10. Early foreign language instruction in Greece: Socioeconomic factors and their effect on young learners’ language development

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1. Introduction

“How is it that some people can learn a second or foreign language so easily and so well while others, given what seem to be the same opportunities to learn, find it almost impossible?” (Gardner and Lambert 1972: 131). This question has triggered much research in the field of individual differences and language learning. While it is undeniably true that all learners can learn a second language, the rate and ease with which people learn can vary enormously. No matter how hard teachers might try, language mastery is not the direct outcome of teaching and learner achievement will vary according to a variety of other factors. It seems plausible that even at the earliest stages learners are different and achieve different levels of performance (Alexiou 2005).

Interest in identifying individual differences in second/foreign language learning has increased significantly in the last three decades (Diller 1981; Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford 2003; Ellis 1985; Fillmore, Kempler, and Wang 1979; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Lightbown and Spada 2003; Parry and Stransfield 1990; Skehan 1989). The common consensus is that individual differences have a direct impact on second language acquisition or success. Individual differences are divided into cognitive and affective variables. Cognitive variables form, to use Johnson’s words, “the mental makeup of a person” (2001: 117) and include age, language aptitude, intelligence, socioeconomic status (henceforth, SES), learning strategies, and learning or cognitive styles. Affective variables form “the emotional side of human behaviour” (Brown 1994: 135) and include personality factors like anxiety, extroversion/introversion, inhibition, risk-taking, empathy, self-esteem and motivation.

With respect to young learners, most cognitive variables, with the exception of the socioeconomic factor, have been studied. In particular, numerous studies have been reported for the age factor (Asher and
García 1969; Munoz 2001; Miralpeix 2002; Nikolov in press; Singleton 1989), learning styles and strategies (Cameron 2001; Cohen 1998; Oxford 1990, 2003), intelligence (Weschler 1991), and aptitude even at young ages (Alexiou 2005; Milton and Alexiou 2004). The reasons why the socioeconomic factor has not been extensively studied probably include both practical difficulties and ethical issues involved in researching this area. However, as foreign language instruction has been introduced to early primary education, it is worth investigating whether learners are given the same opportunities at the outset of their learning or whether, due to their SES, they face educational inequalities right from the beginning of their language learning career.

2. Theoretical background

Socioeconomic status is the relative position of a family or individual on a hierarchical social structure, based on their access to wealth, prestige and power (Mueller and Parcel 1981). With regard to the influence of learners’ SES on their school performance, a large number of studies conducted in various parts of the world have reached some common conclusions. These include (a) inequalities in student performance is very often linked to socioeconomic factors and need not be directly linked to differences in student abilities, (b) differences in school performance are still obvious even when access to education is free, and (c) school assessment, which classifies students into strong and weak ones, seems to reflect quite consistently social stratification. Statistically, students who come from families of lower SES do not do as well in school as those from wealthier families (Frangoudaki 1985). Of course, this relationship is not deterministic; there are children from disadvantaged backgrounds who perform well, and children from advantaged backgrounds who fail. But the overall trend is clear: “... family background is the strongest single predictor of educational outcomes” (Fransoo et al. 2005: 8).

Apart from the economic capital, families possess social and cultural capital and this is passed on to their children as attitudes, preferences and behaviours (Lamont and Lareau 1988). By cultural capital, we refer to specialized knowledge which is not taught in schools, such as knowledge of high culture, and to educational credentials (Walpole 2003). Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (1977, 1984) is the most well
known theory that provides a cultural explanation to differences in educational attainment. Bourdieu argues that children from high status backgrounds have similar cultural understandings to those which underlie the education system and therefore are advantaged over children from low status backgrounds. *Social capital* refers to the contacts and memberships in networks which families can use for personal or professional gain (Horvat 2000).

The processes by which learners’ socioeconomic backgrounds influence educational inequality are not well understood. In an attempt to explain these processes, Marks, Cresswell, and Ainley (2006) distinguished and discussed four types of factors: material, cultural resources, social resources, and school systems. On the basis of their analysis, the authors concluded that “cultural factors play a more important role in socioeconomic inequalities in student achievement than material resources in the home” (Marks, Cresswell, and Ainley 2006: 125).

However, researchers, policy-makers, educationalists and teachers, all agree that in a democratic society, socioeconomic inequalities should not be reflected in educational outcomes. That is why policy initiatives in education over the past half century have been directed at reducing inequalities at school. Although evidence suggests that there has been a decline in the influence of socioeconomic background factors on educational outcomes in most industrialized countries (Rijken 1999; Sieben 2001), few would question or doubt their significance. With reference to Greece, in particular, relevant research findings indicate that Greek students’ school performance is clearly determined by their social and economic background as well as by the geographical location of their school (Frangoudaki 1985; Katsikas and Kavvadias 2000). More particularly, research carried out in Greece indicates, among others, the following:

(a) the majority of high achievers have been born in the capital city (Athens) or in the capital cities of Greek prefectures;
(b) the larger the student’s family is, the worse their school performance is likely to be;
(c) children whose parents have a high level of education are mostly high achievers;
(d) parents’ professional field affects children’s school performance. Children whose parents do manual work are less likely to do well at school (Danassis-Afentakis 1988, cited in Katsikas and Kavvadias 2000: 42).
As regards foreign language education, in particular, and learners’ socioeconomic background, the findings of the British Primary French Research project (Burstall 1980) demonstrated a strong relationship between pupils’ SES and their level of achievement in French as a foreign language: students who scored high were mostly students whose parents had a high-status occupation, whereas students with low mean scores were those whose parents had a low-status job. Furthermore, adolescent learners’ attitudes towards foreign language learning became more positive as their social status increased. Other large-scale studies have tapped into the influence of socioeconomic factors on young language learners’ achievements in a foreign language in Hungary (Andor 2000; Csapó 1998, 2002; Nikolov and Józsa 2003 all cited in Nikolov in press). Their results reveal a close relationship between students’ progress at school and their SES, as this was indicated by parents’ level of education.

To date there has been no research into the relationship between Greek learners’ SES and level of achievement in foreign language learning. Our study, therefore, aims to provide relevant data and explore the extent to which socioeconomic differences have an impact on young learners’ progress in foreign language learning at school. It is important to note that the present study focuses on young language learners, as differences in achievement are normally expected to be minimal at this early stage of language learning. Therefore, any significant differences found may be related not so much to what learners are exposed to in their classes but mainly to other factors influencing their performance, such as their SES.

3. The Greek ELT context

Foreign language instruction was introduced in Greek primary schools in 1987. Initially, this was implemented for the last three years of primary education, with most schools offering English. In 1991, there was a change in the primary school curriculum and English became the compulsory foreign language in all schools. More recently, in 2003, English has been extended to the last four years of primary education.

An interesting and highly individual feature of the Greek foreign language education system is a thriving private sector of foreign language institutes providing intensive foreign language tuition. It targets students
from approximately the age of 8 until their mid teens, although specialized courses are sometimes provided for very young children starting as early as three years of age. Courses offered at private language institutes are not compulsory, are mostly exam-oriented and give the opportunity to students to sit for exams which will allow them, if successful, to obtain a language certificate. Alternatively, parents who can afford it may even cater for private language tuition at home.

The Greek ELT context mirrors Greek parents’ keen interest in early foreign language education even if this requires personal funding for extracurricular tuition. As Greek is not a widely spoken language, Greeks strongly believe in the necessity of mastering at least one foreign language which will allow them to communicate with speakers of other languages inside and outside the borders of their country. English, occupying a dominant place globally, is expected to provide them with important educational, professional and socioeconomic opportunities and thus it is the first foreign language most Greeks choose to learn. Greek parents are convinced that their children’s access to English can actually affect their social mobility and life chances (cf. Lin 1999).

Against this background, the Greek state’s decision to introduce foreign language tuition to primary education was not simply in accordance with similar decisions taken at about the same time in other European countries; it was also an attempt to allow free access to language learning for all so as to respond to Greek parents’ urgent demands for early state foreign language education; thus, this was also a political decision aiming to reduce educational inequalities which might originate from socioeconomic differences among students.

Since private language education is paid for by Greek families, it is likely that the quantity and quality of instruction provided is affected by the family’s SES (cf. Katsillis and Rubinson 1990). Thus inequalities are obvious in the choices Greek parents make with reference to (a) the type of foreign language instruction they provide for their children (private language school or private tuition at home), (b) the age their children start attending tutorial schooling, (c) the foreign language school they register their children, (d) the number of hours of language instruction provided, and (e) the instructor delivering the lessons. Highly qualified language teachers, i.e., holders of a relevant university degree, are normally expected to charge more than those who hold an advanced language certificate (e.g., Certificate of Proficiency in English) and have a teaching practice licence. The same is true for native English language teachers who are often preferred by Greek parents to non-native ones.
The introduction of foreign language instruction in the third grade of state primary school in Greece was expected to limit or even replace private language tuition and thus reduce, at least to a certain extent, differences among learners from various socioeconomic strata. Far from such expectations, however, the number of private language institutes in Greece more than tripled between the years 1985 and 2000 (2,000 private language schools in 1985 and 7,000 in 2000) and has continued to increase until today, as private language tuition seems to have become the norm rather than the exception. According to recent research, about 80% of Greek school children attend foreign language institutes and Greek families spend on average about 880 million euros on foreign language school fees and textbooks.

It is a fact that state schools provide fewer contact hours and less intensive courses than private language institutes; this may be one of the reasons why parents tend to believe that foreign languages are better learned at private language institutes. For a comprehensive breakdown of contact hours in state schools and private language institutes, see Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. School years during which English is taught in mainstream state schools, age of students and contact hours per week for each year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Contact hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd primary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th primary</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th primary</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th primary</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st junior high school</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd junior high school</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd junior high school</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st senior high school</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd senior high school</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd senior high school</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, most students nowadays attend English language courses at both state schools and private language institutes (or receive private tuition). Due to several factors relating to students’ tutorial schooling, e.g., differences in the age of entry, differences in contact hours, lack of
standardization in the services provided, and, of course, variability in
the students’ rate of learning, their achievements in English language
classes at state school vary widely (Mattheoudakis and Nicolaidis 2005).

4. Aims

The aim of this chapter is to examine the extent to which Greek young
learners’ social and economic background tends to affect their progress
in English language learning. Differences in families’ SES are expected
to have a significant impact on young learners’ rate of learning as such
differences influence parents’ decisions about whether or not their chil-
dren attend private language classes, as well as their choices regarding
the quality of the private language institutes and the number of class
hours per week.

Our assumptions are that (a) more children of a higher socioeco-
nomic status attend some kind of tutorial schooling (private language
school or private tuition at home) than children of a lower SES; (b) as
a result, there are important achievement differences among learners of
the same age but of different socioeconomic strata: the higher the socio-
economic background of learners’ families, the better their achievements
are expected to be; (c) due to their cultural capital, learners of a higher
SES are expected to be more highly motivated towards English lan-
guage learning than learners of a lower SES.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Contact hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A senior</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B senior</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C senior</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D senior</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Certificate of English</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency 1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency 2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6–7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Levels of English taught in private language institutes, approximate age of
students and contact hours per week for each level
5. The study

5.1. Participants

The research was carried out in the school year of 2006–2007 and data was collected from 356 Greek young learners of English and six English language teachers. Students came from the last three grades of the primary school (4th, 5th, and 6th) and their age ranged between 9 and 12 years. Four state schools were selected for the purpose of this study: two from the eastern part of the city (henceforth, schools E1 and E2), and two from the western area (henceforth, schools W1 and W2). The city of Thessaloniki is divided into three zones – eastern, central and western – and this division is based on socioeconomic, functional and administrative criteria. Traditionally, the eastern part of the city is considered to be much more affluent and prestigious than the western part (Liambas 2001: 109–110). Thus, the particular areas were selected as their residents represent different socioeconomic backgrounds and therefore, comparative results were expected to reveal possible influence of learners’ SES on their language proficiency.

5.2. Materials

For the purpose of the present study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. In particular, we designed

(a) a student questionnaire with closed items to elicit information about learners’ socioeconomic status and progress in English, and
(b) an interview protocol with open-ended questions for the English language teachers of the students participating in this study. Teachers’ views were expected to reveal their beliefs, opinions and expectations regarding the influence of learners’ SES on their language proficiency.

5.2.1. Student questionnaire

In designing and constructing the questionnaire, general criteria proposed by Dörnyei (2003) were taken into consideration. The questionnaire included clear instructions and simple questions in Greek so as to facilitate and motivate the young participants to complete it. The
advantage of closed-ended questions over open-ended ones is that they are more appropriate for young learners, and the processing of the results is a lot more convenient (Bell 1993; Dörnyei 2003). In most cases learners were required to tick the appropriate answer and in a few cases they needed to answer using minimal wording (i.e., a number, yes/no answer, etc.). Attention was also given to the design of its layout to make it appealing for the youngsters.

The questionnaire included twenty-one questions and consisted of three parts: Part A required learners to provide personal details and information regarding the size of their family (number of siblings) and the location of their home (eastern or western part of the city). Although students from E1 and E2 schools were expected to live in the eastern area, whereas students from W1 and W2 schools in the western part of the city, theoretically, there still might be students whose residence and school were in different parts of the city. Part B included questions on the instruction of English, i.e., years of study, attendance of additional private classes, number of weekly classes, proficiency level (determined by the coursebooks they used in the private language school), details about their English language teacher at the private language institute (native or non-native), parents' help with English homework, learners' motivation towards learning English. Part C elicited information on learners' material and educational resources. In particular, whether they have computers at home and how they use them (e.g., educational games, etc.), whether they have been abroad with their families and how many times, whether and where they learn other foreign languages besides English, whether and what kind of extracurricular activities they participate in. Questions regarding the possession of TV sets, cars and mobile phones – commonly found in similar research studies – were not considered appropriate in this case, as nowadays all Greek households possess at least one TV set and a mobile phone and most of them have a car. Finally, the SES of students' family was primarily indicated by the area of the school and additionally measured by parents' occupational status.

5.2.2. Interviews

A series of six interviews were conducted to elicit teachers' opinions on young learner individual differences and their potential influence on their language learning proficiency level. The interviews were divided in
four parts. *Part A* discussed the background of the teacher interviewed, namely age, relevant studies, length of teaching experience, levels of teaching and teacher development issues. This information is particularly important as it can help the researcher to formulate the teacher’s professional profile. *Part B* aimed to elicit information regarding the pupils and classes in question, such as number of students, level of English, gender and nationality ratio in class, learner performance, frequency of instruction and textbook and materials used. Those were informative issues for the type of instruction learners received. *Part C* explicitly required teachers to express their opinion regarding the influence of learners’ socioeconomic background on their language learning proficiency. In particular, they were asked whether learners from the specific residential area performed better or worse than learners from different areas of the city; whether they believed that students’ grades differed markedly according to where they lived, if school performance is influenced by learners’ SES background when learners are so young, if learners in their classes attended private language schools and whether this improved their language skills in English. Most of the time, these interviews developed into very interesting discussions between the researchers and the interviewees, as some teachers’ answers gave us the opportunity to expand on the initial questions. Finally, *Part D* required teachers to comment on other factors that may affect performance at that age: for example, motivation, attitude, and discipline matters.

5.3. Procedure

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, permission was granted by school advisors, teachers and headmasters as well as by students’ parents. The questionnaire was administered in class and required 15 minutes for its completion. The researchers were present throughout the procedure in order to provide help and answer clarification questions. There was no incident of unwillingness to complete the questionnaire and actually learners seemed to enjoy the process.

The interviews were taken at school usually the same day as the questionnaire was given to students. The length of each interview varied as this depended on each teacher’s personality and willingness to contribute.
6. Results and discussion

6.1. Student questionnaire

Part A: A total of 356 questionnaires were analysed (170 from E1 and E2 and 186 from W1 and W2). Table 3 gives a comprehensive breakdown of the number of students in the schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>E1 &amp; E2</th>
<th>W1 &amp; W2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students from the two areas are considered to represent different socioeconomic strata; however, in order to confirm our classification, we also asked students to provide information about their parents’ occupation. Unfortunately, information about their educational background is not available, as learners were unable to provide accurate details. Our findings showed that the majority of learners’ parents in the two western schools are manual workers (64% of their fathers and 59.7% of their mothers), while the rest of them are mostly state employees. A very small percentage of parents (5.4% of fathers and 3.8% of mothers) in this area hold a higher-status job (teachers, chemists, dentists). In the eastern schools, nearly 65% of learners’ fathers and 51% of their mothers hold a high-status job (lawyers, doctors, dentists, engineers, etc.); only 3.5% of their fathers and 3% of their mothers do manual work and the rest are mostly employees, either in the state or in the private sector. It should be noted that a university degree is not a necessary qualification for such a post and therefore the job itself cannot actually discriminate between educated and non-educated parents. However, the numbers reported above actually mirror a general picture according to which the vast majority of residents in the western part of the city hold lower-status jobs, which may mean lower or unstable income, than those in the eastern area.
According to our findings, in both areas the majority of the learners live very close to their schools, as nearly 70% walk to school every day. The rest (30% of learners in E1 and E2 and 28.1% of learners in W1 and W2) are driven to school by their parents. When asked to provide more details, they indicated that they lived in the neighbourhood but not at a walking distance from school.

Regarding the size of their family (i.e., number of siblings), which, according to Danassis-Afentakis (1988 cited in Katsikas and Kavvadias 2000: 42) influences learners’ level of attainment, findings in both areas are very similar, since 88.1% of children in the western schools and 92.9% of children in the eastern area have at least one sibling; no particular differences were between the two areas and the vast majority of children in both groups have only one sibling.

In the second part of the questionnaire we elicited details about learners’ experience with English language instruction and found interesting differences. In particular, to the question when and where they first started taking English language lessons, the vast majority of children in the eastern part of the city (86%) indicated that they started English before the age of 8 (i.e., before starting English at school). Most of them (68%) attended private language institutes and 18% received private tuition at home. The respective percentages for the children of the western schools are 62% and 6%. At the same time, nearly 32% of children in the western areas did not attend any English classes before the age of 8. This means that they had no prior exposure to English when they started attending English classes at school. Only 14% of the children in the eastern part of the city started English at school.

To the question whether they are currently attending private classes (at a language institute or at home), 80% of E1 and E2 children replied that they go to a foreign language institute and about 30% stated that they receive private tuition. This actually means that among them there are children who attend English at school, at a language institute and at home. Only one child indicated that s/he does not attend English outside school. As for the schools of the western area, 75% of those children attend private language institutes and nearly 15% have a private tutor. Nearly 10% of those children do not receive any kind of extra tuition. Contrary to what we expected, private language institute is a common choice for parents of both areas and no striking differences were found. However, the influence of different socioeconomic backgrounds becomes apparent in the choices of families in the eastern area who opt
for private tuition at home rather than language institutes. Unfortunately, it is not possible to comment on and compare the quality of language institutes in the two areas of the city, as we do not have any kind of information regarding their teachers, syllabus, programmes of studies, etc. Such details would allow us to examine the relationship between parents’ socioeconomic level and the quality of the institutes chosen.

The frequency of private language classes ranges mainly between two and three sessions per week; interestingly, the majority of W1 and W2 children attend such classes three times a week (72%), whereas the majority of E1 and E2 learners attend private classes twice a week (57.3%). Learners were not always able to specify the length of their classes but it is possible that fewer weekly classes mean longer sessions; so, two sessions of 60 minutes equal three sessions of 40 minutes. With respect to the nationality of the teachers in those private schools, the majority of learners in both areas (nearly 85%) indicated that their teacher is of Greek nationality.

The next question elicited information regarding the level of the students. As already mentioned, all state schools are required to follow the state-approved curriculum and teachers as well as students are provided with a textbook written particularly for Greek young learners of English. *Funway I, II and III* are used in the last three grades of the primary school and take students up to the elementary level. However, any test written on the basis of these books could not be a valid measure of students’ level of proficiency; as already shown, nearly all of them attend additional classes in English and their level is normally higher than that targeted by their school textbook. In order to elicit information about the learners’ level, we asked them to write down (a) the number of years they attended private classes, and (b) the textbook they used at those classes during the school year 2006–2007. On the basis of their answers, learners were classified into five levels:

(i) Junior (A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference)
(ii) A senior (A2)
(iii) B senior (A2-B1)
(iv) C senior (B1)
(v) more advanced (B2 and above)

We have matched those levels to the proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference although such correspondence is not
based on test results. Given the lack of standardized placement tests for young learners, we believe that the textbooks used in foreign language schools are valid indicators of learners’ level of English, since those schools always stream learners into levels. Tables 4 to 6 present the percentage of learners at each level in the 4th, 5th and 6th grade of the schools in the two areas.

It is interesting to note at which level the majority of learners in each grade are and compare eastern and western schools on the basis of this level. Such comparison indicates that in the 4th grade the majority of E1 and E2 learners are A Senior, whereas the majority of W1 and W2 learners in the same grade are at Junior level (Table 4).

It is interesting to note at which level the majority of learners in each grade are and compare eastern and western schools on the basis of this level. Such comparison indicates that in the 4th grade the majority of E1 and E2 learners are A Senior, whereas the majority of W1 and W2 learners in the same grade are at Junior level (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparative results of learners’ proficiency level for the 4th grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>E1 &amp; E2</th>
<th>W1 &amp; W2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A senior</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B senior</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C senior</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, in the 5th grade the majority of E1 and E2 learners are B Senior whereas the majority of W1 and W2 learners are A Senior (Table 5). The same happens in the 6th grade: most of the learners in the eastern area are C Senior and another 23.7% are at an even more advanced level. On the other hand, the vast majority of 6th grade students in the western schools are at B Senior level. In those schools there are no students at a more advanced level (Table 6).

Table 5. Comparative results of learners’ proficiency level for the 5th grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>E1 &amp; E2</th>
<th>W1 &amp; W2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A senior</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B senior</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C senior</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More advanced</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, our results indicate that the learners of the two eastern schools are at a significantly higher level in English than their counter-
parts in the two western schools in all grades examined (p < 0.001).
Even at the 4th grade, which is only the second year Greek learners are
exposed to English language instruction at state schools, differences in
level between the two groups are already obvious and statistically signif-
icant (p < 0.001).

Table 6. Comparative results of learners’ proficiency level for the 6th grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>E1 &amp; E2</th>
<th>W1 &amp; W2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A senior</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B senior</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C senior</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More advanced</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As learners get older and progress in English, the gap in the level of
language proficiency between the two groups increases even more. This
may be due to various reasons. One might be that as children get older,
their cognitive abilities develop and children with richer stimuli progress
faster; so the differences between the two areas are even more notice-
able. Another reason might have to do with the ‘nature’ of the type of
instruction. As children get older, fewer games take place in class and
much more emphasis is laid on the grammar of the foreign language.
At the very start, the curriculum is not as rigid resulting in more homo-
genous groups where the level of language proficiency is limited any-
way and much more attention could be given to individual characteris-
tics or innovative methods. However, these results have a significant
impact in later years and that is the reason why we observe significant
differences in students’ proficiency.

Such findings clearly indicate that learners who come from a higher
SES background progress at a significantly higher rate than those of a
lower socioeconomic background. It is particularly interesting that such
a factor seems to influence learners of this age at those early stages of
language learning.

In an attempt to relate this finding to other possible differences
between the two groups of learners, we compared them with regard (a)
to the age they were first exposed to formal English language instruction
outside of school, and (b) to the type of tutorial instruction they have
been receiving (private language school or private tuition at home).
With respect to (a), no significant differences were found between the two groups in any of the grades examined: private foreign language instruction starts in most cases at the ages of 7 or 8, regardless of parents’ social and economic background. With respect to (b), the comparison of the two groups in all grades suggests that the vast majority of learners in both areas receive private tuition at foreign language schools; thus no significant differences were found in this respect between them.

It seems that regardless of their economic status, parents of both areas attach particular importance to their children’s foreign language education and prioritize it over other personal or family needs.

With respect to private tuition at home, in particular, the comparison of the two groups indicated that significantly more parents of the eastern area choose to hire a private tutor for their children ($p < 0.001$). This is obviously a more costly, and thus less popular, option in the western area of the city. Parents of the eastern areas probably believe that private tuition will provide their children with more individualised and intensive instruction and thus they will have the opportunity to progress and obtain the language certificate faster. There were even learners of E1 and E2 schools who stated that they attended both types of tutorial instruction. It is quite possible that those children, under their parents’ influence, gradually become like them: they just want to progress fast and obtain the language certificate; such instrumental motivation may often help them achieve their goals. Previous research has shown that parents of higher socio-economic origins tend to encourage their children in their studies and such encouragement affects positively children’s educational aspirations (Hauser and Featherman 1977).

It is important to stress here that at this age learning should be enjoyable rather than intensive or individualised. Young language learners should belong to a small group of learners of similar age and have the opportunity to feel successful rather than stressed; after all this is their first contact with the foreign language and, as Krashen claims, a lower affective filter in class fosters acquisition (Krashen 1988).

Bearing in mind the importance of families’ socio-cultural capital for learners’ educational attainment, we also examined the possible effect that parents’ occupational status may have on their children’s level of proficiency. According to Burgard, Stewart, and Schwartz (2003), occupational status reflects the outcome of educational achievements and provides, among other things, information about the associated financial rewards. Finally, occupational status can be a measure of social position, as it provides information about job characteristics, such as...
environmental and working conditions (Burgard, Stewart, and Schwartz 2003). Separate Anova tests were used to examine the effect of the occupational status of learners’ fathers and mothers on children’s level of proficiency. Results indicated that significantly more parents in the eastern areas hold a high status job than parents of the western areas ($p < 0.001$). Regarding the former, their jobs indicate that they are mostly university degree holders, whereas the educational background of the latter cannot be easily specified. A large number of parents in the western areas work as state employees and such position may or may not require a university degree. Our findings point to a significant relationship between students’ proficiency level and their SES, as this is indicated by their parents’ occupational status. Such findings actually confirm previous research according to which, children’s school performance is influenced by parents’ professional field (Danassis-Afentakis 1988, cited in Katsikas and Kavvadias 2000: 42).

In order to explore learners’ future aspirations and instrumental motivation with regard to their English language studies, we asked them to indicate whether they are planning to sit any international (e.g., Michigan, Cambridge, etc.) or state exams in order to obtain a language certificate. As already explained, such exams are not compulsory; however, since certified knowledge of at least one foreign language is considered to be a necessary qualification for the future, most Greek learners of about 13–14 years of age choose to take them. In our study the majority of learners in both areas (84% in E1 and E2 and 74.5% in W1 and W2) answered positively and some of them were also ready to indicate the time they were planning to take either international or state language exams. Such findings indicate only a slight influence of young learners’ socioeconomic background on their instrumental motivation. The importance of a language certificate seems to be recognized by most learners, regardless of their SES. As such a certificate is expected to increase their opportunities to find a good job, families of a lower economic level will probably prioritize the cost required for English language classes and exams over other possible needs.

Learners were also required to indicate whether their parents help them with their English homework. Parental help would indicate parents’ knowledge of English and would actually be expected in higher socioeconomic contexts. It would also be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the parents to encourage their children with their English language studies and thus promote their motivation. Our results showed insignificant differences between the two areas in this respect. Parental
help seems to be slightly more common in the eastern schools (51.5%) than in the western part of the city (47.8%). Quite a few children from both areas indicated that their older siblings, rather than their parents, usually help them with their homework.

The final part of the questionnaire elicited information on learners’ material and educational resources. The first question required learners to indicate whether they had already started learning a second foreign language. Recently, there has been an increase in the number of primary school children who study a second foreign language, usually French or German, in private language schools. In an attempt to reduce educational and social inequalities, the state introduced last year a compulsory second foreign language in the fifth grade of primary schools. Even though this measure should reduce learners’ tendency to attend private classes, the answers to our question were revealing. A relatively high percentage (38%) of the learners in the eastern schools were studying a second foreign language, either at private schools or at home. The respective percentage in the western schools was much lower (17.5%) (p < 0.001). In the eastern area, the majority of learners (52.2%) have a private tutor whereas in the western area most children attend a language school (65.6%).

The following three questions elicited more detailed information about learners’ material resources: The first one required them to indicate whether and how many times they had travelled abroad, the second one whether they had a computer at home and the third one whether they participated in any extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, drawing, dancing, etc.) in their leisure time. Participation in such activities is rarely free and thus families of lower economic strata may not afford them.

Children’s answers indicated that the majority of learners in the eastern part of the city had travelled abroad at least once (54%); the respective percentage of the other group was 34%. Similarly, more children in the eastern schools stated that they had a personal computer at home than in the western part of the city (87.1% vs. 61.4%). Finally, participation in leisure activities is much more common among children of the eastern schools than among those of the western area (80% vs. 63%). Learners’ answers to these last three questions indicated statistically significant differences between the two groups of children (p < 0.001) (Table 7).

Such differences led us to explore the relationship between access to those resources and level of proficiency. We found no significant
correlation between learners’ level of proficiency and participation in extracurricular activities or travelling abroad. However, a significant correlation was found between their level and possession of a personal computer at home ($p < 0.001$). Such finding is particularly interesting but we believe that further information and details are necessary to allow us to fully understand the relationship between this variable and learners’ level of proficiency (e.g., the ways children use their computers, the programmes they use, the language of those programmes, the time they spend on the computers). On the whole, our findings indicate that material resources play a minor role in learners’ level of proficiency in English, compared to social and cultural factors (cf. Marks, Cresswell, and Ainley 2006).

Table 7. Learners’ access to material resources in the respective areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>E1 &amp; E2</th>
<th>W1 &amp; W2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trips abroad</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal computer</td>
<td>87.1%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2. Interview results

Six interviews were conducted: three with teachers in the schools of the western area and three in the schools of the eastern area. Here we discuss teachers’ answers and opinions expressed in the interviews.

6.2.1. Background

The average age of the teachers who were interviewed was 42 years, ranging between 31 and 49 years. Experience in teaching varied from 9–31 years: four teachers stated that they had taught in both primary and secondary schools, while two had been teaching 3rd–6th grade, which means they have expertise in teaching 9- to 12-year-olds. All teachers are holders of a university degree in English language and literature; five of them studied in Greece and one in the USA. All stated that they attend seminars at least once a year but they wished they could attend more. They all agreed that they need to be updated and that is why they read ELT articles and books and attend book exhibitions.
6.2.2. Information on pupils and classes

In the second part of the interview teachers provided details about their instruction. They mostly commented on the use of the state-approved coursebook and four of them pointed out that they combined it with other textbooks and relevant teaching materials. All of them stated that their classes were mixed-ability with learners’ level ranging usually from A Junior to A Senior. Finally, all teachers commented on the fact that in the western area of the city there are several immigrants, mainly Russians and Albanians; in the eastern area, when there are students of other nationalities in class, they come mostly from the USA and Australia.

6.2.3. Socioeconomic influence

When asked to compare the level of learners in eastern and western schools, teachers’ answers revealed very interesting opinions and beliefs. According to three teachers, students in the central and eastern areas of the city are at a higher level of proficiency than those of the western area; some learners, they said, can even reach the B2 level in the 6th grade. One teacher thought there were no differences in level and one stated that it would be very difficult to compare learners of the two areas. Finally, one teacher felt that the level was better in the islands – probably due to the fact that tourism in those places is so important for people’s living.

Another question regarded the necessity of private language schools. Teachers of the western schools believe that “it’s the state school system that is at fault. Children wouldn’t need language schools otherwise”. One also said that attending language schools helps children in language acquisition, as it provides them with more knowledge. Teachers of the eastern schools noted that attending private classes provides children with more input but, as one of them stated, “More input and practice does not necessarily mean more knowledge as well”.

When teachers were explicitly asked whether there are socioeconomic factors influencing learners’ performance, the majority agreed. In particular, teachers of the western area stated that their learners do not have the opportunity to attend extra classes in language schools, as their parents are struggling to make a living and cannot afford to pay for private tuition. What is more, most of those children’s parents are not educated and therefore, cannot help their children with their English lessons. One teacher thought that learners whose parents are wealthy
are instrumentally motivated and show more interest in learning English as they have already realised that knowledge of English, job-finding and money-making are closely related. On the other hand, one teacher thought that immigrants’ children are often more eager and motivated to learn English than their Greek peers. Teachers from the eastern area thought that learners’ socioeconomic background influences them throughout their life and learners in those schools have a high interest and motivation to learn English. According to those teachers, “home and family environment seriously affect everything”.

It is obvious that several of the opinions and beliefs expressed by the teachers are not confirmed by our findings. Most learners in W1 and W2 schools, for example, attend private language institutes and in several cases they are helped either by their parents or by their siblings. The same is true for their motivation, as we found very slight differences in learners’ level of motivation between the two groups. It should be stressed, though, that teacher beliefs may lead them to have certain expectations from children of different socioeconomic backgrounds and this may result in teachers having and sustaining a distorted picture of their learners and classes.

6.2.4. Other factors

To the question whether other factors can outweigh the influence of socioeconomic factors, all teachers agreed that motivation, interest, encouraging and motivating teaching techniques, hard work and learners’ intelligence can help all learners regardless of their socioeconomic background.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the extent to which Greek young learners’ social and economic background tends to affect their progress in English language learning. It seems that differences in families’ SES impact significantly on young learners’ level and progress of learning, as learners of a higher SES seem to carry a far richer cultural capital and progress faster in language than learners who do not share the same advantages. In this respect, our findings confirm results of relevant studies that have been previously discussed (Frangoudaki 1985; Katsikas and Kavvadias 2000).
Our findings clearly indicate that the majority of children, irrespective of their SES, attend additional tutorial schooling (language schools) but mostly children of a higher economic status receive private tuition at home. As private tuition speeds up the levels, access to private tutoring results in important achievement differences among learners of the same age but of different socioeconomic background.

As far as attitude or motivational issues are concerned, it is true that children of higher SES bring an ‘enriched’ cultural capital but this does not significantly affect their motivation, as there is no difference between the two groups. What is interesting, though, is that more than 70% of these young learners in both areas are instrumentally motivated and intend to take exams in order to obtain a language certificate.

To sum up, our study has revealed that the social and cultural milieu in which learners live may play, at least at the onset of learning, a decisive role as far as learning opportunities, input and resources are concerned. However, we believe that although our findings provide interesting insights into the inequality of opportunities Greek learners of different socio-economic backgrounds experience, they need to be further explored and studied before they could be generalised.

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