

Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Preschoolers' Vocabulary Development: Evidence from Studies of L1 Learning

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Abstract. This literature review illustrates how measures of socioeconomic status (SES), particularly parental income and education level, influence preschoolers' vocabulary development in first language learning. By synthesizing findings from a range of previous studies, it is clear to see that SES affects vocabulary development in indirect ways: 1) different levels of income contributes to different level of parental stress that further influence children's social competence and vocabulary use; 2) Various levels of parents' educational backgrounds shape diverse educational attitudes that contribute to the quantity and quality of linguistic input. The SES level of the family indeed influences children's language development, but the intermediate variables underlying this indirect relationship still need to be addressed further. This analysis offers valuable implications for understanding the crucial role of the SES and parents in children's first-language vocabulary learning and also emphasizes children's own effort in their own vocabulary development.

Keywords: Socioeconomic status, Preschooler, Vocabulary Development, First Language

1. Introduction

Language development in early childhood is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of early childhood. Particularly, early vocabulary development strongly reflects later academic success and social skills [1]. In recent years, an increasing number of families have paid more attention on it. It is therefore essential to understand the environmental factors influencing these skills. Previous studies have shown that socioeconomic status (SES) has a significant impact on the vocabulary development of children. However, the mechanisms through which SES components affect preschoolers' vocabulary development remain underexplored. Since both SES and children's vocabulary growth are complex, multi-dimensional constructs, it is challenging to establish a clear causal link between the two. To address this gap, this study aims to identify how multiple components of SES affect preschoolers' vocabulary learning in their first language by analyzing different intermediate variables. By analyzing the roles of parental behaviors, like stress and

educational attitudes, this review intended to provide a clearer understanding of the indirect pathways linking SES to language outcome in the preschool period [2].

2. Literature review

2.1. Age range & socioeconomic status

During early childhood, especially in the preschool years (ages 3–5), children will have rapid vocabulary expansion, from about 1,000 words at age 3 to over 10,000 by age 5 [3]. This period is classified as a significant developmental time period: at age 3, children are able to understand common object names; By age 4, they will be aware of similarities and differences; By age 5, they can understand relationships between objects [4]. This learning process is supported by “fast-mapping,” which is the ability to quickly learn new words from limited exposure [5], underscoring the importance of a diverse linguistic environment [6]. During these years, children acquire language largely through interactions in family and kindergarten environments [7]. Socioeconomic status (SES) shapes core educational and linguistic interactions within the family, thereby influencing early language outcomes. SES is commonly known as a multidimensional construct reflecting one’s economic and social standing, measured through education, income level, and occupational status.

2.2. The effects of SES on vocabulary development

A large number of previous studies demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between SES and children’s vocabulary development. For instance, Colker [8] reported that by the age of 3, the vocabulary gap between children from wealthy families and those from poor families can be as large as 30 million words. Moreover, the study also illustrates that comprehensive SES indices and occupational status have been shown to be stronger predictors of vocabulary ability than parental education or income alone. Meanwhile, there are also researchers like Ma who found a moderate correlation between SES and vocabulary growth [2]. They noted that all aspects of SES (e.g. education, income, occupation, and composite indices) have similar effects on vocabulary development for children. This phenomenon suggested that the relationship between SES and language development may not always be as significant as some studies proposed. The research on language development has primarily emphasized that the growth in both expressive vocabulary (i.e. words being used to convey a message) and receptive vocabulary (i.e. words being understood) plays an important role in children’s later academic achievement [2]. However, it has been shown that there is no difference in the impact of SES on these two types of vocabulary [2]. Indeed, all aspects of SES, including SES index, education, income, and occupation, have similar effects on vocabulary development. For this reason, the current review focuses on the overall influence of SES on children’s vocabulary usage, rather than differentiating between types.

2.3. The effect of SES

Although SES is often measured through education, income, occupation and overall SES index, prior studies demonstrate that parental education and income exert the most direct and substantial effects on children’s vocabulary development. Evidence shows that parental education strongly influences early vocabulary through parents’ language input and home literacy environments [9], while family income predicts vocabulary growth even when controlling for education and shared

reading practices [10]. In this study, we mainly consider the two variables in SES: the parents' education level and income.

First, higher levels of parental education are associated with richer language input and more supportive home literacy environments. Educated parents tend to use more diverse vocabulary and complex syntactic structures in their speech, both in child-directed and adult conversations [11]. Furthermore, they also hold stronger educational expectations and are more likely to engage in literacy-promoting activities such as shared book reading [12]. Therefore, home literacy environment (HLE) not only elevates children's phonological awareness but also vocabulary competence [13].

Second, the parental income influences parental well-being and behavior. To be more specific, low-income families often experience higher levels of parenting stress. Moreover, stressed parents are more likely to have a more authoritarian parenting style. Indeed, this reduces the quantity and quality of parent-child interactions [14]. The consequence is that it will lead to insecure parent-child attachment [15,16].

2.4. The effect of variables on vocabulary development

Secure attachment between children and parents has a significant effect on children's social and cognitive development as well as language skills [17]. Specifically, children with secure attachments are more confident in social interactions and more adept at language use, whereas insecure attachment is linked to poorer social competence and weaker language outcomes [18]. Furthermore, frequent shared reading and a print-rich environment can not only improve children's vocabulary but also fosters positive attitudes toward reading [19]. Tian et al. [20] found that greater access to literacy resources increases the quality of shared reading, which directly promotes vocabulary growth. Additionally, strong social skills facilitate language development by providing more opportunities for verbal interaction. Accordingly, children with better social competence who engage in more conversations enhance their vocabulary [21].

3. Discussion

According to the previous studies, there are two indirect pathways linking SES and L1 vocabulary development of preschoolers that can be identified.

First, the amount of parental income has an impact on parental stress, as reflected by the reduced quantity and quality of their responding behaviors that may affect children's vocabulary use in future social life [22,23]. Moreover, parental stress has a negative effect on parent-child interaction, as it increases the likelihood of children forming an insecure attachment to their parents [14]. Specifically, parents with higher parenting stress tend to adopt stricter parenting methods, such as authoritarian education, which can lead to an unstable attachment relationship between parents and children [15]. In addition, researchers also mentioned that the parent-child attachment relationship also affects children's cognition and social behavior [17,24]. Participants with secure attachment reported experiencing greater intimacy and more positive emotions than those with insecure attachment in all interactions since they perceived others as being more responsive and attentive to their needs [24]. Moreover, Social competence is recognized as a critical predictor of early language development [21]. Children with secure parental attachment tend to show greater confidence in forming positive social connections by constructing conversations with others. In contrast, children with insecure attachment is often linked to adverse outcomes, such as reduced self-assurance, that

tend to avoid chatting [18]. Accordingly, the difference in attachment type may influence the social ability and, therefore, the amount of vocabulary use.

Secondly, the quality and frequency of a child's vocabulary input are shaped by the impact of parents' educational expectations, parenting beliefs, and familial practices [12]. This statement indicates that parents' attitudes can influence the learning environment of children, including the role models they provide in daily lives. For example, if parents have a more positive attitude towards shared reading with their children, such as spending more time on it and having a higher frequency of reading, then not only will the child receive better reading guidance, but their language skills will also significantly improve [19]. In fact, as mentioned by Tian et al. [20] in the previous text, by analyzing and comparing the data collected in Chongqing, they concluded that higher SES and more literacy resources increase the likelihood that parents will engage in more frequent or more regular shared reading with their children at earlier age. Therefore, when SES is high, parents tend to maintain a positive attitude towards education, which leads to more frequent parent-child shared reading and then promotes the richness of vocabulary input.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings suggest that SES affects preschoolers' vocabulary development indirectly, with income influencing parent-child interactions via stress and educational attitude shaping the richness of linguistic input. The income level component of SES shows a positive relationship with parental stress, which results in more or less responsive behavior while it is high. The indifference shown by parents, in turn, weakens parent-child attachment and results in poorer social skills in children. Thus, less interaction and conversation with other people leads to less vocabulary use and, therefore, worse vocabulary ability in low-SES families. Another important factor is the different educational attitudes from the various educational levels parents received in distinct SES. Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward education, which leads to increased language exposure for children and subsequently better vocabulary development.

Beyond these findings, this review holds profound educational significance on the perception on statistical results. According to previous research, children from high-SES families do have better vocabulary development. However, this relationship is indirect rather than direct. That is to say, the influence of the SES is not conclusive. There are many intermediate variables involved, such as the quality and frequency of social interaction and reading, which may be the main influential factors for the growth of vocabulary ability. Though the parents' backgrounds are beyond the control of the students themselves, students can take control of their own social interaction and reading. Indeed, it can lead to an improvement in vocabulary ability, regardless of the parents' SES. This challenges the assumption that only children from high-SES families can achieve advanced vocabulary development. More importantly, it has a motivating effect on children born into low-SES families. The finding offers hope to both the students themselves and the teachers that they can encourage students believing they can offset the negative impact of low-SES with their own effort.

5. Limitations & further study

This study has several limitations. First, it lacks first-hand empirical data, as the analysis is based solely on existing literature. Therefore, direct causal conclusions cannot be drawn. Future research should adopt experimental designs to better establish causality. Second, many data sources rely on parental self-reports of literacy activities and stress, which may introduce bias and reduce

objectivity. Third, the findings have limited generalizability. As most studies they do not fully represent diverse cultural or socioeconomic contexts. Future studies should include more diverse samples through large-scale, first-hand investigations. Finally, this analysis did not consider child-specific factors, such as bilingualism or innate language aptitude. This may interact with family SES. Addressing these factors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how socioeconomic contexts influence early language development.

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