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Challenges to Parental Involvement in Children's ESL Learning

Abstract

This paper highlights the findings from the research question, namely: "How do the participating parents work with their children at home?" This is a qualitative study involving seven participating parents of struggling readers of ESL in a Malaysian primary classroom. Interviews were conducted to obtain information from the participants and data was inductively analysed encompassing a co-construction of meaning between the participants' expressions and researcher's own interpretation. Two major themes emerged from the data namely involvement; and challenges. In this paper, the results of one of the main themes developed, that is challenges will be discussed. This paper focuses on three types of challenges reported by the participating parents of this study which are "parents and family factors", "school and teacher factors" and "child factors". The findings of this study suggest some implications for the system surrounding struggling readers in the Malaysian context including strengthening home-school relationship and establishing educational program for parents.

Keywords: ESL Classroom, ESL Students, Low-attaining Students, Parental Involvement, Challenges to Parental Involvement, Malaysian Primary Classroom.

Introduction

A disjunction has been reported between, on the one hand, parents' consciousness of the importance of their involvement, and its potential to have a substantial impact on children's achievement in English learning (e.g. Al-Mahrooqi, Denman & Al-Maamari, 2016) while, on the other hand, their conscious that their participation remained inadequate to deliver those benefits (e.g Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2016). Thus, while parental participation is advocated, it is equally important to recognise how the limitations of parents while working to support their children's ESL literacy learning pervades throughout the entire involvement (Ruzane, 2013). This is because not all parents possess similar resources and opportunities to participate in their children's literacy learning, and many also face real barriers that make it less possible for the parents to get more actively involved in their children's learning (Adheisat, 2014). The challenges that have been reported by parents themselves related to ESL

learning and literacy are therefore discussed further in this paper.

Literature Review

Studies such as that of Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) have reported the challenges that parents face in relation to their participation with children's language learning, while parts of the study by Ruzane (2013) also highlight the challenges facing parents. Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) investigated the barriers to parental involvement in children who studied in an Irish medium primary school. These parents utilised English as their first language and sent their children to Irish immersion schools. From interviews conducted with the parents, the authors generated a few main themes in relation to issues facing the parents in respect to participating in their children's Irish language learning, namely parents and family factors, child factors and school and community factors.

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In respect to the parents' factor, parents reported a lack of proficiency in the Irish language, and resulting lack of confidence in helping their children learn language. Their lack of proficiency also led to emotional issues including feeling anxious and embarrassed to speak with their children's teacher. The parents further felt uncomfortable when going to school premises when surrounded with more fluent Irish speakers. Parents also articulated their worries about using inappropriate Irish in the presence of their children. Parents felt that their lack of capability undermined their authority as parents, especially when their children corrected their flaws in using the language. Parents were also concerned about teaching their children words and grammar incorrectly. Another aspect stated in regard to the parents' factor was practical issues related to time constraints, child management and conflicting commitments. Parents reported being time-poor, and thus having virtually no opportunity to participate in their children's learning. This circumstance was reported by a single mother with three children and other working mothers. As such, these parents were unable to spend time getting involved with their children's school activities. Due to their busy life, parents perceived their 'rushing' as a barrier to them speaking Irish with children at home. Another aspect of the challenges discussed in Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) was in respect to family factors. It was reported by some parents that since family members, such as their spouse and other children, were not proficient in the language, they did not want to exclude those family members in conversation and therefore resorted to using English. Additionally, the parents also reported that other children who attended an English medium school reacted negatively when the parents conversed in Irish with the child who attended an Irish medium school.

In relation to children's factors, Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) also commented that some parents with good Irish proficiency found it challenging to promote Irish to their children at home because the children did not respond well. According to the parents, their children preferred to use English at home because Irish is associated with school and not with home or play. Additionally, the parents seemed to have given up in their attempts to get involved in their children's learning, for example, by supporting children with reading, due to their perception of their own limitations. The parents thought that they were unable to support children correctly and thus were not useful to them. Specifically, they reported that their children laughed at them when they made mistakes as they were better in reading than their parents. Another issue in relation to the children's factor was a lack of invitation from their children. The parents mentioned that as their children got older they were less expressive in asking for help

from their parents, and parents did not increase their participation by approaching students directly to offer help. For instance, one parent stated that her child did her homework all by herself and never asked for help.

School and community factors were perceived as another challenge by the parents involved with their children's Irish learning (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013). One aspect discussed by the parents was that of lack of resources and inability to locate the resources, specifically reading materials. Parents also commented that they could not find engaging and suitable interactive online learning resources to encourage their children's learning. Other parents also searched for classes to learn Irish so that they could become better involved with their children. They expected that the community and school could play a role in helping them by providing such classes.

Another aspect under school and family factors is that of parents' disappointment with the level of support received (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013). It was reported that some parents had attended Irish classes organised by the school at some point in time. Based on their experience, it was discovered that the class size was too big, resulting in difficulty in asking questions. Parents also noted that they were turned off from attending classes due to an unfamiliar regional Irish accent used by the teachers. Additionally, the classes also did not meet the parents' expectations. One final aspect with regards to school and family factors was a lack of invitations or opportunities for involvement. Parents commented that invitations for parents to help in the classroom had decreased compared to previous occasions. Other parents stated that they wanted to help in the classroom but that they did not know how to get the message across to the teacher. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler commented on the issue by stating that "the knowledge of parental involvement and its influence on educational outcomes for children is likely to be enhanced as researchers and policy makers' focus on the benefit it may create for all involved in the process – child, parent, school, and the community as a whole." (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

The parents in the study by Ruzane (2013) admitted that they had problems in assisting their children's learning since English was not their first language. Their inability to read and understand English hindered their capacity to help. For instance, while the parents were trying to assist their children in doing homework assigned by the teacher, parents could not understand the instructions. They felt that the teachers should understand their conditions and provide easier instructions or clear examples in their children's homework so that they could better assist their children. Some parents reported that they were

unfamiliar with the methods utilised by the teachers nowadays, reducing their confidence in helping their children. For example, phonics is utilised in reading but parents did not know about phonics instructions. One parent also stated that he neither knew the right words to use nor the content of the lesson. Another parent mentioned that their child's English was better than theirs. Thus, the parents asked their other children to help the child who required assistance in learning. Several parents mentioned that they felt that the teachers knew best about their child's education and that they did not want to meddle with the teachers' duty. The parents in this study hoped that the school would provide extra teaching sessions for their children as the teacher knew their children better in this respect. Some parents also hoped that the school could provide an English course for them and expose them to the teaching methods employed at school so that they could better support their children's learning at home.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) work, which was later revised in Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler and Hoover-Dempsey (2005), offers an articulation of the factors that influence parental involvement in children's education, this time coming more from parents' viewpoints (Tekin, 2011). According to Walker et al. (2005), the three main factors are:

- a) "Parents' motivational beliefs" including "parental role construction and parents' sense of efficacy" in respect to assisting children to do well at school,
- b) "Parents' perceptions of invitations for involvements with others", including opportunities and requests from children, their school and their teacher to get involved in children's learning.
- c) "Parents' perceived life contexts" including their time, energy, skills and knowledge that could be invested for students' learning.

In short, the reviewed literature revealed that, there were some challenges that the parents faced while taking part in their children's education.

Data Collection Method

This study involved seven parents of struggling readers who studied in Year One in a primary school in Malaysia. Before informed consent was sought, the participants were provided with the Participant Information Sheet that elaborated about the research objectives and their rights to withdraw at any point of time without having to notify the researcher. This study employed interviews as the main method to obtain information from the participants. The interview

began by asking about the participants' demographic information including the participants' age, place of birth, marital status, number of children, educational attainment and history of employment. After that, questions related to the ways parents got involved with their children's ESL learning were also posted to the parents. The interviews were carried out in Malay, the National language or the home language of the participants. A recording device was utilised to record the participants' responses after informed consent was sought.

Data Analysis

The interview recording was transferred onto laptop from the recording device. I listened to the recordings repeatedly and closely as recommended by Silverman (2011) to become familiarised with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I transcribed the data by using an unfocused transcription technique to highlight the deliberate meaning of the data as I did not intend to examine the voice intonation or nonverbal interactions of the research participants (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Once transcription was completed, I read my entire data line-by-line a few times so as to become familiar with the material. After that, I started analyzing my data. I looked for codes and situated the selected codes into categories. Then, I placed the categories into themes. I reread the themes, categories and modifying them by referring to the literature and finalized the themes and categories for findings presentation. I also translated the data in the first language of the participants (Malay) into the language of this research report (English). I decided to do the translation after the data had been transcribed, analysed and interpreted "to stay close to the local context and present the accurate meaning of the participants' views" (Salleh & Woolard, 2019). I adopted both literal and free translation, as explained by Birbili (2000). When using literal translation, the researcher translated the data word-by-word which was perceived as fair to what was spoken by the interviewee. I found that word-by-word translation could not be applied to the whole data, however: it might confuse the readers as it decreases the text's comprehensibility (Bilibi, 2000). As such, I also applied another type of translation, namely free translation that led me to write a 'read well' text.

Findings

Parents and Family Factors

The findings of this study revealed that all the participating parents experienced time constraints as they had long, tiring working days or worked on shifts. In other words, they had a hectic life schedule every day because they had many

responsibilities to shoulder. For example one participating parent mentioned,

"Our time together is so restricted. We pity our child but that is something that we cannot help. We start to get ready for work at 5 o'clock in the morning and finish very late. It is a tiring and long day and when we are home we are just looking forward to sinking into our bed."

Another parents also stated:

"Time spent with my son is scarce because of the long working hours. I also work on shift. It is just difficult. I need to work, and I don't think I will either quit my job or change workplace. I feel comfortable with my job now although it was tiring."

Besides that, a few parents also had to manage their child by themselves since their husband was unwell or had passed away. For instance, one participating parent said,

"I am very busy and have to do so many things every day. As a single parent I need to take care of all my children's education and health conditions as well as needing to earn a living. Life is difficult, and I need to face problems in life all by myself."

Another parent also mentioned:

"I would have the reading activities with Imran only when the time permits and, certainly, it is not frequent. I need to look after my husband, do the household chores and run some errands. That's the reality even though I stay at home and am not working outside. I have a busy life every day."

Another challenge reported by all participating parents included a lack of knowledge in English. One parent said:

"I am not good in English. Usually my husband will take in charge. He knows English a little more than me"

Another parent said:

"I am not very good in English, I want my son to be better in English than me"

Some parents also added about their lack of knowledge and confidence regarding the best ways to help their own child and about suitable and helpful materials. For example, one parent stated:

"I am not very sure but I think books which have pictures and words might be helpful. One picture and one word so my child can imagine the meaning of the words"

Another parent stated,

"I am not very confident to teach her. I don't know a lot about English."

School and teacher factors:

Additionally, they did not know where to get assistance regarding these issues. Moreover,

none of the participating parents indicated that they had a chance to talk to their child's English teacher at school.

One parent said:

"When I talked to his class teacher, his teacher said that he progresses slowly in his learning. But I don't know how he has been doing in English specifically."

Other parents said:

"I talked to Qila's class teacher once, but I never talked to her English teacher so did not know about her progress in ESL learning"

"I talked to my son's class teacher when I collected the government fund from the school. It was a quick meeting. She said my son is okay except for the loud noise he sometimes makes in the classroom. So I took her words, okay means okay. I never know about his performance in English. I never met the English teacher too"

All participating parents also never received any invitation from the school to get involved with their children's ESL learning. They were also poorly informed regarding how their child was assessed at school and regarding the way in which English was taught.

Homework was perceived as insufficient by all of the parents too. For example, one parent mentioned:

"I read with him when he does homework. But it is very seldom that he received homework, unlike Mathematics."

Another parent stated:

"I found that not much homework in English was given to her, very seldom, I think."

In addition, the parents talked about the schoolbooks that were found uncovered or unused by the teacher despite many months of the school term having passed, and they mentioned the need for ESL teachers to use English more than the native language in the ESL classroom. They did not know the best way to approach their ESL teacher to talk through these matters, however.

Child factors:

Apart from that, most of the parents also reported that they faced problems arising from their children's temperament, including when encouraging the child to learn English. The children seemed reluctant to be assisted by their parents in learning English and doing homework. The children also seemed to feel that they have more knowledge than their parents, and looked down on their parents 'teaching'. For example, one parent stated:

"Ali is very certain with his demands. If I reject his requests he will cry his eyes out. For example, if he wants to play with the key and I refuse to give him, he will start to cry, he is very

sensitive and sulks easily. Thus I don't want to push him too much in his studies, including helping him with learning English."

Another parent mentioned:

"It is sometimes challenging. She just refused to listen to us sometimes. She does not believe what we said, and attempted to teach us instead."

The other parent said:

"I want to appear significant to her. The issue is when I listen to her reading let's say simple words in her homework, she was the one who taught me. She left me exasperated."

Discussion

All the participating parents in this study talked about the challenges that affected the way they worked with their children, with these coming from themselves, the school and teachers and their children. In terms of challenges from the parents themselves, one of the most stated challenges mentioned by the parents was they did not have enough time to spend with their children due to work and life commitments. They did not have much time to get involved in the ESL learning activities. For example, many of the parents had tiring days because they had to work for long hours every day, which was also found both in previous local studies (Emmanuel, 2000; Majid et al., 2005) and international studies (Forey et al., 2015; Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013; Lee, 2010). Besides that, two parents in this study also had to manage their child by themselves, in one case since the husband of one participant was unwell and in the other case because he had passed away. Both of these parents admitted that they had a hectic daily life schedule since they had to shoulder many responsibilities. As a result, they could not afford to spend much time with their children to help with the ESL learning.

Other challenges reported by all of the participating parents were little knowledge of the target second language being learned by their children (in this study, ESL) which resonated with past local studies (Emmanuel, 2000; Majid, et al., 2005) and internationally (Forey et al., 2015; Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013; Li, 2004; Rodriguez, 2005). Three parents talked about their insufficient understanding of the best way to facilitate their children and the suitable materials to use with their children. They also did not know where to ask for help (Emmanuel, 2000). Surprisingly, none of the participating parents talked about financial problems to provide their children with English materials, in contrast to some parents in the study by Emmanuel (2000) and Lee (2010). Another category of challenges was related to the teacher and school. This study discovered that all the participating parents felt

that they did not have the opportunity to meet and discuss their children's learning with their ESL teacher. Further, they were not invited to participate in the meetings with the English teachers or to participate in activities related to their children's ESL learning at school. It was also apparent that the parents were little knowledge of the education system, for example in terms of what and how the children learned English and how their children were being assessed (Rodriguez, 2005).

Apart from that, the amount of homework set was deemed as insufficient (Li, 2004). This greatly affected those parents who wanted to engage in their children's learning since they were mostly dependent on homework as the learning resource. Besides that, one parent complained that the schoolbooks were left unused by the teacher and another parent stated that the teachers needed to use English as the medium of instruction in the ESL classroom. To aggravate this further, the parents were also unaware of how to meet and talk to the subject teacher about those concerns and problems.

Challenges in the category of children, however, mainly regarded the way the children perceived the parents' capacity. Children seemed to be doubtful about their parents' ability to help them in English (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013). Additionally, all participating parents confided that their children's temperament was also challenging (Forey et al., 2015; Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013; Li, 2004; Rodriguez, 2005).

The challenges reported in this study can be viewed from the model of parental involvement as explained by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), which was subsequently revised in Walker et al. (2005). The authors highlighted that factors such as parents' beliefs about their role as parents perceived life context and invitations from children, school and teacher can influence parental participation in their children's learning.

In this study, the extent and frequency of involvement were influenced by parents' perceived life context (Walker et al., 2005) which seemed to be a significant aspect affecting those parents' involvement. Due to the parents' perceived English proficiency, available time and energy, the findings suggest that parents were unable to engage actively or consistently in their children's learning.

Parents also had constraints in knowledge, time and energy. Parents lacked time to spend with their children due to the nature of the parents' job. They also still lacked sufficient confidence about the knowledge they had and about the best way to assist their child. Parents' life contexts and can further explain why the parents did not really know what the best learning resources were that would help their children.

Walker et al. (2005) also stated that invitations from school or teachers would

influence the involvement of the parents. In this study, the parents perceived that they struggled to understand the school system, particularly the way their children were assessed. They were also unsure about their children's ESL performance at school and were confused by aspects of the teacher's instructional practices such as the unused schoolbooks and the instructive language applied in the ESL lessons. Besides that, the parents did not receive invitations to meetings or activities related to their children's ESL learning. Moreover, the parents did not know how to talk to the relevant ESL teacher. The findings suggest that there was a lack of communication between parents and teachers. It can be predicted that parental involvement would be more evident if invitations from the school or teachers were made more available for the parents. When the two ties are not strong, as it seems here in the lack of communication between parents and teacher, children's learning development could be hindered.

In addition, invitations from children were also a factor that determined the involvement of the parents in this study. A few parents' reported that they felt that their children undermined their ability to assist them in English. Many of them also felt that their children always gave excuses during study time. Such factors seemed to limit parental involvement in their children's ESL learning. This discovery speaks to Walker et al.'s (2005) proposition that parental involvement is also influenced by children's requests and the opportunities that the parents have to interact with their children.

Conclusion and Implications

Parents in this study have reported circumstances that impeded their ability to participate more in their children's ESL learning. The challenges came from the parents themselves, from the school and teacher and from the child. The findings of this study suggest that the home-school relationship needs to be strengthened and reinforced. Although such a partnership has been in place in Malaysian schools for many years, in my opinion a 'true' understanding of the concept and a 'true' implementation is still in its infancy, and normally restricted to the PTA, parent-teacher meetings or raising funds for schools, which is usually undertaken annually (Harji, Balakrishnan, & Letchumanan (2016). I would therefore like to draw upon the suggestions put forward by Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) regarding how parents can be supported to get involved with their children's ESL literacy learning. Based on Epstein's (2001) six typologies of parental involvement, Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) propose several ways in which parents of children whose first language is not English can be

facilitated. These recommendations are adapted to suit the needs of struggling readers in the Malaysian context. The suggestions include:

1. Helping parents with parenting skills and with ways to establish a home environment that supports the learning of ESL reading;
2. Establishing two-way communication to inform parents about school programmes and students' progress in ESL reading;
3. Getting parents involved as volunteers or audiences in teaching episodes in the classroom;
4. Generating realistic ideas on how parents can get involved with their children's ESL reading activities at home, including suitable books needed for children;
5. Getting parents to be more involved in school decision making through the PTA; and
6. Cooperating with relevant parties, such as non-government organisations, to support school ESL reading programmes, including support for parents.

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