



## THE EFFECTS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ON PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

### İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENİ ADAYLARININ SOSYO-EKONOMİK STATÜLERİNİN AKADEMİK BAŞARILARINA OLAN ETKİSİ

Didem KOBAN KOÇ<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Socioeconomic status (SES), which generally involves factors such as parental educational background, occupation and income level, is a strong predictor of student achievement. That is, students with higher parental SES demonstrate increased academic performance when compared to those with lower parental SES. The purpose of the present study is to explore the effects of SES on prospective English language teachers' academic achievement. The sample involved 253 first, second and third year college students enrolled in an English Language Teaching Department at a government university in Turkey. Data analyses involved examining the relationship between students' recent grade point average (GPA) and several socio-economic variables (i.e. parents' educational background, income levels, and place of residence; students' educational support, and distance travelled from their residence to the university). The results of the correlational analyses showed that the only significant correlation was the one between the students' GPA and the distance travelled from students' residences to the university.

**Keywords:** Socioeconomic status, academic achievement, prospective English language teachers

**Öz:** Ebeveynlerin eğitim durumu, meslekleri ve gelir düzeylerini de içine alan sosyoekonomik durum öğrenci başarısının etkili bir belirleyicisidir. Şöyle ki, sosyoekonomik durumu yüksek olan ebeveynleri olan öğrenciler sosyoekonomik durumu düşük olan ebeveynleri olan öğrencilerden daha yüksek akademik başarı göstermektedirler. Bu çalışmanın amacı sosyoekonomik durumun İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının akademik başarısı üzerine olan etkisini araştırmaktır. Örnekleme, Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinin İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümü'nün birinci, ikinci ve üçüncü sınıflarında öğrenim görmekte olan 253 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Veri analizi öğrencilerin genel not ortalaması ile sosyoekonomik değişkenler (ebeveynlerin eğitim durumu, gelir düzeyleri, öğrencilere verilen eğitim desteği, ebeveynlerin ikamet ettiği yer ve öğrencilerin yaşadığı yerden üniversiteye olan mesafe) arasındaki ilişkiyi içermektedir. Korelasyon analizinin sonuçları, istatistiksel olarak tek önemli ilişkinin öğrencilerin genel not ortalaması ile öğrencilerin yaşadığı yerden üniversiteye olan mesafesi arasında olduğunu göstermiştir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Sosyo-ekonomik durum, akademik başarı, İngilizce öğretmen adayları

#### 1. Introduction

Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined as the relative position of a person, family, or neighborhood (Green 1970; Mueller & Parcel 1981), or a key sociodemographic marker variable used for the purpose of selecting subjects for studies. SES was also used to refer to an important control variable for research on social events (Entwisle & Astone, 1994). More

<sup>1</sup> Assist. Prof. Dr., Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of Education, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey, [dkoban@hacettepe.edu.tr](mailto:dkoban@hacettepe.edu.tr)

recently, SES has been defined as an economic and sociological combined measure of a person's work experience as well as an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). Along similar lines, Vincent and Sutherland (2013) described SES as “a measure of the economic and social status of an individual or group of individuals based on, education, income, occupation, and other relevant indicators, relative to other members of the population” (p. 3). Thus, it follows from these definitions that SES is an eclectic variable, combining several factors.

One of the important issues, which has been the subject of investigation for many years in measuring SES, concerns the factors that SES involves. For instance, in their review entitled “Measures of socioeconomic status: Alternatives and recommendations,” Mueller and Parcel (1981) concluded that economic, power and prestige can be used to rank members in a society and thus are important factors that are relevant to SES. Although most researchers could not reach an agreement regarding which of the factors is the most important in measuring SES, some researchers (Blau & Duncan 1967; Hauser & Featherman 1977; Haug 1977; Runciman 1968) believed that occupational status is the most reliable and valid measure of SES. According to Blau and Duncan (1967), occupation in industrialized societies has a key position because it is occupation that provides people with authority, prestige and income. Economic factors, namely income, were also effective in measuring SES; however, as Mueller and Parcel state, the income level of a person can be influenced by strikes, layoffs, economic crises and wars. In addition, the fact that the income levels may vary from region to region and culture to culture contributes to the difficulty in measuring SES. What is also problematic is that individuals may avoid revealing their exact income levels.

Although the process of defining and identifying factors related to SES has been going on for a long time, the last 20 years have marked a shift with respect to the measurement of SES. Researchers conducting studies on SES in the 1980s and 90s pointed out that the above-mentioned factors were not the ultimate defining characteristics of SES. Researchers extended the 1960s and 70s views on SES to consider other factors such as the mother's education as well as the father's. According to Şirin (2005), this was due to the changes in the society and family structure. For example, in measuring the SES of a child or teenager, most researchers assumed the father to be the provider, so researchers took only the father's education, occupation, and labor force status into consideration. Entwisle and Astone (1994), who considered different types of families, particularly in the US, recommended considering the characteristics of any male as the primary indicator of SES since in some families, biological fathers supported children who lived in poor single parent and stepparent families. The authors also suggested considering the mother's SES in case a male did not exist.

Furthermore, Entwisle and Astone (1994) argued that parents' economic status, education and ability to serve as a bridge between their children and society determine children's SES. Children living with parents who do not serve as links between the children and the society are disadvantaged, no matter how wealthy and educated the parents are. Thus the authors recommended that researchers measure these factors separately when determining the socioeconomic background of a child. Research conducted in the 2000s included even more factors such as a student's race/ethnicity (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), grade level (White, 1982), neighborhood characteristics (Barbarin, 2010), school location (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), educational support (Tomul & Polat, 2013), and access to a free or reduced-price lunch in school (Pettigrew, 2009). However, the inclusion of all these factors that are used to predict SES actually made it more difficult to interpret findings regarding the SES of a family (Şirin, 2005).

## **2. Review of the Literature**

### **2. 1. Studies on SES and Academic Achievement**

Much work in sociology and education has sought to identify the relationship between SES and academic achievement. Empirical studies that investigated this relationship have been steadily accumulating over the last few years. What has become apparent from the extensive reviews and from the empirical studies of the literature is that there is a significant relationship between SES and academic achievement. For example, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) reviewed national longitudinal data sets such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), the Children of the NLSY, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), and the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP) and concluded that family income had significant effects on children's academic achievement. The authors also found that children who grow up in poor households tend to drop out of school more than those who experience poverty at later ages in their lives. Similar results were also obtained by Şirin (2005) who reviewed articles published between 1990 and 2000. The data included 101,157 students, 6,871 schools, and 128 school districts. The results showed that there was a medium to strong relationship between SES and academic achievement.

Considerable evidence from empirical studies also support the above-mentioned results. Such studies mostly categorized students into different social classes based on one or more factors related to SES. For instance, Pettigrew (2009) explored the effect of SES on academic achievement of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in four elementary schools in Tennessee, U.S. The author used the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program Achievement Test and the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program Writing Assessment as measurements of academic achievement. The students were categorized into noneconomically disadvantaged (those who were not qualified for free or reduced-price meals) and disadvantaged students (those who were qualified for free or reduced-price meals). The results showed that economically disadvantaged students' math, language arts, social studies, and science scores were lower than noneconomically disadvantaged students. In another study, Akhtar and Khan Niazi (2011) explored the effects of 1580 secondary school students' SES on their academic achievement in Pakistan. The authors categorized the students into upper, middle and low social classes. The findings showed that students belonging to the upper class were better achievers than middle and low class students. A study by Kormos and Kiddle (2013) sought to examine the relationship between SES and the motivations and self-efficacy beliefs of 740 secondary school students who were learning English in Santiago, Chile. The students belonged to different social classes. The results showed that social class had a medium-size effect on motivational factors whereas students' self-efficacy beliefs, in other words, the belief in their abilities to accomplish a task were strongly influenced by SES.

Suleman, Hussain, Khan, and Nisa (2012) investigated whether parental SES had an effect on the academic achievement of 60 10<sup>th</sup> grade students studying in Pakistan. The authors found that SES had a significant effect on students' academic achievement. A more recent study by Babikkoi and Razak (2014), which amongst other things, investigated the effects of parents' SES on secondary school students' language learning strategies. The participants were 559 secondary school students studying English as a second language in Nigeria. SES involved parental income along with the number of cars in the family, the hospital the family goes to, the security level of the family and so forth. The results showed that parents' SES played an important role in students' usage of memory, cognitive and compensation learning strategies.

The authors attributed this result to the lack of learning facilities for students coming from low social classes.

Knowledge of language and literacy development were areas that were also affected by SES. Farrant and Zubrick (2012) investigated early vocabulary development in children coming from low SES and high SES backgrounds with respect to joint attention and book reading. The data extracted from a longitudinal study were obtained from 2188 Australian children (1119 males). The authors found that children coming from low SES families had poorer vocabulary growth than those from high SES families due to a lack of joint attention. In another study that examined vocabulary growth, Clark (2009), drawing on data from a range of languages, concluded that children of high SES had larger vocabulary growth and made more complex noun phrase constructions than those of low SES due to the fact that parents with high SES asked their children broad questions to encourage their speaking. More research suggested that children of high SES were more advanced than children of low SES with respect to applying grammatical rules in Hebrew (Dorit & Schiff 2012) and having high phonological awareness in English (Noble, Wolmetz, Ochs, Farah & McCandliss 2006). With respect to reading skills, Aikens and Barbarin (2008), in a study conducted in the U.S., found children of high SES to be better readers than children of low SES. More importantly, as they children got older, children of low SES always fell behind. These findings were corroborated in a study conducted by Kieffer (2010) who examined late-emerging reading difficulties of English language learners and native English speakers coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the U.S. Based on the data obtained on parents' education, occupation and income, the results showed that both English language learners and those belonging to lower class were at a significantly higher risk of developing reading difficulties.

Some studies, however, found the relationship between SES and academic achievement partially significant. Butler (2013) investigated the relationship between parents' SES and their beliefs about their children's English language learning, and whether or not such relationship differed across different grade levels. The participants were 572 students at fourth, sixth and eighth grades, learning English as a foreign language in China. Although the authors found that parents' SES had a significant effect on the students' speaking abilities at the fourth grade level, they found a nonsignificant effect on children's listening, reading and writing performances during their elementary school years. In another study, Calvo and Bialystok (2014) analyzed the relationship between socioeconomic status of monolingual and bilingual students and their selective attention, inhibition, and language abilities. The authors categorized 175 six-year-old children living in Toronto, Canada into socioeconomic classes (working class or middle class) and language background (monolingual or bilingual). The children were asked to complete several tests that measured nonverbal intelligence, receptive vocabulary, attention and executive functioning. The results showed that there was not a significant difference among students with respect to performance on the basic intelligence tests, but their performance on the language and executive functioning tests was significantly influenced by both SES and bilingualism. Researchers also emphasized the relationship between students' grade level and their SES. According to White (1982), the effect of SES on academic achievement becomes less and less significant as students get older. One of the reasons for this is that students receive equal education and treatment in schools, and as a result, the influence of SES on student achievement diminishes, leading to homogeneous student populations.

As for the studies conducted in Turkey, Gelbal (2008) investigated the influence of a variety of variables on students' academic achievement such as facilities at home, mothers' level of

education, sex, and the number of brothers or sisters. The data were collected via a 25-item Turkish test and a questionnaire from 30, 714 8<sup>th</sup> grade primary school students studying at different public schools in Turkey. The author found that as the students' facilities at home and the level of mothers' education increased, and the number of siblings decreased, the students showed increased academic performance in schools. Arıkan (2011) examined, along with other variables, the influence of SES on prospective English language teachers' perceptions of the target language and culture. The variables within SES included family income, fathers' job, and students' place of residence during primary and university education. The participants were 412 prospective English language teachers enrolled at two government universities in Turkey. The results of the study showed that lower income groups such as farmers and workers showed more negative attitudes towards the target language culture than higher income groups. In addition, participants who lived in urban areas during their primary education and lived with their parents during university years had more positive attitudes toward the target language culture than those who lived in towns during their primary education and lived with their friends during university education.

A study by Tomul and Polat (2013) analyzed the effect of undergraduate students' SES on their academic achievement. The study involved 691 students enrolled at Süleyman Demirel University, Turkey. The study analyzed the relationship between students' grade point average at the university and several independent variables such as type of high school that students graduated from, parents' educational background, income, and place of residence as well as fathers' occupation, and the number of siblings. According to the results, the type of high school that the students graduated from was the only significant predictor of student achievement. Önür (2013) looked at the effect of family income on students' academic achievement by comparing one group of students attending a public science high school that accepts students based on their nation-wide test scores with those attending a public general high school that does not require an entrance exam. A total of 910 students participated in the study. The results showed that there were more students of high SES in the science high school than in the general school. That is, the number of students whose mothers were teachers and whose fathers were white-collar workers was significantly higher in the science high school than in the general school. In addition, the number of students who received educational support before entering the high schools and had a room of their own was significantly higher in the science high school than in the general school. A more recent study by Ardahan and Ezici (2015) involved a total of 325 students studying at three public and two private schools. The results showed that parents' involvement in their children's education and a strong relationship between parents and children positively affected students' academic achievement.

As can be seen in the review of the literature, research conducted on the relationship between SES and academic achievement by prospective language teachers in Turkey is very rare. The present study aims to fill this gap and suggest implications. The following section presents the research question and the hypotheses along with a discussion of the participants, setting and the instrument. Section 4 provides an analysis of the data and presents some socio-demographic factors regarding the SES of the participants. Section 5 presents the results and finally, the last section discusses the findings of the study and provides some implications.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3. 1. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The study aims to answer the following research question:

Is there a significant relationship between students' academic achievement and the independent variables related to SES?

In keeping with the research discussed in the literature review, the hypotheses relate to the expectation that the students who have educated parents with higher incomes will be academically more successful than those who have less educated parents with lower incomes. In addition, it is expected that students whose families live in the city centers, students who live closer to the university and received educational support before entering the nation-wide university exam will have higher GPAs at school.

### **3. 2. Participants, instruments and setting**

The present study involved first, second and third year prospective language teachers enrolled in the English Language Teaching program at a government university, Turkey. A total of 253 students (57 males and 192 females, four did not report their sex) who were 17-20 years old voluntarily participated in the study. The data regarding the students' SES were derived from a questionnaire adapted from Van Damme, Liu, Vanhee, & Pustjens's (2010). Note that in order to measure SES, several indices were developed by the researchers over the years. These indices were generally unique to the countries in which the research took place. The indices were hardly relevant to studies conducted in other countries due to the fact that the educational systems as well as the economic situations vary so much between different countries. For example, the Hollingshead index (Hollingshead, 1975), which was widely used by researchers, measured education and occupation only. Other commonly used indices were the Duncan SEI (Duncan, 1961), which was actually developed in the early 1960s and the Siegel Prestige Scale in which the ranking was based on the general public's estimate of social standing or prestige. Another scale called Family Affluence Scale (FAS) (Hurrelmann, Settertobulte, Smith, & Todd, 2000), measured family wealth that involved family car ownership, bedroom sharing and travel on holidays.

The questionnaire in the present study included seven factors: mothers' educational level, fathers' educational level, mothers' income, fathers' income, parents' place of residence, distance between students' place of residence and university, and presence of educational support when students prepared for the nation-wide university entrance exam in Turkey. Academic achievement was determined by students' overall grade point average (GPA) that they had received so far. Thus, the students were also asked to report their most recent GPAs in the questionnaire openly. The students completed the questionnaire at the beginning of classes during a regular school day. For informational purposes, following Tomul and Polat (2013), the questionnaire also included items related to the type of high school that students graduated from and their parents' occupations. (The effect of parents' occupations on students' academic achievement will be analyzed in a further study).

### **4. Data Analysis**

The obtained data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, (SPSS). The coding of the factors was as follows: High school (Anatolian Teacher High School =1, Private High School =2, Anatolian High School =3, Vocational High School =4, Science High School =5, Open High School =6, and General High School =7); parental educational level (non-graduate =1, primary school graduate =2, secondary school graduate =3, high school graduate =4, college graduate =5, master's =6 and doctorate =7); parental income (Zero income =1, 1000-2000 Turkish Liras (TL) =2, 2000-3000 TL =3, 3000-4000 TL =4, 4000-5000 TL =5, 5000-6000 TL =6, 6000-7000 TL =7, and 8000-9000 TL =8); and

parents' place of residence (village =1, town =2, city center =3). In order to see the effect of SES on academic achievement, each of the factors was correlated with students' GPA.

The following tables present the percentages of the type of high school that students graduated from followed by mothers' educational level, fathers' educational level, mothers' income and fathers' income levels.

Table 1

*The type of high school that students graduated fom (N=253)*

<b>Type of high school</b>	<b>%</b>
Anatolian Teacher High School	64
Anatolian High School	32.8
General High School	1.2
Private High School	.8
Vocational High School	.40
Science High School	.40
Open High School	.40

As can be seen in Table 1, 64% of the students graduated from Anatolian Teacher High Schools, followed by Anatolian High Schools and General High Schools.

Table 2

*Mothers' educational level (N=253)*

<b>Educational level</b>	<b>%</b>
Primary school graduate	46.6
High school graduate	18.6
College graduate	14.6
Secondary school graduate	14.2
Non-graduate	4.7
Master's	.8
Doctorate	.4

Regarding mothers' educational level, almost half of the mothers did not receive any education whereas nearly 20% had a high school diploma.

Table 3

*Fathers' educational level (N=253)*

<b>Educational level</b>	<b>%</b>
College graduate	28.5
High school graduate	26.5
Primary school graduate	24.5
Secondary school graduate	16.2
Non-graduate	1.6
Doctorate	1.2
Master's	.8

As for father's educational level, almost 30% of the fathers were college graduates followed by high school and primary school.

Table 4  
*Mothers' income level (N=253)*

<b>Income level</b>	<b>%</b>
0	64
Less than 1000	6.3
1000	4.3
1000-2000	10.7
2000-3000	9.1
3000-4000	4
4000-5000	.4
6000-7000	.4
8000-9000	0

With respect to the income levels, the majority of the mothers did not have any income while only 10% of them received an income between 1000-2000 TL.

Table 5  
*Fathers' income level (N=253)*

<b>Income level</b>	<b>%</b>
0	7.1
Less than 1000	5.5
1000	7.9
1000-2000	28.5
2000-3000	29.2
3000-4000	15
4000-5000	4
6000-7000	1.6
8000-9000	.8

Regarding the father's income level, almost 30% of the fathers received 2000-3000 TL monthly followed by 1000-2000 TL per month.

## 5. Results

The following table presents bivariate correlations between each of the socio-demographic factors and students' GPAs.

Table 6  
*Bivariate correlations: Socio-demographic factors and GPA (N=253)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>r</b>
Educational support	.045
Mothers' educational level	.104
Fathers' educational level	.004
Mothers' income	.068
Fathers' income	.027
Parents' place of residence	.054
Distance from university	-.217**

\*\*p<.01

As Table 6 shows, the only significant correlation was the relationship between distance from students' place of residence to the university and students' GPA. In other words, the less



distance the students traveled to the university, the more successful they were in their courses. The effect of educational support, mothers' and fathers' educational levels, mothers' and fathers' income levels, and parents' place of residence on students' academic achievement were nonsignificant. The next section discusses the findings of the study.

## **6. Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the effects of SES on the academic achievement of prospective English language teachers. As the results of the correlational analyses showed, the only significant relationship was the one between distance from the students' residence to the university and students' GPA. In other words, the students who lived closer to the university showed increased academic performance when compared to those who lived further away from the university. The findings are in line with Butler (2013), Tomul and Polat (2013), and Calvo and Bialystok (2014) who found partially significant results with respect to SES and academic achievement in certain educational areas.

The findings may also support the hypothesis that the effect of SES on academic achievement varies depending on students' grade level. As discussed in section 2, the gap between students of high SES and those of low SES disappears as students' grade levels increase due to the fact that schools provide equal education for every student (White, 1982). Recall that the majority of the students graduated from a type of public school called Anatolian Teacher High School and are currently studying at a government university. This means that the students received the same type of education and were provided equal opportunities, and thus the differences among the students with respect to SES may have diminished.

Another important factor that may have influenced the results is the lack of variance in SES of the students, that is, the students were from families that had similar SES. The student population at the university was homogeneous in the sense that the majority of the students graduated from the same type of government high school, which is the Anatolian Teacher High School. The number of students attending private schools was very small. In addition, almost half of the mothers were primary school graduates, and the majority of the mothers had no income.

## **7. Limitations and future directions**

The study has several limitations. The first one is the response error in the questionnaires. Recall that the students themselves were supposed to report the income rates of their parents. The students may not know the exact salaries of their parents as well as any other income that their families receive; therefore, they may have misstated the incomes of their parents. The second limitation has to do with the student population. Recall that the students came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, especially when the mothers' educational levels and income are considered. Therefore, in order to eliminate these problems, researchers in a future study should direct the income related questions to parents instead of students and include students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds attending different types of high schools or universities in Turkey.

## **8. Implications**

The present study may have implications not just for understanding the student profile in the study, but also for what schools can provide to improve academic achievement. Students coming from families with low socioeconomic status cannot receive sufficient academic support from their parents. Lack of financial resources makes it even more difficult for parents to afford materials for their children. As a result, students whose financial and

academic needs are not met at home fail to perform well at school. Some of the difficulties such as lack of financial and learning resources and poor learning conditions that students of low SES face at home could actually be overcome by the school environment. Research indicates that school environment has a significant effect on academic achievement for students of low SES (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). Educating parents about the needs of their children and involving them in the education of their children, improving teaching and learning, providing continuous professional development to teachers and increasing learning resources can compensate for the lack of a good learning environment at home (Muijis et al., 2004).

Another important factor that can contribute to the academic achievement of students of low SES is having qualified teachers at school. Gimbert, Bol, and Wallace (2007) found a significant relationship between a teacher's years of experience along with quality of training and children's academic achievement. It is important that schools recruit experienced teachers for students of low SES so that teachers can understand the background students come from and deal with their behaviors accordingly.

When the Turkish public schools are taken into consideration, unfortunately, less qualified teachers are usually placed in schools where students come from families of low SES. When those teachers get a few years of experience, they tend to teach in schools located in affluent regions. This can be prevented by assigning well-qualified teachers to low SES communities so that they can not only support students emotionally and provide guidance to them, but they can also help students improve their abilities and behaviors, and learn from their peers.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the impact of SES on student achievement cannot be ignored as SES influences personal development, enhances lifelong learning and maximizes the potential of children. Unfortunately, in a country like Turkey where people suffer from economical inequalities, many children are deprived of nutrition, nurture and education. As a result of this, these children fall behind their peers already at their first year of school. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that teachers and social workers work with school administrators to develop programs for children with socioeconomic problems so that they are provided with quality learning opportunities and equal treatment in schools. After all, educators cannot change the economical situation in a country, but they can have a profound effect on an individual's intellectual development.

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