

Socioeconomic Status and Language-Learning Motivation: to what extent does the former influence the latter?

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Abstract: While the influence on language-learning motivation of other macro-level factors, such as gender, have been extensively investigated, there has been comparatively little written about an association between socioeconomic status and language-learning. Given the relationship between socio-economic status and mobility (access to foreign travel), and subsequently mobility and language-learning (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Wright, 1999), deeper exploration of this variable seems equally worthy. Eleven high school teachers were interviewed: four in Scotland, four in Germany and three in France. The three learning contexts were compared, in order to ascertain any differences in the influence of socioeconomic status on language-learning motivation when English was the pupils' mother-tongue, and when English was the pupils' foreign language. Results indicated that in all three contexts, socio-economic status was indeed linked to language-learning via a pupil's mobility. It is hoped that this study will enhance the as yet rather limited work carried out on an association between socio-economic status and language-learning motivation, and encourage a greater focus on this macro-level variable in the future.

Keywords: language-learning motivation, socioeconomic status, secondary schools

Introduction

The current paper reports on a preliminary investigation into a possible connection between a pupil's socio-economic status and their language-learning motivation. The dataset consists of eleven interviews with high school teachers: four in Scotland, four in Germany and three in France. German and French data were gathered in addition to Scottish data, to be able to compare a learning situation where English is the pupils' mother tongue (L1), with one where English is the pupils' foreign language (L2). Is the role played by socio-economic status different in the two contexts?

Literature review

The following is an overview of investigations into possible links between a learner's socio-economic status and their attitude towards language-learning. Particular attention is paid to the way in which these authors have treated the issue of 'micro' vs. 'macro' influences on learning motivation. 'Micro' influences are defined as within-classroom variables (such as learning resources, teaching methods employed, the size of a class) and 'macro' as wider social influences (for example gender stereotypes held by pupils and teachers, the socio-economic status of individual pupils, the value placed on language-learning by the school, parents, and society in general).

Ausubel (1968) puts forward his 'Meaningful Learning Theory' as a way of conceptualising general academic motivation (as opposed to language-learning motivation specifically), a notion which considers the acquisition of knowledge as successful when it is connected to the learner's past experiences. He emphasises what he calls 'group and social factors', which take in some micro-level elements (for example authoritarianism within the classroom), though focus more on macro-level factors, including motivational aspects of cultural deprivation and social class stratification (ibid: 416). He supports the idea that middle-class children emerge as more academically competitive than their lower-class counterparts, the former demonstrating more ambition in their learning (ibid: 423). Furthermore, he sees parents in lower-class families to be far less encouraging of the aspirations their children do have, because they do not give the same weight to education that middle-class parents do (ibid: 436).

A longitudinal study from around the same time is reported in Burstall *et al* (1974). This quantitative survey study also looks mainly at the degree to which 'macro' level factors (specifically gender and socio-economic status) influence English school pupils' achievement in and attitude towards French, and the development of achievement and attitude as the pupils move from primary to secondary school. They explain that, of the many schools investigated, the grammar schools consisted mainly of pupils from 'the higher socio-economic strata', the secondary modern and the bilateral schools from 'mainly the lower economic strata', and the comprehensives largely from 'intermediate social strata' (Burstall et al., 1974: 119). It appears they have defined socio-economic strata predominantly by parents' occupation, given that the relationship between this variable and pupil achievement in French is reported under the heading of 'socio-economic factors'. More specifically, they explain that the link between parental occupation and a pupil's level of attainment in their L2 becomes increasingly stark as a child moves from primary to secondary schooling (ibid). Parental occupation is also a significant variable when it comes to a pupil's tendency to opt out of French study once past the obligatory stage (ibid: 148). Burstall et al. summarise their findings thus:

In the main, favourable attitudes were most characteristic of the grammar school pupils and unfavourable attitudes of the secondary modern pupils, with the comprehensive school pupils occupying an intermediate position. (ibid: 150)

For each aspect of language-learning attitudes or achievement they investigate, at each stage of the compulsory education process, this is the general trend that emerges.

Wright (1999) distributed questionnaires to both grammar and secondary school pupils in Northern Ireland to investigate attitudes towards French language and culture. Her focus is much more on the role that 'micro', or to use her terminology, 'inside-school', factors (for example teachers, textbooks and recorded audio material, the language assistant) contribute to pupil attitudes, finding that actually they are more significant than 'macro'/'outside-school' ones (among other things, socio-economic status).

Like Burstall et al., Wright (1999: 198) takes grammar school pupils to be generally synonymous with 'higher achieving pupils [from] higher socioeconomic groupings', and

therefore by implication secondary school pupils to typically be lower-achieving and belonging to lower socioeconomic groupings.

Although Wright's findings show the micro factors to be better predictors of pupil attitudes towards language-learning than any macro elements, she concludes by highlighting an important point relating to socio-economic status. Whether or not a pupil had visited the target-language country was also seen to have a significant influence on language-learning attitudes, and she then makes a connection between opportunity to travel abroad and socioeconomic status (as the percentage of pupils who had travelled abroad was higher among the grammar school respondents than the secondary school respondents). This therefore indicates a connection between language-learning attitudes and socioeconomic status.

Carr and Pauwels (2006) also link socio-economic status, mobility and language-learning motivation, in their presentation of results from their pupil and teacher interview study in Australia. A survey conducted in a Queensland state school located in one of the lowest socioeconomic areas of the state showed that of sixty pupils, none had travelled abroad, and none anticipated doing so (Carr & Pauwels, 2006: 124). This supports their comment that 'young working class people have not historically seen language study as having relevance to their lives. Our data indicate that this is still the case today' (ibid: 123). We see that perhaps not a great deal of change has taken place since Burstall et al. discussed socio-economic status and language-learning attitudes in the mid-1970s. Burstall et al. and Carr & Pauwels are also connected by their heavy emphasis on the importance of macro rather than micro influences on language-learning attitudes. Carr and Pauwels' main preoccupation is actually the role that gender plays in the way that pupils feel towards foreign language study, as well as socio-economic status. Wright stands alone in her insistence on the greater importance of classroom-based influences.

Methodology

Interviews with high school teachers were conducted between April and July 2010: four in Scotland and Germany, and a further three in France. Two French and two German teachers were interviewed in Scotland, and two French and two English teachers were interviewed in Germany; the intention was to interview two English teachers and two German teachers in France, though I was unable to find a second German teacher to take part. Ten of the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, at the remaining copious notes were taken. All the Scotland and Germany interviews were conducted face-to-face, the participants from France were interviewed via Skype. All eleven teachers work at mixed comprehensive secondary schools.

I investigated whether teachers perceive a connection between pupils' socioeconomic status, and their language-learning motivation. Furthermore, I sought to uncover any difference in the role played by socio-economic status when it came to English as an L1 or English as an L2. I started by taking two commonly-learned languages in Scotland, French and German, and then investigated the opinions of teachers in both these countries, of English, and of the other L2.

There were two main research questions:

1. What is the present reality when it comes to Scottish pupils' language-learning attitudes, as perceived by their teachers?
2. To what extent does socio-economic status determine a pupil's language-learning motivation, and does it differ according to pupils' L1 or L2?

Content analysis of the interview transcripts gave rise to three topics:

1. The general problem of language-learning in Scotland
2. Key differences between English as an L1 and English as an L2
3. Language learning and mobility

Findings

(1) The general problem of language-learning in Scotland

A recurrent point in the Scottish data was that language-learning simply was not valued: not by pupils, parents, the school, authorities nor the general public. A French teacher expressed how languages were a "low priority in pupils' learning [...] even for parents" partly because of geographical location: the school's rural and isolated nature led it to being a "backwater in Scottish education", where there was "not a terrible interest in languages". She elaborates:

It's quite a low priority [...] even in management. Languages come at the end [...] we're not really part of a top priority [...] it's just not on the agenda so much [...] languages are very much in my opinion seen as the poor relative of education. (SFT2)

Her colleague agreed that languages were not being valued at council and governmental level:

There's always these initiatives or these claims that languages is being supported and it's important [...] in reality I don't feel that's necessarily the case [...] you know I feel languages is not particularly valued. (SGT1)

All three teachers explained that the manifestation of such perceptions was pupils asking to be removed from languages before having sat the Standard Grade qualification. SFT2 stated that pupils claim to be "miserable" learning French, and feel "they don't need it".

On the contrary, data from France and Germany suggest that English is held in exceptionally high regard as a school subject, and a life skill:

All of them [his pupils] know that English is important [...] they have that drummed into them by all teachers [...] from everything they hear outside the classroom eh parents generally would like their children to be very good at English [...] and employers obviously require English as a language [...] so I don't really think they need convincing uh about the importance of English. (FET2)

English as a foreign language is valued for all the reasons that both French and German as foreign languages are disregarded in Scotland. On a superficial level, it seems logical that attitudes in Scotland and those in France and Germany differ: as English becomes increasingly valued as an L2, language learning for native speakers of English becomes increasingly perceived as futile.

Interestingly, with L2s other than English in France and Germany, attitudes similar to those expressed in the Scottish data surface:

My colleagues teaching German would probably have the greatest difficulty [...] because increasingly people argue well what's the point of learning German when ah so few people speak German [...] they [pupils at his school] don't need German when they go on holiday there's very little chance of them going to Germany on holiday [...] people speak English anyway. (FET2)

FET2's German-teaching colleague supports his viewpoint:

English is practically everywhere [...] some [pupils] are already learning German in class six [...] it's not many pupils [...] perhaps only ten percent [...] it's really decreasing [...] because it's English that dominates [...] and also the kids think that even if they go to Germany they can speak in English (FGT1)

A comment from a French teacher in Germany falls along similar lines:

I don't know if the English teachers need to publicise [their language] as we do [...] I don't think so [...] the pupils are motivated from the start [...] or ok they're maybe not exactly motivated but they know that they've got to continue [with English] [...] that without English they're nothing. (GFT1)

(2) The differences between English- L1 and English- L2

Firstly, English as an L2 enjoys significant reinforcement outside the classroom. There are numerous opportunities for learners of English to practice their skills, opportunities that exist to a lesser degree for those learning other L2s:

I think that the music's English [...] even a lot of commercials like on television in Germany are English you find like printed ads in English [...] there's so much English around [...] so yes they know - big movie industry it's all English-speaking [...] they know that there is the English-speaking world outside [...] I think it's more present than let's say Spanish for instance. (GET2)

His colleague GFT2 agrees that pupils are familiar with English-speaking culture to a far greater extent than they are with French-speaking culture. I argue that this enables pupils of English to more readily live and experience their L2 than those studying other languages. GET1 believes that a significant factor in motivating pupils to study English is them seeing their parents using it, perhaps through their work, or foreign travel. Pupils therefore get a chance to see that English skills come in useful in many situations. While there will certainly be instances where Scottish pupils see their parents using a foreign language, it is probably less common.

The mention of travel leads to the second point, a consideration of the relevance of socio-economic status for language-learning motivation. I had hypothesised that socio-economic status would be an important factor in determining language-learning motivation with regard to Scottish pupils, but not so vital for those learning English in France or Germany. I thought this would be the case because Scottish pupils would probably have to travel abroad to come into contact with the target language, which is not so feasible for less wealthy pupils. In France or Germany, however, I believed that the greater presence of English would bypass any class distinctions that arose because of varied access to travel. The findings indicate that travel is indeed a key contributor to Scottish pupils' language-learning motivation but it also plays quite a significant role for pupils learning English in France and Germany.

The following opinion of a French teacher in Scotland supports the former point:

Some of the youngsters have gone abroad [...] and quite often it would be well-off families that can afford to go abroad [...] and going abroad it's quite a motivation to learn languages [...] so I would say maybe being from a well-off family would help the motivation if they've had the experience of going abroad. (SFT2)

Similarly, the following excerpts demonstrate the latter:

Some of them want to be pilots [...] and their English was really excellent [...] and when I looked at what their parents were doing [...] most of them were travelling a lot [...] they'd been travelling since they were children [...] children who are used to using English outside of school um they watch films in English. (FET1)

When we asked them [a different group of pupils to the ones under discussion above] [...] what they wanted to do next year [...] they all want to become hairdressers [...] and work in beauty parlours and things like that [...] so English was not really their motivation. (FET1)

I believe that for many of them it's simply that they don't see any relevance [to English] [...] when you look at their personal situations I don't think that many of them actually experience English in their family situations in their environment outside the school [...] for them it is a school subject period end of story and these other kids experience it in many ways through travel through friends through family [...] it's part of their lives and [...] for the others it's not and I don't honestly think that they see it ever will be [...] that's something that's very hard to work against because I don't think they see the need to put an effort into it. (GET1)

Despite strong evidence for socio-economic status being relevant for language-learning motivation in English-learning contexts as well as those where it is the pupils' mother tongue, I posit that pupils with English as a mother tongue are much more likely to disregard language learning if they do not have a real enjoyment of the subject, or do not see themselves travelling. Pupils in France or Germany, however, who do not enjoy English, or do not see themselves travelling abroad either now or in the future, will still more often have a sense of the language being an important life skill. For example,

when asked about pupils' reasons for wanting to be removed from language classes, SFT2 explains:

Because it's useless or they don't like it [...] it's mostly that kind of comment you know they can't do it they're miserable they don't need it [...] you know can they please come out of French [...] a fair number of children have been removed from language classes. (SFT2)

Compare this with comments from two teachers in France, however. The first excerpt from FET1 refers to a pupil who was unmotivated and uninterested in English classes; the second, from FET2, refers to his pupils overall:

He knows that he will need that for his studies [...] it's just the problem of studies [...] they know that they have to do languages for most further education studies. (FET1)

They all of them know in their heart of hearts that English is an important subject [...] I've never had anybody actually saying to me what's the point of learning English [...] nobody is stupid enough to say anything like that. (FET2)

Pupils learning English may well not see themselves using the language outside the classroom, but they nonetheless tend not to question the usefulness of the subject. This, however, is not at all the case for English-L1 learners of other languages.

(3) Language-learning motivation, mobility and socio-economic status?

This final section problematises the potential link between mobility, here defined as the possibility to travel: a factor mentioned above as highly relevant to language-learning motivation, and socio-economic status. Is it justified to connect the two on the basis of the available evidence?

The starting point is identifying the connection between language-learning motivation and mobility, which appears straightforward, given the prevalence of comments from the teachers of each country regarding this issue:

I think the trips [school excursions to France] were very important and I think that it would influence them I mean you can see the way some kids have been to France to Paris [...] they understand it much better not only the language of course but the culture [...] and everything else and they're keener [...] to know more about it [...] or more interested but for a lot of the pupils it's completely irrelevant [...] it's very far away- they'll never go to it. (SFT2)

The pupils who go on holiday with their parents [...] use German [...] they certainly use it much more. (FGT1)

[Motivation to learn English] has to do with the fact that they see their parents using it [...] they travel quite a lot. (GET1)

Teachers clearly perceive a connection between their pupils' motivation, and having travelled to the target-language country. Can we therefore associate access to travel with socio-economic status? If so, this would enable an indirect connection between

language-learning motivation and socio-economic status. The data do show there to be an understanding about such a link:

There's some kids who haven't even been to Edinburgh [...] you know there's some kids who've just never- go out of this local area [...] so to go to France is just like going to the moon for them isn't it you know it's just so far away [...] they don't see the relevance of learning the language because they're never going to be going there [...] whereas the better-off kids you know the doctors' kids and the office workers' kids and everything they've all had their foreign holidays, they've been to Spain, they've been to France, some of them several times and so they're more motivated. (SFT1)

Quite often you know it would be well off families that can afford to go abroad [...] and you know going abroad it's quite a motivation to learn languages [...] so I would say maybe you know being from a well-off family would help the motivation if they've had the experience of going abroad [...] you know people on the low income can't do that. (SFT2)

Obviously pupils who have benefited from family trips abroad as well as school trips abroad will see a relevance [to language-learning] that those who are poorer do not. (SGT1)

These quotes clearly support the existence of a relationship between access to foreign travel and socio-economic status, as seen by the teachers. Given that a connection between foreign travel and language-learning motivation was highlighted above, I argue for a link between language-learning motivation and socio-economic status. Indeed, teachers in each of the three countries signalled an association between a pupil's socio-economic status and their academic motivation in general, not just within the language-learning domain:

It [a pupil's socioeconomic status] relates to their possibility to learn [...] but not specifically English [...] this is not specifically for English but for all subjects that the higher the social status is- and this cannot be generalised but quite often [...] the better off the parents are the better the students are at school but it's got nothing to do with languages per se they have the support the means to, and they have the surroundings to learn. (GET2)

I've noticed that pupils that [...] want to do well you know who come from a reasonably middle class background who want to do well- it wouldn't matter what subject they want to do well in it [...] I'm inclined to think that you know the pupils of the poorer end I think it is sad because I don't think they take- they maximise the opportunities that they could [...] they don't take advantage of opportunities that are available in school because I think everything to do with school is kind of you know I think they see it as a passing through phase with not too much relevance to their own personal lives. (SGT1)

Kids whose parents are professionals [...] kids whose parents understand the importance of learning you know the importance of education the importance of

qualifications [...] across all the subject areas then they- the kids will be more motivated [...] you clearly see the attitude in class [...] there's a closer link between the message that you're putting across in school and the message they have at home [...] and it's much easier to teach the kids whose parents [...] you know em are [...] more well off. (FET2)

To recapitulate, the following links have emerged from the interviews:

- between language-learning motivation and a pupil's possibility to travel;
- between possibility to travel and socio-economic status and a subsequent link between language-learning motivation and socio-economic status.
- between academic motivation more generally, and socio-economic status.

While the Scotland, Germany and France data all support the above connections overall, there are two interesting counterpoints; they hint at the connections above being strong, but not absolute.

The first example comes from a French teacher in Scotland. When discussing pupils being removed from language classes at their own, or their parents', request, she explains that given the range (in terms of socio-economic background) of parents who make such a request, there is no support in this case for a connection between language-learning motivation and socioeconomic status:

We've got very middle class parents who want their children removed from French. (SFT2)

It can be seen, therefore, that while this teacher, like the others, does indeed perceive a link between socio-economic status and language-learning motivation, she admits that it does not always hold.

In contradiction to the second link, that is to say between general academic motivation and socio-economic status, there arises a comment from a German teacher in Scotland, who has not yet been cited with reference to any such link, either between social background and language-learning motivation, or social background and general academic motivation, because she is the one teacher who simply believes it not to exist. Her words which follow stand in direct contrast to those of FET2, for example, who discusses above the way in which positive messages about the value of education put across at home facilitate effective interaction with pupils in the classroom:

To be honest it's not important for me [...] the background of a pupil should not stand in the way of a pupil's education [...] and no matter who comes through my door [...] they are pupils that I teach and it doesn't matter what their background is [...] I know that there's a particular opinion that children from better-off families they're more motivated [...] I mean certainly there will be parents who are more aware of what they want to achieve for their children [...] but that is home [...] they come to me in my class and I'm trying to involve to include everybody [...] and I say to the children the amazing thing about the Scottish school system in comparison to the German one that I come from is no

matter what their background is they all have the same chances [...] what they do with the change that is in their hands. (SGT2)

Discussion

It seems fair from the interview responses to make an indirect connection between socio-economic status and language learning. I support Wright's (1999) conclusion that the gap between is closed by the notion of 'mobility': mobility helps to motivate pupils in their foreign language study, and mobility is facilitated by having a higher socio-economic status.

As outlined above, all the teachers work in comprehensive, non-selective schools. If Burstall et al.'s (1974) and Wright's (1999) assumptions are valid, then it is likely that pupils would come from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, but with a greater number of pupils belonging to the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. Considering Burstall et al.'s (1974) point that pupils at grammar schools (i.e. pupils generally of a higher socio-economic status) tend to be more positively disposed towards language-learning, would the interviews have yielded different responses if I had been talking to teachers working at selective, fee-paying schools?

Comments largely support Ausubel's (1968) claim that there is a tendency for parents of a lower socioeconomic status to give less weighting to their children's education, making these pupils less academically predisposed than their counterparts whose parents value their education highly. When it comes to language learning in Scotland, the trend still follows, but there are also exceptions, namely, parents of a relatively high socio-economic background rejecting foreign language learning as worthless. While Carr and Pauwels' (2006) claim that young working-class people have tended not to, and still tend not to, perceive the importance of language learning for their lives, it appears to hold true for some middle-class native English-speakers too.

Conclusions and Future Research

As stated above, the two main research questions aimed to

1. ascertain today's language-learning attitudes in Scottish schools, and
2. determine the extent to which socio-economic status contributes to such attitudes

Regarding the first, all Scottish participants independently claimed that there was a disregard for language learning by pupils, parents and management. This disregard was also described by French and German participants with regard to languages other than English, which remains highly valued. Concerning the second, the participant responses suggest that socio-economic status makes a significant contribution to language-learning motivation in contexts when English is an L1 and an L2. Their responses also imply a correlation between low socio-economic status and low motivation on the one hand, high socio-economic status and high motivation on the other. However, in the Scottish context, a lack of value placed on language learning extends in some cases to

pupils of a higher socio-economic status as well as those from less well-off backgrounds. The opposite holds for situations where English is the L2: despite higher socio-economic status pupils see it as more relevant to their lives, pupils of all backgrounds recognise the subject's value.

A number of directions for future research have presented themselves:

Only a small number of teachers interviewed, and they were working in relatively similar schools: diversification at the next stage of data collection, that is to say, speaking also to a greater number of teachers, and also including those who work in fee-paying schools would provide essential contrastive insight.

In addition to speaking to a greater and more diverse group of teachers, the intention is now to interview pupils from both state and independent schools in Scotland. It has been extremely useful as a first step to gather teacher opinions on pupils' attitudes, but it is no substitute for speaking to pupils themselves.

The two exceptions to the general trends both warrant further exploration:

1. SFT2 noted that there are some 'very middle class' parents who wish to have their children removed from French classes.

Unfortunately, she was not able to elaborate as to why this might be, as she explained that parents speak to the school's management, rather than the individual class teachers, about having their children terminate a subject. It would be interesting to speak to other teachers and pupils to probe further why families with ready access to foreign travel would disregard foreign language-learning.

2. SGT2 explained that for her, a pupil's socioeconomic background was completely irrelevant to their learning once they stepped inside the classroom.

It is a fascinating, and somewhat tempting, idea that teachers might be able to separate so absolutely macro issues like socioeconomic status from the micro level of classroom operations, in order to reach all pupils more effectively. The other teachers, however, suggested that the opposite was true, that is to say, that macro-level variables play an undeniable role in classroom dynamics. Worthwhile, then, would be a deeper investigation with a greater number of participants: is it possible to leave at the classroom door potentially harmful variables that enhance inequality?

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