

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The impact of neoliberal discourse and the socio-economic status of parents on TEFL young learners' achievement: Parental beliefs and behaviors in the spotlight

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Abstract: Considering the scarcity of research on different aspects of young learners' teaching and learning English, and given the fact that parents provide financial support for the young learners' education, this study was an attempt to investigate how socio-economic factors interact with parents' behaviors and beliefs regarding young learners' success in achieving English oral proficiency. The participants were 28 young learners of English with their parents. They were selected through purposive sampling and these learners were taught with the same method, and tuition were waived for children with low SES. To explore parents' perceptions, beliefs and 7 behaviors, 17 parents of adequate and inadequate means were interviewed. Qualitative findings indicated that parents based on their SES viewed their young learners' success in English differently. This study has implications for various agencies in English language teaching, including teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers in Iran, highlighting the interaction of Neoliberalism discourse and parenteral factors and behaviors in education.

Given the limited research on young learners' English language teaching and learning, coupled with the provision of financial support by parents towards their educational pursuits, this study sought to investigate the interplay between socio-economic factors, parental behavior, and beliefs in achieving English oral proficiency. Participants involved in the study comprised 28 young learners of English and their parents, who were selected through purposive sampling. These learners were instructed using the same syllabus, teachers and textbooks with tuition fees waived for children from low socio-economic backgrounds. In order to explore parents' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, 17 parents of the student participants representing varying financial means were interviewed. Qualitative analysis of the findings revealed that parents' socio-economic status influenced their views on their children's success in learning English. The implications of these findings are far-reaching, not only for teachers and teacher educators but also for policymakers in Iran, stressing the interplay between neoliberalism discourse and parental factors and behaviors in education.

Keywords: parents' perception; socioeconomic status; speaking skill; young English language learners

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Received: February 2, 2023; **Accepted:** May 30, 2023; **Available online:** June 28, 2023

Citation: Ghajarieh A and Mirkazemi FS (2023) The impact of neoliberal discourse and the socio-economic status of parents on TEFL young learners' achievement: Parental beliefs and behaviors in the spotlight. *Forum for Linguistic Studies* 5(1): 234–249. DOI: 10.18063/fls.v5i1.1536

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1. Introduction

As teaching and learning English as a foreign language has become increasingly developed among adults, the need to present it to young learners is being felt more than ever. Therefore, recent research has become increasingly interested in the factors that influence young learners' L2 learning. In the case of young learners, their parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and other parental factors may influence early language learning in terms of vocabulary diversity, syntactic complexity, conversational and literacy development, and general processing ability (Hoff, 2013). Parents' influence over their children's academic success is well established (Butler and Le, 2018). Family factors, including family cohesion (Cruz-Ramos et al., 2017), may affect teaching and learning processes.

Wigfield et al. (2006) pointed out four major influential factors related to parents: (a) family, parent, and neighborhood characters; (b) parents' overall views and behaviors; (c) parents' specific views about the child; and (d) parent-specific behaviors. Among these factors, socioeconomic status can also influence parents' perceptions and expectations of their children. Factors such as parents' level of education and household income have a positive effect on parents' expectations of their child's immediate school success and long-term educational prospects aspects (Davis-Kin et al., 2003).

In recent years, studies on learners' socioeconomic status and parents' beliefs about their young learners' academic success as two significant factors have gained prominence in educational settings. A growing body of research has investigated the role of socioeconomic status on young learners' language skills (Abel et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2006). Due to the importance of SES in the case of young learners of English as a global language, *System* journal dedicated an issue in 2018 to various aspects of this variable. The topics range from longitudinal investigations (Butler and Le, 2018) and assessing the influence of SES in language learning (Sanjurjo et al., 2018), reading skills and SES (Nikolov and Csapó, 2018) and exploring Neoliberalism and English learning (Song, 2018).

In a study in Bangladesh, Hamid (2011) studied the possible associations between socioeconomic characteristics and academic performance in English among high school families in rural areas. As a result, the "academic achievement in English" of rural students was low and there was a pattern correlation between family income, parents' educational background and English academic performance at this generally low level of performance. As a result, students with higher levels of parental education and higher family incomes were more likely to score high on the aptitude test and on the English test on the high school qualifying test.

Similarly, Honea (2007) showed the effects of commitment, commitment support, family socioeconomic status and other variables on academic performance. The survey involved 315 high school students, 215 parents and 46 teachers from rural South. As a result, in this study, the relationship between the socioeconomic status of the family and school results proved to be statistically significant. In their study, Aikens and Barbarin (2008) found that children with low ESS acquired slower language, delayed character recognition, and phonological recognition and were at risk of learning difficulties.

Furthermore, Ghaemi and Yazdanpanah (2014) found that compared to middle/high status students, lower status students are often more depressed and worried about their financial problems and sometimes do not have enough time to study and work. Therefore, the socio-economic status of

students or their families could be a factor affecting their emotional state and motivation to learn, as well as the provision of teaching materials and facilities to promote learning and performance in educational settings.

While these studies focused on the SES on various educational settings in different countries, no study adopted a longitudinal design to bring change in the life of children from low SES and examined their perceptions regarding their children's achievement in oral proficiency with references to parental beliefs and behaviour.

The present study finds the most affinity with the one done by Song (2018) as in the Iranian context, despite political mottos promoting equality in education, the discourse of neoliberalism plays a pivotal role in education. Owing to the importance of contextualizing SES within the bigger picture in education, the responses of these parents were analyzed by resisting or supporting the discourse of neoliberalism in education and related dominating ideologies in society. The discourse of neoliberalism in education is a topic of concern for many scholars and educators (Gibbons, 2018). Neoliberalism is an economic ideology that emphasizes the free market (Harvey, 2005). In education, this translates into a focus on competition and as Harvey (2005) states that this may lead to the commodification of education.

As Saunders (2007) argues, neoliberalism has negative consequences for students in educational settings. In other words, the discourse of neoliberalism in education and its related ideologies raise important questions about the role of education in shaping our future society. The dominance of neoliberalism in education is closely related to ideologies that privilege the individual over the collective. In a society that emphasizes success as an individual achievement, rather than a collective effort, education can become a tool for upward mobility.

The reason behind conducting this research is that in Iran, the provision of English language instruction is deemed a luxury that many families are unable to bear the tuitions and thus take the decision on behalf of their children not to enroll them in language centers. In other words, while learning a language at an early age is considered as "the weapon to change the world" (Murphy, 2018: 89). In the Iranian context, the socio-economic status of parents could enforce the discourse of neoliberalism in education. The influence of neoliberalism, emphasizing the principles of market liberalism (Harvey, 2005), has garnered attention within educational contexts of Western societies (Gibbons, 2018). However, investigation into the replication and propagation of this discourse in the education of young learners of language in Iran, an Eastern society, remains limited. To fill this gap, the following research question was formulated:

How do socio-economic status and neoliberalism discourse interact with parental beliefs, behaviors and perceptions in the case of Iranian young learners' English oral proficiency?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This study is a qualitative case study, exploring the beliefs and behaviors of parents with high versus low socio-economic status. The study included 28 young learners (14 boys and 14 girls) with an age range of 4–6 years and a mean age of 4.5 years, who were enrolled in Mahestan English Lan-

guage Institute in Tehran, Iran. A total of 17 parents of these children (parents with either high or low SES) attended the interview sessions as well. They filled out a questionnaire asking about their education level and income. Among 17 parents, 10 had received no education with an income below the poverty line in Iran. 7 other parents were educated and had at least one academic degree with their income being 50% above the poverty line. Their children had no or little experience of attending language classes and started learning English for the first time in a private language institute.

Mahestan is a kid's English language institute with two branches which are located in Tehran. One branch is located in Tehranpars and the other one is located in Pasdaran. The research took place at Pasdaran branch. Mahestan held two kinds of classes, general classes and term-time classes. General classes are held every day from Saturday to Wednesday. Its morning shift starts at 8:30–13:00 and afternoon shift starts at 13:30–18:00. And term-time classes are held at different time and days of the week. Admission requirements include the ability to speak mother tongue and being upper 3 years old. Among the English institutes in the area, Mahestan has become one of the leaders in the use of technology in teaching English.

The Internet is widely used in this institute supporting learning courses and academic programs. The technological facilities of the institute include a large number of computers, smart boards, and video projectors located in each class. Moreover, the institute provided the possibility of learning English in such a real situation through its laboratories.

The English course under study in this research was developed by the institute. The course offers different English subjects per week. The primary focus of the course is on children's listening and speaking ability. Upon the completion of six months, students are expected to comprehend what they listen and be able to communicate in English. Since the course has a variety of instructors, the teachers follow the course and its activities, so that there is a similarity between classes. The participants in this study, have no educational background in English.

The morning classes were selected for high socioeconomic group with 14 students (7 boys and 7 girls) and the afternoon class was selected for low socioeconomic group with the same numbers and genders of students. Both classes met 5 times per week, 4 hours and a half a day. The crucial point here is that for both groups an experienced instructor was chosen who worked in Mahestan for 3 years. The researcher prepared a syllabus that the instructor reviewed and modified without changing the content. The instruction paralleled the topics included in the course syllabus and the only resources used were videos and audio files prepared by the researcher. However, the teacher did explore websites related to the course content. All class meetings were held in an ordinary classroom equipped with computers, video projectors, and smart boards. The length of treatment for both groups was approximately 6 consecutive months of instruction at the beginning of 21 April 2019.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Survey of parents' SES

The participants were required to fill out a self-reported survey of parents' SES which collected data on parents' education and income level. Parents' education was evaluated based on an 8-point scale: (1) elementary school and below; (2) elementary school; (3) secondary school; (4) high school diploma; (5) Associate degree; (6) Bachelor's degree; (7) Master's degree; and (8) Doctorate. Moreover, data on the monthly family income were also collected. The high-SES level and low-SES

level were determined by calculating the income-to-needs ratio that is by dividing the overall income of the family by the threshold of poverty reported by the Iranian government for the relevant family. The alpha Cronbach reliability for the developed questionnaire was 0.8.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interview

Parents' perceptions and behaviors were evaluated through semi-structured interviews. The survey of parents' beliefs and behaviors was used as the framework of the interview. The interview items were developed based on this framework. It comprised items that covered the following elements: (1) characteristics of parents, such as their SES; (2) the indirect behaviors of parents, such as language environment and their English proficiency; (3) the direct behaviors of parents, such as assisting their child to learn English, helping them do their homework, and providing private classes; (4) their overall views of English; and (5) their views and expectations about their children's capabilities in learning English. For a sample of the questions, see Appendix A.

2.2.3. Procedure

For conducting the interviews, 2 female English language teachers were selected from experienced teachers in Mahestan Language Center to hold the English classes in this research; 2 classes were held for these students (each class with 14 students—7 boys and 7 girls). The morning class was selected for high SES group with 14 students (7 boys and 7 girls) and the afternoon class was selected for low SES group with the same numbers and genders of students. Prior to the beginning of data collection procedure, ethics approval was obtained from one of the researcher's institutions. Parents' consent was obtained for all the learners. During the study, the Mahestan syllabus was taught to the learners by the trained teachers. Parents were also given a demographic questionnaire including items related to their educational level and income. One of the researchers prepared a syllabus that the instructors reviewed and modified without changing the content. The instruction paralleled with the topics included in the course syllabus and the only resources used were videos and audio files prepared by the researcher. However, the teachers did explore websites related to the course content. All class meetings were held in an ordinary classroom equipped with computers, video protectors, and smart boards.

The English course conducted for the purposes of this study was developed by the institute. The course offers different English subjects per week. Since the course had a variety of instructors, the teachers follow the course and its activities, so that there was a similarity between classes. The parental factors include parents' beliefs and behaviors about their children's English learning. Students of both high SES and low SES started learning English in these classes as zero-beginners and only the parents of high SES were required to pay tuitions for these classes. Upon finishing these speaking courses, the participants were evaluated with speaking tasks.

Parents who had a high SES and low SES were only invited to participate in interview sessions at their own consent (8 high SES, 9 low SES). In the qualitative phase, parents participated in interviews to share their perceptions about enhancing the English oral proficiency of their children with references to their beliefs and behaviors.

2.2.4. Data analysis procedure

The data underwent content analysis, which involved breaking down the information into codes, categories, and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Riazi, 2016). Inter-coder reliability was also assessed (0.9), with results indicating a high level of agreement between coders. A high level of agreement between coders would typically result in a kappa coefficient between 0.8 and 1.0.

The following steps were taken to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative data analysis. In the first step, the data were gathered and transcribed by both researchers. Data familiarization came next. This involved reading through the data several times to become familiar with its content. The coders could make notes, highlight important sections and come up with initial ideas for coding. The next step was to develop a coding frame with all codes, anchor examples, sub-themes and main themes based on ten percent of data, using open coding (Riazi, 2016). The coding process involved breaking down the data into meaningful segments or codes. Codes were assigned to specific sections of the data based on their content, using open coding. The next step was to group similar codes into categories or themes. This process helps to reduce the complexity of the data and highlight overarching themes. The final step was to review and refine the themes. This involves checking to see if all the data has been accurately categorized into themes, and if any themes need to be combined or split. Throughout the coding process, coders engage in ongoing communication with one another regarding their respective coding procedures and the emergence of new codes, subthemes, and overarching themes.

3. Results

The research question has been answered by analyzing the data achieved from participants in the interviews. They produced overarching themes, which were extracted and provided below.

3.1. Theme A: Starting age for learning English

All the parents of high SES mentioned that they started learning English very soon, maybe at the age of 8 or 9. So, they were aware of its importance. They also mentioned that children will be better English learners and L2 speakers when they start any foreign language at an early age.

Sample A:

“I myself started learning English when I went to primary school. I remembered that I was so happy on Saturdays and Tuesdays because my mother took me to English classes period now, I think part of my success at work is due to my ability to speak English and email to foreign learners.”

As another parent stated, she would achieve a good rank at university in the exam because of her English skills.

Sample B:

“I could get my English certificate when I was a high school student so that was very helpful on my Conqueror test period. I answered all of the English tests on the Concorde and it significantly improved my rank to get accepted in my desired major.”

Interestingly, those with low SES have similar beliefs. Furthermore, some of the interviewees aim to provide situations for their children to study abroad, mainly in English speaking countries. From their viewpoint, acquiring a second language from the very beginning makes them ready for a partly guaranteed life in a foreign country.

Sample C:

"I believe that when your kids start English or any other languages at the age of 4, 5 or 6, they can have a better pronunciation and they learn it like their mother language. I would like my son to continue his education at the best university in the world, so that will be possible only through getting a good score on the IELTS or TOEFL exam."

"One of the potential reasons for the high number of parents with high SES believing in starting learning English at an early age is that most of these parents knew English or had the experience of learning a language which in both cases have formed the assumption that learning."

Young children have brains that are better able to absorb new information, including language and starting to learn a language at a young age, such as around 8 or 9, allowing children to engage with the language in a natural way, almost as if they were learning their first language.

3.2. Theme B: Role of family income in facilitating language education

The interviews were run during different meetings with the parents with high socioeconomic status. Asked about the effect of income on children's language learning achievement, the parents remarked that a high salary can significantly lead to more proficiency. They added that when parents can financially afford the kids' language class, they can be sent to better and more experienced language institutes. Professional institutes are more equipped with the latest learning and teaching approaches and would promote their kind's language command.

They also believe that expert tutors, when required, can be invited for further teaching which can in short term and considerably identify learners' weaknesses and solve them. However, they added that everything depends on the motive and attempts (perseverance) of their kids and money would serve as a driving motor for it. An overwhelming number of the parents were of university post-graduates. In the interviews, they mentioned that fathers' and mothers' education plays a significant role in determining their kids' attainment. Parents with university degrees would value the role of English in directing kids to success and a brilliant future.

Sample A:

"I have seen that at work when you are equipped with a foreign language namely English, you can provide a better job prospect in the workplace. As shown above, expectedly high SES are more likely to visit foreign speakers as a guest or partner, so knowing a language can help them better get promoted in their job."

In other words, all of the parents with high SES hold the view that while motivation is a must in the case of language learning,

However, those of low SES families believed that a family needs lots of stuff such as a ceiling over heads, food, and bills. Thus, English learning is a negligible part of the list of their needs. It

can be considered an important factor besides other matters but not as the most urgent one, as one of the interviewees answered:

Sample B:

“I believe learning foreign language is good and necessary for a kid but it should negatively impact other children’s success and the family budget. Now, an English class costs around 1 million in a term and this money is not affordable for a family of four or five. Monthly expenses such as rent, board and food and bills are their first priorities in my opinion. On the other side, some parents believe that going to English classes has become too obsessed with this issue. Now, schools run good English classes with professional teachers, which is in sharp contrast to what we had in the past. You can see a school that invites experts from language institutes and uses the most recent textbooks and materials in classrooms. So, if a child wants to learn English, schools are sufficient and there is no need to consider extra classes or ask a tutor for home learning.”

These results indicate that the income of a family has a significant role in shaping parental beliefs regarding the necessity of learning a new language for their children. At the macro-level, the stated beliefs support the discourse of neoliberalism in education where parents with low SES failed to resist the discourse in the interviews. As such, this could reinforce the ideology that without money are not served in education and society at large.

3.3. Theme C: The importance of extensive reading in language learning

In the interviews, it was revealed that parents of high SES believe that two sessions a week are not enough at all for language learning. They believe that when parents read an English book to their kids, they get engaged in learning English day by day, which helps them to improve their knowledge and become interested in extensive reading.

Sample A:

“I asked my daughter’s teacher for introducing graded stories. She recommended a publication to read one or two pages of the story every day. I believe this has two positive points: first, my daughter gets to know that English is not just limited to classes or institutes. Second, this can make her interested in reading books which can ultimately increase her knowledge.”

However, parents of low SES mentioned that they do not often read out books to their children as they believed that such would interfere with teachers’ activities and instructions.

“Why should I do that? I am neither a teacher nor a good guide for my children in academic courses. I think I cannot pronounce words as well as teachers do and even, I may mispronounce some words that would interfere with learning.”

3 of the interviewees of high SES also remark that language institutes are paid for this purpose and teaching their kids is on institutes’ shoulders. What they do is paying the tuition fee and whatever institute does is providing the best training, as provided below.

“At the beginning of the term, institute officials call me and ask for the monthly tuition fee. When they are this much strict with money, they must take responsibility for good teaching and learning. I expect my kid to learn whatever is needed in the institute and self-study/learn at home.”

Nevertheless, parents of low SES found the waiver of tuition as an act of kindness on the part of the language center. In such a case, they just showed their appreciation without considering themselves as social actors passivized to claim anything from teachers and other education agencies. This could enforce the discourse of Neoliberalism in education where money rules over students' needs and talent and exclude families of inadequate means.

3.4. Theme D: Importance of consistent practice for language development

Expectedly, high and low SES families bear striking differences in terms of speaking English at home. Some of the parents believe that learning English or any other ones is kind of artificial in that materials have been prepared in advance and both kids and teachers know what and how to learn, which makes it difficult to name it "learning". They have added that they use each moment to talk in English with kids to both follow their improvement as well as pave the way for more learning progress.

Sample A:

"I myself experienced that when I was a kid, my mother was an English teacher and she tried to speak with me and asked for her request in English. She believed that this is a natural way of learning a foreign language. I firmly believe that she was quite right. I forgot many things that I learnt from language classes but what my mother said to me are just kept in my mind."

The other parent's answer was also interesting. She noted that asking for the class process and communication in English with kids is a subtle way to assess their progress. Kids get to know that parents care about their education and it is of high importance to parents to spot where their kids are and what they have. This transfers the feeling to kids that they have not been left alone. The other positive point of speaking in English is that you can use this to encourage kids for more attention and motivation.

They believed that kids get encouraged to enhance their level to that of their parents for an easier interaction. Also, parents can give rewarding words to motivate kids for keeping learning English.

Sample B:

"To check the progress of your kids, you can go to the institutes and talk to their teachers or principals, which in my opinion cannot be very accurate. Alternatively, you yourself can practice speaking English with kids at home and identify their progress or any weaknesses. Speaking in L2 has two main advantages. First, you can examine their probable progress. More importantly, you can encourage your kids to learn English."

When kids see that their parents can speak English and this is what they want from the kids, they get motivated to try more to reach their parents' levels or even exceed them. What's more, discourse on immigration occurred in the interviews with a majority of high SES families. They believe that lack of competence for effective communication with L2 native speakers would be a great obstacle for every immigrant, in particular for children, which may even lead to bitter depression. So, starting real interaction with kids from home may be a substantial way towards solving any challenges which may occur in the future.

Sample C:

“When I speak with my wife about immigration, the only concern is our children. They are not old enough and unfortunately English classes are not that good to teach details. We have decided to take the responsibility of teaching at home by speaking in English with our kids to make them ready for immigration sooner. My wife and I have an acceptable command of English. So, we are not worried about our living abroad but for our kids, I am not very sure.”

On the other hand, when asking the families of low SES, several interesting points were revealed. First, some of their parents mentioned that they lack adequate knowledge and skills for using English as their main language at home. Most recalled English was one of their weak points when they were students.

Sample D:

“Sadly, my English is too bad for even introducing myself. That’s the reason I decided to send my kids to English classes when I see myself in such a poor situation, I made up my mind to provide the best for my children for learning foreign languages.”

The findings indicate that parents with a low socio-economic status attribute their lack of proficiency in an additional language to personal shortcomings, neglecting the impact of neoliberal ideology that pervades the educational settings, affecting both themselves and their offspring. It appears that parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds do not challenge this discourse, possibly reflecting their privilege and lack of direct threat to their benefits. Given the emphasis on individualist values promoted through neoliberal rhetoric, the complacency of these parents is understandable.

3.5. Theme E: Belief in necessity of educational materials aids

In terms of educational aids, those of high SES produced and supported the theme that provision of educational aids is necessary because books are not complete in terms of all four skills. Supplementary materials can compensate for any defects in the textbooks or teachers, as one of the parents mentioned:

Sample A:

“It is not logical to assume that textbooks are so complete that cover all four skills and areas at the same acceptable level. So, when a supplementary book is proposed by the teacher or institutes, I buy it for my kids.”

Interestingly, low SES families hold similar opinions. They have mentioned that educational aids in particular educational videos, clips and cartoons help children get familiar with different accents, speed and characters.

Sample B:

“Children like to watch TV, so we can use cartoons to make them interested in learning English. I think that films and cartoons are even more effective than textbooks because kids can get native speakers’ pronunciation and see the characters as the models.”

Nevertheless, low SES families were not activated in the analyzed scripts as experiencers of

these educational materials. As such, they had no idea whether in reality these measures were useful when they were students.

As revealed in the interviews, some parents of high SES preferred to watch clips/videos or listen to music/podcasts for learning English, which can significantly impact their English learning.

Sample C:

"I myself learnt English without attending any language classes. I was extremely interested in watching recently released films and listening to top music. Now, I see the result. I can speak very fluently with an American accent."

This excerpt clearly shows that parents of high SES depicted an active role in guiding their children based on a belief shaped through their own experiences as successful language learners.

3.6. Theme F: Belief and behavior in the case of monitoring

In terms of monitoring, high SES families believed that monitoring is a crucial responsibility of the parents to their children. They maintain that tracing kids' progress helps to recognize their kids' weaknesses as well as strengths. This also reminds kids to take their learning more seriously.

Sample A:

"Kids are by default naughty and playful. They can't distinguish the importance of what they learn either L2 or any other courses. So, they need to be aware that they are checked by their parents. Monitoring can also signal them to be more attentive to what they learn at schools and attempt to improve more for further monitoring."

On the other hand, families of low SES believe somehow differently. They hold the idea that monitoring can have negative consequences. Kids become too dependent on parents' monitoring and cannot act autonomously.

Sample B:

"I think monitoring has both advantages and disadvantages. The negative aspect of such a behavior is that children just wait for parents' comments on their learning. They would anticipate comments on any of their learning processes so this can take independence."

While high and low SES parents expressed opposing views regarding monitoring in education, the high SES parents activated themselves as social actors who have an active and constructive role in monitoring their children's educational success. Low SES parents seemingly supported the discourse of over-parenting as a bad behavior. Nevertheless, they implicitly reproduced and supported the discourse of neoliberalism by justifying their inadequate meaning through the ideology that poverty is piety and shapes one's character.

To further justify their stance, low SES families firmly believe that English learning in private centers is only one aspect of their family concerns besides clothing and food. So, all the family budgets cannot be devoted to it.

Sample C:

“Why should I consider secondary classes for him or her? He goes to English classes at school.”

They also noted that monitoring can happen for their children’s homework, while high SES parents were activated in their talk as ones who can intervene for better results in their children’s learning progress. Such viewpoints can be generated due to the fact that money plays an important role in Iran’s economy and most of these parents believed they could control their parents’ educational success in English.

3.7. Theme G: Perceptions of parents towards oral proficiency success

When the longitudinal study was complete and the results of children’s oral proficiency were shared with their parents, high and low SES parents reacted completely different. The high SES parents were delighted to know about their children’s success and ascribed part of this achievement to monitoring and encouraging their children. Some of them even started asking the interviewer what their next steps should be to guarantee the continuation of such success in future courses their children take in the language center. As most of them mentioned money was not their concern when it comes to their children’s success in education. Such way of thinking supports neoliberalism discourse in education as well. To the authors’ dismay, the low SES parents did not react well to their children’s achievement with all showing no concern if their children quit learning English at private language centers in Iran.

4. Discussion

Based on the results of this study, it can be claimed that high SES families care more about their children’s learning process, do their best to provide the best educational aids, monitor their learning process using different means and strategies, and enroll their kids in even more private classes. This is consistent with the findings of Miura (2010) who referred to the role of families’ SES background in influencing in educational attainment and the career choices (Zou and Zhang, 2011).

Overall, both high and low SES parents produced themes related to beliefs and behaviors with regard to language learning of their children. The majority of high and low SES parents unanimously agreed on the critical role of English in the current fast-paced world. The interview made it clear that most parents of high and low SES regard English as a strategic skill by which kids can facilitate their improvement both in educational fields and workplaces. While they believed English is a requirement in our present world, high SES parents put a different spin on the belief, linking the necessity of learning English as part of a bigger picture to train their children as global citizens. They also produced the discourse of immigration to validate their beliefs on necessity of teaching English to young learners. Conversely, low SES parents could not envision any meaningful and fruitful future for their children in learning English in language centers in Iran. This clearly shows how the discourse of Neoliberalism with utmost emphasis on facilities and money is supported by both groups of parents.

When interviewed regarding parental behaviors, it shed light on the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and parental involvement in their children’s education. It suggests that parents from high SES families are more likely to perceive themselves as active social actors who can positively impact their children’s future through educational opportunities, such as language centers. Meanwhile, parents from low SES families may not hold the same perception, which could lead

to a lack of involvement in their children's education. This difference in parental involvement and self-perception may have implications for children's education success. The results above underlined the significance of parental factors in EFL learning. Moreover, it highlighted the role of oral communicative competencies in L2 learning and how it can contribute to widening gaps caused by students' socioeconomic status if policies do not provide similar resources and help for all learners within the formal system of education. This is in line with the findings of Eggen and Kauchak (2002) and Ward (2002), demonstrating that there is a direct relationship between SES and performance on exams in secondary schools.

Results of this study can be compared with those of Song (2018) as both research studies were done within the Neoliberalism discourse. In Korean society, class and early study abroad interact with Neoliberalism. For Iranian society, the present study's findings also suggest that English learning and socio-economic status interact with immigration discourse in Iranian society. Many families of adequate means are willing to live abroad, and English is considered a facilitator in this regard. In Korean context, early study abroad acts as an advantage when their children return to their homeland.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated how parents' beliefs, perceptions and behavior interact with their SES in the case of their young learners' oral language proficiency development. The findings showed the prominent role of SES in shaping parents' opinions towards different aspects of language learning. As the case in point, the parents have been found considerably different in terms of the necessity of extra private classes for kids, the amount of time they put aside reading books out for them, and the process and reason for monitoring their kids. However, they have held similar viewpoints regarding the role of English in determining one's future life.

The differences between high and low SES families can be explored in the sociopolitical/economic conditions of Iran and support of neoliberalism discourse. Economy has a predominant effect on the educational policy of any society and education, which, definitely, involves a huge amount of costs and experts. Despite its high costs, any government shall recognize the long-term benefits of education and regard it as an investment rather than a waste of resources. Speaking of language learning, the government and authorities do not adequately invest in acquiring an L2 and regard it illogical to expend in promoting a foreign language.

The other reason relates to a significantly low rate of GDP dedicated to the Ministry of Education and Training, which makes it difficult for schools to sufficiently devote sources to language learning. This makes the way suitable for private sectors to run their own language Institutes and schools to attract motivated learners. But the tuition fee is often unaffordable for many low SES families. While this pioneering study strived to bring hope for children of inadequate mean in Iran, the results in the long run could not be very much promising as parents of these learners still supported the Neoliberalism discourse and the dominance of money in education. Due to the constraints encountered during the present study, it is recommended that further qualitative and quantitative research be conducted in order to investigate the potential impact of socio-economic status (SES) on academic achievement among students of varying age groups, including adolescents. Interviews with education policy makers may also provide insight into their views on the influence of SES on families, as

well as their strategies for minimizing such effects. Factors such as family structure, size, income, and employment patterns may also have a significant impact on both academic performance and personal adjustment, and should be considered in future investigations. Additionally, future research may explore the impact of inclusive education policies and bilingualism in schools, which may help to mitigate the effects of varying socio-economic backgrounds on young language learners.

This research has significant implications for policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators, as it raises their awareness of the necessity of considering socio-economic status (SES) and parental behaviors when devising programs and policies aimed at enhancing educational outcomes and fostering personal development. These factors should be taken into account when designing educational programs and policies to create a level playing field for all students, regardless of SES or parental behaviors.

Furthermore, this study highlighted the dominance of neoliberalism in education. In teacher education programs, both pre- and in-service, efforts should encompass the identification of the neoliberal discourse in educational settings and textbooks and critically evaluate its role in shaping teaching and learning practices. Ultimately, by incorporating this knowledge into teacher education programs, they can better prepare educators to support students from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds and promote equitable learning outcomes. After all, education can be a powerful force for positive change in society and reducing poverty. As such parents and their children should play a proactive role to encourage change in education and society.

Conflict of interest

Both authors have no conflict of interest to declare regarding the content discussed in this article. They have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could potentially influence the objectivity or integrity of the research or its outcomes. This article has been prepared with utmost transparency and adherence to scientific ethics.

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Appendix A

A sample of questions for parents

- 1) How does parental SES influence a child's academic achievement in English?
- 2) From your perspective, how do parental behaviors such as reading English books or encouraging their children to learn a new language affect a child's academic achievement?
- 3) What do you think of the relationship between parents' English proficiency and their child's academic success in English language?
- 4) In your opinion, what are the benefits of parental assist to their children to learn English?
- 5) How do you believe parents can support their child in doing their homework effectively?
- 6) What advantages do private language classes offer to children learning English?
- 7) How can parents communicate with teachers to address challenges and difficulties of their children in learning English?