

TEACH MY CHILDREN ENGLISH: WHY PARENTS WANT ENGLISH TEACHING FOR THEIR CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper describes parents' reasons for sending their children to an English language course, their expectations from the English language instruction, and the disadvantages they perceive in getting their children to learn English at their early ages. A small-scale exploratory survey using questionnaires was conducted among 46 parents whose children learn English at a private course. The results indicate that the majority of the parents are generally aware of the practical values of providing English instruction for their children and hardly perceive any disadvantages in this early English learning. Also, they expect English instruction to enable their children to perform the four language skills, notably speaking. Implications for the young learners' first language as well as the teaching of young learners are then presented. These may offer teachers, parents, and other researchers some important points to consider.

Keywords: parents, young learners, English language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The interest in teaching English to young learners has been gaining momentum in the past few years. This growing trend is apparently attributable to parents' ideas about why learning English for their children is important as well as what they expect from the teaching institutions. Up to now, to the writer's knowledge, studies that look into the realm of these parental factors in teaching English to young learners have yet to arrive at a general picture of such parental expectations and reasons. This paper draws on the results of a small-scale survey to sketch out why some parents of young learners of English want their children to study English, whether they perceive any disadvantages of such early foreign language instruction, and what they expect the teaching institution to equip their children with.

RESPONDENTS

The small-scale survey involved 46 parents. They were randomly selected from a larger accessible population of 52 parents whose children (aged from 6 to 12 years) were studying English at private course “V” in Malang. Questionnaires were used to elicit their responses regarding the reasons for sending their children to the private course to study English. To ensure the consistency of the responses within the time and resource constraints, both open-ended and closed-ended questions were asked. There were a total of 2 closed-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions. The former allowed the respondents to give more than one answer. The responses are summed up in the following tables:

Table 1. Parents' reasons for getting their children to learn English

Reasons	Number of respondents (in %)
To help them understand English lesson at school; to earn good grades at school	83.33
To get them to like English	72.22
Because it is easier to learn English at a young age	72.22
To make them able to communicate in English	38.89
To equip them with the necessary skills in the future	27.78
To provide them with longer time to learn English	16.67
To get them to know English as early as possible	11.11
To enable them to widen their perspectives	5.56

Table 2. Parents' expectations from the private course

Expectations	Number of respondents (%)
Make them able to speak English	77.78
Help them understand English lesson at school	66.67
Make them able to read English	61.11
Make them able to write in English	61.11
Make them able to listen in English	61.11
Get them to like English	55.56

Table 3. Parents' view about the disadvantages of early English instruction

Opinions	Number of respondents (%)
There is no disadvantage in learning English at a young age	100

PARENTS' INSTRUMENTAL MOTIVATION

Today's trend among parents is summed up by Ellis (2000) in the following remark:

Ten years ago many parents perceived language learning at school as an additional subject which was 'fun' for their children. Parents now recognize the important role a foreign language can play in their child's global development as well as the instrumental role it can play in their future at school, at university and in the work place.

In line with the statement above, most of the parents (83.33% in Table 1) state that they send their children to take extra English course because they want their children to keep up with English lesson at school, and by doing so, earn good grades for the subject. The same response also figures prominently (66.67%) in Table 2, which sums up their expectations from the private course where their children learn English. They apparently fear that without extra English course, their children would have problems

of understanding the lesson from school. Thus, the decision to have their children learn English is still prompted by an instrumental motivation. But, this kind of motivation is somehow understandable in the light of the possibility that schools may demand too much too early from the children. The types of classroom exercises, such as rote memorization of word lists, abstract rules, and analytical, discrete-item tests may well lie beyond the children's current abilities to grasp, resulting in learning difficulties, which in turn force their parents to seek assistance from the private course.

While many have believed that young learners are advantaged over adults in acquiring a language, the reverse may be true as far as classroom language learning is concerned. As Brown (1994:90) aptly points out, "children in classrooms may have some difficulties in learning a second language." It is not surprising, therefore, to see private teachers give extra guidance, including lots of drills and accuracy-focused exercises, to young learners. The necessity to help these young learners cope with English lesson from school may limit private courses in providing experiential, more message-focused language lessons for the children.

School administrators should take this tendency into consideration by adjusting the school-based English lesson so that it would accord with the nature of young language learners. Madrid (2001) argues that a suitable English lesson for children should center on children's power of imitating utterances, curiosity for new language items, high capacity for memorization, low inhibitions, and little fear of making mistakes. Songs, dances, stories, and physical response activities would cater for this set of predispositions.

AWARENESS OF ADVANTAGES OF EARLY ENGLISH LEARNING

Quite a substantial number of the parents (72.22% in Table 1) are apparently aware of the advantages of learning English at a young age. No attempt was made to explore this response through an interview to find out whether the parents have based their responses on the theoretical arguments for learning a foreign language early in life. This seems to be a remote possibility, given that none of the respondents is a language teacher who would otherwise have kept himself or herself updated on language learning theories. The fact that they are cognizant of such advantages is, therefore, quite interesting. Their belief corresponds with theoretical claims of language learning at a young age. Met and Philips (1999) reviewed a body of research on brain development and came into the following conclusion:

This body of research is interpreted to suggest that the innate wiring of the brain favors early development of both first and additional languages. A judicious interpretation of brain

development research would lead to the conclusion that the young brain may well be predisposed to acquiring language(s).

In a similar vein, Madrid (2001) argues that children have a set of characteristics that facilitate the learning of another language besides their mother tongue. These include few inhibitions, low level of anxiety, higher enthusiasm in game-like activities, and higher skills in imitating models and patterns.

Another view critically argues against the common belief that younger learners learn better, saying that the learning situation is not ideally suited to young learners with the above properties. The popular belief that “younger learners learn better” is likely to hold in a situation where they can be exposed to rich-input environment which gives them ample opportunities to interact with other fluent speakers in order to satisfy real communicative needs (Rixon, 2001). A typical EFL situation, such as the one in Indonesia, lacks these supportive conditions, and instead puts the young learners in a classroom situation with low exposure to the target language, and with interactions mostly with their teacher in order to satisfy some equally limited communicative purposes. It is the awareness of this situation which, as the previous section has discussed, apparently prompts the parents to send their children to English private courses for additional assistance with their school-based English lesson.

Another possible reason why the parents are eager to have early English instruction for their children is the awareness that learning a foreign language takes a long time. They may reason that since English is not used widely in daily public affairs, there should be longer time for their children to study the language in order to master it. Indeed, Haas (1998:89) agrees with this tendency as he states the following:

It takes a long time to gain proficiency in a foreign language, particularly when it is learned in a school setting. Therefore, the earlier students start the higher the level they are likely to achieve.

PARENTS' OPINION ABOUT THE MOST LANGUAGE SKILL

DESIRED

As many as 77.78% of the respondents (see Table 2) state that they expect the private course to enable their children to speak English. Speaking seems to be the most desired language skill that these parents deem important for their children. This might stem from their awareness of many job vacancies, which explicitly state “good command of spoken English” as one of the requirements. They apparently believe that the most perceivable

evidence of one's English mastery is her ability to speak English well. And indeed, a number of language educators have agreed on this tendency. Brown (1994), for instance, states that speaking and listening are the most often used skills in the classroom. Situations outside the classroom, as Rivers (1981) argues, demand the mastery of those two skills much more than they do of reading and writing. Huda (1990) carried out a survey in secondary schools in eight provinces in Indonesia, which reveals that parents and students alike put a great importance on the speaking skill. Following this result, Crocker (1991:140) notes that this tendency seems to be commonplace among Asian countries, notably Indonesia, Hong Kong and Singapore. Crocker (1991:140) also states that while the respondents apparently agree that reading skill is undeniably useful for higher learning, they "tend to think in terms of ultimate uses, i.e. employment, for which an ability to speak the foreign language is seen . . . as being of higher value and importance". In short, as Florez (1999) contends, speaking, along with listening as its concomitant skill, is vital for a language learner to be able to function fully in an English-speaking ambience.

While stating that speaking is the most expected language skill that the course should equip their children with, the parents apparently put no less importance on the other language skills. As Table 2 indicates, many of them (61.11 %) state that the English course should also teach their children to read and write in English. This opinion was clearly prompted by their awareness that their children will later have to go to universities, in which reading and writing skills are of paramount importance.

PARENTS' VIEW TOWARD THE DISADVANTAGE OF EARLY ENGLISH INSTRUCTION

It is interesting to note that none of the parents surveyed perceives any disadvantages of early English instruction for their children, as Table 3 shows. Against the backdrop of the diminishing prestige of Indonesian as the national language (see Gunarwan, 2000; Rosidi, 2003), this opinion reflects the fact that the parents are either oblivious of the warning or that the intention to equip their children with competitive English language skills overrides the need to make these young generations maintain the national language. A rather different picture emerged from a similar survey conducted among parents of Spanish learners of English (Montalvo, 2003). It reveals that some of them are aware that their children's learning of English may risk losing their native language. Montalvo (2003:14) conjectures that

The parents who believe that there are no disadvantages show pride in their child's language ability. Even if it means

English dominating more than Spanish, they approve this because of the opportunities they may be able to accomplish. The parents that mention the possibility of losing their native language take much pride in their background.

Judged from their responses, Indonesian parents—at least those who were involved in the survey—do not seem to feel the same worry regarding the fate of Indonesian language. Whether this indeed represents a nationwide standpoint of Indonesian parents is yet to be proved through a more rigorous survey involving more parents from different social classes.

A recent review on the role of English in shaping sociocultural identities (Lie, 2003) implies that along with the pervasive pressure of globalization, local identities are giving ways to more cosmopolitan life styles, including the use of English as a means of communication. A host of actual cases presented in the review suggests that Indonesians are voluntarily yielding to the so-called linguistic imperialism by happily embracing the use of English for various purposes at the expense of their own national language. Lie (2003:191) attributes this to the desire of the middle and upper classes of the Indonesian people to identify themselves with English-speaking cultures. If this is true, it should explain why the respondents of the survey do not discern any adverse effect of their kids' early English learning on the maintenance of their national language and, more importantly, on their pride toward their own national language. They may have unconsciously looked down on the national language, giving it a lower status than the English language, which, like it or not, opens the ways to decent jobs and global life styles. Given the pace and the pervasiveness of the globalized culture, there is a question of whether the parents' standpoint will in the long run lead to a loss, or at least a minimized role, of the national language among the next Indonesian generations. Walqui (2000) addresses the same concern from the learners' viewpoint:

Students whose first language has a low status vis a vis the second may lose their first language, perhaps feeling they have to give up their own linguistic and cultural background to join the more prestigious society associated with the target language.

Thus, the current situation described above embodies two important characteristics: first, the parents' increasing eagerness to get their children to start learning English at a young age; second, the increasing pride of using the global language in order to satisfy daily communicative needs which could otherwise be met by the national or even the regional language. Are these the symptoms indicating that the linguistic imperialism is likely to prevail in Indonesia? Time will tell.

An alternative explanation concerning the parents' response about the possible threat to the national language may not be so much about pride as it is about practical considerations. Knowing that their children are taught Indonesian lesson much more intensively at school than they are taught English, they may think that English instruction in no way will push the Indonesian language out of their children's linguistic repertoire. They would probably argue that since Indonesian is much more widely used for daily communicative purposes, this language will still be used among the young generations despite their increasingly favorable attitude toward English. In line with this, Rixon (2001) concludes from a survey that within a busy school curriculum, the time available for English lesson is limited. There has not been any study highlighting the same issue in Indonesian context, but suffice it here to say that the limited hours for English lesson at school may have made the parents favor extra English lesson without necessarily discerning a threat to the national language.

CONCLUSION

This paper is based on the result of a survey aimed at identifying some parents' reasons for having their young children start learning English, and their expectations from such early English instruction for their children. In addition, it also reports the parents' opinion about any disadvantage they might perceive in the early learning of English. Three main points figure prominently in their responses. Firstly, most of them send their children to a private English course in order to help these youngsters keep up with English lesson at school. In addition, they also believe that learning English at a young age is more favorable in terms of ease. Secondly, they expect the private course to teach their children how to speak English. Finally, they are of the opinion that learning English at a young age does not incur any disadvantages on the part of their children.

Some factors are suggested that account for the opinions. Firstly, the parents are inclined toward satisfying instrumental motivation of having their children earn good grades at school, which in turn give them a competitive edge for winning good jobs in the future. Secondly, they apparently know well that learning a foreign language takes a considerable amount of time, and therefore can lead to mastery only if learning starts at an early age. Thirdly, they believe that their children's command of English language can be convincingly demonstrated by their speaking skill. Finally, their attitude toward a possible threat to the national language may be caused either by their desire to have their children be identified with English-speaking cultures, or the belief that the use of Indonesian language

has been so firmly embodied in their children that early learning of English will not in any way endanger the national language.

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