

Learning Through English Language in Early Childhood Education: A Case of English Medium Schools in China

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Abstract

In China the English medium schools are now mushrooming and many parents send their children at very early age. These schools enroll children of pre-school to school age to learn through English as foreign language regardless of their proficiency in the first language. Therefore the study aims at examining the learning English language as a foreign language in English medium schools (EMS) in China. Specifically the study intended: to identify reasons for parents sending their children in English medium school at early age; and to identify challenges facing parents sending their children to English medium schools. The study used qualitative approach. Random and purposeful sampling were used in getting sample for the study, the sampled size was 4 parents. The parents/guardians were interviewed in data collection. Results showed that majority of the parents sent their children to English Medium schools (EMS) for future mobility of their children in education sector which leads to economic sector, Happiness and better child care. On other hand of lack teacher competence in English language being a major challenge followed by the afraid of the children to foreign teachers, lack of conducive environment for English language practice time and cost. The government should give more consideration on training Chinese early childhood English teachers for their English medium schools.

Keywords: English Language, Early Childhood, English Medium School, Learning Language.

1. Introduction

The term language according to Algeo (2010) can be explained in different scenario, language as a system, as a vocal, as a conventional as human activity and as a communication. In this study has defined language as a system of communication based upon words and the combination of words to form sentences (www.uio.no/studier/hf/ikos/EXFACO). The communication said is of two categories these include; linguistic type of communication and non linguistic communication these are like; laughing, smiling and shrieking to mention few. English language therefore as far as the study is concern is said to be a cultural universe that is the most widely used language in the world (Wierzbicka, 2006). English language is a West Germanic language that originated from Anglo-Frisian dialects brought to Britain in the fifth to seventh centuries by Germanic invaders and settlers from what is now northwest Germany and the Netherlands (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_English). Recently English language according to Crystal (2003) is a global language as it develops roles that are recognized in every country. English language plays an official role or English language given a priority in a country as foreign language teaching, although the language might have no an official status. Then in a country where English Language plays an official role, English language can be used in media, government issues, to the court or laws and to the education system, for that nature English language become the second language, as a complementary of the first language or mother tongue (Crystal, 2003). For the education system, English language learners are learners in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English (www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ikos/EXFACO). In education therefore, language is the vehicle by which knowledge is jointly constructed, internalize and exchange verbal or symbolic utterances for communication (Mercer,1994). Thus, the present study is concern on examining the learning through English language in early childhood education particularly in English medium schools, these schools are the schools which use English language to teach academic subjects in countries where first language (L1) of the majority population is not English (Dearden, 2012). The study particularly explores factors which influence parents sending their children in those schools and identifying the associated challenges for sending children in English medium schools.

Since 1949, multilingual China's language education policy has evolved through three stages, culminating in the common language law of 2001. The first stage (1949–1957) was pluralistic, when Chinese education policy and minority language education policy were developed independently. The second (1958–1977) was integrationist, when Chinese was promoted to marginalize minority languages in minority schools. The third stage, from 1978 to the present, is bilingual /multilingual. Legislation has established *Putonghua* as the standard national language, with other Chinese dialects nonstandard and minority languages local. However, China's greatest challenge has always been policy implementation rather than policy making.

Early childhood education in China has made dramatic progress since the 1980s. In Tobin, et al. (2009), which studies across three cultures, the continuity and change across the systems of early childhood education are evident. The project report *Zhongguo Xueqian Jiaoyu Fazhan Zhanlue Yanjiu Ketizu* (2010) reflects upon the development of China's early childhood education and locates the current situation of the development of

early childhood education. The historical development of Chinese early childhood education indicates three distinct cultural threads, including traditional culture, communist culture, and Western culture, that have shaped early childhood education in China, as demonstrated in Zhu and Zhang (2008) and Lau (2012). Furthermore, currently, administrative authorities intend to establish an independent budget for the ECE field in order to support early childhood education in rural areas Zhao and Hu (2008). A higher quality of educational provisions for children living in rural areas will be another goal for the Chinese government. Many researchers have detailed the important issues of early childhood education, especially teacher education. The exploratory study in Hu and Szente 2010 (cited under Early Childhood Inclusive Education) has indicated that Chinese kindergarten teachers hold negative attitudes toward inclusion of children with disabilities, as they do not have enough knowledge and skills for working with this population. This indicates that kindergarten teachers need to improve their perceptions of children with disabilities. Furthermore, Gu (2007) has focused on the issues of new early childhood teachers' professional development and puts forward some feasible suggestions about how new teachers deal with key events in their everyday teaching practices. With regard to families' support of their children's early development at home, family education should be focused and the collaborative partnership between kindergarten and family needs to be enhanced. Teachers' attitudes toward family intervention are a vital aspect of teacher-family collaboration. Therefore, kindergarten teachers should support family members in their role as the child's first teacher and build collaborative partnerships with family, as presented in Ding (2007). Furthermore, kindergarten teachers should be considered as active researchers in children's role play. This supports the co-construction of their teaching knowledge in relation to children's initiation/subjectivity in role play Liu, et al.

The policies based on English language education in China have been inextricably linked to political, economic and social development in the country in the last 25 years. These policies have been shaped by the perceived goals and changing contexts of national development, while some policy swings have occurred over the years, the overall trajectory of the policy efforts has been characterized by the shift from an emphasis on the political ideological functions of foreign language education to a focus on its role in facilitating economic development and national modernization (Hu 2002a)

After the cultural Revolution, a political movement of ideological extremism started by Mao Zedong, came to an end with his death in 1976 the new Chinese leadership headed by Deng Xiaoping launched a national modernization program, English language Education figured prominently in the drive for modernization (Adamson and Morris 1977) Deng was convinced that advanced science and technology held the key to China's modernization and that China would need to access scientific knowledge base needed for national revitalization (people's Education Press 1986) Access to international know-how was, however, seen as being predicated on the availability of a large pool of personnel proficient in technological information. Thus to revive and expand English language and education became an integral part of the modernization drive (Hu 2005)

Then China made more emphasis on the strategic role of English in the modernization process, the projected demand for human resources with good proficiency in English and the marginal English provision in the school system made the reinstatement and expansion of the English language education a top priority on the national agenda of educational development. In 1978 the ministry of education issued the first unified primary and secondary curriculum and accompanying draft English syllabus in the era of modernization. The curriculum introduced foreign language education at primary 3 (Liu 1993) and allowances for the introduction of foreign language education at junior secondary in poorly equipped schools (HERC 1993)

Thus English language was recognized as an important tool for engaging in economic commercial, technological, and cultural exchange with the rest of the world and hence for facilitating the modernization process however it was the first and foremost of a vehicle for international class struggle and revolutionary diplomacy (CTMRI 2001:120)

Education in English is spreading around the world, not only as a foreign language subject, but increasingly as a language of learning as both local and international schools implement English medium teaching across the curriculum (Kirkpatrick 2011). In China the English medium schools are now mushrooming and many parents do prefer to send their children in those schools at very early age. The English early childhood education in China has been intimately influenced by the reforms and progress of Chinese politics, economy and social development. Currently, the Chinese government has shown interest in English early childhood education, implementing policies in the form of The Guidance for Kindergarten Education (Trial Version) in 2001 and The National Education Reform and Development of Long-Term Planning Programs (2010–2020) in 2010. It has been found that China's kindergarten education has dramatically changed since 1990. In recent years, various Western curricula and pedagogical models have been introduced to China. Many kindergartens have faced difficulties and challenges in adapting these models in their programs. Therefore, a heated debate about how the Western curricula can be appropriated in the Chinese cultural context has been initiated between early childhood researchers and practitioners. These schools enroll children of pre school to school age to learn through English which is a foreign language regardless of their country education language instructional policy. Therefore my

study intends to examine learning through English language in early childhood Education in Jilin province China.

2. Specific objectives

Specifically the study ought to:

- i. Identify factors influencing parents to send their children to English Medium Schools
- ii. Identify challenges facing parents sending their children into English medium Schools

3. Literature Review

This part will give an overview of the literature that relate with the study basing of the mentioned objective above. However, before that, the chapter will explain the meaning of early childhood and early childhood education

3.1. Conceptualization of the terms Early Childhood and Early Childhood Education

Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years old. A time of remarkable brain growth, these years laid the foundation for subsequent learning and development. Early childhood education is frequently applied to the education of young children from birth through eight or the type of education which takes place before formal education either at home, neighbor, child care centers, pre- school or nursery school, Montessori and other pre primary schools (EFA, Global Monitoring Report 2007). Quality Early Childhood Education (ECCE) helps a child develop their potential and promotes their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. (UNESCO 2012). Early childhood is a crucial time period for the development of children's mental functions. This development, including the emergence of language, motor skills, psychosocial, cognitive, and learning abilities, is now known to be greatly influenced by exogenous factors, including the educational environment to which a child is exposed during the first 6 to 8 years of life (Bowman, 2001).

It has been realized that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE or ECCE) can be a major input into a child's formal education. A number of studies links ECE to increases in school readiness for primary school, and it has been shown that school readiness is an important predictor of early school achievement (Forget-Dubois et al 2007). One review of 36 studies of ECE effectiveness in small-scale demonstration and large-scale public programs—each study comparing participants with a control group of non-participants—finds "overwhelming evidence that ECCE can produce great improvements in school success." (Barnett 1995, pg. 40) Thus Early child education in China is regarded as a preparation for primary education focuses on development of literacy and numeracy skills, social and emotional skills. Children who attend well-planned, high-quality ECE programs in which the curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling." (Bowman 2001, p. 7-8)

Apart from the international consensus that ECE will place children at a better starting point for primary education and give them a better chance for achievements later in life. In China the importance of ECE has not caught society's full attention. Lack of awareness and uncertainty over the influence of ECE on the school readiness of their children lead many parents to place ECE far from the top of their educational priority lists. Policymakers have also relegated ECE to a much lower position. While national legislation and municipal policy in some urban areas (e.g. Shanghai) have been passed in recent years to try to regulate teacher training and qualifications and to provide guidelines for high quality ECE classroom teaching (Li 2006), public policy has not been backed with public funding. The empirical evidence on the extent to which these guidelines have been put into practice remains to be seen.

The ECE situation is far worse in rural China. There is a gaping disparity in ECE between urban and rural areas. In urban areas approximately 95% of young children attend a preschool prior to starting primary school (Educational Statistics Yearbook of China). In rural areas, however, participation in ECE is only 50% (Sohu News 2007). Thus the present study investigated why 95% of children's parents send their children in early childhood English language education in Jilin province.

There is a gap in ECE care in China between urban and rural areas. One reason may be due to the differences in the institutional setting. Preschools in China are private. The government provides very limited support for preschools and ECE programs. There are no large-scale government compensation programs, to help families and their children gain access to preschool education. Therefore, in middle- and large-sized cities, where income levels are much higher than in rural areas, most families self-finance their children's preschool education. In addition, there is a lower availability of preschools in rural areas. Even if parents pull together enough money and decide to send their children to preschools, preschools are often not close enough to where they live to make it sufficient (Sohu News 2007).

3.2. Factors influence Parents sending Children in English Medium Schools and Challenges Parents Encounter Sending Children in English Medium Schools

Generally, There are factors that influence any language learning whether first, foreign language or second

language these include learner factors and learner process (Alcon and Guzman, 2000). Learner factors are like the age, motivation, anxiety, extroversion, aptitude, cognitive style and individual learning techniques. On the other side, learner's process can be explained into two perspectives that is linguistic grammatization and cognitive capability on what learner has to do to develop their second language (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). The learner factors discussed above, according to Paradis (2011), the factors for child language learning can be grouped into two categories; child internal factor and child external factors. The child internal factors have been explained above while the child external factors are the factors determine quality and the input the child receives in the targeted language. These include; the length of exposure, time in school, in the community and the home environment of a particular language. Moreover, the differences of language learning differ from one child to another depending on the mentioned and explained factors above. Language learning, English in particular is very important for the children who Learning through English (English medium Schools) although, some children do begin school without having been exposed to English language (Clark, 2009) while the ability to speak English in these schools is an important asset that children can use within the school environment. The above explained factors can also be challenges which encountered by sending children to English medium schools.

4. Methodology of the Study

This study used qualitative approach through structured interview to the parents who sent their children in early childhood English medium schools. The interview enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of issues as well as explore and discover new and important themes around the factors influencing parents to send their children to Learn English at early childhood age as well as the challenges faced by sending their children in learning English language at early childhood age. Themes were created based on the views of participants (parents). Random and purposeful sampling were used in getting sample for the study, the sampled size was 4 respondents. The interview sessions involved 1 parent who is an English medium childhood education teacher and other 3 parents who sent their children in English medium schools. Issues that were involved in the interview include, factors that driven parents sending their children learning through English, also the challenges parents encounter by sending their children into schools which English is their medium of instruction. Content and discourse analysis were employed in analyzing collected data.

5. Presentation, Analysis of the Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the results below involves the demographic characteristics of the respondents, the two objectives of the study these are; the exploration of the factors influencing parents sending their children in English medium schools and the second is on the identification of the challenges parents face by sending their children in English medium schools.

A total of four parents who sent their children in English medium schools in Jilin province were consulted in this study. Among these four, one was a male and three were female. Children of the parents who were interviewed were three girls and one was a boy, the three girl's one was three years old and the rest were four years old while a boy was four years old. In this group of participants two were blood parents and two were grandmothers of the children. All participants were native speakers of Chinese language except one can speak English and Chinese language. Each respondent were interviewed around 15 minutes to 30 minutes. The demographic characteristic shows that almost all Chinese parents know how to speak Chinese language.

5.1. Factors that influencing parents to send their children to English Medium Schools at early childhood age in China.

This subsection is discussing the factors that influencing parents to send their children to English Medium Schools at early childhood age in China with regard to the interviews done to some parents in Jilin province China.

The findings reveal that, all four respondents on the interview mentioned the education future of their children as a major factor for them to send their children in English schools to learn English language. They raised their concerned on the university entry requirement, The English is among the major requirement for the good university in china so they prepare their children to study at a good university in china, and also three of them touched the issue of studying abroad out of china where English is used so they prepare their children to study abroad. This is supported by the policy makers and implementation of the ministry of education (MOE) by introducing English as a first compulsory subject from primary school education to tertiary level of study MOE (2001) more recently in 2011 the ministry of education introduces the new version of English language curriculum standard. In this case most of parents do prepare their children for the future educations stages through English language and the parent demand and expectation on English education is high.

Respondent 4 said that;

“English now is common in china. I like my son to specialize in English and mathematics in future; I want him to

join higher education easily” (Respondent 4, June 17, 2016)

However the respondents marked their attention on the English language for communication worldwide in daily life, on this reason the respondents mentioned English as a public language that can allow anyone to go anywhere in the world for various purposes and for future employment opportunities for children. The use of English language is also stressed by Coleman (2010) that, in Switzerland English language skills are directly associated with labor market. The study also concur with the findings that by allowing individual to go anywhere, English language is seen as a key for unlocking development opportunities and accessing crucial information worldwide. The finding also show that English language prepare children to become worldwide persons in various field through English language as connectors with other people in the world. Respondent 2 said that;

“I want my daughter to use English for traveling various places in the world like Taiwan etc, communication in English is better because she can communicate with foreigners” (Respondent 2, June 10,2016)

The reason was supported by kingsley and Graddol (2012) in 2010, china Daily Article that, “More and more importance has been given to English after China carried out the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world in the late 1970s. And accompanying China’s rise on the world stage in recent years are growing connections of commerce and culture with other countries, especially those developed English speaking countries [. . .] The entire Chinese society attaches high importance to the English study as sometimes it even plays a vital role for a person who plans to pursue further education and seek a better career. There is no doubt that people who have a good command of English are more competitive than their peers”. (China Daily,2010a)

More over respondents 2and 3 reported that happiness of the children is one among of the factors that makes parents send their children in English medium schools, by believing that the English medium schools are the places where their children are taken much care in comparison to public schools. Respondent 2 argues that,

“I want to make my daughter happy with a good and careering school” Respondent 2, June 10,2016

The above findings are supported by the single child policy in China most of parents do care most their child every day and they invest much on them. With this policy parents always find a better place for their single child care and education.

The findings also found parents prestige as an important factor which influences parents to send their children in English medium schools in china. Respondent 1 said that;

I will be happy if my child will speak English very well.aim not happy when we are at home to see other children speak English well and my did not, know sometimes at home when the children play some parents ask the children to speak English I feel good if my child will speak English that why I send my child to know English. . .

(Respondent 1 June 1, 2016)

The parents feel happy and prestige if their children speak English language in front of other children. Again some parents prepare the future employment opportunity to their children by sending them to learn English at early stage. English is said to be additional advantage in china employment opportunity so by sending their children in English medium schools they add the advantage for their future children opportunity employment in the country and outside the country.

“also English is machine language in the working place many machines wrote in English so if you want to work you must understand English I do send my child to prepare him for his future life, In China there few opportunity for employment”. (Respondent 1, June 10,2016)

The above findings give the implication that, parents send their children into English medium schools due to educational reasons, , they expect that by studying in those schools their performance are going to be higher and make children competence in the world labour market and that makes the second reason be economic reason. Personal reasons as well as culture holding low position in the influencing of the parents sending children in English medium schools.

5.2. Challenges facing parents sending their children into English medium schools

With this era of globalization, most of parents do prefer to send their children in English medium schools to learn English for different reasons as explained in previous question. The parents still face some challenges in sending their children in English medium schools and the whole process of learning English language in china. This section discusses the different views from parents on the challenges they face on sending and learning English language of their children.

The most challenge is lack of conducive and opportunity environment for their children to speak and practice English language. All respondents admitted that, their children had few and no environment to practice what they have learned in the schools out of the schools environment. Since almost all family members do speak Chinese all the time at home and other places, so the child will not speak English at all. Due to this the children will have few addition of vocabulary and probably they can forget even the taught English words in the class. Also the children are too young to remember new English words without really practice of it. This can be supported by the author’s experience in china when he meet with children with their parents, the parents do encourage their children to speaks English with the author this shows that they lack opportunities for English

practice.

The question of English quality teachers, become another challenge for the parent in the sense that most of children do afraid for the foreign teacher, as a results they do not want to learn with them. Again the Chinese teachers are not good and conversant in teaching English language as a result most of the time there is a change of the teachers in schools which disturb the children trend of learning English language. The afraid may be is contributing with the children age and exposure. The above results differs with by El-fiki (2012), the study content that there three languages used in Egypt these include; Arabic as a first language, English as the second language and French or German as the their language however, English language teaching is done by competent teacher of, foreign /native English speaking character ' or locals with higher fluency in English. More emphasis was given by respondent 3 who was a grandmother of the child said that;

The child afraid the English teachers, because she still very young. Our family cannot speak English. No English environment for practice, her parents are very busy in such a way they cannot speak with their daughter (Respondent 3, June 17, 2016)

From the respondent 3 argument there is any element of time as challenge for parents on sending their children in English medium schools. Since they have no time to send and pick their children rather the grand parents do for them again they don't have time to speak English with their children.

Another parent's challenge mentioned in the interview is the cost though only one respondent mentioned it as a challenge to her because she has to pay for schools fee at the same time she has to pay for extra teacher to teach and practice English at home. She said this makes double cost in one thing. Respondent 1, she said that;

Also money is a problem because the fee of school is too expensive, sometimes I pay for private teacher to teach my daughter English at home. (Respondent 1, June 10, 2016.)

Generally in china cost (money) is not a problem in sending children in English medium schools like in any other developing countries.

On the explained challenges faced parents to send their children in medium schools almost every respondent mention the same solution on the lack of English environment for practice of their children, all admitted that they are hiring the extra English teachers to teach and practice at home, also some are thinking to send their children in speaking English countries for more practice.

The study had the limitations be taken into consideration when interpreting results. First, the study was limited to early childhood education through English language in two schools in Jilin province. Also, a limited population of 4 respondents participated in the study due to limited research time, fund resources. The author would therefore suggest that future researchers use larger samples for more in-depth data. However, because of the explained limitations, the study findings may not be generalized to all parents who sent their children in English medium schools in China. Again this study done in urban area there is a need of taking the same study in rural area. The findings from this study showed the possible factors and challenges of the parents that sent their children in English medium schools to learn English language.

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6. Conclusion

Education in English is spreading around the world, not only as a foreign language subject, but increasingly as a language of learning as both local and international schools implement English medium teaching across the curriculum (Kirkpatrick 2011). In China , parents do send their to acquire education through English medium schools due to the educational reasons which results into the economic factors. However, the educational provisional through English medium schools is much encountered by a challenge of having teachers who are not competent in speaking English, this give the implication that in the teaching and learning process there may be barriers of communication between a teacher and children hence poor education provision and future educational impact in China.

On the other hand, Language is the most powerful tool in the development of any human being. Every language has its own significance, culture and values in a society regardless of differences. Learning through English as a second language for a child has positive implication in the sense that, the child is connected with and contributes to their world. Therefore the first language (Chinese) has to be maintained for the purpose of preserving and respecting national language and its culture for a child identity.

7. Recommendations

The government should prepare the indigenous quality English teachers for the English childhood education and support the programme financially and materially because a pre-education school is a foundation of all levels of schooling and life of a human being in general. The government should allow other social network media from other counties in order to see what is going on worldwide, what other people look like in other countries. Language they use, the different culture.

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Biography

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