Economic strain and foreign language attainment:  
A Polish perspective

Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel

Opole University
epiech@uni.opole.pl

Abstract
Foreign language learning is not only a personal endeavor, but also an activity that takes place within a social support system. In times of economic crisis adverse economic conditions handicap parents’ educational investments. For this reason a student’s development of foreign language skills, limited to the school context, may suffer. This study sheds more light on the experience and effect of economic strain in Polish secondary grammar school students who learn English as a foreign language. The results corroborate studies in the field and demonstrate that high achievers have low perceptions of economic strain.

Keywords: economic strain, financial problems, foreign language attainment, support system, economic crisis

1. Introduction
In an economic collapse, such as the one Europe is still experiencing, children and adolescents are likely to be victims of family and school stress. As they are still dependent on their parents and significant others, they easily fall victim to adults’ feelings of economic insecurity. This paper sheds more light on the relationship between school performance, more specifically defined as foreign language attainment (final grades and self-perceived foreign language skills), and perceived economic strain in Polish secondary grammar school students. The paper first outlines the issue of financial concerns and their effect on the individual’s well being, as well as its possible interplay with school performance, especially foreign language learning. The results of an empirical study on this relationship are presented, together with a discussion. An outline of possible implications for the foreign language classroom concludes the discussion.
2. Financial problems and wellbeing

Among the many stressors affecting adolescents’ lives, financial problems appear extremely influential, with their impact on their macro and micro dynamics, school behavior among them. Not having enough money to pay the bills and lacking basic necessities contribute not only to psychological problems in parents, but also to emotional and behavioural problems in adolescents, constituting additional sources of stress for all family members (Wadsworth et al. 2005). Various adult stresses, observed in the time of an economic downturn, are immediately revealed in relationship problems (such as family interactions), creating a vicious circle that thwarts the well-being of the vulnerable. Even when adolescents recognize their families’ and significant others’ problems, they have limited opportunities to contribute to solutions. They worry about what their own future holds in a society that appears to be failing them.

The concept of economic strain is used in reference to worries about money. A mismatch between financial resources and demands (Falahati & Paim 2011) is mostly generated by adverse economic conditions that create unmet material needs. These unmet needs may result from: low income, high debt, job disruptions, and income loss. In effect, the inability to pay bills or make ends meet develops. In such circumstances the overall well-being of individuals is seriously hampered (Shobe & Boyd 2005), both concurrently and long-term, including physical and mental health, and educational/occupational goals and expectations (Mistry et al. 2009). Financial problems produced by the family’s economic crises may increase one’s preoccupation with financial matters. Frustration, anger, and family demoralization, stemming from cut-backs on necessary expenses (e.g., health insurance and medical care) (Conger et al. 2010), all may increase. Hence, the individual’s health, happiness and prosperity is strongly related to economic deprivation, straining family relationships and exacerbating adolescents’ developmental problems (Walper 2009). When parents are unable to provide for their children’s material expectations due to a diminishing of the family’s economic resources, their growing distress will further cause irritability, distraction, anger, and less involvement in family relations (Whitbeck et al. 1997). At the same time, economic strain seriously damages parents’ ability to provide sufficient support, like instrumental help (monetary) among others. Individual and family stress processes, in turn, threaten the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being of children (Conger et al. 1992). Economic strain may function as a
catalyst for negative responses, limiting effective parenting skills (Low, Sinclair & Shortt 2012). Unfortunately, adolescents have little objective control over the stress of economic hardship (Wadsworth & Compas 2002), and for this reason they may easily fall victim to the disastrous effects of their family’s financial problems. On the other hand, parents’ positive attitudes and interest in school can impart encouragement and help, and render assistance in their child’s school work (Danielsen et al. 2009). This is so because their participation in scholarly culture enhances children’s educational attainment (Evans et al. 2010). It is extremely unlikely, though, for highly strained families to effectively face the challenges of financial problems.

Economic strain and financial concerns have been proved to exert a significant influence on quality of life and personal well-being (Evans & Kim 2007). They are also related to reduced functioning later in life (Wadsworth et al. 2005). Furthermore, they limit the individual’s capacity to plan a meaningful future and contribute to a decline in psychological health (Wu et al. 2010). Low socioeconomic status in the family not only predicts adverse economic circumstances during adolescence, but also economic problems and illness during the early adult years (Wickrama, Conger & Abraham 2005).

Obviously, low income also constrains a family’s educational investments. Therefore, the socio-economic status of a student’s household (the combination of family income and parents’ education) greatly influences various forms of educational attainment. For example, learning problems may arise when parents are unable to invest in educational resources, hire tutors, or even assist their children in the learning process (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Skowron, Wester & Azen 2004). The reason is that a family’s poor financial situation forces them to reduce investments in different forms of cultural practices, such as visiting museums and/or taking extracurricular classes (Aschaffenburg & Maas 1997). Such shortcomings may in effect deprive adolescents of a chance to develop the cultural skills and preferences rewarded in school, and thus lead to lower school attainment, as low socioeconomic status predicts not only lower academic achievement, but also continuing life stress throughout childhood and adolescence (Schoon et al. 2002). Luckily, several individual factors that help in combating the effects of economic deprivation have also been identified (Schmitt-Rodermund & Silbereisen 2008). Among them, an important role is played by a variety of hobbies and social contacts, accompanied by a strong belief in one’s own abilities, good planning skills, and optimism. Family-
related factors include parental support, family stability, warmth, and an active interest in the child’s school experience. At the school context level, the support of teachers and significant others, as well as a positive school environment, are strong buffers against daily stresses (Rueger, Malecki & Demaray 2010).

The modern approach to second language acquisition demands the development of communication skills; one must talk in order to learn a second language (Skehan 1989). For this reason, formal foreign language instruction often appears insufficient. In fact learners who want to develop further, alongside with those who do not want to fail their formal course are quite often forced to seek extra contact hours outside the school context. In such a situation the family’s ability to manage finances also seems of key importance for the adolescent second language learner. The fact is that certain economic investments ensure better contact with the language, especially because the process itself is lengthy and demanding – materially and emotionally. Providing course books, access to the Internet, or extra contact hours (arranging private tutorials or foreign language courses) are valuable endeavours that promote the learner’s greater familiarity with the language. Foreign language learning is therefore not only a matter of personal actions, but also an effect of the social support system (Stern 1983). Yet, its effectiveness can easily be influenced by the family’s economic downfalls. As primary caregivers, parents are the main providers of social support for their children’s needs. This includes the acquisition of foreign language teaching aids, private tutors, and newspapers. Due to the family’s financial hardships, they are forced to cut down on these educational expenses and the foreign language learner may become deprived of many out-of-school opportunities for language development. This may foster an array of negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger or aversion on the part of the student and other significant figures involved in this process (parents, teachers, and peers). For this reason, lack of foreign language proficiency (calling for deeper contact with the language) and poor general school achievement may be strongly related to the student’s economic hardships.

Empirical studies on this important relationship have, to date, been quite scarce, though conclusive. It is strongly stressed that quality of education is related to the sociocultural economic status (SES) of the student families – also in the case of foreign language learners in Europe (e.g., Mattheoudakis & Alexiou 2009) and worldwide (e.g., Attamimi & Rahim 2011; Kormos & Kiddle 2013; Weicheng et al.
2007). Also, in the context of the Polish secondary grammar school these results have been confirmed (Piechurska-Kuciel 2009).

Latest economic downturns experienced in Europe and around the world prompt special attention to the relationship between family economic problems and the well-being of their members, adolescents among them. This is why this study seeks to shed more light on the experience of economic strain in adolescents, who, in a very sensitive period of life, are still learning how to live within one’s means, pay bills on time, and avoid excessive debt (Beutler & Gudmunson 2012). Another factor prompting this research is the role of foreign language proficiency (especially in English) in the lives of European teens. An examination of the interplay among these important variables may enable a deeper understanding of the economic conditioning of language processes. For the purpose of this paper it is presumed that in the face of the economic crisis affecting Europe, the secondary grammar school student’s subjective economic strain (personal experiences of poverty and hardship) correlates with self-perceived levels of foreign language attainment. In the present study, economic strain is conceptualized in terms of the degree to which students report (a) worries about not having enough money, (b) observations about whether there is enough money to afford basic material needs, and (c) their family’s perceived ability to pay bills. Foreign language attainment is operationalized as self-perceived evaluation of the four FL macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), as well as final grades obtained in the FL course. The following hypothesis is proposed: *Students with lower levels of foreign language attainment demonstrate higher self-perceived levels of economic compared to those of their higher achieving peers.*

3. Method

Below there is a description of and justification for the chosen methodology, including research methods used in the study.

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 609 students from 24 randomly selected classes of the six secondary grammar schools in Opole, southwestern Poland. In the sample there were 438 girls and 255 boys (mean age: 17.50, range: 15.5–19). They were all second-grade students at their schools, with three to six hours a week of English instruction at the intermediate level. They also studied French or German as the other
compulsory foreign language (two lessons a week). The average length of their English language experience was almost ten years, with a vast majority (91%) learning it for between six to 16 years.

On the basis of the participants’ self-perceived FL skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading in English), the sample was divided into quartiles: the lower one, called LS, (≤3.5 points) comprised 182 students with low self-perceived levels of FL skills (138 girls and 44 boys), and the upper one: HS (≥4.5 pts) comprised 192 students with high levels (105 girls and 87 boys). The middle quartiles were excluded from further analysis.

3.2 Instruments

The basic instrument adopted for the purpose of the research was a questionnaire. Its first part explored demographic variables such as age and gender (1 – male, 2 – female).

The questionnaire also included three subscales that measured forms of economic strain, adopted for the purpose of the research from Schramm (2006). The first subscale, Financial Concerns, consisted of five items that assessed feelings of worry and concern regarding the meeting of current and future needs (e.g., I have trouble sleeping because of my financial problems or I often worry about my poor financial situation). The participants indicated their answers in a 5-point response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The minimum number of points on the scale was 5, while the maximum was 25. In this study the scale’s reliability was measured in terms of Cronbach’s alpha, ranging the level of .89. The responses were key-reversed, so that a high score on the scale designated low levels of economic strain.

The second subscale, Felt Constraint: Material Needs, included seven questions that measured if the student perceived that there was enough money to afford material needs such as food, medical care, furniture, and clothing (e.g., We have enough money to afford the kind of food we should have or My family has enough money to afford the kind of leisure and recreational activities we want to participate in. Again, the participants used a 5-point Likert scale with reliability of α=.78. The minimum number of points on the scale was 7, while the maximum was 35. A high score on the scale represented a low level of economic strain.
The third subscale, *Can’t Make Ends Meet*, included three items that measured the student’s perceived ability to pay bills and expenses, and to meet the needs of the family with the current income (e.g., *My family has enough money to afford the kind of home we would like to have* or *We have no difficulty paying our bills*). Again, the same Likert scale was employed, giving three as the minimum number of points in the scale, and 15 as the maximum. The reliability was .79, while a low score represented a high level of economic strain.

Another instrument used in the study was a scale calculating *self-perceived levels of FL skills* (speaking, listening, writing, and reading). The score was an aggregated value of separate assessments of the FL skills with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*unsatisfactory*) to 6 (*excellent*). The minimum number of points on the scale was 4, while the maximum was 24. The scale’s reliability was Cronbach’s $\alpha=.87$.

*Final grades* were the last data source. They were represented by the aggregated value of the previous year’s grade and the prospective semester and final grades. They were assessed by means of a Likert scale ranging from 1 – *unsatisfactory* to 6 – *excellent*. The scale’s reliability was $\alpha=.87$.

### 3.3 Procedure

The data collection procedure took place in January 2011. In each class, the students were asked to fill in the questionnaire. The time designed for the activity was 15 to 45 minutes. The participants were asked to give sincere answers without taking excessive time to think. Each part of the questionnaire was preceded by a short statement introducing a new set of items in an unobtrusive manner.

The design of the study was mostly differential, comparing groups that were differentiated on a pre-existing variable, i.e., self-perceived levels of foreign language skills. The research was conducted by comparing means obtained on financial strain subscales in groups with low (LS) and high levels of foreign language skills (HS).

The data were computed by means of the statistical programme STATISTICA, with the main operations being descriptive statistics (means and $SD$), and a student’s t-test for independent samples. It estimates differences between the LS and HS groups on the measurements of final grades and forms of financial problems.
4. Results

Table 1 gives a summary of the data collected. The means received on the three subscales measuring financial concerns and final grades are presented along with the corresponding standard deviations. It is visible that both groups differed on their final grades – the group with lower self-perceived levels of foreign language skills (LS) also presented significantly lower final grades in comparison to their high self-assessment peers (HS). Apart from that, the group declared significantly higher financial concerns than the group with higher self-assessment with \( t=1.99^* \). However, the latter group had significantly higher worries about not being able to make ends meet, and about their material needs (respectively: \( t=4.00^{***} \) and \( t=-3.93^{***} \)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>LS (=182)</th>
<th>HS (N=192)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t Make Ends Meet</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Constraints: Material Needs</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Concerns</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final grades</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* \( p \leq .05 \), \*** \( p < .001 \)

Table 1. Levels of economic strain and final grades in students with low (LS) and high self-perceived levels of foreign language skills (HS)

Below there is a visualisation of the results received on the three subscales of financial strain by the two groups of respondents (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Economic strain in students with low (LS) and high self-perceived levels of foreign language skills (HS)
5. Discussion
The main aim of this research was to corroborate the hypothesis: *Students with lower levels of foreign language attainment demonstrate higher self-perceived levels of economic strain compared to those of their higher achieving peers.* The study results clearly demonstrate that the hypothesis can be fully accepted, because both groups of students differ significantly in their responses to the all the measurements of economic strain, confirming the pattern identified in the literature of the field.

Also, in this study students who consider themselves high achievers in the field of foreign language learning have significantly fewer anxieties concerning meeting current and future needs. They do not worry or have trouble sleeping because of their or their family’s financial problems. Moreover, they are not stressed about not having enough money to afford the kind of home, food, and clothing they want. In their opinion their family income is sufficient to cover all needs. It follows that any expenses the students connected with foreign language mastery are likely covered without great problems. This finding can be explained by the well-functioning support system the family represents. On the one hand, it can be expected that the parents recognize the needs within the foreign language field, which have to be met in order to ensure optimal language development – be they private tuition or unlimited access to the Internet. This means that there may be a two-fold explanation for this kind of scenario. The parents of high achievers are either easily able to support the student due to their sufficient income or, even in spite of their considerable economic strain, they exert their financial aid without the child’s awareness of potentially grave financial consequences. It may be stipulated that the parents treat their role of primary care givers seriously, and do everything in their power to aid the unrestrained development of skills their children may need in their adult lives. By the same token, it can be concluded that the adolescent student themselves may be adamant about developing their language mastery in a very conscious manner, by commanding more financial interest on the part of their parents, who comply even in spite of an exhausting workload. It may then be suspected that a self-centred student may turn a blind eye to their parents’ financial sacrifices, just for the sake of being able to pursue foreign language goals. Nevertheless, it may also turn out that an internally motivated foreign language student has already developed various language routines, allowing them to achieve language mastery without serious financial investments. For instance, they may seek opportunities for language use outside the school context by using
English with friends or over Skype or other communicators. On the whole, the general behavioural pattern identified in this study strongly stresses the interconnection of low economic strain and self-perceived foreign language mastery, confirmed by external assessment, i.e., final grades. This shows that even in time of economic upheavals freedom from financial concerns, whether real or not, is a key to language development.

Sadly, the pressures of economic strain take their toll on students who consider themselves less able in the field of foreign language learning, with low final grades confirming their poor language progression. One may suspect here that, again, the social support systems may appear quite ineffective in their case. Most of all, it seems that low achievers may be less able to consciously manage their foreign language learning process in comparison to high achievers. In consequence, the external motivators may prompt them to avoid language learning opportunities, which they might see as dangerous or unprofitable – though the latter may be most unlikely in the Polish cultural context. Even so, these students experience significant economic strain, have trouble sleeping because of their family’s financial problems, and worry about their poor present circumstances and future financial situation. In jeopardy of economic instability extensively ruining their private lives, they may be unable to concentrate on the foreign language process, not to mention the voluntary seeking of out-of-school-context opportunities for language use. Their cognitive capacity may be already engaged trying to solve everyday problems connected to making ends meet or helping their parents to survive. Even worse, they may have to do without their family’s emotional support, which further exacerbates the negative effects of economic strain. In actuality, the limitations of their financial situation may condemn them to failure in the field of foreign language learning, limiting their future life chances for personal and professional success in the contemporary world.

Overall, the findings reported in this study indicate that it perceptions of economic hardship are significantly related to perceptions of one’s foreign language abilities. As such, they confirm the findings of research on the individual’s well-being and their functioning in various domains. Again, it turns out that the concept of feeling economic hardship may be at least as important as objective measures of economic hardship, because when individuals perceive something as real, its consequences will be real to them. Hence, whatever beliefs foreign language learners have about their
financial situation will affect their self-perceptions and future choices, language learning opportunities included.

6. Implications and recommendations for the EFL classroom
Self-perceptions of one’s economic strain are inevitably connected with the level of one’s foreign language skills. Unfortunately, the stresses of the student’s unsatisfactory material situation cannot be alleviated by the teacher, a fact that may in effect doom the future of a low achiever, who is unable to take advantage of out-of-school opportunities for language development. It is therefore vital for the language teacher to create positive experiences connected with the use of English within the context of formal language instruction, which may give a chance to the unprivileged.

One of the key strategies is to provide a stress-free environment that will enable low achievers to feel less stressed in the dangerous situations connected with language learning and use. Aside from giving them the emotional support that is extremely important in threatening circumstances, the teacher can simultaneously offer other kinds of support (e.g., instrumental, informational, or appraisal) connected with direct and indirect language development. Thanks to it, students may be able to identify positive emotions in the language learning process.

Another important step is connected with the teacher allowing students to take control of their own learning. This is especially important because of the fact that serious economic strain limits one’s chances for exerting effective control over one’s life. So at least within this domain the stressed language learner may have a feeling of greater control when they are free to choose tasks or strategies they apply while working on an activity. More importantly, they should be encouraged to set their own language learning goals, immediate and distant. For this purpose they need to be explicitly instructed on ways of achieving these goals, and selecting effective language learning strategies.

Obviously, the main weakness of the students with high economic strain is their low level of foreign language skills, which is also revealed in their final grades. This means that their continuously growing learning deficits should be addressed openly by offering them more chances for in-class language development. This can be done by more frequent revisions of the language material, starting from most basic ideas and skills, approached from the point of view of different techniques or student groupings.
This study is obviously not free from limitations. Although its great benefit lies in addressing the basic everyday problems of low and high achieving students in the contemporary world, it would greatly profit from including variables measuring not only subjective, but also objective economic strain (e.g., socioeconomic status of the student’s parents). Aside from that, it would be worthwhile to focus on predicting the role of economic strain in one’s foreign language proficiency by including other influential variables (demographic, e.g., age or gender, or educational, e.g., GPAs or language anxiety levels). Finally, a longitudinal design might be extremely informative for understanding the prolonged role of financial pressures in the lives of foreign language learners.

All in all, economic strain observed from the point of view of secondary grammar school students definitely deserves more study, which will ultimately broaden our knowledge and understanding an array of cognitive and emotional processes involved in language learning.

References


