

Taiwanese Parental Perceptions toward English Learning in Bilingual Kindergarten

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Abstract

In Taiwan, the average age of learning English is declining year by year; most parents seek relevant channels to expose their children to English learning as early as possible despite a ban from the government. The purpose of this study was to investigate Taiwanese parents' opinions and reasons for sending their children to learn English in Chinese-English bilingual kindergartens. Eleven parents who enrolled their children in bilingual kindergartens were selected to participate in the semi-standardized interview procedure. The finding indicates that most parents disagree that learning English in bilingual kindergartens would improve their children's English communicative competence; meanwhile, those parents think that children's confidence is not thereby increased under the English immersion kindergartens. The results of this study can be broadly applicable to various groups, such as governmental authorities, school administrators, and EFL teachers to create a more complete English learning environment for kindergarten children.

Keywords: Chinese-English bilingual kindergarten; communicative competence; English learning; parental perceptions

Introduction

"Can your children speak English?" This slogan has been commonly used by some children's English cram schools or Chinese-English bilingual kindergartens in Taiwan to promote the importance of English-language learning. Most of the cram schools and preschools attract children with the golden promise to teach solely in English. As a result, parents send their children to such schools in the hope that doing so will give these children the edge in a very competitive educational environment (Oladejo, 2006). Hence, more and more children's English educational institutions have been established to compete in the potential market, and the number of

kindergartens teaching English has continued to grow in the past few decades. In Taiwan, there are three reasons for parents to enroll their children in such English-learning schools. First, parents are convinced by the rationale that they should let children learn a foreign language as early as possible, and they expect their kids to be a “dragon or phoenix” because of early English-language learning, since English is the preferred foreign language of international communication and trade. Parents hope that early exposure to English could enhance children’s skills in this language for academic achievements or better career opportunities (Liu & Chien, 1998; Lao, 2004; Oladejo, 2006).

Second, in 1998, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan promulgated a new policy, which started English-language learning as early as the third grade of elementary school. In the beginning of the 2005 school year, children in elementary schools Grade 3 were expected to commence learning English (Government Information Office, 2005). Given the view of English learning promoted across the country, especially through formal education, it is not surprising that more and more Taiwanese parents would like their children to start formal English learning even before the official commencement age (Oladejo, 2006). Third, with the international requirement for global competition, parents and education authorities in Taiwan are faced with the need to increase length of exposure to English in order to raise students’ English communicative competence. As a result, a significant number of studies show that parents would like to see their children begin learning English as early as kindergarten, as opposed to the current provision of third grade level (Oladejo, 2006; Lao, 2004).

Despite acknowledging the importance of the early exposure to English education, there is a general level of confusion or ignorance among parents regarding who should be an English-language teacher (Oladejo, 2006). According to Oladejo, most parents prefer foreign English teachers to the local teachers, even if they do not actually know how to properly determine the essential qualifications of English-language teachers. In order to please parents and secure their children’s enrollment, many schools usually employ foreign teachers, most of who have neither teaching qualifications nor relevant educational backgrounds. Such phenomenon results in the parents’ concerns regarding the effect of English learning in Chinese-English bilingual kindergartens. Confronting the overabundance of children’s English institutions or bilingual kindergartens, some scholars (Shin, 2000; Lao, 2004; Shannon & Milian, 2002) indicate that the earlier the children learn English, the more effective it will be for the benefits of better career opportunities, enhancement of English communicative ability, as well as positive self-image; on the contrary, others reveal that it is inappropriate for children to learn a foreign language due to its ineffectiveness due to the employment situation of untrained and unqualified teachers (Tsai, 2003; Wu, 1998;

Chang, 2004). Since English education for kindergarten children is a debatable issue, the purpose of this study was to investigate Taiwanese parents' opinions and reasons for sending their children to learn English in Chinese-English bilingual kindergartens. It was hypothesized that parents should be in favor of English learning as early as kindergarten, and that parents believe that English learning will benefit their children at least in providing them with better job opportunities in the future.

Literature Review

In recent years, English education has become a controversial issue because the qualifications of teachers are a major factor which causes parents to prefer not to send their kids to bilingual kindergarten. At the National Education Development Conference, October 10, 2003, children education scholar Tsai (2003) indicated that one of the current children's education problems is the high ratio of unqualified teachers. Wu (1998) also demonstrated that the most emergent problem of the implementation of Chinese-English bilingual education is the insufficiency and quality of teachers. Furthermore, based on Chang's (2004) research, the purpose of her study was to explore whether the practice of English-only kindergartens for children was appropriate or not and what attitudes parents held in regards to children's foreign language learning. The result shows that school administrators inappropriately force children to learn English, neglecting to select proper and suitable teachers. Such situation makes children refuse to attend school. To sum up, these studies emphasize the importance of teacher's quality and qualifications that parents are concerned about.

Despite the attack on teacher's quality, there is still abundant evidence which is supportive of English education in bilingual programs; being competitive in job fields is usually considered to be the major reason for parents to enroll their kids to learn English in bilingual schools. In the study conducted by Tsai (2001), the questionnaires were designed to investigate parental attitudes and expectations regarding children's foreign language in bilingual kindergartens. The participants, who were parents of children attending 102 private and 66 public, legally registered kindergartens, were surveyed in the period of July 25-Sep.15, 2000 through telephone. The results indicate that 82.2% of the parents believe that children can have better job opportunities in the future with foreign language abilities. These findings are closely supported by Cazabon, Lambert, and Hall's (1993) study, showing that with excellent foreign language ability, bilingual education is considered as a necessity for children in providing better career opportunities.

More recent studies (Lao, 2004; Shin, 2000; Shannon & Milian, 2002; Young & Tran, 1999; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2002) have been con-

ducted regarding parents' attitudes toward bilingual benefits in providing children with better career opportunities. Those studies all reveal that the major reason for parents to send their children to bilingual programs is to possess a foreign language skill to make them more competitive in the future job field. In sum, those studies point out that high level of bilingualism could lead to practical, career related advantages. In general, the conclusion of those studies is that almost all parents totally speak in favor of the implementation of bilingual education because of its effect on future career benefits.

Besides the career benefits, the other reason for parents to be in favor of English learning in bilingual schools is that it can enhance children's communicative competence. A study done by Lee (1999) indicated that 83% of the parents support the implementation of bilingual education, and 67% of the parents believe that bilingual schools can facilitate children's development of English communicative ability. In accordance with Lee's findings, Lao (2004) and Cava's (1998) studies demonstrated that parents believe that bilingual education can enhance overall learning and communicative ability. The conclusion of those studies indicates that parents are in favor of bilingual education programs because it can increase children's communicative competence.

In addition, parents are in favor of bilingual programs because they think kids can increase their self-image and confidence by learning a foreign language. In the study conducted by Lao (2004), the author surveyed 86 parents who sent their children to bilingual kindergartens and finds out that 55.8% of the Chinese-dominant parents and 38.2% of the English-dominant parents believe that Chinese-English bilingual education would help children develop a positive self-image, because kids understand the importance of being bilingual, so they are more willing to learn the foreign language better and faster. Such result closely matches with the study done by Shannon and Milian (2002), showing that 70% of the parents who sent their children to Spanish dual-language programs in Colorado think that bilingual education will contribute to self-worth and pride. Furthermore, according to Saucedo's (1997) study, the result also indicates that about 97% of the parents believe dual-language programs would help their children increase their self-esteem and confidence.

From the above literature, some scholars agree that bilingual learning, especially foreign language learning can promote children's career competitiveness and increase their communicative competence as well as self-confidence; still, others doubt the effectiveness of bilingual learning because of the employment of unqualified teachers. Due to the controversy of foreign language learning in bilingual schools, the purpose of the present study was to investigate parents' attitudes in regard to children's English

language learning in bilingual kindergarten through the qualitative interview method.

Methodology

Participants

Eleven parents who sent their kids to four bilingual kindergartens were selected in this study. All of these participants were females/mothers. Table 1 demonstrates the demographics of each participant.

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information

Participants	Age	Career	Place of Living
# 1	About 40	Accountant	Kaohsiung City
# 2	45	Principal of a bilingual kindergarten	Kaohsiung County
# 3	About 30	Lecturer at a university	Kaohsiung City
# 4	30~35	Teacher of day-care center	Kaohsiung City
# 5	32	Teacher of day-care center	Tainan City
# 6	40~45	Housewife	Tainan County
# 7	42	Housewife/Realtor	Kaohsiung County
# 8	32	Office lady	Tainan County
# 9	About 30	Teacher of day-care center	Tainan City
# 10	About 30	Accountant	Tainan City
# 11	About 30	Teacher of day care center	Tainan City

Previous to the formal interview procedure, all participants were informed that each of them was under rigid protection from unveiling their identities and the interview results. Participants were informed the research purpose and genus of interview questions of being asked in advance. Participants' rights of withdrawing from the interview were guaranteed, which ensured them against being vulnerable throughout the process. The participants were assured that their responses were strictly kept confidential and served a research purpose only.

Sampling Strategies

Purposive sampling strategy was most extensively adopted in this study. Eleven participants were chosen by means of personal rapport to participate in the study. Due to lack of sufficient time, "11" was decided to be the ultimate quantity of the interviewees. The number of each participant in Table 1 was determined by the order they were visited.

Instrumentation

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese so that some participants' insufficient English oral proficiency would not hinder them from participating in a full discussion of their own perceptions. On the average, each interview lasted for about 45 minutes. The interview questions were prepared before the formal interview process by using a semi-standardized interview technique. The interview questions were developed by the researchers and divided into three parts (see Appendix): Part I was composed of five items concerning participants' past experiences and reasons for sending their children to learn English in bilingual kindergarten. Part II consisted of eight items aimed to obtain information about children's present English learning experiences and environment at school. Part III contained seven items in regard to participants' opinions toward the effect of the bilingual kindergarten. At the inception of the research journey, the research was "dealt a blow" while seeking the first interviewing volunteer. Initially, the researchers visited a bilingual kindergarten located in downtown Kaohsiung for help in person, but the principal refused to cooperate. Consequently, it was a blessing to find the first interviewee, via private relationship. Before undertaking formal research questions, a pilot test was done by a confidant, in order to make adjustments based on the previous literature, aiming to discuss whether bilingual kindergartens can effectively promote career competitiveness for children and boost children's self-confidence and English communicative ability; or unqualified teachers might lead to parents' hesitation of sending kids to bilingual schools. According to the literature, four hypotheses were composed as follows:

1. Parents agree that children can be more competitive in the future job market with English immersion in bilingual kindergartens.
2. Parents agree that children can increase self-confidence via learning English in bilingual kindergartens.
3. Parents agree that children can enhance their English communicative ability after entering bilingual kindergartens.
4. Parents are unwilling to send kids to bilingual kindergartens because of unqualified teachers.

Analysis Technique

A digital voice-recording pen was utilized to record the interview content for further investigation. No additional transcriber was hired to translate the Chinese transcriptions into English written format verbatim. By extracting from the most interesting parts of each transcript and interview questions consistent with each hypothesis, condensed profiles were developed and written with first person perspective, providing a meaningful reading content under scrutiny and analysis.

Results

The information collected from the participants were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Based on each hypothesis, the results are displayed in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2 Parents' Opinions regarding the Effect of English Learning in Bilingual Kindergarten

Hypotheses	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
1. Parents agree that children can be more competitive in the future job market with English immersion in bilingual kindergarten.	54.5%	45.4%	0%
2. Parents agree that children can increase self-confidence in bilingual kindergarten.	36.5%	54.5%	9%
3. Parents agree that children can enhance their English communicative ability after entering bilingual kindergarten.	25.6%	63.6%	10.8%
4. Parents are unwilling to send kids to bilingual kindergarten because of unqualified teachers.	81.8%	9%	9.2%

Hypothesis 1: Parents agree that children can be more competitive in future job markets with English immersion in bilingual kindergarten.

Nearly 55 % (see Table 2) of the participants reveal that they believe their children can be more competitive in the potential job fields with the English immersion of bilingual education. For example, participant #1 stated:

You can save a lot of time receiving messages directly without translation. It will be much faster to search the information through news media and Internet if you are good at English. Of course that will enhance your job performance.

Likewise, participant #10 expressed:

I agree that having English proficiency can make one be more competitive and have more opportunities in the job market. My experience has told me how important English is; wherever you go, you always have to face English. My English is not so good, so I encountered many difficulties. Hence, I don't want my child to face the same trouble as I did. English is everywhere in our daily life. If you don't know English, how do you survive in the society?

Besides, participant #6 maintained:

I think that having him [her son] learn English as early as possible will increase his competitiveness in job markets, because he won't refuse to learn a different language later in childhood. As he grows up, he will naturally accept it and get used to it. Of course, he will overcome language barriers easily, so he will surpass others earlier.

Based on these excerpts from the participants, the result is consistent with the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Parents believe that children can increase self-confidence via learning English in bilingual kindergarten.

About 55% (see Table 2) of the participants, however, disagree that attending bilingual preschools can effectively increase children's self-confidence. As participant #2 indicated, "probably because he [her son] is a boy; boys are more outgoing than girls, so I think it depends on his personality rather than English learning." In addition, participant #9 stated, "I don't think bilingual education raises my son's confidence. Sometimes I ask him, 'what do the teachers teach you?', but he is afraid of telling me, and he always responds, 'I don't know.' I think it is probably because we seldom communicate with him. Besides, it kind of relates to his personality. I think he's a very shy boy." Similarly, participant #11 stated, "since my son is not outstanding among his peers, I don't think English thereby raises his self-confidence. His classmates all speak English in this environment, but his personality is very introverted. Hence, he is unwilling to open his mouth to say something even in Chinese, let alone English." According to what participants expressed, the result does not fit the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Parents believe children can enhance their English communicative ability after entering bilingual kindergartens.

Close to 64% (see Table 2) of the participants do not believe their children's English communicative ability is enhanced by attending bilingual kindergartens. As participant #5 stated:

I think those children who were sent to bilingual kindergartens seldom speak English with their parents at home because only few parents know English and would like to communicate with them in English. After all we don't live in an English-speaking environment, so children's development of English communicative ability should be limited.

Moreover, participant #6 said, "he never speaks English at home, unless he opens his textbook to read the content. Because we don't speak English at all, it's also very difficult for him to make a request in English." Participant #11 also mentioned, "he seldom speaks English with me at

home because I can't speak English in return. Besides, it's probably because he is very shy, and he is still too young to understand what he is talking about." The excerpts from each participant indicate the inconsistency with the third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Parents are unwilling to send kids to bilingual kindergarten because of unqualified teachers.

Approximately 82% (see Table 2) of the participants are satisfied with the qualifications of teachers under the current environment of bilingual kindergartens. The statistics show that the majority of the participants are satisfied with the teachers' quality in the kindergartens. Participant #5 stated:

I am satisfied with the current teachers in the kindergarten because the teachers are professionally trained, meaning they possess valid teaching certificates and they are also required to have at least a college level educational degree or abundant teaching experiences.

Likewise, participant #8 stated, "I'm very satisfied with the teachers. They're friendly, so my daughter loves them so much. Each teacher has a certificate and abundant experiences. I'm quite happy with that..." Participant #11 also indicated, "I'm satisfied with the quality of the teachers in the kindergarten, although I don't pay much attention to check into it...Because I rely on them, the principle and administrators are supposed to take responsibility for that." In conclusion, the results, however, do not fit into the fourth hypothesis.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study provide evidence that most parents strongly support bilingual kindergartens because they believe it can productively promote career opportunities. It is undeniable that foreign language proficiency--English in particular--does play a significant role in the global village. Not only do companies require English proficiency as criteria for employment, but also individuals need English as a tool to receive or transmit messages. Living in the information explosion era, we can easily search first hand information through the Internet, and this information is mainly presented in English. No wonder most parents believe that equipped with English ability one will gain more opportunities in job fields than those illiterate in English. This result is consistent with the previous research findings (Lao, 2004; Tsai, 2001; Shin, 2000; Shannon & Milian, 2002; Young & Tran, 1999; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2002). However, in our view-point, language is regarded as nothing but an instrument that enables people to communicate. Early exposure to foreign language learning does not

guarantee ultimate academic achievements or better career opportunities. The more critical issue here is how to engage in the strong competition of a specialized and collaborative society where specialized skills are increasingly required. Few parents reveal that interpersonal relationships or human resources play a very important part in career performance as well.

It is also proven that teachers' disqualifications fail to stop parents from enrolling their kids in bilingual kindergartens. In other words, the parents in this study keep positive attitudes with respect to the qualifications of teachers. From parents' perspectives, almost all kindergarten teachers should have graduated from professional schools. They must have passed a certain kind of examination to be certified as a teacher and undertaken a series of practical training to gain teacher certificates; thus, parents feel secure and trustworthy sending kids to learn English in bilingual kindergartens. This finding clearly does not match those found in several previous studies (Tsai, 2003; Wu, 1998; Chang, 2004). On the other hand, few parents expressed that some of the teachers' personalities or ethics are still questionable, and that will definitely influence children's education. Thereby, our suggestion is that "a certificate is not equal to a good teacher." Parents should also break the myth that being a native speaker of English is enough of a qualification to become an English teacher. For parents to evaluate teacher's qualifications, we think patience and enthusiasm are more important than any printed documents or teachers' nationalities.

Parents of this study disagree that children can enhance their self-confidence via learning English in bilingual kindergartens. Instead, they attribute the effect of increasing children's self-confidence to their personalities rather than to bilingual preschools. This finding clearly conflicts with the support shown by previous studies (Shannon & Milian, 2002; Lao, 2004; Saucedo, 1997). Most parents in the present study claimed that some children are inherently extroverted, some were born to be shy, or some are too young to build their confidence. One of the parents stated that we all used to be shy at childhood, but we are getting more mature and confident when growing up. To build children's confidence, we suggest that teachers and parents should often encourage kids and lead them to join activities frequently instead of pushing them.

With respect to English communicative ability, this study also indicates that many parents do not view bilingual education in kindergarten as a vehicle for achieving high levels of proficiency. Once again, the result does not match those found in the previous studies (Lee, 1999; Lao, 2004; Cava, 1998). From most parents' perspectives, the major reason for poor oral ability is that we do not live in an English-speaking environment; therefore, only few parents can talk to their children in English at home. As a result, children lack chances to practice speaking English outside the classroom. It is a fact that children solely read what they have learned from textbooks or

teaching materials, such as simple vocabularies and phrases. They just follow the particular patterns and routines to produce an utterance. Under such circumstances, the development of their oral proficiency will be impeded (Krashen, 1996). To solve this problem, Liu and Chien (1998) suggested that parents should try to increase their involvement in their children's English learning and enhance their communication with their children by discussing meaningful topics and sharing their experiences, instead of placing great value on teachers' schooling only. In addition, Lao (2004) mentioned that:

Schools need to work in concert with parents to establish more effective home-school partnerships to meet the different language needs and expectations of the parents and students, and to provide students with the necessary language and literacy experiences in a meaningful way. (p. 99)

Conclusion

According to the aforementioned, a grounded insight has been developed in this study. That is, in terms of parent's attitudes toward English learning in bilingual kindergartens, they believe that children can obtain more job opportunities if they start to learn English at an early age, and parents are satisfied with the qualifications of English-language teachers in the kindergartens. Oppositely, parents hardly think that bilingual kindergartens can serve as a vehicle to increase children's self-confidence and English communicative ability. According to the research findings, it should be noted that the results are based on a sample of 11 parents who enrolled their children in bilingual kindergartens in Taiwan. Thus, the generation of the results to other populations with different educational backgrounds may yield different results. Besides, since only 11 parents' participated in this study, the research result can not be generalized to larger populations. However, the results can provide various groups such as school principals, educational institutions, and EFL teachers and administrators with a dimension to seriously take into consideration our children's English learning problems: Why are children poor in English communicative ability? Why are they still afraid of speaking English in front of others? Does school truly establish a mutual connection with parents to pay attention to children's learning conditions? In brief, it has been a controversial issue whether preschool students should learn English in the bilingual kindergartens or not, despite the government policy stipulation that children are not allowed to learn English until the third grade of primary school. Since most parents still hold high value on the positive effect of English learning in the aspect of better job opportunities, we strongly suggest that the government loosen the restriction on the age of formal English learning, so that we are

able to cultivate our next generation to have international perspectives, and enhance their competitive ability in the so-called international stage.

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Appendix

Questions of Interview Series

Part I

1. When did you first send your child to bilingual kindergarten? How old was he/she then?
2. What was your main reason to send him/her to bilingual kindergarten?
3. Was he/she willing to go to bilingual kindergarten?
4. Have you ever taught him/her English at home before entering school?
5. If yes, how did you teach him/her?

Part II

1. How old is he/she and what classes does he/she study now?
2. When does school time begin and end?
3. Besides English, what other courses does school offer?
4. What facilities relevant to English learning does school provide?
5. Has he/she ever participated in any school activities relevant to English?
6. What is their reaction?
7. How is the interaction between you and teachers?
8. Will he/she speak English at home? What vocabularies or sentences does he/she say?

Part III

1. What advantages or disadvantages do you think there are to send children to bilingual education?
2. Learning English has become a global trend. Do you think having children learn English as early as possible will help them be more competitive in future job markets? Why or why not?
3. Do you think his/her confidence is thereby increased after entering bilingual kindergarten? Raise a concrete example.
4. Do you think that teachers with abundant experience and teaching certificates are important? Why or why not?
5. Tell your opinions about the teachers.
6. Will you send him/her to bilingual elementary school? State the reasons.
7. Tell your opinions or suggestions about bilingual kindergarten.