



## **EXPLORING ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CAPITAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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English has become one of the most important indicators of a student's academic competitiveness due to the factors triggered by globalization. Students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds who learn English as a second language have faced significant economic disparities worldwide as English is considered the international language in this globalized context (Butler & Le, 2018). The concept of capital introduced by Bourdieu (1986) has been used as the theoretical framework for this study. Although a significant increase in the results of English can be noticed, the data obtained through the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka shows that the performance of the students in English Language (O/L) and General English (A/L) has not shown a considerable increase in percentage when compared to the performance of students in other main subjects. The current study was conducted as a part of a large study on 'the Social Biographies of Students and School English achievement in the Sri Lankan context. The purpose of this paper is to explore the economic and cultural capital factors that influence the academic achievement of the senior secondary school students in English drawing on Bourdieu's concept of Capital (1986). The study was conducted as a case study in five government senior secondary schools in the Educational Zone of Kegalle in the Sabaragamuwa Province, selected through convenience sampling. The informants of the study were 50 members of the selected five schools. A background information questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule, observational field notes, and document analysis were used as data collection tools for this study. Findings revealed that the economic and cultural capital factors influence the academic achievement of the English language in negative and positive ways. Even if the students face such negative factors that result in their education, the motivation and the competition of society can enhance the level of achievement in English. As an outcome of this study, it is recommended that parents play an active role in the educational activities as stakeholders by providing an appropriate environment for their children to get quality education, especially in the field of English Language.

Keywords: economic capital, cultural capital, academic achievement, English language

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The English Language has become increasingly important in everyday life. In Sri Lanka, English is a major factor that impacts the workplace where fluency in English has become an indispensable requirement, particularly in the private sector more so than in the public sector. English has become one of the most important indicators of a student's competitiveness due to the factors that emerged with globalization. An important area that should be focused on learning English is the achievements of the students. It can be primarily measured through standardized national examinations such as General Certificate of Examination - Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) and General Certificate of Examination - Advance Level (GCE A/L) or non-standardized achievement tests such as teacher-made tests. The achievements of the students in English at the senior secondary school lead to an influential effect on their performance in the colleges/universities where they pursue their tertiary education and in their future careers.

The students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and who learn English as a second language face a great economic disparity all over the world due to the consideration of English as the international language in this globalized era (Butler & Le, 2018).

Having a strong foundation in English facilitates the development of broader perspectives for students and offers them more career opportunities. However, to make meaningful progress, it is crucial to understand the factors influencing students' achievement in English and how these can be improved to foster academic success.

In this context, Bourdieu's (1986) concept of "Capital" serves as the main theoretical framework for this study. According to Bourdieu, capital is accumulated labor appropriated privately, allowing individuals to harness social energy in the form of reified or living labor. Capital exists in three primary forms: Economic Capital, which is directly convertible into money and institutionalized as property rights; Cultural Capital, which is convertible under certain conditions and manifests in three forms: embodied, objectified (in cultural goods), and institutionalized; and finally, Social Capital, which consists of social obligations that can be converted into economic capital and institutionalized, for example, in titles of nobility. Thus, the concept of capital can serve as a valuable tool for community development.

Economic and cultural factors play a crucial role in students' performance in English. According to Blythe (2003), three key factors influence students' academic achievement in English: the educational level of their parents, the financial status of their family, and their parents' occupations. Students with well-educated mothers acquire English vocabulary much faster than those whose mothers are less educated (Kim et al., 2014). Raihan (2023) argues that limited resources, reduced parental involvement, and decreased motivation levels contribute to the achievement gap.

Similarly, Keumala et al. (2019) found that the socio-cultural and educational backgrounds of students affect their motivation to learn English as a foreign language, although the impact varies depending on the cultural context (individualistic or collectivistic). The home literacy environment is another key factor, as exposure to multiple languages at home can affect reading and literacy development (Goodrich et al., 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the economic and cultural capital factors that influence the academic achievement of senior secondary students in English, based on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of Capital.



## RESEARCH PROBLEM

At present, the Sri Lankan government provides many opportunities to students for their education. However, when the performance of students in English Language is considered, it is very doubtful whether the students get the maximum use out of these opportunities. The percentage of students passing the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) English Language in the consecutive three years 2018, 2019, and 2020 are respectively, 54.9%, 62.3% and 65.8% (Ministry of Education, 2021). Also, the percentage of students passing the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) General English in the consecutive years 2018 and 2019 is 40.55%, 50.55% (new), and 53.60% (old) (Department of Examinations, 2022). Although there is a significant increase in the results in English, the mentioned data reveals that the performance of the students in the English Language (O/L) and General English (A/L) has no considerably high value or the rate of percentage increase compared to the performance of the students in the other main subjects.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study was conducted as part of a large study on “The Social Biographies of Students and School English achievement: A case study in the Government Senior Secondary School Students in Sri Lanka”. It used the case study design, which allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the case being studied, i.e. A set of senior secondary school students in the Kegalle Education Zone of the Sabaragamuwa Province in Sri Lanka were selected through the convenience sampling method.

### Research questions

The following research questions were designed to guide the study.

1. What is the general economic capital background of the students in senior secondary schools in Kegalle Education Zone?
2. How do cultural capital and economic capital background of the students influence the achievement in English in the Kegalle Education Zone?

### Data Generation & Analysis

To conduct the larger study, five government schools were selected, and written permission was obtained through the principals of each selected school and the Zonal Education Office, to collect data for the research purpose. Fifty students were randomly recruited as the informants of the study. A 25-item background information questionnaire was used to collect demographic data such as the parents' occupation, parents' highest education level, monthly income, details of family members, marks of English in the three term test papers of the last year, available educational resources and home educational practices of each informant using the google form. In addition, ten randomly selected informants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule which consisted of fifteen main questions. The interviews were carried out in both English and Sinhala languages, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The informants were visited at their residences for data collection. This provided the researchers the opportunity to observe the way, the informants were engaged in education, and the support they received from home and school. These observations were noted in a study diary immediately after each field visit. It enabled the researchers to gain information on the impact of English achievement made available to them through home and school. And it was used as a secondary source of data. To sustain the ethical validity of this study, each informant was identified by a pseudonym, and all the other information that would lead to the identification of informants was also anonymized when recording and presenting data in this study. To maintain the validity and the reliability of the questionnaire and the interview protocol, a selected group of five members who were not in the sample of this research were also used. The ten interview transcripts were analysed independently by the two researchers using both: theory-driven, and data-driven codes. The initial findings were triangulated by analysing the field observational notes and the secondary data quantitatively and qualitatively.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Economic Capital

According to this study, all the parents of the students who were the study sample for this research, were noticed to have had a formal education. Most of the parents have had a good education above the junior secondary level of education, and the percentage of fathers with such education (88%) is higher than that of the mothers (70%). Among them, 12% of the fathers and 30% of the mothers have achieved an education below the junior secondary level. Students with higher levels of parental education obtained more than 72 marks each in English while those whose parents had lower levels of education obtained low marks. Parents' educational backgrounds were found to be a positive predictor of their children's academic success in a study on the connection between family background and children's academic performance in Korea and Singapore (Wößmann, 2005).

“Both mother and father have studied well. My father is doing a good job, and my mother is a housewife, both tell me to study as much as possible. If you want to succeed, English is required. They do everything for me, so I study hard. I had 95 marks in English last time.” (Sanuki, Interview Data)

Based on the analysis of parental income and family expenditure on students' education per month, it is evident that a majority of families fall into the low-income category. Specifically, about 42% of families earn less than Rs. 75,000 per month, with 22% falling into the income range of Rs. 50,001 – 75,000, and 20% in the range of Rs. 75,001 – 100,000. The representation of families earning Rs. 100,001–125,000 and Rs. 125,001 or more is relatively lower, at 24% and 14% respectively. Corresponding to the family income, the expenditure on children's education is also significant. Notably, 14% of students reported that their families spend over Rs. 20,001 per month on their education, while 22% indicated that the monthly expenditure is Rs. 5,000 or less. Moreover, 20% of students fall into the second and third lowest expense categories, between Rs. 5,001 – 10,000 and Rs. 10,001 – 15,000. Families with higher incomes generally make substantial contributions to their children's education, resulting in better academic performance among those students compared to others.

“Father does a small job. Mother also does not work. We don't have much money, so they cannot spend a lot on my studies. Besides, I have a younger brother who is still studying.” (Vihangi, Interview Data)

In relation to external financial assistance, 66% of students stated that they did not receive any financial aid for their education, whereas 10% reported that they did. Approximately 16% of students indicated that they were unaware of such assistance, while 8% mentioned that they did not require it beyond their family. It was observed that students from families with comparatively higher incomes generally achieved better academic results. This positive correlation between student achievement and family income suggests that higher income levels corresponded to higher test scores and greater likelihood of obtaining higher grades in English exams. The association between economic capital and English achievement can be attributed to several factors, including the inability of lower-income families to provide educational resources at home, which could limit students' engagement in activities conducive to building confidence and positive academic self-perception (DuBois, 2001, p. 162).

Analysis of the parental occupations of the sample revealed that a significant proportion of mothers are homemakers (48%), while fathers are engaged in various occupational categories. In the Sri Lankan context, many women primarily contribute to the family as housewives. Despite their substantial contribution, it is important to note that household work does not directly contribute to the family income. Nevertheless, mothers play a crucial role in supporting their children's education by creating a conducive environment for their academic development while working as homemakers. “My father is working abroad, and mother is not doing a job in order to spend time with me for my education purposes. They are always with me for my education.” (Poorna, Interview data)

Non-government service and Business have become the main occupation of the fathers, as reported, it is more than a half (58%) of the study participants. The percentage of the fathers in the sample who are engaged in business is 34%. The percentage of fathers in the government and Semi-government sectors are 10% and 6% of the total sample respectively. According to the data of this study also, the fathers of all the participants are engaged in some kind of work and the 52% of mothers are also employed. Not only the fathers but their mothers also try to raise the economic level of the family by providing a source of income to their homes indicating the influence of the economic capital. Here the number of students



whose fathers draw a salary from the public or private sector exceeded the number of students whose fathers were occupants in the field of business, farming and day labouring.

A high percentage of fathers in higher social status are engaged in higher standard jobs, while a considerable percentage of mothers, as housewives, are directly involved in their children's education. This study suggests that children in such households tend to have strong English language abilities. An analysis of the last year's three-term test marks revealed that students whose fathers held well-salaried positions in the public or private sector demonstrated significantly better academic performance compared to students whose fathers were involved in business, farming, or day labour. Lareau's (2002) ethnographic study of childrearing in middle, working class, and poor families in the US, including both White and Black families, demonstrated that parents' occupations influenced their childrearing beliefs and practices.

"My mother went to school only till the fifth grade. Father is farming. They don't force me to study hard. I study as much as I can. English is my most favourite subject as well. I always try get the best result for English in my class" (Dilan, Interview Data)

Although the parents of this interviewee are not so educated and not in the so-called higher status in the society, with the motivation that student has gained from the society and with the influence of the competition of the outer world, the level of his English achievement has reached a satisfactory level as his term test mark in English has been reported as 89%. Even if the students having lower levels of parental income and education, the motivation and the competitive standards of the society can enhance the level of the achievement in English.

### **Cultural Capital**

In this study, the linguistic existence of Bourdieu's (1986) embodied state was taken into consideration. Students were asked to indicate the extent of the use of the native language (Sinhala or Tamil), and English in their homes. 64% of the students predominantly used their native language. 34% of the students used English sometimes, while 32% of the students never used English. A higher percentage of people using English at home seems to be influenced by their cultural background. All those students who used English sometimes have scored over 82 each in the term tests. After analysing data, it was found that the marks of those students, demonstrated a strong command of English.

"All facilities required for learning are provided at home. In our house, separate rooms have been arranged for me to study, to read newspapers and to watch TV as well. Most of the time we use English at home. I am used to that now." (Ahamed, Interview data)

Students with well-educated mothers learn their target language vocabulary much quicker than their peers who have less educated mothers (Kim et al., 2014). The home literacy environment exposes children to language and when there are two or more languages used in the home children are getting their reading and literacy activities distributed across those multiple languages (Goodrich et al., 2021). As Bourdieu (1986) indicates about the objectified state, some other aspects which were socially relevant in the context of the students' education were analysed here. A considerable number of students (96%) had access to telephones/mobile phones. Also 60% of the sample mentioned that they have got computers/laptops. Compared to telephones, the households had more limited access to newspapers. Only 32% of the students reported that their families subscribed to newspapers. All the households (100%) had electricity and 76% of the students had access to a television. The high availability of computers & mobile in the homes of the students is a pointer to the digital dividing between developed and developing nations on one hand, settings within developing nations on the other (Mutonyi & Norton, 2007).

Regarding the possession of English books (in addition to the textbook), 14% of the participants have mentioned that they do not have such books. 44% of the total have possessed between 1 to 10 English books. Only 42% of the students had 11 books or more. Students from a high socioeconomic family could possibly have a more advantageous environment for learning. For example, books or teaching materials are more easily accessible in high socioeconomic level families. The students most at risk are those who come from low-income families. The home literacy environment of a student involves the attitudes, resources, and practices used throughout the home that promote children's literacy development. Cultural capital to which the parents' economic capital is closely related is a significant



family factor that affects students' academic success (Goddard et al., 2000; Shi, 2013; Cheng and Kaplowitz, 2016). The English language achievement of the students who consume the English books could be found comparatively high. This fact was further proved through the data analysed in the interview as well.

An overwhelming majority of students reported that they had study desks, the English textbooks and the adequate stationery. Approximately 89% of the students reported that they wished to have sufficient stationery for their studies. It can be inferred that stationery was not as high on many students' priority list as more pressing needs such as tuition fees, supplementary books and fees for private tutoring. They may have been satisfied by having even a minimum stock of pens, papers, pencils... etc. As this study depicts, the performance of the students with such necessities had good marks in between 72 -95. Also, the English language achievement of the students who do not possess such necessities had higher marks, and the English achievement of most of some students who had gained so called essential necessities has been poor to be in the 45-65 marks range also. Therefore, this study depicts that the fact that the necessities the students possess affect both negatively and positively in the achievement of the students in English. More than a half of the sample (56%) has taken private tuition for English. This is striking here because of the overall socio-economic conditions and the levels of parental incomes and educational expenses as reported by the students. These students who take private tuition classes have performed well in the English papers of the so-called term tests. This involvement increases the state of credentials that the students gain through their educational progress one day and it showcases how the institutionalized state as Bourdieu (1986) embodies in the cultural capital.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the study, there are several economic and cultural factors that influence the academic achievement of students in English language. In terms of economic factors, it has been observed that students with parents who have higher levels of education and higher family incomes tend to perform better in English. Analysis of the selected sample's parental occupations shows that mothers are predominantly homemakers, while fathers are engaged in various occupational categories. A significant proportion of fathers and mothers in higher social status are actively involved in their children's education. Students whose fathers hold well-paying positions in the public or private sector tend to demonstrate better performance in English compared to others.

When considering the English language achievement that was influenced by the factors related to the cultural capital, the students who sometimes used English at home, who consume the English books, stationery and other necessities and who had taken private tuition classes have depicted a complementary level of achievement in English while the students who had not gained the so-called essential necessities were in the low mark range. According to the aforesaid findings, it is suggested that the economic and cultural capital factors influence the academic achievement of the English language in both negative and positive ways. Even if the students face such negative factors in their education, the motivation and the competition of the society enhance the level of the achievement in English. As revealed by this study, parents may play an active role in their children's education as stakeholders by providing an appropriate environment for their children to get quality education especially in the field of English Language.

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