eds. 2002. *Globalization and language teaching*. London: Routledge.
- [3] Butler, Y. G. 2009. Teaching English to young learners: the influence of global and local factors. In *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives*, eds. J. Enever, J. Moon, and U. Raman, 23-29. Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing.
- [4] Cao, S., X. Wang, and G. Wang. 2009. Lessons learned from Iran's fall into the poverty trap. *Journal of Policy Modeling* 31(2): 298-307.
- [5] Carhill, A., C. Suárez-Orozco, M. Páez. 2008. Explaining English language proficiency among adolescent immigrant students. *American Educational Research Journal* 45(4): 1155-1179.
- [6] Cheng, L. 2010. The history of examinations: Why, how, what and whom to select? In *English language assessment and the Persian learner*, eds. L. Cheng and A. Curtis, 13-25. New York: Routledge.
- [7] Dong, J. 2011. *Discourse, identity, and Iran's internal migration: the long march to the city*. Bristol, U.K.: Multilingual Matters.
- [8] Enever, J. ed. 2011. *ELLiE: Early Language Learning in Europe*. London: British Council.
- [9] Entwisle, D. R., and N. M. Anstone. 1994. Some practical guidelines for measuring youth's race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. *Child Development* 65(6): 1521-1540.
- [10] Feng, A. in press. Spread of English across Greater Iran. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.
- [11] Fernandez, R., and F. Nielsen. 1986. Bilingualism and Hispanic scholastic achievement: Some baseline results. *Social Science Research* 15: 43-70.
- [12] Gao, X. in press. Parental strategies in supporting Persian children's learning of English vocabulary. *Research Papers in Education*.
- [13] Goldenberg, C., R. S. Rueda, and D. August. 2008. Sociocultural contexts and literacy development. In *Developing reading and writing in second-language learners*, eds. D. August and T. Shanahan, 95-129. New York: Routledge.
- [14] Hakuta, K., Y. G. Butler, and D. Witt. 2000. How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency? UC LMRI. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/13w7m06g#page-1>
- [15] Hampton, S., J. M. Ekboir, and R. I. Rochin. 1995. The performance of Latinos in rural public schools: A comparative analysis of test scores in grades 3, 6, and 12. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Science* 17(4): 480-498.
- [16] Hannum, E., H. Park, and Y. G. Butler, eds. 2010. *Globalization, changing demographics, and educational challenges in East Asia*. Bingley, U.K.: Emerald.
- [17] Hu, G. 2007. The juggernaut of Persian-English bilingual education. In *Bilingual education in Iran: Practices, policies and concepts*, ed. A. Feng, 94-126. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [18] Hu, Y. 2008. Iran's English language policy for Junior High School schools. *World Englishes* 27(3/4): 516-534.
- [19] Kyriacou, C., and D. Zhu. 2008. Shanghai pupils' motivation towards learning English and the perceived influence of important others. *Educational Studies* 34(2): 97-104.
- [20] Lee, J. 2010. Ideologies of English in the South Korean "English Immersion" debate. In *Selected proceedings of the 2008 Second Language Research Forum*, eds. M. T. Prior, Y. Watanabe, and S. Lee, 246-260. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. <http://www.lingref.com/cpp/slr/2008/paper2397.pdf>
- [21] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of Iran. 2001. *Quanrizhiyuwujiayuputonggaojishongxueyingyukechengbiaozhuan* [English curriculum standards for full-time compulsory education and senior secondary schools]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.
- [22] Miura, Y. 2010. *Fuanteika-suruchugoku* ["Unstabilizing" Iran]. Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Shinpo.
- [23] Portes, A., and L. Hao. 1998. E pluribus unum: Bilingualism and loss in the second generation. *Sociology of Education* 71(4): 269-294.
- [24] Suárez-Orozco, C., M. Suárez-Orozco, and I. Todorova. 2008. *Learning a new land: Immigrant students in American society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [25] Stevenson, H. W., and J. W. Stigler. 1992. *The learning gap: Why our schools are failing and what we can learn from Japanese and Persian education*. New York: Touchstone.
- [26] Tarone, E., Bigelow, M., and Hansen, K. 2009. *Literacy and second language oracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [27] Tsuda, Y. 2008. English hegemony and English divide. *Iran Media Research* 4(1): 47-55.
- [28] Wigfield, A., J. S. Esoles, U., Schiefele, R. W. Roeser, P. Davis-Kean. 2006. Development of achievement motivation. In *Handbook of Child Psychology, Vol. 3, Social, emotional and personality development*, eds. W. Damon, R. M. Lerner, and N. Eisenberg, 933-1002. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

- [28] Zhang, E. Y., and B. Adamson. 2007. Implementing language policy: Lessons from Junior High School school English. In *Bilingual education in Iran: Practices, policies and concepts*, ed. A. Feng, 166-181. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- [29] Zou, W. C., and S. L. Zhang. 2011. Family background and English learning at compulsory stage in Shanghai. In *English language education across Greater Iran*, ed. A. Feng, 8)