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# Social Constraints of Aspirations for Second Language Achievement

Abstract

Educational aspirations are defined as "educational goals students set for themselves" (Trebbels, 2015, p. 37). They are widely studied in psychological and sociological research, in which it was found that, firstly, aspirations form in late adolescence and early adulthood, and secondly, their goal and level (i.e., high vs. low) are determined by the social environment they come from, that is, their family background, peer and school influence.

The paper presents the results of the qualitative study, in which 56 students of English philology in one of the vocational schools in the south of Poland expressed their aspirations in reference to their future foreign attainment and associated vocational goals. The results showed that in the majority of cases the aspirations are not so high and fully-formed, which, it is hypothesized, is rooted in the social background the students come from.

*Keywords*: foreign language, young adults, educational aspirations, social background

## Introduction

In the poststructuralist framework to the study of SLA, it is emphasized that success in foreign language (FL) learning does not depend merely on the individual psychological traits of the learner, but on the social context in which learning takes place, such as the family, the school, the neighborhood, and even the socio-political situation of the country one lives in. Each of these environments determines educational opportunities and limitations, and thus may indirectly impact the learners' educational decisions. This impact has long been studied in educational psychology (e.g., Marjoribanks, 2006; Spera, Wentzel, & Mato, 2009). It has been generally found that educational success is to a large extent dependant on the family environment in the early years, and

on peer and school influence in the adolescent years. This impact manifests in the arousal and directioning of educational aspirations, which, in turn, justify the effort undertaken towards the achievement of educational goals.

While many of the studies focus on the educational aspirations of middle-class youth from big city environments, this one focuses on the aspirations of young people from a rather provincial and rural area. More precisely, it aims to investigate what goals and aspirations young adult learners of L2 English have towards their achievement, how they plan to utilize their L2 knowledge for vocational purposes, and if their aspirations are dependant on social variables.

## Educational Aspirations —
## Defining the Concept and Their Determinants

Educational aspirations are defined as "educational goals an individual sets for himself/herself" (Fraser & Garg, 2017, p. 807). They can be measured as high, low or medium. The level of aspirations an individual possesses is particularly relevant for educational achievement, as it has been found in research (cf. Majoribanks, 2003; Farmer, 1985; Lewowicki, 1987) that individuals of high educational aspirations tend to achieve higher success in education, which in turn leads to better-paid occupational careers. If that causal relationship is true, one should be interested in boosting educational aspirations in adolescents and young adults, as it is at this age that individuals decide about their vocations.

While possessing high/low educational aspirations can be related to a variety of personal characteristics (e.g., Skorny, 1980) such as experience of success and failure, level of intelligence, personality, level of neurosis, and perception of Self (cf. Galas & Lewowicki, 1991), more recent research focuses on the social/environmental factors that contribute to the growth of aspirations, particularly to the role of family, and later in the adolescent years, of school, peers, and even wider educational policy.

The influence of the family is seen as an interplay of proximal and distal characteristics. The former relate to socio-emotional and cognitive interactions among the family members. For example, it was found that children of parents presenting an authoritative parenting style characterized by support, emotional warmth, attention, and clear demands are more likely to achieve better results at school (Baumrind, 1989). Additionally, Rosenzweig (1989) identified seven parental practices which contribute to high school attainment: parental educational aspirations and grade expectations, parental engagement, authoritative

parenting, autonomy support, emotional support, providing resources and learning experiences, and parental participation in school. These factors stem from the general family orientations towards upbringing and education and are less dependent or dependent indirectly on distal characteristics.

The distal characteristics of the family include: socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, availability of material resources, parental level of education, age of the parents, child gender, family size, living standards, place of living. The most commonly studied of these variables is SES, although its impact on the level of aspirations is not direct. On the one hand, higher-SES families can provide their children with better access to material resources, and can pay for additional/ private tuition. Higher-SES parents may also have a higher level of education and show better educational awareness, thus may hold higher educational aspirations. Yet, due to performing more time-consuming jobs, they may be less involved, or have less time to engage directly, in their children's education. As a result, these parents may delegate the role of supporter to teachers, often in private school and private tutoring. By contrast, lower-SES families, not having such capabilities, may aspire for their children's high educational and occupational achievement more directly by providing such cognitive stimulation on their own.

These dependencies show that parents' own educational aspirations can further be transferred onto children and contribute to the growth of the children's educational aspirations which normally manifest in late adolescence or early adulthood. It is unclear as to what is first in this cause-effect relationship between aspirations and achievement: is it high educational aspirations which boost higher achievement, or is it high achievement caused by parental educational aspirations which boost high school achievement, where the feeling of success contributes further to the growth of children's own educational aspirations?

A model of growth of educational aspirations has been proposed by Garg et al. (2002), who take into account similar characteristics as above, that is, background, environmental and personal factors. The background factors would coincide with the distal factors as distinguished by Majoribanks (2003). The environmental factors refer to parental involvement, including their support and communication with school. These could partly overlap with proximal factors. The last element distinguished by Garg et al. (2002) is the personal factor, called academic Self-Schema, which is composed of self-perception of competence, school achievement, attitudes toward education and work, and extracurricular activities such as reading at home. According to the authors, students who have a positive Self-Schema lay more trust in their learning abilities and find learning more enjoyable. I believe this concept is related to what is known in motivational theories as self-efficacy beliefs. Both of these concepts may be an outcome of inborn traits as well as parental support and prior learning

experiences, thus there is a great role for schooling institutions to support and not discourage learning.

Finally, it has to be noted that research on educational aspirations is markedly boosted in liberal and democratic societies, where there is an opportunity to move up the social mobility ladder, and where education is considered to be one of the keys to it. High educational aspirations are less likely to arise in communities which have a fairly established social structure, and as a result, little chance to change social position. For this reason, research on educational aspirations has been particularly strong in Australia (Majoribanks, 2003, 2006), especially among groups of immigrants, and in the USA (Spera, Wentzel, & Mato, 2009), predominatly in the 1970s and 1980s. Research conducted in more recent years, that is, from 2000 onwards, has observed that in times of neoliberal economy, it is more difficult to guarantee mobility merely through education. As the number of university graduates has grown, the number of positions for which educated people are required has not. The competition for occupational positions has kept the salaries stable, or has even seen salaries lowered, thus it is hard to say that high educational achievement leads to higher vocational positions and social mobility. As Devine (2004), working in the British context, noticed, it was much easier to achieve advancement in the 1960s when the post-war generation had grown-up as there were more places to be filled by educated labor than nowadays. Yet, previous advancement occurred not so much due to removing the elite from the privileged positions, but due to a higher demand for skilled professionals and more space at the top. This shows that aspirations are more likely to arise in the times of sociological and historical change.

For similar reasons, there is a well-established tradition for psychological and sociological research on aspirations in the Polish setting. Already in communist times of the 1970s and 1980s, individuals who were willing to complete a higher education usually obtained jobs of higher prestige, although not necessarily much better paid due to the official policy of equality (Janowski, 1977; Lewowicki, 1987; Domański, 2007). Another historical moment which precipitated the growth of aspirations, and particularly the need for foreign language competence, was the fall of communism. This was the time when the borders opened, thus giving ground for foreign investments. Individuals who knew any FLs made astonishing careers in foreign companies, even without formal qualifications for which they made up later on. The 1990s was the period when a variety of foreign languages was learnt and required in the job market. However, with the growth of popularity of English as a global language, this yearning for multilinguality diminished. English dominated the educational and job market, not least since Poland joined the EU in 2004. A similar shift in FL motivation has been noticed in Hungary, which passed through similar historical moments (cf. Dörnyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2006).

Joining the EU has given many a chance for personal and professional mobility for which languages are necessary, both for communication and functioning in the job market. Thus it seems young people should be willing and motivated to learn foreign languages, especially lingua franca English. Thanks to it they have a chance to move upwards either in the social or occupational structure.

## Aspirations and SLA

In SLA theory, aspirations have received more attention in theories of language learning motivation, originating in psychology. One of the major theories within achievement motivation theory is *attribution theory*. Attribution theory deals with individuals' perceptions of their causality and their understanding of cause-effect relationships between various phenomena. It also identifies relationships between a person's perceptions of causality and their behavioral tendency in the future, especially in reference to achievement motivation and the level of aspirations (Weiner, 1972). So the attribution theory has utilized the concept of experience in formulating individuals' aspirations.

The theory claims that people of higher achievement motivation are more likely to attribute their success or failure to their own work and effort. What is more, past experience of a similar type positively influences a person's orientation towards goals of similar type. By contrast, people of low achievement motivation ascribe their success or failure to pure luck and coincidence, or lack of ability (in the case of failure). This causative relationship can lie at the bottom of the formation of aspirations, as only persons who feel that they have influence over their success or failure in the future can formulate stronger aspirations. Weiner (1972) introduced the term *locus of control* to describe an individual's power to direct one's behavior. The locus is the place where an individual places this power in the continuum from objectivity to subjectivity, and can be dependent on the person's volition, intelligence, ability, or on external influences.

Aspirations are also regarded as an important component of Ideal L2 Self, that is, a Motivational L2 Self Theory proposed by Dörnyei (2009), as they set goals for learning. In further development of the theory Dörnyei (2014, 2015), stated that what motivates learners for the learning activity are their visions of future achievement, which, to my belief, coincides with aspirations. Thus imagination plays an important role in establishing the vision/goal.

Finally, it must be mentioned that no other studies have dealt with young people's aspirations so far. Some common ground can be found in the studies

conducted by Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2017) on willingness to communicate from the macro- (i.e., as a general learner feature) and micro- (i.e., as a class factor) perspective. The studies were conducted among students of English philology at the Higher Vocational School in Konin with a view to verifying the factors that make some students more willing to communicate than others. Having conducted a number of studies, the authors have proposed a model of interrelated factors influencing WTC. According to them, the variables are: communication confidence, ought-to self, classroom environment, international posture—openness to experience, unplanned in-class WTC, international posture—interest in international affairs, practice-seeking WTC, and planned in-class WTC. Of these factors, WTC correlated the most with the two dimensions of International posture, which indicates that learners who are more willing to learn and use the language are those who see its utility in the wider world. This stance, I believe, is rooted in prior experience and social background, and these learners have been found to seek more practice in out-of-class situations. The classroom environment was found to be conducive to WTC only if foreign-exchange students were present in class, which indicates that the classroom environment generates fewer communicative activities.

This study, focusing only on WTC, has omitted social reasons due to which learners may be motivated towards learning a language and believe in achieving the final goal.

While the aforementioned study focused on WTC, the following paper aims to verify the general motivation towards L2 achievement, which could be called the willingness to study. The common feature of both studies is the fact that a learner willing to obtain communicative competence in a FL must be motivated and willing to undertake the effort to study the language, and to actively seek opportunities to use it both in class and in the outside world.

# The Study

The following study aims to investigate what are the goals and aspirations for L2 achievement of young adults. It is assumed that in early adulthood aspirations of young people coincide with vocational aspirations, as young adults are at the threshold of making serious decisions regarding their future. Their vocational goals determine their educational decisions. It is also assumed that the vision of their future attainment is what can motivate them to undertake a serious effort in pursuing the goal. More precisely, it is investigated why young adults choose to study English philology in a vocational school and how this relates to their vocational aspirations.

The following research questions have been addressed:
1. What goals and aspirations do young adult learners of L2 English have towards their FL achievement?
2. How do they plan to utilize their L2 knowledge for vocational purposes?
3. Are their aspirations dependant on social variables? If so, which ones?
4. What do they ascribe their FLL success to, that is, to what situations, events, factors, people?

The social variables taken into account are: socio-economic status (SES)-measured as a self-perceived feature on a 7-point scale (1–poor, 7–excellent), parental level of education (1–primary, 5–doctorate level), family size, parental level of FL knowledge. In reference to the last variable, it is believed that those parents who have some FL knowledge can support their children in FL learning by either directly helping with the retention of class material, or by setting positive models and creating opportunities for L2 use.

## The Instrument

The instrument was a survey which consisted of seven open-ended questions inquiring about factors, situations and life events which influenced their current FL knowledge, beliefs about factors contributing to/inhibiting success, visions of Self and their FL ability in five years' time, a scale about self-efficacy beliefs, which was to provide information about their locus of control (in their ability of external factors).

Additionally, the demographic information about self-assessed L2 proficiency, length of learning, gender, age of the learner, as well as their parental level of education, occupation and level of FL knowledge was collected, and the size of family and self-perceived SES measured on the self-assessment scale (1–very bad, 7–very good).

The study was qualitative in nature, yet the data will be presented in reference to the social variables.

## Participants

The participants of the study were 63 students in their 2nd year of English philology at the Higher Vocational School in Nowy Targ. There were: 15 males and 48 females. Their mean age was: 20.6. There were 33 students in the teaching specialization group (coded as S1–S33), and 30 students who had chosen the translation specialization (codes S34–63). In the teacher specialization, there was only one male student.

At this point, it should be mentioned that the region where the school is located differs from others in the sense that traditionally, it has been a place where families were quite big (had many children) and where it was common to emigrate to the USA. Thus, there is a long-standing need and willingness to learn English for utilitarian purposes as this language enables communication and higher earnings abroad.

Also, what makes this study different is the fact that it is the students in big city institutions that are usually investigated/studied, who by getting a place at a prestigious university already show a certain degree of success and ability. The participants in this study come from lower SES families, a group which is quite underrepresented in research.

## Results

The following section presents the results of the study, first presenting the quantitative data for the synthesis of the findings, and then illustrating the key points with qualitative remarks.

As regards their proficiency level, the students assessed their ability at either B2 ($N$ = 34) or B1 level ($N$ = 28), most probably referring to their results at the Matura exam. Only one person self-reported a C1 level. This level of FL knowledge allows communicative use, yet still requires further development. It is notable to say that the students have studied L2 English for a relatively long time (Mean length of study: 11.2 years), which indicates they have mainly learnt the language throughout the schooling years, however, not always successfully, as the attainment of B1 level shows. Surprisingly, more students at B1 level were in the teaching specialization group, while in the translation section there were more students at B2 level.

Table 1 below shows the types of aspirations as identified in the qualitative analysis together with the quantity of their appearance.

In regard to the students' aspirations referring to their FL attainment and vocational attainment, it can be seen that the learning goals are quite varied. Nearly half of the students are language aficionados, as they either aim for achieving a native-like level of English (25%) or wish to learn other foreign languages (22%). Thirteen students (21%) would like to be teachers and eight students (13%) would like to be translators, while ten students (16%) would like to emigrate.

It seems that to a certain extent their vocational plans are connected with the choice of specialization. The desire to become teachers has been voiced by almost all students in that specialization (88%), whereas in the translation section, vocational plans seem to be more ambiguous. This is manifested in the vast array of responses showing plans which seem to remain in the sphere of

dreams rather than being fully materialized plans (positions 8–20). Apparently, the choice of this specialization was dictated by the lack of willingness to become a teacher on the one hand, and the desire to obtain additional time before making a final decision on the other.

Table 1

*Goals of studying English and future vocational/educational aspirations (N = 63)*

| Aspiration type | Count | Percentage score % |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Achieving native-like level | 16 | 25 |
| 2. Learning other languages (Italian, Russian, German, Spanish) | 14 | 22 |
| 3. Work as a teacher | 13 | 21 |
| 4. Going/working abroad | 10 | 16 |
| 5. Work as a translator in a firm/sworn translator | 8 | 13 |
| 6. Working with languages | 6 | 10 |
| 7. Emigrate to an EU country/Australia/theUSA | 5 | 8 |
| 8. Interpersonal communication | 6 | 10 |
| 9. Open my own business (language school/kindergarten/tourist agency) | 6 | 10 |
| 10. Working in tourism (as a guide) | 4 | 6 |
| 11. Travelling | 4 | 6 |
| 12. Learning L2 culture | 2 | 3 |
| 13. Working in a corporation | 1 | 2 |
| 14. Giving private tution | 1 | 2 |
| 15. Study further and work | 1 | 2 |
| 16. Work as a journalist | 1 | 2 |
| 17. Combine language with studying another field | 1 | 2 |
| 18. Translating books | 1 | 2 |
| 19. Helping a family member to learn | 1 | 2 |
| 20. Working in a consulate | 1 | 2 |

*The total number of aspirations exceeds the number of respondents as more than one aspiration was expressed.

This tendency can be further endorsed by explicitly stated student aspirations. A student from the teaching specialization clearly knows what she would like to do in the future, saying,

(S1, B2 level): *I would like to teach young children so as to give them the best opportunities and make them speak fluently from the earliest years. I would like to speak the language fluently, just like in Polish.*

From this statement, it can be seen that the student perceives a teaching profession as rewarding, and the student's choice of this career is deliberate with high aspirations for her future learners' achievement.

Whereas the students from the translation specialization group say,

(S 46) *Foreign language learning is a pleasure for me; I would like to combine this (hobby) with my future profession. I hope that my language level in 5 years will be advanced.*

(S 59) *I would like to master English to the degree that would enable me free conversation, however, I am trying not to look too much into the future, and so I have no plans.*

(S 45) *It is difficult to say for the time being as I am not planning my future yet. However, I would like to work, maybe as a translator. In that situation I would use the language every day during my work.*

(S 56) *I am going to continue learning L2 in my own way so that it is pleasant and motivating towards the goal. Nothing enforced.*

These students supposedly enjoy learning English, but as they reported elsewhere in the questionnaire, they learnt it to a large extent effortlessly, often by playing online games or using the Internet. It might be hypothesized that if students acquired language to a large extent implicitly, they are less familiarized with effective studying techniques, but may have willingness or interest to learn. Those who acquired it through conscientious study might have taken liking to it, and consequently, would like to pass their interest and competence to others via the teaching profession.

Additionally, due to the fact that the students have unclearly specified vocational goals, the students may be less knowledgeable or aware of the ways which help to pursue them. Table 2 shows a summary of the students' beliefs as to what leads to success in a FL.

As can be seen, about one third of the students (33%) believe that systematic learning/working hard is sufficient to realize their learning and vocational goals. What is more, nine students (14%) believe that graduation from English studies will help to attain these goals. Another five students believe that the key to success is enrolling in additional FL courses. These choices were supported by 53% of the students, and indicated their belief in external factors aiding the process of a FL. The opinions relating to students' autonomous learning were solitary, and denoted such aspects of learning as: going abroad temporarily (14%), looking for an opportunity to communicate (8%),

reading in English (6%), and watching films (6%). Furthermore, there were only singular innovative ideas about ways of improving their FL command, such as learning words and structures daily (3 persons) or even finding a job where English is required (2 persons) as a means of improving their command. Clearly, these students felt that the best way to improve language skills is to use it frequently (e.g., as when abroad) and for communicative purposes (e.g., at work). It is quite surprising that the learning opportunities provided through various tools on the Internet remained unnoticed. Only one person pointed to the possibility of using various social networking sites as a means of using a FL.

Table 2
*Ways of pursuing the aspirations (N = 63)*

| Ways of pursuing the aspirations | Count | Percentage score % |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Systematic learning / working hard | 21 | 33 |
| 2. Graduate from English studies | 9 | 14 |
| 3. Going abroad for a while | 9 | 14 |
| 4. Looking for an opportunity to communicate | 5 | 8 |
| 5. Enroll on FL courses | 5 | 8 |
| 6. Reading in English | 4 | 6 |
| 7. Watching films | 4 | 6 |
| 8. Learning words and structures daily | 3 | 5 |
| 9. Study more on my own | 2 | 3 |
| 10. Find a job where English is required | 2 | 3 |
| 11. Revising L2 material | 2 | 3 |
| 12. Study more on my own | 2 | 3 |
| 13. Reward myself for achievements | 1 | 2 |
| 14. Increase L2 contact | 1 | 2 |
| 15. Pursue interests | 1 | 2 |

Most of the ways of pursuing aspirations relate to formal instruction which may also indicate the locus of control is placed outside the learner. This further indicates the learners feel less responsible for their own achievements, do not believe in their self-efficacy, and delegate the responsibility for achievement to their teachers. Thus it may be speculated the learners are not autonomous and cannot pose clear goals themselves. Consequently, learning a foreign language seems for them to be an infinite process.

One could wonder what the reasons for this situation might be: the long-lasting experience of authoritarian education which does not foster autonomy, or lack of out-of-class experiences for learning the language. Indeed, in the times of the Internet and availability of online resources, the lack of its use is surprising. One would expect greater autonomy and a clear pursuit of the goals by university-level students.

The use of metacognitive or affective strategies which would indicate one's autonomy is also scarce. Single metacognitive and affective strategies are mentioned as indicated in statements number 9, 11, 12, 13; however, they were reported only by a few students. This finding may indicate that despite many years of school education, the students still do not know how to learn a language.

Additionally, it was observed that learners who have already achieved a higher level of L2 proficiency (B2) had more concrete visions of what they would like to achieve, and had more goals and more ideas of how to pursue these goals. Similarly, respondents of the teacher specialization group had more accurate plans (students 1–33) than students of the translation group. It may be thus concluded that those who chose a teaching specialization had clearer language learning goals at the start of the study in a higher education institution while those who chose the translation specialization were looking to gain additional time before making a final vocational decision. This stand-point can be illustrated by statements of selected students of the translation group:

(S 39) *I am planning to complete BA and MA studies. If this does not teach me the language, nothing will, not even working abroad.*

(S 61) *First I would like to learn English perfectly and then go abroad, so as to use it skillfully.*

From such statements it is evident that the learners have little knowledge of language learning processes and that they allocate teaching-learning effectiveness to educational institutions rather than holding it in their own hands. This finding is quite surprising, as it is already known from research in language pedagogy that what is most conducive to language learning success is going abroad and intensive communicative language use (Muñoz, 2012), and not school instruction. The role of implicit language acquisition remains unnoticed. This may be due to the fact that contrary to the initial assumption, not many students in the cohort studied have the experience of living/travelling abroad (only one person was born in the US). As it was found from other responses, in this environment, the goal of many of those young people is to emigrate and stay abroad for good. Therefore, language learning is for these

young people a tool which will help them realize an important life goal. They learn the language in order to go abroad, and not use an opportunity to stay abroad to improve language skills. Language learning has a purely instrumental function. It is also possible that the perception of available life choices is limited. The students may observe their own cognitive and social constraints which do not let them to either dedicate a sufficient amount of time to the study, or use extracurricular resources. As the following student says,

> (S 41) *When I entered the university I thought I would become a world-famous translator, but now when I understood how difficult it is, I decided to learn the language in order to go abroad. With FL knowledge, it will be easier for me to get a well-paid job, and not e.g. of a cleaner.*

A student from a low socio-economic background says:

> (S 37) *I spend too much time helping my parents on a farm, and when I have time, I often do everything to put it off. I have poor concentration, I forget about motives that direct me towards FLL.*

This finding leads us to answering the third research question, which aimed to identify social variables which might determine these rather low educational and vocational aspirations.

In a vast number of sociological studies, SES is measured as an important social variable influencing L2 outcomes as it enables access to a better quality of education, learning materials, cultural resources, etc. In this study, however, the SES has not turned out to be a significant variable. The mean score was 5.6, which denotes a quite high level of satisfaction with one's socio-economic status (on a 7-point scale) and indicates that none of them felt any financial inadequacies. For this reason, on the basis of this scale, it was difficult to single out higher or lower SES students. The reason for that might be that SES was measured as a self-assessed feature, and therefore the respondents may not have been willing to reveal their true SES as it is a delicate issue. Secondly, it is possible that the students' perception of their status is quite positive as there are no huge disparities in the level of income among the students, and the sense of well-being is always measured against others. Therefore, SES defined as a self-perceived feature has not turned out to be a sufficient/objective descriptor of the ability.

However, when we look at other distal variables, such as parental level of education and parental FL knowledge, they can tell us more about the SES of the learners. In the cohort studied, practically no parent knew a FL at a high level (B2). Only in one case both parents were reported to speak English at an intermediate level (B1). In all other cases the parents were re-

ported to have no knowledge or very little (only rudimentary) knowledge of a FL (Mean: 0.8 for mothers and 0.4 for fathers). The same can be observed in reference to parental education (Mean 2.7 on a 5 point scale). The majority of parents had a vocational or intermediate level of education. There were only a few parents, and these were usually mothers, who had a higher level of education.

This data indicates that having taken into account the distal factors of the family environments from which the students came, the group studied was rather homogenous, that is, they came from low socio-economic families in which parents had a lower level of education and no, or only a rudimentary level of, FL knowledge. Yet, it is known from other research in educational psychology that in postmodern society, it is particularly the parental level of education and the type of occupation that define the SES of the family. Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero (1979) developed scales which describe social structure in postmodern society according to occupations. According to them, the occupations which guarantee the highest SES are: intelligentsia, top corporate management, and large-scale businessman, referred to as service class, while the occupations which denote lower SES are: skilled workers, unqualified manual workers, rural workers, and farm owners. Taking this classification into account, it can be judged that the participants come from lower SES backgrounds. Furthermore, parents of the students studied had little knowledge of a FL themselves, thus were unable to help their children in language learning at school, and/or inspire them for autonomous language development. It may be, therefore, concluded that the impact of low linguistic/cultural capital is evident in the fact that the majority of students ascribe their language success to the teacher and school, or to staying abroad, which, however, was undertaken for work, and not leisure purposes. This view is further illustrated by factors to which the students attributed their current FLL level (Table 3).

As can be seen in Table 3, approximately one third of the students ascribe their current FL success to visits/staying abroad. Yet, as is known from previous analysis, this experience of living/working abroad has not turned out profitable to all of the students. Despite this opportunity, many still believed that attending formal instruction is necessary (cf. Table 1). The reason for this may be twofold: the amount of contact with a FL may have been varied and therefore not everyone profited with high proficiency. Secondly, it may have been the case that some of the students first had a FL experience, and having realized their deficiencies, opted for more systematic formal instruction. As one of the students confessed,

(S 21) *In order to improve my language skills I enrolled to the language studies. In my opinion this has increased my liberty at using English. It's a key element that has influenced my knowledge of English.*

Table 3.
*Student attributions to FL competence*

| Sources of language learning success | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Visits abroad; opportunity to practice L2 | 18 | 29 |
| 2. Watching cartoons/films/TV series | 10 | 16 |
| 3. Willingness to communicate with foreigners/foreign friends | 6 | 10 |
| 4. Choice of the subject of study/profile class | 6 | 10 |
| 5. Work (e.g., restaurants) with an opportunity to speak L2/work abroad | 6 | 10 |
| 6. Total time of learning spent at school | 6 | 10 |
| 7. Interest in the humanities/languages | 5 | 8 |
| 8. School success (in comparison to other school subjects) | 5 | 8 |
| 9. Listening to L2 songs | 4 | 6 |
| 10. Playing computer games in L2 | 4 | 6 |
| 11. Private tuition | 4 | 6 |
| 12. Reading in English | 3 | 5 |
| 13. Early start in a FL | 3 | 5 |
| 14. The teacher (bringing additional materials) | 3 | 5 |
| 15. Willingness to get to know other cultures | 3 | 5 |
| 16. Communication in the Internet | 2 | 3 |
| 17. Very good teachers in primary school (raising motivation) | 2 | 3 |
| 18. Extended program of FL at school (additional classes) | 2 | 3 |
| 19. Living in the English-speaking country | 2 | 3 |
| 20. Practice at speaking with foreigners | 2 | 3 |
| 21. Exchange programmes with schools from abroad | 1 | 2 |
| 22. Requirement to take a FL at school exams | 1 | 2 |
| 23. Participation in EU progams (free courses) | 1 | 2 |
| 24. Help of a family member | 1 | 2 |
| 25. Self-study | 1 | 2 |
| 26. Attending language courses | 1 | 2 |
| 27. Parents' motivation | 1 | 2 |
| 28. *Lack of opportunity to speak L2 with foreigners | 1 | 2 |
| 29. Hard work in preparing for exams/tests | 1 | 2 |
| 30. Internship abroad | 1 | 2 |
| 31. Ambition to improve (due to poor school results) | 1 | 2 |

Another group of students are those who may not have had a chance of going abroad but found opportunities of learning the language in the home country, arousing their own interest in languages and looking for contacts with foreigners (points 2, 3, 5). However, such self-motivated students constitute only about 10% of the whole cohort. Student 29 illustrates this type of experience best:

(S 29) *I have been always interested in the English language (mainly its melody). I began learning subconsciously with listening to English songs and printing out the lyrics so as to know precisely what they mean. The other factors that influenced my FLL are the willingness to communicate with foreign friends; I have always admired people who could speak this language fluently (teachers, translators), and looked up to them.*

Yet another group of students are those who were successful at language learning at school and therefore chose it as a subject of university study. They attended a special profile class with an extended program of English (position 4), or they ascribe it to their overall time spent at school and relative success in language learning as compared to learning other subjects. All other events took place sporadically as they were mentioned by individual students.

## Discussion

The above study showed that not all young adults, despite studying in a higher education institution and having chosen a prestigious subject to study (English philology), have high educational and vocational aspirations. Only 25% point out to clear language learning goals, like achieving native-like competence or learning other FLs (24%). As regards the choice of career, only about one third of the students are positive about their future occupational careers, such as the teaching (21%) or the translation profession (13%).

These findings are quite surprising as in socio-pedagogical literature, young adults, when choosing higher educational institutions, have already well crystallized goals. Yet, the above findings negate this fact and show rather low, or no, educational and vocational aspirations. This finds reflection in a rather relaxed approach to studying in general, and a lack of study skills.

One reason for that fact may be that the students studied have low academic self-schema/self-efficacy beliefs due to low parental involvement at earlier stages of education, and often low language achievement (B1 level). This may denote also that they come from families of low cultural and linguistic

capital. Thus the FL level they have achieved so far can, to a large extent, be attributed to effortless acquisition rather than to a deliberate plan and investment or conscientious study. The reason they chose to study a FL was probably caused by the fact that they found it easy and enjoyable to learn the language in school times.

Another reason, which may overlap with the former, is the fact that in times of crisis of neoliberal economy, young people may be less positive about their future and hesitant about what profession to choose. There are few stable jobs available and a higher level of education no longer guarantees access to secure and better-paid jobs. Consequently, young people additionally opt for 'wait time.' The availability of a free higher education institution in their neighborhood allows them to obtain a diploma, and possibly to gain some academic and/ or professional skills which may turn out useful in the job market. But first and foremost, it allows them to delay making decisions about their vocational future. This often results, in Brzezińska's words, "delayed adolescence" (Brzezińska, Ziółkowska, & Appelt, 2016). Young people have a chance to prolong their carefree years and postpone the time of making crucial life decisions, such as starting up a family or setting on a career path, while having a good excuse of study. It can be further speculated that had a higher education institution not been freely available in their environment, these young people would not have chosen to study and would have started to work earlier, possibly in some manual jobs. This provides the justification for the existence of such higher vocational schools in rural areas. The role of educational institutions is to make up for the deficiencies in cultural capital that a family has not been able to cater to, and provide learning opportunities for ambitious individuals.

On the other hand, it is speculated that those young adults who have higher educational and vocational aspirations, if only they can afford it, decide to study in bigger cities, where more educational and vocational opportunities can be found. It is also possible that higher educational aspirations are characteristic of gifted learners who have internally placed locus of control and who thus feel more responsible for their learning, and set clearer goals. This issue, however, would require further investigation.

# Conclusion

The above study was carried out in a specific social environment, characterized by low socio-economic status, low level of parental education, including FL knowledge. These facts denote that learners can rely on the family environment for educational support to a lesser extent than learners

from big city schools, where they receive more support from both parents and peers. Ambitious adolescents coming from less favorable environments can always look up to their privileged friends, aspire for similar status and seek ways for its achievement.

The homogeneity of the group studied is counterproductive as the young adults cannot learn about other career paths or ways to achieve them as they are all in the same boat. Emigration seems to be the only available choice in improving one's socio-economic status. For this reason, the role of school and teachers in awakening educational aspirations, as well as showing means of their realization is even more prominent in rural areas, in a considerable distance from larger educational centers. In a wider socio-political scale, there should be supportive education policies, for example via grants, which enable young people to pursue their aspirations.

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## Soziale Begrenzungen der Bildungsaspirationen beim Zweitspracherwerb

Z u s a m m e n f a s s u n g

Die Bildungsaspirationen werden meistens definiert als „Bildungsziele, die sich der Lernende setzt" (Trebbels, 2015:37). Diese werden häufig zum Gegenstand der psychologischen und soziologischen Forschungen, in Folge deren es u.a. festgestellt wurde, dass Aspirationen auf Bildung in späten Jugendjahren und /oder im frühen Erwachsenenalter entstehen und deren Ausrichtung und Niveau (hohes oder niedriges) durch soziale Umgebung des Lernenden (d.i. seine Familie, Altersgenossen u. Schule) gestaltet werden.

Der vorliegende Beitrag präsentiert die Ergebnisse der Qualitätsforschung, die unter 56 Anglistikstudenten einer der Berufsfachschulen in Südpolen durchgeführt wurde. Sie bezweckte, die Bildungsaspirationen der Studenten auf Englischerwerbung und die damit verbundenen Berufsaspirationen zu untersuchen. Die Ergebnisse zeugen davon, dass diese Aspirationen in den meisten Fällen nicht zu hoch sind, was mit sozialer Herkunft der Studenten begründet werden kann.

*Schlüsselwörter*: Fremdsprache, Jugend, Bildungsaspirationen, soziale Herkunft