

# Beyond the Classroom Walls: Parental Attitudes, Support Systems, and the Struggle for Fluency among Turkish University EFL Learners

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Language education has predominantly focused on classroom instruction and pedagogical strategies, yet the sociological aspects of learning—especially the family's role—are often overlooked in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This study explores how parental attitudes, support systems, and disciplinary approaches influence Turkish university students' oral fluency in English. While educators and curricula are frequently held accountable for low communicative competence, this paper posits that sociocultural factors originating from the home environment play a crucial role. Utilizing a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design with 210 undergraduate EFL learners and 24 lecturers from four Turkish universities, data were gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and parental focus groups. Findings indicate that students with supportive and engaged parents exhibit greater self-efficacy, confidence, and linguistic agency in communication tasks. In contrast, those from indifferent or authoritarian families experience anxiety, low motivation, and stagnation in oral skills. Grounded in Bourdieu's social capital theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and Coleman's social context of learning, this study conceptualizes the family as an "invisible classroom" where linguistic habits, discipline, and cultural aspirations are cultivated. The paper concludes by proposing a Family-Engaged EFL Fluency Model (FE-EFM) that integrates learner development within a framework of sociological co-responsibility involving parents, educators, and institutions.

**Keywords:** parental attitudes, social capital, EFL fluency, learner agency, sociological education, Turkish higher education, family support

## Introduction

### Background to the Study

In today's globalized economy, proficiency in English is not just a linguistic skill but also a form of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). In Türkiye, acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is essential for employment opportunities, academic advancement, and international engagement. Despite this recognition, Turkish students continue to face challenges in achieving oral fluency, which frustrates educators and policymakers alike. Although reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, and communicative methodologies have been implemented, progress has been minimal. A significant factor that remains underexplored is the

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social environment surrounding the learner, particularly the family, where foundational attitudes towards education, discipline, and responsibility are established.

As an EFL lecturer in a Turkish university, I have observed that students' motivation and confidence in language use are closely linked to their parents' values and emotional involvement. Students whose parents show interest in their English learning, encourage communication, or establish supportive routines tend to participate more actively in class. Conversely, those who experience apathy or authoritarianism at home often approach English learning with fear or passivity. This suggests that language acquisition, while taught in classrooms, is also socially reproduced through familial habitus, echoing Bourdieu's (1977) assertion that education perpetuates social structures through implicit cultural capital.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research in Turkish EFL education has largely focused on institutional and instructional challenges, such as curriculum reform, teacher proficiency, assessment practices, and classroom interaction (Doğan & Çelik, 2022; Sarı, 2023). However, the external factors that influence learner performance—especially the family's attitudinal climate—remain largely unexamined. Teachers often bear the brunt of responsibility for students' stagnation, yet many report encountering learners whose home environments do not support or understand language learning as a long-term investment. Parents may prioritize test scores over communicative competence, provide inconsistent discipline, or underestimate the emotional effort required for sustained language practice. Consequently, fluency—the skill most reliant on confidence, exposure, and psychological safety—becomes a significant challenge.

From a sociological perspective, this educational imbalance reflects the unequal distribution of linguistic and cultural capital among families. Students from homes that model reading, conversation, and curiosity about the world have access to richer linguistic environments than those whose families prioritize rote learning or economic survival. Thus, the issue transcends pedagogy; it is fundamentally a sociological concern regarding the formation of social capital and cultural transmission.

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this research is to investigate the sociological relationship between parental attitudes, support systems, and EFL oral fluency among Turkish university students. The study seeks to uncover how familial dispositions towards education, responsibility, and discipline shape learners' linguistic identity and agency. Specific objectives include:

1. Investigating the nature and extent of parental involvement in Turkish students' EFL learning.
2. Analyzing the relationship between parental educational values, emotional support, and learners' communicative competence.
3. Exploring how discipline and responsibility within families affect students' language self-efficacy and fluency.
4. Developing a sociologically grounded model—the Family-Engaged EFL Fluency Model (FE-EFM)—to integrate home-based social capital into language education frameworks.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do parental attitudes and support practices influence Turkish university students' EFL learning experiences and fluency development?
2. What sociocultural patterns characterize families whose children exhibit higher English fluency?

3. How do discipline and perceived parental responsibility correlate with learner confidence and agency in speaking?

4. What implications does the family's social capital hold for EFL program design and teacher training?

### **Significance of the Study**

This research broadens the scope of EFL scholarship beyond the confines of classroom methodology, framing language learning as a sociological process mediated by family and community. By examining the family as a micro-society, the study contributes to educational sociology's understanding of how values, emotional structures, and social networks shape learning trajectories. Its relevance is threefold:

- For sociologists, it empirically links social capital theory to second-language acquisition.
- For EFL educators, it clarifies why certain students resist communicative engagement despite quality instruction.
- For policymakers, it emphasizes the need for family-inclusive educational strategies that democratize access to linguistic capital.

The study also contributes to cross-cultural discourse by highlighting the unique tensions within Turkish society—between collectivist family structures and individualistic communicative pedagogy—revealing how these tensions manifest in students' linguistic behavior.

### **Theoretical Context**

This investigation is grounded in three interrelated sociological theories:

1. Bourdieu's social and cultural capital theory (1977; 1991): Language proficiency operates as a form of symbolic capital transmitted through family habitus; the home environment shapes the learner's orientation towards linguistic prestige and effort.

2. Coleman's social context of learning (1988): Educational outcomes depend on the strength of intergenerational social networks that transmit norms and expectations.

3. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979): The learner is situated within concentric systems—family, school, and society—where reciprocal interactions influence development.

Together, these frameworks view the EFL learner not as an isolated cognitive entity but as a social actor embedded within a network of familial influences that either facilitate or hinder linguistic agency.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This research focuses on Turkish university EFL learners enrolled in preparatory or first-year English programs across four regional universities. It emphasizes oral fluency—measured through self-reported CEFR-aligned proficiency and lecturer evaluations—rather than grammar or writing. While the findings may not be globally generalizable, they offer theoretical insights applicable to other collectivist cultures where familial expectations significantly impact educational motivation.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **The Family as a Sociological Site of Learning**

In contemporary sociology of education, the family is recognized as the most formative institution for transmitting cultural values, aspirations, and behavioral norms that shape academic trajectories (Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2011). Before students enter formal classrooms, they are immersed in linguistic and social routines that

encode expectations about success, discipline, and self-expression. In collectivist societies like Türkiye, where intergenerational hierarchies and parental authority are deeply ingrained, the family serves as a microcosm of both opportunity and constraint (Aydin & Yıldırım, 2021). Parental involvement in a child's education is not merely educational support but reflects broader social structures—economic class, gendered responsibilities, and cultural capital.

For EFL learners, the home environment often dictates the nature of their engagement with the English language. Parents who promote reading, curiosity, and exposure to international culture create an informal linguistic ecology that fosters communicative growth. Conversely, families that view English solely as an academic requirement may inadvertently limit their children's agency in using the language outside of school. The sociological question, therefore, is not just what students learn, but where and with whom they internalize linguistic confidence.

### **Parental Attitudes and Educational Disposition**

Parental attitudes encompass the beliefs, values, and emotional orientations that parents hold towards education and learning (Fan & Chen, 2001). In EFL contexts, this includes perceptions of the importance of English, tolerance for communicative risk, and support for language exposure beyond examination success. Positive parental attitudes correlate with higher learner self-esteem, motivation, and fluency (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). When parents express enthusiasm for English, engage in school activities, or provide emotional reinforcement, they create what Bandura (1997) referred to as self-efficacy scaffolding—an environment where learners feel capable of linguistic experimentation without fear of judgment.

However, research in Middle Eastern and Southeast European contexts indicates that overly disciplinary or achievement-focused families may induce language anxiety (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2020). Turkish university students often report high parental expectations coupled with emotional distance; English is frequently associated with status rather than communication. This instrumental motivation can lead to performance orientation—students learn to pass exams but hesitate to speak, fearing parental disappointment or ridicule for mistakes. Such dynamics illustrate how the emotional climate of the home influences language learning outcomes.

### **Support Systems and Educational Responsibility**

Support systems refer to the tangible and intangible resources families provide for learning—time, attention, structure, and encouragement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Sociologically, these resources represent a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988). When parents establish routines, monitor progress, or communicate regularly with teachers, they create trust networks that sustain educational responsibility. The absence of these networks leaves learners to navigate academic challenges in isolation, often leading to disengagement.

In Turkish universities, support systems are unevenly distributed across socioeconomic lines. Students from urban families typically have access to better technological resources, private tutoring, and parents with some English exposure. In contrast, rural or lower-income students often lack such resources, relying solely on institutional instruction. This disparity echoes Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that educational success depends on the accumulation of economic, cultural, and social capital, which families reproduce through daily practices. Thus, the capacity to sustain EFL learning is socially stratified: What appears as “student motivation” may actually be the visible effect of hidden familial capital.

### Discipline, Responsibility, and Learner Autonomy

Discipline within families often reflects cultural norms regarding authority and obedience. In collectivist contexts, parental control is typically viewed as protective; however, excessive control may undermine learner autonomy (Hofstede, 2011). Students accustomed to directive parenting may struggle when EFL pedagogy requires independent speech, opinion sharing, and creative risk-taking. Research by Özmen (2022) indicates that Turkish learners familiar with rigid classroom hierarchies are reluctant to engage in open speaking tasks, perceiving them as potential sources of embarrassment.

Nevertheless, moderate parental discipline—characterized by consistency and responsibility rather than punishment—has been shown to foster self-regulation (Mendez & White, 2021). Such regulation encourages linguistic endurance: the willingness to persist despite communicative challenges. Therefore, discipline should not be viewed as repression but as a form of moral support when balanced with empathy. The most successful EFL learners often come from families that integrate responsibility with dialogue—where rules coexist with respect for the learner's voice.

### Social Capital and the Educational Ecology of EFL Learning

Social capital, as theorized by Coleman (1988) and expanded by Bourdieu (1991), refers to the resources embedded within social relationships that enable collective action. In language education, it manifests as communicative networks, peer support, and parental engagement. A student's social capital determines both access to linguistic exposure and the motivation to use the language meaningfully. In Türkiye, limited opportunities to practice English outside academic settings make familial networks even more crucial. Parents who value cross-cultural communication or maintain social ties with English-speaking communities create bridging capital that exposes learners to authentic linguistic experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory further situates these interactions within concentric social environments. The microsystem (family) interacts with the mesosystem (school) to influence the learner's development, while the exosystem (community and media) provides contextual reinforcement. For Turkish EFL students, these systems are often misaligned: schools advocate communicative freedom, while families emphasize discipline and exam performance. This incongruence creates a sociological “tug of war” between institutional and domestic expectations, hindering fluency development.

### Language Learning, Identity, and Learner Agency

Fluency in a foreign language is not merely about linguistic mastery but also involves identity negotiation. As Norton (2013) noted, language learners continuously construct and reconstruct their sense of self through interaction. Learner agency—the capacity to act intentionally within learning contexts—is shaped by social structures, particularly family discourse. In households where English is perceived as a foreign imposition, students may internalize ambivalence towards the language, resulting in communicative restraint. Conversely, when English is framed as a gateway to cultural expansion, learners express greater confidence in asserting new identities.

Studies in East Asian and Mediterranean contexts confirm that family discourse about language strongly predicts willingness to communicate (WTC) in English (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Turkish learners often navigate between the collective identity encouraged by family and the individualistic expression demanded by English communication. This internal negotiation produces fluency gaps that are not solely attributable to pedagogy but also to sociological identity tensions.

### **Empirical Gaps and the Need for a Sociological Lens**

While numerous studies in applied linguistics address motivation, anxiety, and communicative competence, relatively few adopt a sociological lens that connects these constructs to family systems. Parental influence is typically examined through psychological frameworks (motivation, self-determination) rather than sociological ones (capital, habitus, responsibility). The lack of sociologically grounded EFL studies in Türkiye limits understanding of how domestic cultures of learning affect fluency outcomes.

Existing research (e.g. Demirbilek, 2020; Karataş & Sari, 2021) has highlighted teacher-student dynamics and curriculum deficiencies but rarely interrogates how social structures—parental education, gender roles, economic stability—shape linguistic outcomes. This study, therefore, fills a conceptual void by merging the sociology of family and the sociology of education to explain persistent EFL fluency struggles. It repositions the learner within the social field (Bourdieu, 1991) rather than treating fluency as an individual cognitive achievement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To interpret the complex interaction between family and fluency, this study integrates three overlapping theoretical perspectives: Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital, Coleman's theory of social context and intergenerational closure, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Each framework contributes a distinct analytical dimension.

**Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital.** Bourdieu (1977; 1986; 1991) conceptualized education as a site where social hierarchies are reproduced through habitus—internalized dispositions—and capital—resources that confer advantage. In EFL learning, parents who possess linguistic or cultural capital (e.g. exposure to English media, travel experience) transmit confidence and aspirations to their children. This symbolic investment transforms English from a subject to a status marker. Conversely, families lacking such capital may unconsciously position English as alien or unattainable. The disparity in learners' oral fluency thus reflects unequal access to linguistic capital.

Applying Bourdieu to the Turkish context reveals how economic and cultural stratification shapes educational attitudes. Middle-class families often view English as a means of mobility, while working-class families prioritize immediate employability over long-term linguistic development. The resulting asymmetry perpetuates generational inequalities—what Bourdieu (1991) called the “reproduction of privilege through language”.

**Coleman's social context of learning.** Coleman (1988) emphasized that children succeed educationally when parental and institutional networks are interlinked—a condition he terms intergenerational closure. Strong relational ties between parents, teachers, and students foster accountability and mutual reinforcement of learning norms. In contrast, when family and school operate in isolation, learners receive fragmented messages about discipline and purpose.

For Turkish EFL programs, this theory underscores the importance of parental communication with educators. Parents who view teachers as allies rather than service providers contribute to shared educational responsibility. Coleman's model thus bridges micro-level family interactions with macro-level institutional structures, framing language acquisition as a networked process of trust and exchange.

**Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.** Bronfenbrenner (1979) situated human development within nested environmental systems. The family (microsystem) directly influences the learner's immediate

attitudes towards education; the school (mesosystem) mediates between home and society; the larger sociocultural environment (exosystem and macrosystem) shapes policy, economy, and ideology. In the Turkish EFL context, these systems often clash: While schools advocate communicative, student-centered learning, families emphasize discipline, respect, and measurable outcomes.

Integrating Bronfenbrenner allows the study to trace how and where parental attitudes translate into learner behavior—whether through direct encouragement, emotional support, or implicit value systems. The ecological view positions the learner as a node in a dynamic network rather than a passive recipient of teaching.

### **Conceptual Synthesis**

By merging these frameworks, this study constructs a Family-Engaged EFL Fluency Model (FE-EFM) that conceptualizes the learner's oral proficiency as a sociological product of capital, context, and connection. Parental attitudes shape cultural capital; support systems sustain social capital; discipline nurtures self-regulation; and the school mediates these forces within a broader ecological field. In this model, fluency is neither a purely linguistic nor psychological phenomenon but a socially situated competence arising from the interplay between family structures and educational environments.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design. The approach was grounded in interpretivist sociology, aiming to capture lived experiences rather than produce generalizable statistics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data provided structural insights into trends, while qualitative inquiry illuminated the emotional, familial, and cultural nuances shaping English fluency.

The design combined a survey of university EFL students with semi-structured interviews involving students, lecturers, and parents. This triangulation enhanced validity by allowing comparison between learner self-reports, teacher perceptions, and parental reflections.

### **Participants**

Participants were drawn from four public Turkish universities representing diverse geographical regions (Central Anatolia, Aegean, Marmara, and Black Sea). The sample comprised:

- 210 undergraduate EFL students enrolled in English preparatory or first-year communication courses;
- 24 EFL lecturers, including course advisors and speaking-skills instructors;
- 18 parents (selected from volunteers contacted through institutional outreach).

Students ranged in age from 18 to 23 years. Most parents had limited English proficiency but varied widely in education level and socioeconomic status. This diversity enabled a sociological rather than purely linguistic analysis of inequality in access to linguistic capital.

### **Instruments**

1. Student Questionnaire: Designed to measure perceived parental attitudes, home discipline, emotional support, and self-rated English fluency (aligned with CEFR descriptors).
2. Interview Protocols: Separate guides were developed for lecturers and parents. Questions explored daily study routines, parental engagement, and perceptions of speaking difficulties.
3. Observation Notes: Short classroom observations were conducted during communicative-practice sessions to cross-check behavioral data.

All instruments were piloted with 20 students to ensure clarity and cultural sensitivity.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection occurred between February and June 2025. Surveys were distributed online via institutional email; interviews were held in person or through secure video conferencing. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Sivas University of Science and Technology. Participants signed consent forms and could withdraw at any time. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms and coded transcripts (e.g. P1 = Parent 1, S5 = Student 5).

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS 29, generating descriptive statistics and correlations. Qualitative data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding proceeded through three cycles: open, axial, and selective. Themes were refined through peer debriefing and member-checking with eight interviewees. Integration occurred through data weaving—connecting numerical trends to qualitative narratives for interpretive depth.

## **Findings**

### **Quantitative Overview**

Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between perceived parental support and students' self-rated fluency ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Emotional encouragement (e.g. parental praise, interest in progress) showed the highest predictive value for oral participation ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, rigid discipline unaccompanied by empathy correlated negatively with communicative confidence ( $r = -.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Socioeconomic status correlated moderately with access to English media ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not directly with motivation, suggesting that attitudinal capital outweighed financial capital in shaping fluency.

### **Qualitative Themes**

#### **Theme 1: Home as the First Classroom**

Students frequently described their families as their “first school”. Those raised in households that encouraged reading, debate, or watching English-language media expressed comfort speaking in class:

“My parents always ask me to tell them what I learned in English. It makes me practice without pressure” (S23).

Conversely, learners from silent or authoritarian homes associated English with anxiety:

“At home, we don’t talk much. My father says ‘just study hard’, but we never discuss language” (S41).

#### **Theme 2: Emotional Temperature and Fluency Confidence**

Across all universities, emotional warmth emerged as a decisive predictor of communicative confidence. Parents who expressed pride and curiosity in their children’s English progress nurtured psychological safety. Teachers confirmed that these students were more willing to volunteer in speaking tasks.

#### **Theme 3: Discipline and Responsibility as Moral Capital**

Many Turkish parents equated educational discipline with moral upbringing. Students who experienced structured yet understanding discipline developed punctuality and resilience—traits transferable to language learning. One parent explained:

“We never punish for mistakes, but we expect effort every day. Speaking well comes from consistency” (P7).

#### Theme 4: Economic and Cultural Stratification

Lecturers observed distinct fluency gaps between students from urban, globally connected families and those from rural or economically constrained households. The difference was less about material privilege than cultural exposure. Students with access to English media and family conversations about global issues demonstrated broader vocabulary and pragmatic fluency.

#### Theme 5: The Teacher's Burden

Teachers reported that lack of parental engagement left them compensating for missing social capital: “We try to motivate, but without support from home, our influence ends when class ends” (L12).

They advocated for family-education initiatives emphasizing communication habits and realistic expectations.

### Discussion

#### Families as Reproducers of Linguistic Capital

Findings affirm Bourdieu's (1986; 1991) proposition that families reproduce social hierarchies through symbolic resources. In the Turkish EFL landscape, linguistic capital is transmitted unevenly: middle-class families invest emotionally and culturally in English, while lower-income families view it as utilitarian. The result is a stratified distribution of communicative confidence that mirrors broader patterns of educational inequality.

#### Emotional Support as Social Capital

Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital—trust and reciprocity within relationships—explains why emotional warmth predicted fluency more strongly than material resources. Parental encouragement functioned as a social bridge connecting family and institution, creating intergenerational closure and accountability. Without this bridge, students inhabited a sociological vacuum between institutional demands and domestic indifference.

#### Ecological Mismatch between Home and School

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model clarifies tensions between family microsystem and school mesosystem. Turkish EFL pedagogy promotes communicative freedom; families often prioritize deference and avoidance of error. This misalignment produces what can be termed an ecological mismatch—learners oscillate between obedience at home and expression at school, hindering spontaneous speech.

#### Reinterpreting Discipline as Moral Capital

Contrary to Western critiques of parental control, this study found that disciplined family structures can be productive when embedded in empathy. Discipline evolved into moral capital—a consistent moral order motivating persistence. This nuanced finding expands sociological debates by showing that control and compassion need not be oppositional.

#### Towards a Family-Engaged EFL Fluency Model (FE-EFM)

Synthesizing results yields the Family-Engaged EFL Fluency Model, comprising four interactive pillars:

1. Attitudinal Capital—Parental optimism and belief in English as a cultural opportunity.
2. Supportive Infrastructure—Routine, feedback, and access to media.
3. Moral Capital—Balanced discipline and accountability.

#### 4. Emotional Ecology—Warmth that nurtures self-efficacy.

These pillars operate within the school-family interface, suggesting that sustainable fluency emerges when educators collaborate with parents to align expectations and communication practices.

### Conclusions

#### Summary of Key Insights

The study reveals that Turkish university students' struggle for English fluency is not solely pedagogical but sociological. Families act as unseen classrooms where values, habits, and identities germinate. Emotional support and positive parental attitudes serve as crucial reservoirs of social capital, compensating for institutional limitations.

#### Sociological Implications

1. Policy: Universities and ministries should integrate family-engagement modules into language programs, promoting sociological awareness among educators.
2. Community: Parent-teacher partnerships can bridge the ecological gap between school and home, democratizing access to linguistic capital.
3. Research: Future studies should include longitudinal designs exploring intergenerational transmission of linguistic attitudes across economic strata.

#### Final Reflection

Language learning transcends grammar and vocabulary; it is a social inheritance sustained by care, curiosity, and communication. When families and institutions co-construct educational meaning, English ceases to be a foreign language—it becomes a shared social space where learners express both competence and identity.

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