

Meetings Without Dialogue: A Study of ESL Parent–Teacher Interactions at Secondary School Parents’ Nights

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Abstract

Research in home–school communication has incorporated little, to date, about participation by English as a second language (ESL) parents. This article examines the communication processes between recent Chinese immigrant parents and Canadian teachers at secondary school Parents’ Nights. Drawing from observations of three annual Parents’ Nights, interviews with teachers and bilingual assistants who acted as interpreters for parents, and focus groups, this study revealed that teachers and parents held conflicting expectations of Parents’ Night. Such a mismatch of expectations could make their communications difficult even before meeting at Parents’ Night. The organization and delivery of Parents’ Nights made it clear that parent participation was strongly limited by a structure of power often faced by marginalized parents within the school space. The study suggested that it is important to move beyond cultural differences to understand actual ESL parent–teacher interactions and that using bilingual assistants or liaisons may help parents participate fully in Parents’ Nights or similar school events. Implications for the future development of ESL parent–teacher communication are considered.

Key Words: parents, participation, teachers, ESL, parent–teacher, interactions, communication, Chinese, immigrants, intermediaries, students, families, secondary schools, Parents’ Nights, dialogue, bilingual, liaisons, English as a second language, learners, assistants, cultural brokers, expectations

Introduction

The results of the 2006 Census of Canada showed that almost 6,293,000 people, or about one out of every five in the country, spoke languages other than English or French as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Furthermore, the Canadian K-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) population included **considerable numbers of students who were at risk of educational failure**. Watt and Roessingh's (2001) Calgary study reported a 74% dropout rate for the ESL high school population, and Gunderson (2004) found that 61% of the ESL high school students in Vancouver disappeared from their academic courses.

There are many reasons why ESL students may experience such a high rate of school failure. One reason is poor home-school communication (Ogbu, 1982; Osborne, 1996). Some research has suggested that whereas White, English-speaking parents are increasing their participation in their children's education, ESL parents' contacts with their children's schools are **actually decreasing** (Moles, 1993). Over the years, research has also repeatedly revealed that limited communication between ESL parents and teachers has been a serious problem confronting educators (Gougeon, 1993; Guo, 2006; Jones, 2003; Naylor, 1994); in fact, the Alberta Beginning Teachers' Survey (Malatest & Associates, 2003) indicated that the difficulties beginning teachers have in communicating with ESL parents are also shared by many experienced teachers (Faltis & Coulter, 2007).

Theoretical Background

Home-School Relations

The issue of communication between schools and ESL parents has moved to the foreground in British Columbia. The Vancouver and Richmond school boards have both been approached with proposals for the establishment of more traditional schools. Most of the parents supporting these proposals are recent Chinese immigrants who are unhappy with the work their children are doing in Vancouver and Richmond public schools. These parents asked for "teacher-led instruction, a homework policy, dress code or uniform, regular study and conduct reports, frequent meetings between parents and teachers, and additional extra-curricular activities" (Sullivan, 1998, p. 15). Some local parent groups and members of the media presented these parent-teacher differences as the familiar "traditional" versus "progressive" views of education, a contrast that does **not always fit local conditions**. The **traditional versus progressive** debate may have highlighted cultural differences between educational

views, but it overshadowed the importance of communication between teachers and ESL parents.

Teacher–parent communication is fraught with complexity for a variety of reasons. Communicating with parents whose first language is not English and whose children are struggling academically adds another dimension to the interaction between home and school because of linguistic and cultural differences. In addition, many other barriers work against effective home–school communication, such as teacher attitudes and institutional racism. Many teachers often do not have sufficiently high expectations of ESL parents’ capacities to support their children’s education (Jones, 2003). Class and race may also play a role in parent–school interactions. As Cline and Necochea (2001) suggested,

the quest for parental involvement comes with a caveat—only parental involvement that is supportive of school policies and instructional practices are welcome here...parents whose culture, ethnicity, [socioeconomic status], and language background differ drastically from the white middle class norms are usually kept at a distance, for their views, values, and behaviors seem “foreign” and strange to traditional school personnel. (p. 23)

Probing further, Lareau (2003) found that White and Black middle class parents were more strategic in intervening in school than parents of Black working class students. Parents of both Black middle class and working class students were continually concerned with schools’ racial discrimination. It is worth noting that parent involvement in North America has focused on values and concerns that are more middle class than working class and on experiences that are more relevant to parents of Anglo-Celtic descent than those from non-English-speaking backgrounds or those of Native American or Aboriginal descent. **As a result, the significance of the non-dominant forms of parent involvement of different races and social classes has been overlooked** (Jackson & Remillard, 2005).

Culturally Contested Pedagogy on ESL Learning

Another major obstacle to developing educational partnerships with ESL parents can be teachers’ and parents’ differing views of ESL education. At issue is whether a language is best learned before or within mainstream classrooms. Many teachers regard learning English as a second language as crucial for ESL students before they move to mainstream classes. Liang and Mohan’s (2003) study of an ESL program in a Canadian school showed that teachers believed that ESL programs helped ESL students acquire **proficiency in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing**. Teachers also believed

that ESL classes helped students to acquire basic **study skills and to be socialized** into North American school culture, two things teachers believed are fundamental to students' continuing education in Canada.

Nonetheless, studies of ESL parents and teachers reveal very different, **negative views of each other**. A **study of eight Taiwanese ESL families in Vancouver**, British Columbia, revealed that parents were anxious to mainstream their children, as they believed English learning was delayed through separate ESL classes (Salzberg, 1998). Parents tended to prefer more intensive written homework and more exams indicative of measurable improvement. Another study of 27 teachers in Calgary, Alberta, suggested that Chinese immigrant parents were distrustful of the Canadian school system and confused about the significance of credentials **and the Canadian style of teaching and learning** (Gougeon, 1993). According to one teacher, "I think [ESL parents] may feel very disappointed with the Canadian system. They do not view this as real learning" (Gougeon, 1993, p. 265).

Cultural Differences in Home–School Interactions

A further barrier to ESL parent involvement in schools is cultural differences concerning home–school communication. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss each cultural group; however, the numbers of Chinese immigrants in Canada—the largest visible minority group, reaching 1,029,400 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008b)—warrant a closer examination of their assumptions about home–school interactions. Communicating with schools as one type of parent involvement is the norm in North America. Parents are expected to come to routine parent–teacher conferences before or after they receive their child's report card. They are also expected to volunteer at school functions, help their children with their homework, and initiate **parent–teacher meetings** if they have any particular concerns (Epstein, 2001). However, parent involvement is mainly a North American concept; it is neither expected nor practiced in China (Ogbu, 1995). ESL **parents from a focus group discussion** conducted by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation reported that "the notion of helping in schools is a 'western idea,' so they need more outreach to involve them" (Naylor, 1993a, p. 2). In fact, parents' presence in schools may have negative associations; **Wan (1994) explains that in Hong Kong, Chinese parents seldom attend school functions** because if the school asks to see parents, it means their **children have gotten into trouble**. This **social stigma** associated with communicating with teachers might prevent some Chinese ESL parents from interacting with schools when they come to Canada.

Other researchers find that Chinese parents are reluctant to challenge a teacher's authority because in their culture teachers are held in high esteem

(Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006). Many Chinese parents see teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling; they believe that parents should not interfere with school processes. Yao (1988) explains that Asian parents usually do not initiate contact with schools, as they see communication with teachers as a culturally disrespectful way of monitoring them.

Because of these language and cultural barriers, a third person, known as an intermediary, can be used as a support for ESL parent–school communication (Buchanan, 2000; Constantino, Cui, & Faltis, 1995; Hiatt-Michael & Purington, 2007; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006). An intermediary is a bilingual staff member or parent liaison who is sensitive to community needs and may act as an ambassador for relations between the home, community, and school. Clark and Dorris (2006) found that bilingual liaisons can increase the involvement of families with low English proficiency. In their study of Chinese parental involvement in the schooling process, Constantino, Cui, and Faltis (1995) reported that a Chinese bilingual resource teacher, serving as a bridge between teachers and parents, determined the success of parent–teacher communication. Their study indicated that parents and teachers placed different weight on parent–teacher meetings. Teachers believed that all parents should attend the meetings. In contrast, parents chose not to attend parent–teacher meetings because, in addition to language barriers, they did not understand the significance placed on the meetings. As a response to this problem, the Chinese bilingual resource teacher attached Chinese translations to all the signs in the school area and translated many school forms and the monthly school newsletter. The resource teacher also provided in-services for teachers, educating them about Chinese cultural values and the myriad roles members play in that culture, and even offering a crash course in conversational Chinese. Because of these active interventions, teachers and Chinese immigrant parents were more at ease when they communicated with each other, and more Chinese parents attended meetings with teachers.

Most studies on ESL home–school relations have focused on general, structural barriers and few on beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of ESL parents themselves (Heredia & Hiatt-Michael, 2009). Although there are some notable exceptions, the limited accounts of interaction between Canadian teachers and ESL parents are often based on anecdotal evidence. Investigations often focus on the perceptions of teachers rather than parents or are based on interview data rather than observations of actual ESL parent–teacher interactions. Addressing such gaps, this article explores conditions that may have hindered or promoted participation by Chinese parents **through observations and interviews** within the context of ESL Parents' Nights.

Generally, the term Parents' Night refers to "Meet the Teachers Nights" held at the beginning of a new school year. Teachers may use these events as opportunities to develop a quick rapport with the parents and to explain course syllabi and class rules. Parents' Nights also refer to periodic evening events where parents, teachers, and sometimes students meet to discuss a student's progress. Research suggests that secondary school Parents' Nights are often unsatisfactory events for all concerned; teachers' may approach the experience with negativity or trepidation (Bellace, 2003). The purpose of Parents' Nights at this level are often unclear to participants (Walker, 1998), and teachers and parents may be reduced to blaming each other for a student's difficulties (MacLure & Walker, 2000).

In this study, the term "ESL Parents' Night" refers to a special annual teacher-parent conference organized by an ESL Department of a secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. In contrast with routine parent-teacher conferences, which usually deal with the concerns of a specific parent about a specific student, Parents' Night provides an opportunity for teachers to address the concerns that ESL parents share. Two research questions guided my study: First, what factors hinder parental participation at ESL Parents' Night? Second, what factors help parental participation at ESL Parents' Night?

Methodology

Research Site

A purposeful sampling procedure was adopted for the study¹ (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The study was conducted at Milton Secondary School (a pseudonym) located on the west side of Vancouver, British Columbia. Milton was chosen for three reasons: diversity in student population, its ESL program, and its ESL Parents' Night. A secondary school with about 1,700 students from Grades 8 to 12, Milton is situated in a quiet, middle- to **upper-middle-** class neighborhood. Sixty-two percent of the students spoke a language other than English at home. The approximate number of students studying in the ESL program in the first year of the study was 200, in the second year, 160 students, and in the final year, 120 students. Many of the students were recent immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. The ESL-program consisted of a number of non-credit content-based courses such as ESL science which integrated the instruction of the **English language and subject matter** simultaneously. The exceptions were physical education and math which were mainstream classes. The students at Milton generally stayed in the ESL program for two years. The program had organized an ESL Parents' Night for more than 10 years. These nights allowed teachers to inform parents about

the philosophy of the ESL program and to explain the differences in educational systems between Canada and their native societies.

The investigator was introduced to the teachers and parents as a researcher from a Canadian university who studied the processes of home–school communication. She played the role of participant observer (Spradley, 1980), seeking to “maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (p. 60). As requested by teachers, she explained Parents’ Night to the parents on the phone, presented information gathered from the parents at the teachers’ planning meetings, interpreted for Chinese parents at Parents’ Night, and reported parents’ feedback to the teachers after Parents’ Night.

Participants

Nine ESL teachers and six bilingual assistants participated in the study. All of the teachers participated in the planning, delivery, and feedback sessions for the Parents’ Night. They also involved their students in the entire process. The bilingual assistants were trained graduate research assistants who were also experienced ESL teachers. Before the Parents’ Night, teachers sent home invitations in English to parents, explaining that the purpose of the event was to inform parents about the ESL program. The assistants followed up the invitations to parents in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English. Many Chinese parents were postsecondary educated entrepreneurs, investors, or professionals from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.² In the parent questionnaires, parents stated that the major reason they immigrated to Canada was for their children’s education. The parents had been in Canada from a few months to four years. The bilingual assistants served as interpreters at Parents’ Night.

Data Collection

Three research methods—interviews, naturalistic observations, and focus groups—were used for data collection over a three-year period. The researcher observed 12 ESL department planning meetings regarding Parents’ Night, four for each event. At these meetings, teachers discussed their purposes and educational philosophies for Parents’ Night. Three annual ESL Parents’ Nights were observed. Observations focused on how teachers and students made their presentations, how parents asked their questions, and how teachers responded. With the consent of the teachers and parents, the 12 planning meetings and three Parents’ Nights were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The researcher interviewed six bilingual assistants individually. Each interview ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. Before Parents’ Night, bilingual assistants telephoned 257 parents/guardians to explain the purpose of the event in

Mandarin or Cantonese. On referral from the assistants, the researcher made a further 105 follow-up calls with parents/guardians to clarify the nature of parents' concerns. **After Parents' Night, the assistants also talked to the parents informally to get their feedback on the event, particularly about their reactions to teachers' and students' presentations and whether their concerns were addressed.** Parents' feedback was recorded in bilingual assistants' and the researcher's field notes.³ The parents did not provide consent for formal face-to-face interviews, but allowed the bilingual assistants and the researcher to take notes during telephone conversations. The bilingual assistants listened to and recorded parents' questions and comments. The interviews with the assistants focused on parents' **interpretations of the ESL program, parents' major concerns, and their strategies for working on these concerns.**

After Parents' Night, the researcher also interviewed nine ESL teachers individually. Each interview ranged from 30 to 80 minutes. Three teachers were interviewed twice because of their active involvement in Parents' Night. These interviews allowed teachers to reflect on their experience with the event and to articulate their beliefs about ESL education.

A focus group with eight ESL teachers and four bilingual assistants was also conducted after individual interviews were completed. The **summary of the interviews** was duly reported, and the group also reviewed data about the parents' feedback conveyed by six bilingual assistants. The focus group generated more information about teachers' **and parents' perspectives of ESL learning and parents' concerns, valuable data used for purposes of triangulation.**

Data Analysis

The process of qualitative data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic, as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2001). Data analysis in this study was ongoing throughout the data collection period. The ongoing analysis helped to identify emerging themes. The inductive **analysis strategy was applied to the interview data in order to understand how participants approached Parents' Night.** Observation data of the teachers' planning meetings were also analyzed inductively **to identify teachers' goals for Parents' Night. This was accomplished by searching for patterns that emerged from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).** More systematic analysis was conducted after the data collection was **completed** and the interviews were transcribed.

Findings and Analysis

Conflicting Goals for Parents' Night

The parents expressed two kinds of expectations about Parents' Night, which included opportunities to: (a) talk to teachers about their individual child's progress; and (b) ask specific questions about the ESL program and voice additional concerns. The following examples illustrated these two kinds of expectations:

I would like to meet the teacher individually to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. I don't feel I should go to Parents' Night unless I can talk to the teacher.

I wanted to know why there is no credit in the ESL program.

I have a lot of concerns. I want to know why there is no test and no adequate amount of homework, and why our kids are still in ESL, and when they can move out of ESL.

While the parents expressed a number of concerns, perhaps the most central was with the length of time their children spent in the ESL program. In their return invitation tear-off sheets, parents expressed:

- Why do they (students) have to waste so much time studying in ESL?
- We understand the program, but it's useless.
- My daughter was in ESL in elementary. Why is she still in ESL at high school? I don't think she needs to be in the ESL program.

Parents believed that two years spent in the ESL program was too long for their children and this seriously hampered ESL students' possibility of high school graduation before reaching the age limit of 19. Parents also perceived that the curriculum in the ESL program was watered down and that, as a result, their children received inferior education.

Aware of the parents' concerns, the teachers reported that their purpose with Parents' Night was to inform parents and students about the ESL program and the Canadian education system. Such purpose was illustrated in the following teacher interview excerpt:

Our students are primarily Chinese from either Hong Kong or Taiwan, where the predominant mode of instruction is rote learning. Students are motivated by demanding and strict teachers who give tests regularly and expect students to memorize what is said in the classroom. Our more lenient approach, based on developing thinking skills and creativity, is already a huge shift for parents to grasp. When we throw in non-graded ESL classes where Grade 8s are mixed with Grade 12s and

where beginners are grouped with advanced English speakers, parents are sometimes bewildered....As professional educators, teachers in the ESL department recognize the need to educate our parents, as well as our students, to the goals and philosophy behind our system....As they (parents) continually “push” their children to “work hard” and get out of ESL, we feel it essential to organize a Parents’ Night every year to introduce our parents to these new ideas.

Seeing an urgent professional responsibility to inform all parents about how Canadian programs were different from those of the families’ emigrating countries, the teacher described Parents’ Night mainly as a mass educational information event. Yet, as was clear from parents’ input, parents wanted to talk to the teachers individually about their own children and voice their concerns about the perceived negative outcomes of the ESL stream. The data therefore indicated that there were mismatched expectations between the teachers and the parents about Parents’ Night.

Organization and Delivery of Parents’ Night

Parent’s Night⁴ was a multipart event, and its first part typically began in the school auditorium, where the school principal welcomed ESL parents and students. Next, a school area superintendent outlined provincial and school district ESL policy. Then others reviewed services such as counseling and the multicultural liaison. In the second part of the evening, teachers and others spoke about the ESL program. In the third part, teachers, parents, and students moved to seven individual homerooms for breakout sessions.

In one of the classrooms that the researcher observed, the vice principal and ESL counselor, three ESL students, and the teacher sat in a panel format. Facing them, parents sat in small groups surrounded by students. The teacher asked the parents to brainstorm the question: “What motivates students to work?” and the bilingual assistants were asked to join the groups to assist with translation. The teacher addressed the importance of student self-motivation. Three former ESL students made oral presentations⁵ about the difficulties ESL students have in mainstream classrooms and how parents can help their children. The vice principal talked about the school rules, and the ESL counselor advised parents about how families could assist their children in learning. The teacher then discussed additional ESL program-related topics, including why students generally stayed in ESL for two years, how students moved from ESL to mainstream classes, the importance of field trips, students’ motivation, and homework habits.

Specifically, in contrast to parents’ desire to move their children as quickly as possible out of the ESL stream, teachers expressed that two years in ESL was

the minimum required for students to acquire academic English. For example, one ESL teacher used basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language skills (CALP; Cummins, 1991) to explain to parents why students generally stayed in the ESL program for two years. Cummins (1991) maintained that it takes less than two years for immigrant students to acquire BICS, **whereas it takes as long as five to seven years to acquire CALP.** Teachers thus emphasized that learning academic language is a complex and lengthy process.

Parents' Night in other classrooms took similar approaches as teachers explained the value of the ESL program, and the students showcased their presentation skills. **Parents were the audience for these presentations, and interaction was minimal.** This observation was supported by the comments made by two bilingual assistants in two separate classrooms:

In the classroom, there were basically the presentations. The teacher did a very short introduction about what they were going to do that night, and then the students made their presentations...At the end, the teacher ran out of time. In fact, no parents asked questions or made a comment in her room.

During the night, there were two questions from the parents. Most of the time, the parents were quiet. I was wondering why parents did not ask their questions because in our telephone conversations they asked me many questions regarding the ESL program and Canadian education system.

The above excerpts suggested that neither the large group presentations nor the breakout sessions were conducive to dialogue between **parents and teachers.** The structured presentations left parents with limited time to voice their concerns at Parents' Night.

Bilingual Assistants Facilitated Parent Participation

In contrast to the dynamics of the large group, the researcher noticed that the Chinese parents in a small group⁶ asked the bilingual assistant **many questions**, including:

- How many levels are there in ESL? Why don't they (the ESL program) have a clear level?
- Why don't they (teachers) give grades in ESL?
- Did you go to school here? How long did you stay in ESL? What do you think of the ESL program? Do you think the ESL program slowed you down in the process of going to university?

The parents were asking these questions of the bilingual assistant during the classroom sessions instead of directing their questions to the teacher. These questions were interesting, because the parents would have regarded the bilingual assistants as having some expertise based on their Canadian school experiences. So they were looking to the “voice of expertise” here instead of trusting the teachers’ positioning themselves on the basis of expert/codified knowledge about second language acquisition. The parents who were silent most of the time in the evening suddenly became vocal. Why was there little dialogue in the big group but much in the small group?

The bilingual assistants reported playing a range of roles in helping parents participate in Parents’ Night, such as “helper,” “language interpreter,” “cultural interpreter,” and “intermediary.” The more specific functions within each role that bilingual assistants played are discussed below.

In the role of “helper,” the bilingual assistants followed up the teachers’ written invitations to parents and guardians with telephone calls explaining the agenda of Parents’ Night and emphasizing the importance of their attendance. Some of the parents who had initially refused to come to Parents’ Night changed their minds when they had the opportunity to talk with the bilingual assistants in their home language. This was evident, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Agreement to Attend ESL Parent Night: Contrast Before and After Telephone Follow-ups

Core Class	Assistant	Before Telephone Calls	After Telephone Calls
ESL 7	Yingying	Yes 3 No 16	Yes 15 No 4
ESL 2	Mei	Yes 12 No 4	Yes 15 No 1
ESL 5	Amy	Yes 15 No 3	Yes 17 No 1

As Table 1 illustrates, in ESL 7 class, before the telephone call, only 3 parents agreed to attend Parents’ Night; after the telephone call, 15 parents agreed to attend Parents’ Night. The bilingual assistants’ interventions had a significant, positive impact on attendance at Parents’ Night. A number of parents directly attributed the successful attendance to the bilingual assistants:

I wouldn’t have come if you hadn’t explained what Parents’ Night was about. I thought this was another walk-about information night.

When I received the telephone call, I was very surprised to hear about the upcoming event, because my son did not give me the invitation from the teacher. I would definitely come to the Parents' Night.

This result shed light on the findings of Constantino (1994), who observed that ESL teachers' outreach overtures often prompted little response from parents. This finding of the present study was consistent with a previous study by Buchanan (2000) who proposed that parent liaisons following up important written communication with telephone calls in the home language was one strategy to encourage greater school involvement among ESL families.

In the role of "language interpreter," the bilingual assistants served as translators for those Chinese parents who had low English proficiency. One bilingual assistant reported:

Parents have limited proficiency in English. I think they had a lot of questions, but because of the large group setting, they couldn't ask these questions. As soon as I sat down in the small group and told them I could speak Mandarin, they were asking me all sorts of questions.

The parents said:

I don't usually come to school's meetings because I don't understand what they (teachers) are talking about. But if there are translators, I will be there.

I didn't look at my son's folder. I don't understand what it is anyway. With the help of the interpreter, I can understand it.

The above excerpts seemed to suggest that the parents were unable to discuss their concerns because they felt their language abilities and educational knowledge were insufficient to express themselves clearly. This finding was consistent with a British Columbia teachers' report that found many ESL parents attempted to communicate with schools but were hampered by limited English ability and a lack of available translation services (Naylor, 1993b).

In the role of "language interpreter," the bilingual assistants also explained to the parents some of the jargon that teachers used, such as Core class, A Block, and B Block. Jargon often leads to the exclusion of those not familiar with a field (Gaskell, 2001). The linguistic interpretation by the bilingual assistants helped the Chinese immigrant parents to become more familiar with the educational field.

In the role of "cultural interpreter," the bilingual assistants went beyond literal translation to explain the Canadian school culture. The bilingual assistants commented:

I did more than translating. I explained to parents some of the educational terms, for example, what science and social studies mean here,

because it is different from what students learned in their home countries. Social studies could include history, geography, political studies, law, and current events. Parents found it very helpful because school languages are quite different.

I explained the differences between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to daily conversation skills such as the type of language children will learn on the playground. CALP refers to the specialized subject terminology such as biology or social studies at school.

I think because they did not have the Core class in Taiwan, and they didn't know what the students were doing in the course. It looks like it was quite an important course. I not only translated the Core class, but also explained what the students were learning in the course.

I felt parents **may not understand me if I literally translated ELC** [English Learning Centre]. Actually the district is not even consistent with what ELC is...in this school reading comprehension and vocabulary development are a large part of ELC. In addition, students learn grammar, paragraph writing, organization, outlines, and basic essay writing. Parents said, "Oh, I know now what they are doing in ELC."

These accounts provided clear evidence that the bilingual assistants went well beyond language interpretation by providing assistance to parents in interpreting and navigating the features and cultural contexts of the ESL program and the Canadian education system in general.

In the role of "intermediary," the bilingual assistants acted as a go-between for parents and teachers. For example, some Chinese parents said:

I would like to meet the teacher individually and more frequently to discuss how well my child is doing in ESL. But I don't feel like that I should go to the teacher because back in Hong Kong it is usually the teacher who comes to us if our children have some problems at school.

I have been waiting for the teacher to call me and come to talk to me. I didn't know I should go to the teacher.

The bilingual assistants explained to the teachers that teachers usually take the initiative to communicate with parents in Chinese culture. One teacher reflected in his interview:

I know that traditionally in Hong Kong, or in Asia, the teachers contact the home, but in Canada, generally we don't do that; we are always dependent on the parents to contact the school—unless you've got a real concern about a student, we will contact the home. Unfortunately, the parents assume we will contact home.

The bilingual assistants, after talking to the teachers, went back to explain to the parents that, unlike cultural practices in China, in Canada it is usually parents who take the initiative to contact the school if they have any concerns regarding their children. Such explanation enabled teachers and parents to raise their awareness of cultural differences that hinder parent–teacher communication.

In the role of “intermediary,” the bilingual assistants also notified the teachers that Chinese parents do not want to make critical comments in public—an observation also made in previous studies (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Ma, 1992):

Even if parents have many concerns—I know they do because they told me on the phone—nobody made any comments about the ESL program or the educational system. Probably it is not in the Chinese culture. They are not supposed to criticize the ESL program in public.

The parents seemed to perceive the bilingual assistant as being on their side (Lee, 2002). For example, one parent reported initially that she blamed her child, who spent two years in the ESL program, for not working hard. After she heard the teacher’s explanation at Parents’ Night, the parent realized that it was the school’s policy that required students to stay in the program for two years. The parent told the bilingual assistant that “it is the school’s fault.” Yet the parent said she would not complain directly to the teachers. This example demonstrated that Chinese people usually convey their concerns to an intermediary in order to avoid conflicts (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Ma, 1992). This was also, as suggested above, because in China teachers have high status (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006). Parents in the study seemed to feel more comfortable expressing their dissatisfaction to the bilingual assistants than to the teachers.

Limitations and Discussion

One recommendation for schools is to create school-level ESL parent committees that include bilingual members who are knowledgeable about the schools and their programs and are willing to act as intermediaries between parents and school staff (Boethel, 2003; Hiatt-Michael & Purrington, 2007). The ESL committee as a whole can also play a mediating role, communicating information, examining conflicts, developing ways that parents and teachers can cooperate more, and exploring possible, educationally responsible changes to ESL programs that are within the ESL teachers’ control. The evidence suggests that intermediaries were very valuable for the Chinese parents, but other groups of immigrant parents may also have difficulty expressing their concerns directly in public. Further research should consider exploring intermediaries with parents from other cultural backgrounds.

Other areas for future research have to do with the range of considerations which have not been discussed here, such as parents' psychological difficulties, including the lack of confidence and feeling of embarrassment in the presence of their children because of the parents' lack of English proficiency (Tung, 2000), or power relations between teachers and parents in which teacher resistance to parent-framed questions can leave parents voiceless (MacLure & Walker, 2000; Wine, 2001). These possible lines of exploration would be important to investigate in future research on communication between ESL teachers and parents. Furthermore, this study was limited in that the sample was drawn from a single immigrant group in a single school in Vancouver. The particular community characteristics may contribute to the findings and thus limit the generalizability to other communities as well as to other immigrant groups. Future research should explore ESL teacher-parent communication processes with larger samples of different immigrant groups in many schools.

Implications for School Practice

The lack of ESL parents' visible involvement in schools is often attributed to cultural differences (Dyson, 2001; Ogbu, 1995; Wan, 1994; Yao, 1988). The results of this study suggest that we need to go beyond blaming cultural differences to understand the difficulty of ESL parent-teacher communication. The findings of the study reveal that there were conflicting expectations of Parents' Night between teachers and parents. The teachers perceived the Parents' Night as an educational event to provide general information about the ESL program, whereas the parents viewed it as a venue to voice their concerns. Such a mismatch of expectations could make their communication difficult even before meeting at Parents' Night.

More importantly, simply attributing communication problems to cultural differences or to ESL parents being reluctant to participate in their children's education (Wan, 1994; Yao, 1988) is to sweep over the importance of examining actual ESL parent-teacher interactions. As indicated by this study, it is important to recognize that the conditions for full dialogue were neither aimed at nor present at the mass meeting of Parents' Night. The ESL teachers maintained knowledge and authority through their use of specialist vocabularies and professional registers, while placing the parents in a position of receivers of educational information (MacLure & Walker, 2000). Parents' Night was, in fact, a Teachers' Night. The organization and delivery of Parents' Night made it clear how parent participation was strongly limited by the structure of power marginalized parents faced within the school space (Cline & Necochea, 2001; Lareau, 2003). Schools need to consider whether events are structured in ways that foster cross-communication instead of one-way transmission to open up opportunities to listen to ESL parents' voices.

However, when the bilingual assistants were available to play their roles as interpreters and cultural brokers of the educational context, parents participated much more actively. It is important to use bilingual assistants or liaisons to help parents participate fully in school events and to communicate their questions and concerns about their children's education (Constantino et al., 1995). In this study, Parent's Night was a highly appropriate forum for discussing the aims of an ESL program with new parents, but not for addressing the concerns of parents who want their children to exit the program. In this case, Parent's Night as an ESL parent–teacher communication process was problematic and was not able to accommodate the negotiation of differences between the ESL parents and Milton's teachers.

Endnotes

¹I have received the ethical approval for the protection of human subjects from a Canadian university for this study.

²This is not to say that the Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group. In fact, there are significant differences in the political, economic, social, and educational systems between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, thus caution in generalizations about Chinese parents is needed.

³The parents did not give consent to the audio recording, but they allowed me and the bilingual assistants to take notes while we telephoned them. I attempted to conduct formal face-to-face interviews with the parents, but they did not wish to be interviewed, something that was not unexpected. Siu also found it difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews with Chinese American parents. See Siu, S.-F. (2003). Towards building home–school partnerships: The case of Chinese American families and public school. In E. H. Tamura, V. Chattergy, & R. Endo (Eds.), *Asian and Pacific American education: Social, cultural, and historical context* (pp. 59-84). South El Monte, CA: Pacific Asia Press.

⁴The description of the event focused on one Parents' Night. The parents had changed from one year to another, but they seemed to share **similar concerns. In response to the parents' concerns**, the teachers seemed to be consistent across the years with their goal for Parents' Night: to inform parents about the philosophy of the ESL program.

⁵Having children present to their parents was in some ways culturally inappropriate. This topic is addressed further in Guo & Mohan (in press).

⁶Not all of the bilingual assistants had such interactions. These sessions did not eventually become a planned part of the evening.

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