

The Impact of Students' Cultural Capital on their Learning Experiences in an EFL Programme in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is a potent theoretical device in the analysis of the correlation between familial educational background and individual student performance and outcomes in higher education. The theory of cultural capital enables culture to be conceived as an asset that furnishes its possessors with advantages that can be transferred from parent to child. This paper explores how the possession of cultural capital by students of English as a foreign language at a Saudi university can influence their subsequent learning. Specifically, this study examines how familial education shapes student outcomes in an EFL programme. This relationship has been investigated extensively in different contexts around the world, but not sufficiently within the Saudi context. The findings of the current study are significant as they indicate that Saudi students accrue certain advantages from the educational experiences and resources available to them in their social environments. Furthermore, the study reveals that students with a deficit of cultural capital and no family history of higher education encounter more problems in the EFL programme and demonstrate overall lower levels of language proficiency.

Key words: Familial Education, Cultural Capital, English as a Foreign Language, English Language Learning, Educational Attainment

INTRODUCTION

Bourdieu describes cultural capital as an individual's education, as manifest in their intellectual prowess and their knowledge. Moreover, educational attainment is mediated by the experiences to which they are exposed in their home environment in that families can transfer their own cultural resources to their children as assets (Bourdieu, 1977). Transmission typically occurs between generations and can be either active or passive (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Sullivan, 2001). According to Lamont and Lareau (1988), cultural capital includes the knowledge, objectives, aspirations, outlooks, expertise, and conduct that parents can transmit to their offspring. Bourdieu (1986) suggested that the cultural capital possessed by students is directly shaped by their childhood experiences and family behaviour. In terms of education, therefore, cultural capital determines whether an individual transforms into an autodidact or becomes an individual with cultural capital whose academic attainment is culturally and legally validated.

Sullivan (2007) has observed that Bourdieu's concept of cultural reproduction can be employed to elucidate the relationship between social class of origin and social class of destination in relation to the influence of cultural capital on educational performance and outcomes. Thus,

cultural capital comprises a mechanism for the transmission of wealth and power. According to Bourdieu, upper class homes are replete with cultural capital. Hence, students from these backgrounds can more readily obtain higher levels of educational attainment, thereby solidifying their class position and legitimating their dominance. This, because cultural capital is associated with specific expertise, attitudes, and knowledge, easily conveys social status. Nevertheless, cultural capital alone does not determine social class. Rather, it should be regarded as means of more clearly discerning the positioning of individuals within a broader social context (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Munk & Krarup, 2011).

With the exception of a limited number of studies (see for example Alhawsawi, 2013), Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has not been utilized to examine how social structures, such as the family, can shape the learning experiences of EFL students in the Saudi context. This paper adopts this notion as a tool with which to examine the relationship between the cultural capital of the family and students' linguistics attainment. In this context, cultural capital is assumed to denote the competence, as manifest in knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that is transferred from families to the students in the study and which can assist and support learning. The principal research question addressed in this paper, therefore,

is: How does the educational background of the family influence Saudi students' learning in an EFL programme?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Considerable scholarly attention, in numerous national contexts, has been devoted to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, not least in relation to its implications for the impact of family background on higher education attainment (e.g. Alhawsawi, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2017; Georg, 2016; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Zimdars et al., 2009). The cultural capital framework allows scholars to regard culture as something which can be transmitted from one generation to the next in order to ensure that recipients can more readily access rewards (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Cultural capital differs from economic capital since it essentially comprises the intangible cultural conventions, protocols, and outlooks that parents transmit to their offspring through socialization (Tzanakis, 2011). According to Bourdieu (1977), the most beneficial cultural capital allows children to acquire familiarity with the ascendent culture. Moreover, the educational system assumes that successful students are in possession of this capital.

The notion of cultural capital enriches any attempt to appreciate the importance of social class because its possession is indicative of class membership, not least because it is demonstrated through specific behaviour and can determine success or failure within the education system (Sullivan, 2007). Thus, cultural capital not only differs along class lines, but also influences educational outcomes.

Forms of Cultural Capital

There are three broad categories of social capital, namely: embodied capital, objectified capital, and institutionalised capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The former denotes the accumulation of capital, through passive inheritance or active acquisition. According to Bourdieu (1986), accumulated capital consists of permanent cognitive and physical deposits denoting the transformation of material wealth into an inherent aspect of the individual. It cannot be transmitted in any obvious way, in the manner of wealth, title, or property. Nor can it be gifted, sold, purchased, bequeathed, or exchanged. Rather, it is acquired through socialization in the form of habits, customs, cultural practices, and family knowledge. Transmission and acquisition require investment in the form of time and exposure to those who already possess cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Direct interaction is unnecessary. The mere presence alone of the possessor will suffice since they have the power to influence the behaviour of the recipient (Alhawsawi, 2013; Sacker et al., 2002). In this way, educated parents transmit cultural capital simply by acting as role models who support their children's learning.

Objectified cultural capital consists of the material objects and items, such as books, computers, pictures, and paintings, possessed by a family and which can be employed to enhance intellectual qualities of family members. Thus, Bourdieu (1986) suggested that objectified cultural capital

only has relevance in terms of its relationship with embodied cultural capital. In other words, this relationship is predicated upon the assumption that individuals can transmit their embodied cultural capital through objects. Therefore, whilst the objects come to denote the possession of cultural capital, their real value lies in their function as educational resources (embodied capital). Bonal and González (2020) suggested that the economic and cultural capital possessed by a family shape the informal learning activity that regularly occurs within families and which accord with formal school-based learning. In this way, children from such background become increasingly familiar with ideas of valid knowledge. However, in order to optimize the use of objects or artefacts families must have the expertise required to employ them effectively for educational purposes.

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to formal academic qualifications, as manifest in various certificates indicating expertise, skills, and knowledge and conveying an immutable cultural value (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, academic qualifications are a clear manifestation of cultural capital wherein institutionalized cultural capital functions in a manner akin to economic capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2007). The qualifications obtained from academic institutions, such as universities and schools, provide students with credentials confirming their possession of defined knowledge, expertise, and outlooks which are esteemed by the institutions. Universities allow students to demonstrate their possession of socially and personally valuable cultural capital through attendance on programmes in multiple disciplines. On a societal level, academics and others deemed to possess superior cultural capital are obliged to act in accordance with their status, whilst, on a personal level, household possession of institutionalized cultural capital benefits the learning experiences of students from those households. For example, educated family members can emanate attitudes and conduct indicative of their cultural capital, thereby shaping the academic decisions made by other household members.

Different Interpretations of Cultural Capital

Despite the consensus that cultural capital comprises multiple different forms, disputes exist as to the precise way in which the concept can be interpreted. The origin of this dissonance lies in the imprecision inherent in Bourdieu's original concept of cultural capital. Hence, the term has been employed in multiple different ways (Sullivan, 2001). The educational research conducted by DiMaggio (1982) represents one of the earliest applications of Bourdieu's theory. DiMaggio (1982) employed cultural capital to denote attitudes, knowledge, and participation in cultural activities, including visits to museums and galleries, attending the theatre, and reading, all of which deemed to be indicative of social class and proximity to the dominant culture. Moreover, by engaging in such activities, learners are accorded the opportunity to develop knowledge and expertise which will assist them in their future education. By becoming intimate with the dominant culture, students place themselves in a position in which teachers find it easier to communicate and develop

more intimate working relationship with them. As a result, teachers are more likely to perceive these students as intelligent in comparison to students who lack cultural capital.

According to De Graaf (1986), cultural capital is a wide-ranging term which includes specific knowledge or skills, such as reading, and participation in intellectually oriented activities, as exemplified in visits to the opera, the theatre, galleries, and classical concerts. Attending such activities exposes participants to middle class culture. Thus, increased attendance leads to an accumulation of culture (De Graaf, 1986). Moreover, this cultural capital is not only both embodied and objectified, but also available to students to support their academic endeavours. Nevertheless, both De Graaf et al. (2000) and Crook (1997) have drawn distinctions between elements of cultural capital and their respective impact on educational attainment. In other words, parental assistance with reading is more valuable to student educational attainment than participation in the arts.

The interpretation of cultural capital employed by Brown et al. (2016) emphasizes the role of capital as a competence which includes knowledge, expertise, qualifications, and academic validation. In other words, their interpretation is akin to an institutionalized form of cultural capital, whereby individuals acquire access to opportunities through which they accrue advantage (Brown et al., 2016). This is illustrated by the way in which individuals use titles such as "Dr" or "Professor" to gain special treatment (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia the titles "Imam" and "Sheikh" are employed to indicate high status or knowledge of Islamic scripture. For this reason, those who possess either of these titles tend to be consulted by government officials on public matters (Alhawsawi, 2013).

According to Sullivan's (2001, 2007) interpretation, cultural capital is a form of linguistic competence where-in possessors have the ability to use "educated" language. Thus, the primary impact of cultural capital is on the linguistic skills of students. Sullivan's (2001, 2007) research located a clear correlation between parental education and the linguistic competencies of students, indicating that parents transmit linguistic proficiency via cultural activities, such as reading and supervised access to the television. The research found that these activities played a major role in shaping both motivation and educational attainment. Thus, when parents engage their children in creative pursuits, such as painting, gardening, and participating in poetry readings or debates, this actively supports their linguistic development. Moreover, Sullivan's (2001, 2007) supposition that social class and education are strongly correlated with parental cultural capital closely accords with the views expressed by Bourdieu regarding the unequal distribution of cultural capital between the classes (Sullivan, 2001).

The interpretation of cultural capital favoured by Lee and Bowen (2006) emphasizes both parental educational attainment and parental engagement in the education of their children, as manifest through homework assistance and the monitoring of children's activities. Hence, according to Lee and Bowen (2006), educated parents possess the knowledge and economic capital necessary to allow

them to engage in their children's education. Moreover, their wealth permits them to provide resources, such as books and computers. Parental involvement promotes the transmission of knowledge and expertise from parents to children, thereby positively influencing educational performance. In contrast, parents who lack comparable education tend to be less involved in their children's education, thereby promoting lower educational attainment (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Hence, there is a correlation between low educational attainment and lack of parental involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Specifically, parents from different backgrounds demonstrate different patterns of involvement. However, parents from dominant social or cultural groups invariably engage more in their children's education, which has obvious implications for educational outcomes.

Research by Alhawsawi (2013) suggests that cultural capital in the context of Saudi Arabia includes knowledge, skills, and outlooks possessed by families which are employed as assets that support offspring in higher education environments. Alhawsawi (2013) examined student learning experiences in Saudi higher education in order to ascertain the impact of cultural capital and family background amongst students participating in an EFL programme at a Saudi university. The results not only confirmed the importance of family background in the development of competencies, but also revealed that family educational background, provision of resources, and economic affluence all shape the accrual and transmission of cultural capital. Moreover, cultural capital can be enhanced through the provision of books and the inculcation of attitudes and behaviours. Possessing cultural capital determined the manner in which the EFL students in Alhawsawi's (2013) study experienced their education and used the resources available to them. Those students who lacked cultural capital were at a disadvantage compared to their more fortunate peers. This was because an absence of cultural capital limits participation, inhibits confidence, and impedes effective interactions with both peers and teachers, thereby generating low self-esteem. It might be preferable, therefore, if students could receive tailored support from their university to remedy these shortcomings.

This literature review has examined the significance of family education for the learning experiences of students. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been examined, as having different definitions and approaches adopted by various researchers in this field. This overview suggests that cultural capital is regarded as indicative of social class and position within the social hierarchy (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Moreover, the literature has also discussed different categories of cultural capital and observed that these different forms tend to intersect. Hence, their impact is observable in multiple ways (Ahmed & Sayed, 2009). The literature review concluded by noting that researchers have devised multiple different conceptualizations of cultural capital. The present research employs the term cultural capital to denote the skills, knowledge and perspective transmitted by families to students which can be employed to support their learning on the EFL programme.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study methodology is used in the current research, wherein data is collected through semi-structured interviews. Twenty participants were selected from amongst the EFL programme students through purposive sampling. Furthermore, seven lecturers, from different age groups and with diverse levels of teaching experience, were also interviewed. The teachers were all involved in teaching different semesters. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and audio recorded. Subsequently, they were transcribed and translated.

The data was collected from both sets of interviews in order to address the following research question: How does the educational background of the family influence student learning in an EFL programme? The data analysis commenced with an evaluation of the different ways in which families actively support the development of cultural capital in students, after which there was an evaluation of the manner in which families passively transmit cultural capital. The analysis finishes with a discussion of the impact of the absence of cultural capital on student learning on the EFL programme.

ANALYSIS

The Active Transmission of Cultural Capital

There is a significant part to be played by familial involvement in cultural capital transmission. Richards (2019) has noted the importance of cultural capital as an educational resource which promotes academic performance through the provision of outstanding expertise and instruments which are highly valued in educational contexts. According to Alhawsawi (2013), this capital diffusion is predicated upon two assumptions, to wit: families have possession of cultural capital and families take either an active or passive approach to the accrual of cultural capital by their children. Parental educational attainment is also a useful predictor of both socio-economic standing and the possession or otherwise of family-based cultural capital. According to Lee and Brown (2006), family activities are often dominated by the influence of the most educated family members. Thus, individuals with university education can shape the learning of other family members by transmitting this educational capital to them. Moreover, the presence of educated individuals within the family unit is indicative of institutionalized cultural capital, which can then be transferred, either actively or passively, to other family members.

The student participants in the research conducted by Andersen and Hansen (2011) had parents with higher education experience. Hence, they not only benefited from exposure to institutionalized cultural capital, but also had access to individuals who appreciated the challenges involved in advanced scholarship. The parents were able to transmit their experiences to their offspring. The interviews with both students and lecturers revealed that family members who were educated to either a bachelor's or master's level has a constructive influence in the experiences of learners enrolled in EFL programmes. The mechanism for this positive impact

comprised the transferral of knowledge and expertise to EFL students, who subsequently not only benefitted from this within the EFL environment, but also performed well at university. One participant (T2) describes this affirmative effect:

Students that come from upper middle-class families, I mean, their English is much better than the other students. Why? Because those students have been exposed to the language, either because their parents were educated or studied abroad and they've been accompanied by them so they studied English,... so those students, of course, I mean, speak much better, far better than the other students, and lecturers can spot them immediately from the first meeting. (Lecturer 2, Interview, Sunday 19th October 2019)

It is evident from this quote that the educational backgrounds of family members can have constructive consequences for EFL students. Specifically, T2 maintained that students with at least one educated parent are regarded as upper middle-class and benefited quite clearly from parental educational status in terms of their English language proficiency. According to T2, the influence of educated parents also included early exposure to the English language at home, thereby providing them with an advantage over their peers. Moreover, it appears that the language skills of lecturers enable them to rapidly identify students from such backgrounds. Through such mechanisms, cultural capital, in the shape of attitudes and competencies acquired from parents, can be located and accredited in formal EFL settings, thereby supplying certain students with an advantage prior to the commencement of teaching. This supposition confirms the research of Breinholt and Jæger (2018), who postulate that cultural capital determines academic achievement because it signifies or portends the potential ability of select students and garners preferential or partisan treatment from teachers, which enhances the possibility of elevated performance. This is verified in the following comments offered by T1:

I think there are some students in the programme that do recognise the importance of hard work. I think they are influenced in this thinking by their parents. Perhaps their parents are educated or might have lived abroad. Maybe they have been exposed to different cultures. They understand and appreciate that hard work, most of the time, equals success... and that hard work does pay off eventually (Lecturer 1, Interview, Tuesday 14th October 2019).

This quote reveals the way the perceived benefits offered by educated parents can shape learning experiences and outcomes for students. For example, T1 makes a link between having educated parents and possessing a predisposition for hard work and other related attributes. Thus, the idea that hard work leads to success is deemed to be a tenet transmitted by educated parents to their offspring as a form of cultural capital. In addition, there is significant evidence that positive reinforcement from parents is a determinant of academic success and emotional health amongst students (DeBerard et al., 2004; Roksa et al., 2020; Strom and Savage, 2014; Strømme & Helland, 2020). This is confirmed in the statement offered by S8:

Both my parents are teachers. My father is an English language teacher and my mother is a science teacher, and they encouraged me to join the English department and told me that learning English will enable me to learn anything and communicate with different people around the globe ... this always gives me reassurance and peace of mind. My father helps with some of my course assignments, especially the linguistic courses. (Student 8, Interview, Wednesday 15th October 2019 (3rd year))

There is also evidence that educated parents influence the degree programme choices made by their children (Alhawsawi, 2013; Thomas & Quinn, 2007), as verified in the previous comment by S8, whose parents had degrees in English and science. Hence, institutionalized cultural capital mirrors parental educational backgrounds. When S8 explains that his parents valued English and, therefore, persuaded him to study English at university, this not only shows that they possessed an appreciation of the inherent capital value of a university education, but also demonstrates how cultural capital is actively transmitted within families. Therefore, to be beneficial, institutionalized cultural capital must be demonstrably transmitted to students. Moreover, it is worth noting that the parent of this student is an English language teacher, thereby indicating his prior experience of EFL instruction in a higher education context, which comprises a form of cultural capital based on first-hand experience. This direct experience can be transmitted to students from parents or siblings and pertains to information related to multiple areas, including university admissions procedures and employment options. In other words, students with family members who have gone to university have a clear advantage (Ceja, 2006; Goodman et al. 2015; McDonough, 1997). This is illustrated by S8's description of the assistance he received from his father in his linguistic assignments, which represents an unmistakable active transmission of experience and knowledge capable not only of increasing the likelihood that the student will perform well in the EFL programme, but also of augmenting the student's self-confidence.

The comments provided by S30 (see below) stress the role played by his father in his degree choice. Specifically, his father is currently employed by Saudi Aramco, officially the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Saudi ARAMCO), having previously graduated in engineering from King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). The fact that the father is fluent in English indicates his acquisition of additional expertise from his time at university, thereby augmenting his institutionalized cultural capital still further. According to S20, when he expressed his desire not to become an engineer, despite his father's attempts to persuade him otherwise, his father recommended that studying English would be a worthwhile alternative. This form of counselling and advice from family members who have experienced the higher education system can have major implications for academic choices. Thus, S20's father successfully prevailed upon his son to apply for the EFL programme.

According to S20, his father continues to offer constructive support, at least in respect of his listening and speaking skills, thereby offering him a valuable opportunity to develop

his language proficiency outside the classroom. This is particularly significant because many EFL student lamented the lack of opportunities to practice their language skills in authentic situations outside the formal learning environment.

My dad had a huge influence on my choice of degree. He works for ARAMCO [the Saudi oil company] and he wanted me to become an engineer just like him, but I always hated maths in high school, so he suggested that I join the English Language Department and said that English was in demand in our society ... he always encouraged me to practise my speaking skills with him and I hope that one day I can be as fluent as he is. (Student 20, Interview, Wednesday 12th November 2019 (4th year))

In addition, students from educated families also benefited from higher levels of economic capital. Typically, either one or both parents were full-time professionals, such as teachers or engineers, which allowed them to purchase cultural and educational resources to reinforce their children's educational experiences (Xie & Ma, 2019). In other words, upper middle-class educated parents have access to economic resources they could deploy to benefit their children's educational and occupational prospects (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Sullivan, 2001). For example, parents could purchase books, dictionaries, computers, and media resources assisting educational aspirations, as illustrated in the following comments:

When I was in high school, my dad told me about the BBC Learning English website and said it was one of the resources he used for learning English in college ... now I listen to the broadcasts, especially while I am driving. (Student 20, Interview, Wednesday 12th November 2019 (4th year))

The comments made by S20 are a perfect illustration of the way in which parents mobilize different resources in order to benefit their offspring. Thus, S20's father recommended that his son employ a learning technique that had proved useful when he was a language student. The suggestion that S20 visit the BBC website is an example of objectified capital (resources) and active support. It encouraged S20 to exploit an array of resources, such as English language broadcasts, therefore mobilizing assets to promote the interests of S20. The father's prior educational experiences allowed him to appreciate how the resources (objectified capital) could assist his son. In other words, familial awareness of resources is crucial to the provision of student support. The example provided by S20 exemplifies Bourdieu's (1986) proposition that objectified cultural capital must be appreciated through its relationship with embodied cultural capital.

In a similar vein, S1, a second year EFL student with demonstrable proficiency and a near-native American accent, described how he had been learning English since he was in high school. He had loathed English until his father began encouraging him to adopt the same reading habits as himself. S1 rapidly discovered that reading English books was interesting, thereby simultaneously developing his English competency. This example confirms numerous existing observations in the literature that family context and

behaviours, such as reading, is one of the most important determinants of cultural capital development and subsequent educational attainment (see Breinholt & Jæger's, 2018; Gaddis, 2013; Šarvajcová & Rybanský, 2020; Sullivan's, 2001). Moreover, it emphasizes that the investment of time and energy by family members is critical to the optimal exploitation of cultural capital.

Most of it [English] was self-taught ... but nobody is born a genius or a scientist. I remember that I hated it so much. But then, I think it was at the start of high school that I took interest in it. Mainly because of my father's comic books that we sometimes read together. (Student 1, Interview, Wednesday 17th September 2019 (2nd year))

The difficulties experienced by Saudi learners in respect of English speaking and listening skills have been widely acknowledged (Alhawsawi, 2013; Alqurashi & Assulaimani, 2021; Al-Roomy, 2013). Despite never having travelled abroad, S1 exhibited high proficiency in both speaking and listening skills, both of which are central to successful completion of the EFL programme. According to S1, he honed these skills through video games. In this case, therefore, video games comprise an example of objectified cultural capital since they were employed as a learning resource. Moreover, S1 stated that the video games motivated him to pursue his language studies, allowed him to challenge himself, and brought him into contact with new English-speaking friends, thereby presenting him with a chance to improve his language proficiency. S1 noted:

I am also fond of video games and I used to become so frustrated with any video game when I couldn't get past a certain level, because the objectives weren't clear to me, or I didn't know it at all, maybe it was a puzzle ... I also made friends with many native speakers during online playing and that's how I got to learn ... step by step. (Student 1, Interview, Wednesday 17th September 2019 (2nd year))

The Passive Transmission of Cultural Capital

The understanding of cultural capital employed in this paper has tended to stress the active participation of educated family members in the accrual of cultural capital in students. Nevertheless, cultural capital can also be transmitted passively (Sullivan, 2001). That is, embodied, objectified and institutionalized cultural capital can all be transmitted passively through multiple means, including exposure to different behaviour and objects, such as books or technology. Thus, the second-year student S9 explained that observing his father reading English novels inspired him to do likewise:

My father has a collection of English novels. I remember watching him read his books as a kid ... I then started to try to read some of them, but at that time my English was weak (S9)

This exemplifies passive transmission. In this case, the father was an English teacher whose interest in English literature was passively transmitted to his son. Hence, S9 began to acquire skills that are linked to academic success, elevated examination performance, critical thinking, and

manifestation of style (Crook, 1997; Sullivan, 2001; De Graaf, 2000). Moreover, during the interview, the student was keen to emphasize his reading skills, which were clearly a source of personal pride. Hence, S9 discussed authors such as Jane Austen and Mark Twain during the course of the interview.

However, S9 also noted that his writing skills were less than outstanding. Interestingly, he made no mention of being exposed to English writing by any family members. This disjoint between his reading proficiency and his writing skills confirms the important role played by his father's interest in reading. Thus, whilst his father's passion for book collecting and reading had caused S9 to develop his own reading skills from an early age, no comparable attention was devoted to writing. This reveals the importance of both making resources available at home and having role models to passively transmit cultural capital to students.

S14 had two siblings studying at the same university. These siblings were role models who encouraged him to study. Thus, not only parents but also siblings can act as role models and motivate students, thereby guiding them towards success. The cultural fit of students is manifest in the degree to which their economic, social, and cultural capital matches the dominant majority in the educational environment. It also has implications for the ability of students to use the information sources available. In other words, it familiarizes students with the hidden curriculum, allowing them to more easily acclimatize to university life (Lessky, Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2021). For example, the two siblings of S14 had a positive passive influence on him because he was able to observe their exam preparations. The fact that the siblings were unaware of the influence they had pertains to the passive element of this form of institutionalized cultural transmission. Irrespective of its passive nature, however, the cultural capital helped S14's performance on the EFL programme.

Two of my brothers are studying here at CU ... the oldest is studying medicine and the other is in the IT department ... seeing them study and prepare for their exams encourages me try my hardest to succeed. I ask them for their advice, especially my oldest brother because he speaks perfect English (Student 14, Interview, Monday 27th October 2019 (2nd year))

Sections 4.1 and 4.2 explored the active and passive transmission of cultural capital in family contexts and the influence this had on the learning experiences of EFL students. This revealed that the transmission of cultural capital benefited these students. Moreover, there was an obvious link between transmission and educational experience in cases where family members actively participated in the development of student knowledge, outlooks, and expertise. Specifically, the focus has been on the advantages accrued by upper middle-class students through this process. Thus, far, no attention has been devoted to the students from backgrounds where no family member has experience of higher education in terms of the impact this has on their learning experiences during the EFL programme. These issues are explored in the following section.

The Absence of Cultural Capital

The paper proposes that families have access to diverse forms of cultural capital which they transmit, actively or passively, to students. This capital then influences the learning experiences of different students on the EFL programme. According to Lessly et al. (2021), students can experience the transition to university as a challenge if they are the first members of their family to move into higher education. In contrast, the challenge is far less extreme for students from tertiary-educated families. The reason for this is that the university system is primarily designed for middle class students. Research by Bonal and González (2020) revealed that students with at least one parent with a university education were more likely to engage in extracurricular activities. Thus, 81% of such student engaged in artistic or language pursuits, compared with 45% of students whose parents had only a minimal level of education. In the current study, most student participants were the first in their families to go to university. Hence, it was a first-generation experience and these students must be deemed to be at a disadvantage as a result.

This section discusses the influence of the absence of cultural capital on the learning experiences of EFL programme participants, as manifest in poor language skills, impeded adaptation to the university environment or course requirements, and limited or non-existent family support in relation to assignments. Alvarado, Stewart-Ambo and Hurtado (2020) have suggested that less affluent students frequently come from underrepresented minorities, are the first in their family to attend university, have dependent children, and are financially autonomous. The comments offered by T5 address the subject of disadvantaged students and their language skill:

I would say that the majority of our students come from lower middle-class families ... and most of them I would say have very poor English because they haven't been exposed to the language enough, although they've studied English at school (Lecturer 5, Interview, Sunday 26th October 2019).

This quote indicates that there is a correlation between students' linguistic abilities and their family's socioeconomic background and higher education participation. T5 distinguishes these lower middle-class students from their upper middle-class peers in terms of their comparatively weak language skills. This characteristic owes its existence to the poor standards of language teaching in schools. According to multiple studies, despite the fact that Saudi students typically study English for nine years at school, most graduate with low level of English (Al-Johani, 2009; Assulaimani, 2019; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011).

As already noted, students who are exposed to the English language at home, as a form of cultural capital, demonstrated markedly superior level of English language proficiency when they began the EFL programme. Therefore, as observed by Alvarado et al. (2020), first-generation students do not benefit from family assistance in the university application process. Moreover, these students frequently experience additional challenges on the EFL programme, not least

because many erroneously anticipate being instructed in the fundamental of the English language when they join the programme. This is confirmed in T4's comments:

Plenty of them join the department hoping to learn English from A, B, C, and then they are faced with advanced courses in literature, linguistics, and other things; and they become totally lost here. They come here with the idea of learning English from scratch and they are shocked that it's not what we are doing here. In fact, plenty of them can't carry on. I expect some of them will just spend three semesters here, maximum, and then they have to go somewhere else. They can't stay here, they can't make it (Lecturer 4, Interview, Tuesday 21st October 2019).

Thus, T4 believes many students with poor English apply for places on the programme hoping to receive quite basic language instruction. Hence, the inevitable language and literature modules represent quite a challenge. Not only do many disadvantaged students struggle with the course requirement, but also a significant number depart from the EFL programme. There is evidence of a significant correlation between university degree attainment and socio-economic background. According to research by Cahalan et al. (2018), 58% of graduates in the United States come from the top income quartile, whilst only 11% come the bottom quartile. The failure of some EFL programme participants to complete the course highlights the challenges faced by disadvantaged students, one of the most significant being their poor language skills at the commencement of the programme. T3 elaborates on this theme:

I think many of the students don't appreciate the opportunity they have [of being university students] and they don't understand, because they don't come from families that have academic backgrounds ... they struggle to effectively transition from thinking like a high school boy to acting like a university student. They just want the degree, unless they come from the educated elite. So, a lot of our students, for example, come from Bedouin families and, for some, this is a first-generation experience for their kids. Their kids are at school for the first time, their parents are not educated ... They simply can't help them. You can't give what you don't have, you can't teach what you don't know (lecturer 3, Interview, Monday 20th October 2019).

T3's comments refer to disadvantaged students as coming from Bedouin backgrounds, thereby indicting that they were desert dwellers from undeveloped regions, most of whom would invariably have had no exposure to higher education. Hence, they were first-generation higher education students who had had scant exposure to cultural capital. This accords with the research conducted by Collier and Morgan (2008) which identified student from low socio-economic as being more likely to struggle with the requirements of university programmes and the overall higher education environment due to insufficient family support and guidance. Implicit in T3's comments is the assumption that students from privileged, educated families, who have been exposed to cultural capital, possess the necessary skills to adapt to university life.

In contrast, less privileged students are more likely to struggle with this adaptation, as shown in the remarks made by S11:

I remember when I first joined the programme, I was praying that our lecturer didn't give us homework and when he did, it came down on me, just like thunder. I felt like paralysed, 'oh, homework'. Then I went back home, opened the book, looked at it, and began to cry because I didn't have anyone to help me (Student 11, Interview, Sunday 19th October 2019 (3rd year))

This clearly illustrates the extent to which students struggle with the language proficiency requirement on the EFL programme. Thus, S11 experienced considerable anxiety when required to submit his assignments and regarded the assignment demands as an insurmountable obstacle during his first year as a student. Lack of academic guidance from families appears to be the principal reason why many disadvantaged students experience difficulties. Recent work by Lessky et al. (2021) has confirmed the problems experienced by first-generation students when transitioning to the university environment, not least because they have no family members to act as reference points. Thus, these students not only lack cultural capital but also are entirely unfamiliar with the higher education environment. Typically, such students encounter major problems at the start of their degree programmes, the lack of cultural fit often having psychological manifestations, such as profound disquiet or pronounced unhappiness (Friebertshäuser, 1992, as cited in Lessky et al., 2021). However, lecturers can temper these difficulties by offering additional assistance and guidance. This possibility is considered in T3's comments:

My office hours are actually in the campus park for one hour every day, and this is something they appreciate, because they don't have a lot of guidance from their families and the older generation ... and that older generation did not receive an education, except in a religious context (lecturer 3, Interview, Monday 20th October 2019).

It has been suggested that students are socio-economically disadvantaged when at least one parent, usually the mother, is unemployed or when the father is in low-paid employment, such as the military or taxi driving. Such parents are ill-equipped to provide educational resources, i.e. objectified cultural capital. Moreover, there is evidence that illiteracy rates are higher in these families, with potentially both parents being comparatively uneducated. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that these students enrol in the EFL programme in order to elevate the socio-economic status of their families. The economic circumstances of these families are addressed by T4:

I think that the majority of students are financially challenged. They come from poor [economic] backgrounds, and I think they come just to get a certificate and improve their living standards. We do have those who are privileged. You know, wealthy students who were brought up in educated families so English is a piece of cake for them and they are excellent. These are the best students we have in our university, but most of them don't come to the English department, they go

into medicine, engineering – things like that. But you do have some of them here. Plus, the majority are here to improve their living conditions after they graduate (Lecturer 4, Interview, Tuesday 21st October 2019).

These comments illuminate the economic standing of disadvantaged students and confirms the supposition that many of these students are motivated by the desire to improve the living standards of their families. There is also evidence that these students are frequently obliged to engage in part-time employment in order to assist their families. Obtaining a degree in English language is regarded as a major opportunity to improve their economic conditions. T4 regards such students as coming from uneducated families, hence, they inevitably lack cultural capital. In contrast, T4 considers his best students to be those from privileged backgrounds who have had ample opportunity to accrue and benefit from cultural capital. For this reason, T4 considers English to be easy for them ("a piece of cake"). These attitudes explain why many disadvantaged students prefer to apply for programmes in STEM subjects, with acceptance on to the EFL programme comprising a poor second choice. Research conducted by Alvarado et al. (2020) confirms that many low-income students are compelled to work whilst studying because they receive less financial support from their families and are often expected to contribute financially to their families whilst at university. S12 summarizes the economic challenges faced by such students:

... When I first started my study in the department, I was a part-time student and was also working in the military. By the second year, I had quit my job and joined the department as a full-time student. I was expecting to start from the beginning and to be taught all the basics, but was surprised to discover that the department had high expectations for second year students. They expected us to be intermediate or advanced English learners, but, in reality, a lot of us were just beginners. The focus on the four main skills was limited, and we went into more specialised courses within the department. I am a married man with kids, and I don't have much time to study at home. I spend most of my spare time working as a taxi driver to support my family. I am an English language student in my final year, but I am not satisfied with my language competence (Student 12, Interview, Sunday 19th October 2019 (4th year)).

In summary, most students who participated in this research were first-generation students. Hence, their families lacked the knowledge, perspective, and expertise required to assist them in the higher education experiences. The lecturers in this study tended to describe these students as lower middle-class and to highlight the low educational background of their families, thereby confirming Alvarado et al.'s (2020) observation that low-income students lack academic preparation and guidance available to their affluent peers. The consequent lack of cultural capital and the absence of parental assistance with assignments can be deemed responsible for the poor English proficiency manifest by low-income students and their concomitant difficulty in adapting to the demands of university level study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has examined the manner in which family educational background shapes the learning experiences of students enrolled in an EFL programme at a Saudi university. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is employed to evaluate the impact of background. Specifically, this study reveals that economically privileged upper middle-class families supported the education of their offspring through learning experiences and resources. The passive and active transmission of cultural capital from educated family members allows students from these backgrounds to gain an advantage in relation to their study experiences. In other words, they were more likely to succeed. These findings accord with the recent research conducted by Bonal and González (2020), wherein it was found that social, economic, and cultural capital generate markedly different learning outcomes for students from diverse socio-economic environments. In addition, this study also explored the correlation between familial cultural capital and ultimate education achievement. Lecturers regarded less affluent or lower middle-class families as lacking in cultural capital, particularly institutionalized cultural capital. The research also revealed how the lack of cultural capital caused these students to commence the EFL programme at a distinct disadvantage because their English skills were noticeably lower.

Thus, this paper reveals that the social, economic, and cultural capital possessed by families influence the educational attainment of their children. The study also revealed there was insufficient demographic data about the students because the university in which the research was based fails to store data pertaining to student backgrounds, a practice it shares with other Saudi universities. Hence, this study has been unable to offer any rigorous data related to family, schooling, parental occupation, or sibling occupations. This research recognizes the importance of such data for both lecturers and policymakers. In fact, possession of this form of data would allow higher education institutions to improve the efficacy of their support systems, not least in terms of honing the guidance they provide to address the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds with lower levels of proficiency in English. For example, universities might opt to provide cultural resources, such as English language clubs, libraries, and language laboratories. According to Lessky et al. (2021), other interventions have the potential to temper the impact of the disadvantages faced by less affluent students, including peer tutoring, mentoring, professional counselling, outreach, and other support services.

This study into cultural capital employed a qualitative research model in order to obtain an in-depth appreciation of the correlation between cultural capital and educational attainment. The data collection method selected for this study comprised interviews with both students and teaching staff. Thus, the interviews generated rich data related to learners' experiences and environments. However, the researchers appreciate that additional insights could be acquired through the application of other research methods,

such as focus groups and life histories. For example, life histories can more lucidly narrate learner experiences in their own words. Future studies in this field might seek to employ multiple research methods in order to enhance our understanding of how cultural capital transmission mechanisms, or their absence, can shape learning experiences and outcomes.

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