

Factors Related to the Home Teaching of English Language to Preschool aged Children: A Taiwanese Study

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Abstract

Issues surrounding the introduction of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction to children during the early childhood period are subject to much debate. Official government policies may not always reflect actual parental practices. Little is known about the extent to which explicit EFL teaching by mothers occurs in the home context. This study investigated whether Taiwanese mothers of 3 to 6 year old children were teaching EFL to their children at home and the characteristics associated with this practice. A sample of 466 mothers of preschoolers completed a questionnaire identifying their home teaching practices and assessing their attitudes towards teaching EFL. Results indicated a positive trend towards home EFL teaching, with teaching mothers tending to be aged between 30-39 years, more highly educated and more confident about their own English abilities than those who were not teaching. The findings raise significant issues that can inform EFL teaching policy and practice during the early childhood years.

Keywords : EFL teaching, early childhood, maternal attitudes, maternal education, Taiwan

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Introduction

In many countries where a language other than English is the national language, a key concern for governments, educators and families is when, and if so how, young children should be introduced to English as a foreign or additional language. This is a complex question. While proficiency in English is seen as desirable by many governments in Asian countries, there are also concerns about the implications for cultural identity, traditional values and maintenance of mother tongue languages. In several Asian countries, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Korea, Japan and China, formal English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction does not officially commence until the elementary school level at the earliest (Butler, 2004; Kai, & Ingulsrud, 1996; Li & Rao, 2000; Taipei County Government, 2009). Yet regardless of the official starting age for EFL learning, anecdotal evidence suggests that many parents are keen for their children to begin instruction in English as a foreign language as early as possible, as evidenced by the popularity of English “cram schools” for preschool-aged children (Hsieh, 2008; Park, 2007) and the availability of pedagogical materials (Kitano, 2008).

This is in spite of the fact that the Taiwanese Ministry of Education has explicitly prohibited English language instruction in all preschools and kindergartens. Instead, the Taiwanese government has emphasized the importance of parents teaching their children EFL in the home context, in a playful and informal manner through activities such as shared reading of English language picture books, songs and games. The Brochure of Early Childhood English Education Policy (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2004), which is based on Article 5 of the Children and Youth Welfare Act of 2003, claims that it is more effective for parents and children to study English together at home rather than for children to attend formal English programs in prior to school services. Currently little is known about the home English teaching practices engaged in by Taiwanese mothers of young children before they commence formal schooling.

In this paper, we will explore factors which relate to Taiwanese mothers’ decisions

about whether or not to teach English as a foreign language to their preschool-aged children in their homes. Such information about mothers' views and practices is important for several reasons. The success of any educational policy or recommendation depends on the beliefs and attitudes of those who are most affected by that policy. If there is a disjunction between government policies, teachers' beliefs and parents' views about what is in the best interests of their children, it is unlikely that the policy will be successfully implemented. Furthermore, mothers do not constitute a homogenous group. Research in several countries has shown that there are systematic differences in mothers' views about early childhood education and children's learning, in relation to maternal education, socio-economic status and ethnicity. An understanding of the backgrounds of those mothers who have decided to teach their children EFL at home, and those who have decided not to do so, will provide insights into factors affecting the potential for Asian countries to increase the English proficiency of their citizens. Such information will enable governments to formulate educational policies, provide professional and parenting development programs, and allocate resources where they are most needed and are most likely to achieve positive results.

Furthermore, an understanding of the views of mothers from different social, economic and educational backgrounds will provide educators with valuable information to assist them in developing partnerships with families. Recent educational research has emphasized the importance of parental involvement in children's education (Hung, 2007). Many have argued that parents' attitudes influence the manner in which they interact with their children and thus play a powerful role in their children's development (Bingham, 2007; Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; De Houwer, 1999; Sonnenschein et al., 1997), hence it is important to understand more about parents' views and attitudes in relation to the critical area of EFL learning. The more early childhood educators understand about the families of the children they teach, the more they will be able to develop relevant learning experiences. According to Lin and Tsai (1996), writing about the Taiwanese context,

“Early childhood educators have to respond to social needs and reflect current values in deciding what to teach” (p. 157).

Tensions between traditional values and the influence of western ideas are acutely visible in relation to Taiwanese attitudes towards the appropriate period to commence formal EFL education. Parental age and educational attainment have both been found to relate to parents’ attitudes. Oladejo (2006) found that older parents were more likely to be concerned that children would become confused if they were required to learn a foreign language at a very young age than were younger parents. Tsai (2001) found that father’s age was also a significant predictor of his attitudes, with younger fathers holding more positive attitudes towards the introduction of EFL instruction at an early age than their older counterparts.

Yeh (1994) and Oladejo (2006) found that parents with university qualifications believed that it is better to introduce foreign language learning as soon as possible in a child’s education (summed up in the phrase “the earlier, the better”). Tsai’s (2001) research into Taiwanese parents’ attitudes towards kindergarten English as a foreign language instruction not only reinforced the significance of parents’ educational attainment, but also highlighted the potential role of parents’ English proficiency in their decision making.

The findings of these studies suggest that there is a disparity between the Taiwanese Ministry of Education’s policies about teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in prior to school services, and parents’ own beliefs, attitudes and ideas about the optimal time to commence learning EFL (Oladejo, 2006; Shang, Ingebritson & Tseng, 2007). It should be noted, however, that the studies described above were limited to Taiwanese attitudes towards EFL teaching in preschools and kindergartens, and did not refer to the parents’ views regarding the Ministry of Education’s active promotion of home EFL teaching practices.

The proportion of mothers teaching EFL to their pre-school aged children, and the characteristics associated with this practice, are currently unknown. This study therefore aimed to address the following two research questions:

1. What proportion of Taiwanese mothers are teaching EFL to their child aged 3-6 years in the home setting prior to the commencement of formal schooling?
2. Which demographic and attitudinal characteristics are associated with mothers' decisions about whether or not to teach EFL to their child in the home?

Methodology

Recruitment and Questionnaire Distribution

The directors of 20 government and privately-operated early childhood centres located in or around the City of Tainan, Taiwan were contacted and asked to distribute a questionnaire to mothers of 3-6 year old children attending their service. Ten directors indicated a willingness to participate and these directors were either telephoned or visited in person to address any concerns or questions that they had.

Questionnaires were distributed to mothers by the directors over a 14 day period. Each survey included a statement about the study affiliation, purpose and university ethics committee clearance. A collection box was placed in each participating centre, and the first author went back to those sites on specified dates to thank directors and collect the questionnaires.

Participants

Of the 1180 questionnaires distributed, 647 (54.83%) were returned. Because not all mothers answered every survey question, the total number of participants for the present analysis was the 466 mothers who responded either positively or negatively to the following question in the questionnaire:

Are you teaching your child English?

Table 1 presents the demographic information about these 466 mothers. It includes age range, educational attainment, yearly income and the type of service their children attend (government operated or private provider).

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Participants*

| | Number | % |
|--|--------|------|
| Age Range (n=422) | | |
| 20-30 | 34 | 8.1 |
| 31-39 | 326 | 77.3 |
| 40-49 | 61 | 14.5 |
| 50 and above | 1 | 0.2 |
| Educational Attainment (n=419) | | |
| Elementary School | 1 | 0.4 |
| Junior High /Middle School | 10 | 2.4 |
| High school / Vocational high school certificate | 86 | 20.5 |
| Junior college Diplomat | 91 | 21.7 |
| Bachelor's Degree | 164 | 39.1 |
| Master's Degree | 55 | 13.1 |
| Doctoral Degree | 12 | 2.8 |
| Yearly Household Income (n=406) | | |
| Below NT \$ 300,000 | 35 | 8.6 |
| NT \$300,000- 1,000,000 | 221 | 54.4 |
| NT\$ 1,000,001-1,700,000 | 112 | 27.6 |
| NT\$ 1,700,001-2,300,000 | 17 | 4.2 |
| above NT\$2,300,001 | 21 | 5.2 |
| Service Type (n=462) | | |
| Government operated | 206 | 44.6 |
| Privately operated | 256 | 55.4 |

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire, which sought information about mothers' demographic details and their EFL teaching attitudes and practices, was designed and translated into Chinese by the first author. In addition to asking mothers to identify their demographic characteristics and to specify whether they were teaching EFL to their preschooler, they were also asked to indicate, using a Likert-scale, whether they

agreed or disagreed with 15 statements. These statements expressed positive and negative attitudes towards aspects of English as a foreign language (EFL), as follows:

- attitudes towards bilingualism and EFL learning in general (e.g., *'It is important for Taiwanese people to be bilingual'*; *'People in Taiwan need to know English to get a good job'*)
- attitudes towards the introduction of EFL instruction to children prior to the commencement of formal schooling (e.g., *'The younger the child, the greater the ability to learn a second language'*; *'If children begin to learn English before they start school, they will not learn Chinese properly'*)
- attitudes towards a parental role in teaching EFL to young children (e.g., *'Mothers can teach their children English, even if they don't know English'*) and
- attitudes towards gaining further education about how to teach EFL to young children (e.g., *'I would like to attend a free, government-provided mother-and-preschool child English-learning program'*).

Mothers were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A list of the attitude statements is set out in Table 2 below, including their grouping as to whether they are positively or negatively oriented towards EFL instruction prior to school.

An exploratory factor analysis of the responses to these 15 attitude statements was conducted to determine groups of statements for analysis. Three factors emerged, one relating to negative attitudes, one to positive attitudes, and one relating to a desire for further education about teaching EFL to young children (Eigenvalues of 3.36, 1.94 and 1.63 respectively). Two statements (*'Parents are their children's first teacher'* and *'I want my child to learn to read and write properly in Chinese before learning English'*) failed to load on any factor and were therefore excluded from analysis. The final 13 statements and their factor groupings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of the Attitude Responses of Mothers who were and Mothers who were not Teaching English to Their Preschool-age Children

| Attitude Statements | Overall Mean (SD) | Teaching English | | Univariate <i>F</i> |
|--|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| | | Yes | No | |
| | | (<i>n</i> =286) | (<i>n</i> =180) | |
| | | Mean (SD) | Mean (SD) | |
| <u>Negative attitudes (<i>n</i>= 451)</u> | | | | |
| Children should learn Chinese for at least 5 years before they start to learn English. | 2.91 (1.00) | 2.74 (.92) | 3.20 (1.10) | 23.79** |
| Schools are responsible for teaching children to read and write in English. | 2.46 (.92) | 2.27 (.86) | 2.76 (.93) | 32.12** |
| Only gifted children learn to read and to write English before receiving formal instruction at school. | 1.67 (.68) | 1.58(.62) | 1.81 (.76) | 12.14** |
| If children begin to learn English before they start school, they will not learn Chinese properly. | 2.29 (.85) | 2.11(.78) | 2.58 (.89) | 35.35** |
| Children get confused if they have to learn both Chinese and English before they are in 3rd grade. | 2.25 (.91) | 2.04 (.81) | 2.59 (.97) | 42.80** |
| Only native English speakers can teach children to read and write in English | 2.29(.85) | 2.25(.85) | 2.36 (.87) | 1.75 |
| <u>Positive attitudes (<i>n</i>=456)</u> | | | | |
| People in Taiwan need to know English to get a good job. | 3.71(.90) | 3.77 (.88) | 3.61 (.94) | 3.16 |
| The younger the child, the greater the ability to learn a second language. | 3.92 (.98) | 4.02 (.93) | 3.74 (1.04) | 9.21 * |
| It is important for Taiwanese people to be bilingual. | 4.01 (.78) | 4.06 (.75) | 3.92 (.82) | 3.57 |
| Children can start learning English prior to school. | 3.80 (.90) | 4.04 (.72) | 3.42 (1.02) | 57.84** |
| Mothers can teach their children English, even if they don't know English themselves. | 3.77 (.85) | 3.85 (.82) | 3.63 (.87) | 7.95* |

Table 2. continued

| | | | | |
|--|------------|------------|------------|---------|
| <u>Desire for adult education (n=460)</u> | | | | |
| I would like to attend a free, Government-provided program which would teach me how to assist my preschool child's English learning. | 3.78 (.94) | 3.91 (.89) | 3.59 (.99) | 12.73** |
| I would like to attend a free, Government-provided mother-and-preschool child English-learning program. | 3.87 (.90) | 3.99 (.86) | 3.67 (.94) | 13.71** |

Note: * $p \leq .01$ ** $p \leq .001$

Coding of Demographic Data

In this study, we investigated whether the demographic variables of (a) mothers' age, (b) mothers' educational attainment and (c) the early childhood service type that mothers were using were related to whether they were or were not teaching English to their preschool-age child. Because of the low numbers in the outlying age groups, the original five age groups were collapsed to form three new categories: 30 years or under ($n=34$), 31-39 years ($n=326$) or over 40 years ($n=62$). Similarly, mothers' educational attainment was coded as up to high-school completion ($n=97$), 2-year vocational diploma ($n=91$), 4-year Bachelor degree ($n=164$) or post-graduate Masters or Doctoral degree ($n=67$). Early childhood service type was coded as government operated ($n=206$) or privately operated ($n=256$).

Preliminary analysis indicated no relationship between service type and any other demographic variable. However, mothers' educational attainment was highly related to their income level ($\chi^2(12) = 157.87, p < .001$). This relationship has also been found in other studies, some of which have suggested that mothers' educational level can constitute a general measure of socioeconomic status (Dollaghan et al., 1999; Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Hoff, 2006). In this study, however, we decided to limit our analysis to maternal education.

Results

Results are presented in four sections. First, we present the percentage of mothers who stated that they were teaching English to their child in the home before the commencement of formal school education. Next, we detail the relationships between mothers' demographic variables and whether or not they stated that they are teaching English in the home. In the third and fourth sections we investigate whether their decision to teach English or not was related to their attitudes towards English-language learning and teaching and their own self-reported English proficiency. Because not all mothers responded to each questionnaire item, the sample size for each analysis is provided in the relevant table of results.

Mothers' Reported English-Teaching Practice

Of the 466 mothers who answered the question about teaching English at home, 61.4% ($n=286$) responded that they were teaching English to their preschool age child at home, and 38.6% ($n=180$) reported that they were not doing so.

Relationship between Mothers' English Teaching Practice and Demographic Characteristics

Pearson Chi-square analyses were used to determine whether the mothers' reported English teaching was related to each demographic category. Table 3 presents the percentage of mothers in each demographic category who reported that they were or were not teaching English to their child.

Mothers' educational attainment was significantly related to their reported English teaching practice ($\chi^2(3) = 30.97, p < .001$), with the proportion of mothers who reported that they were teaching English increasing with their level of education. The relationship between mothers' age and their reported English teaching practice was also significantly related ($\chi^2(2) = 8.48, p < .05$), with mothers in the 30–39 year age bracket more likely to be teaching English than younger or older mothers. Finally, a significant relationship existed between the service type and mothers' English teaching practice ($\chi^2(1) = 12.21, p < .001$), with a higher percentage of mothers using

privately-operated services reporting that they were teaching English than those using government operated services.

Table 3. *Percentage of Mothers in Each Demographic Category Who Were and Were Not Teaching English*

| Demographic Category | <u>Teaching English</u> | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|------|
| | Yes | No |
| <u>Educational attainment (n=419)</u> | | |
| High school or lower | 42.3 | 57.3 |
| Vocational Diploma | 54.9 | 45.1 |
| Bachelor Degree | 71.3 | 28.7 |
| Post graduate degree | 77.6 | 22.4 |
| <u>Mothers' age (n=422)</u> | | |
| 30 years or less | 44.1 | 55.9 |
| 31 – 39 years | 65.4 | 34.4 |
| 40 years or older | 53.2 | 46.8 |
| <u>Service type (n=462)</u> | | |
| Government operated | 52.4 | 47.6 |
| Privately operated | 68.4 | 31.6 |

Relationship between Mothers' English Teaching Practice and Their Attitudes towards English Language Learning

Three separate Multivariate Analyses of Variance were computed to determine whether mothers' English teaching practice was related to their responses to three groups of attitude statements. This revealed a significant relationship between mothers' English teaching practice and the negative attitude statements ($F(6,444) = 12.05, p < .001$), the positive attitudes statements ($F(5,450) = 11.62, p < .001$), and a desire for adult education about English-language learning during the preschool years ($F(2,457) = 7.22, p = .001$). The mean responses and post-hoc univariate analysis for each separate question are presented in Table 2.

While mothers overall tended to disagree with the negative attitude statements,

with the exception of the statement ‘*Only native English speakers can teach children to read and write in English*’, those who were teaching English to their children were significantly less committed to these negative statements than those who were not. Overall, mothers tended to agree with the positive attitude statements, with no significant difference between teaching and non-teaching mothers about the importance of bilingualism and English learning in Taiwan. Teaching mothers, however, were significantly stronger in their commitment to the ideas that ‘*The younger the child, the greater the ability to learn a second language*’, that ‘*Children can start learning English prior to school*’, and that ‘*Mothers can teach their children English, even if they don't know English themselves.*’ Similarly, teaching mothers showed a significantly stronger desire to attend English-learning educational programs than those who were not.

Relationship between Mothers’ English Teaching Practice and Their Reported English Proficiency

A final Multivariate Analysis of Variance showed a significant overall relationship between mothers’ reported English-teaching practice and their own reported English-language proficiency ($F(2,460) = 24.13, p < .001$). As Table 4 shows, while mothers overall reported that their English proficiency was quite low, the teaching mothers reported significantly higher personal oral and written English language proficiency than those who were not.

Table 4. *Comparison of the English-Proficiency Responses of Mothers who were and Mothers who were not Teaching English to Their Preschool-age Children*

| Questionnaire Statement | Overall Mean(SD) | Teaching English | | Univariate <i>F</i> |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| | | <u>Yes</u> Mean(SD) | <u>No</u> Mean(SD) | |
| I can speak English fluently. | 2.49 (1.00) | 2.66 (1.00) | 2.20 (.95) | 24.59** |
| I can read and write in English. | 3.07 (1.11) | 3.34 (1.01) | 2.64 (1.14) | 47.86** |

Note: ** $p < .01$

Discussion

This study represents one of the first attempts to explore the home English teaching practices of mothers in a Chinese speaking context. The study investigated whether Taiwanese mothers of three to six-year-old children were attempting to teach English to their children at home prior to formal schooling, and the demographic and attitudinal characteristics associated with this practice. The analysis indicated that more than 61% of mothers were teaching English to their young children at home. This suggests that in Taiwan, similar to other Asian countries, many mothers believe that early childhood is an important time for English language learning. While the Taiwanese Government has been promoting home-based Chinese language and literacy learning programs for over a decade (Wu & Honig, 2010), this encouragement has more recently included home English language teaching and learning practices (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2004). The present results suggest that a majority of mothers see the value in such home-based language experiences.

Teaching Practices and Demographic Characteristics

A number of characteristics were associated with the Taiwanese mothers' decision to teach English to their young children. To begin with, the proportion of mothers who reported they were teaching English increased with their level of education, confirming the important role that maternal education plays in determining language and literacy beliefs and practices in both Western and Taiwanese contexts (DeBaryshe, 1995; Wu & Honig, 2010). Previous studies (Oladejo, 2006; Tsai, 2001; Yeh, 1994) have all reported that parental education level is positively related to parents' support for the incorporation of English instruction in preschools and kindergartens. The present study extends on those findings to suggest that more highly educated mothers are also providing English language learning experiences for young children in the home context.

The present investigation also found a link between the mothers' age and their teaching practice, with those aged 30-39 most likely to report that they were teaching

English. There are few studies that report relationships between mothers' age and their language-teaching practices, but Oladejo (2006) did find that older parents expressed their concern that foreign language learning would have a negative influence on children's mother tongue competence. While the relatively low numbers of older mothers in the present study constrain any firm conclusions, the result lends cautious support to Oladejo's finding, suggesting that such a concern may be preventing older mothers from engaging in English teaching practices. Our results indicate, however, that the association between maternal age and teaching may not be linear, as the youngest age group of mothers had the lowest reported English teaching practice. The reasons for their lower teaching rate are unclear, especially given that younger mothers would have had the most exposure to, and experience with English language in the Taiwanese society. Future research is therefore required to more finely investigate the teaching practices of different age groups and the factors associated with these group differences.

A further characteristic associated with these mothers' decision to teach English was their choice as to whether to send their child to a government or privately run preschool or kindergarten service. Mothers who were using a privately run preschool were more likely to be teaching English at home than those who had enrolled their children in a government-run service. This finding may be attributable to the fact that in Taiwan, as long as early childhood services follow the guidelines of the Standards for Kindergarten Curriculum, they are free to design their activities to meet their goals and social needs (Lin & Tsai, 1996). Given that many Taiwanese parents have high academic expectations for their children (Beckert et al., 2004; Chan, 2004; Shang et al., 2007), and the fees for private programs are at least three times higher than those for public ones, private services are expected to provide an attractive English program in the curriculum to fulfill children's potential language needs. English learning, therefore, is part of early childhood education in most of the privately run services (Hsu, 2004). It may be that mothers' expectations and goals for their children lead them to seek out and provide avenues for English learning

experiences in both the home and school. Alternatively, the teaching mothers may be supporting their child's preschool English learning by reviewing the English taught at the child's privately run preschool in the home context.

While mothers generally reported quite a low level of English proficiency, those who were teaching their child English reported higher oral and written English proficiency than those who were not. This finding is interesting given that the mothers' relatively strong level of agreement with the questionnaire statement that *'mothers can teach English even if they don't know English themselves'* would appear to indicate a belief that a high level of English proficiency is not a necessary attribute of English teachers (Nunan, 2003). It may be that the confidence that mothers have in their English abilities affects their confidence as a teacher of their child. Alternatively, mothers' own perceived proficiency may stem from a generally positive attitude towards English language learning that then extends to teaching their own children. Given these results, future research is needed to enhance current understanding of the nature of the association between the mothers' perceived English proficiency and their reported home English teaching practices.

Mothers' Attitudes towards English Language Learning

In Taiwan, early exposure to a foreign language remains a contentious issue. This controversy is perhaps reflected in the finding of the significant differences between the attitudes of mothers who were teaching and those who were not. While many have argued that parents' attitudes and beliefs underpin their parenting behaviours (Bingham, 2007; Buckwalter and Lo, 2002; Sonnenschein et al., 1997), our design prevents us from making any such causal interpretation. It is possible that mothers' different attitudes towards English did impact on their decision as to whether or not to teach English to their child, but it is equally possible that their attitudes actually stemmed from their parenting behaviours, either as a justification or a consequence of their teaching practices (Goodnow, 1985).

The most significant difference in their attitudes is related to the ideas about when

English language learning should start. Teaching mothers were less committed than non-teaching mothers to the ideas that children should learn Chinese for 5 years before starting English, that learning English would be confusing or that it would impede their Chinese language learning. While it has been argued that children do not become confused by literacy development in two different languages (Buckwalter and Lo, 2002; Oladejo, 2006), our finding suggests that non-teaching parents are still concerned that learning two languages during the preschool years may be detrimental to their child. This finding may also reflect some endorsement of the present government's policy that actively promotes local mother tongues like Chinese Mandarin, Taiwanese, Hakka, or indigenous languages over English language learning in the early years (Taiwan MOE, 2004).

Despite these differences in maternal attitudes to English as a foreign language instruction for the very young, it should be stressed that the attitudes of the mothers in this study suggested a generally positive stance towards English as a foreign language learning in the early years. Consistent with studies by Chang (2006), Oladejo (2006) and Shang et al. (2007), these mothers supported the idea that preschools and kindergartens should offer some English language instruction. The majority of mothers strongly agreed that it is important for Taiwanese people to be bilingual and English is needed to get a good job. This finding supports a widespread parental belief that knowing a foreign language is important for children to be competitive and have good career opportunities (Cazabon, Lambert, & Hall, 1993; Lao, 2004; Lindholm-Leary, Borsato, & Educational Resources Information, 2001; Shannon & Milian, 2002; Shin, 2000; Tsai, 2001; Young & Tran, 1999).

The findings suggest a disparity between government policies and some parents' beliefs and behaviours regarding the introduction of English as a foreign language for preschoolers. The findings also contribute to our understanding of the influence of social contextual factors on mothers' engagement with their young children's second or foreign language home learning environment.

While the teaching mothers in this study did show a greater willingness to attend

adult education programs about children's English language learning than non-teaching mothers, our results indicate a general interest in such programs. Combined with the overall positive attitudes shown towards bilingualism and EFL learning for young children, it would appear that mothers are not only positive towards EFL teaching and learning during early childhood, but are also seeking information about how they can support their children's English acquisition.

Suggestions for Further Research and Implications for Policy and Practice

This study highlights a number of areas that require further research. As noted earlier, governments throughout Asia are increasingly focusing on the nature and quality of their early childhood services. Factors such as parental education and attitudes, English and mother tongue language and literacy development, and government goals, cannot be divorced from issues surrounding the provision of evidence-based high quality early childhood education and care services.

A key question concerns the effectiveness or otherwise of mothers' home teaching practices in facilitating their children's knowledge of spoken and written English. If future studies were to demonstrate that the children whose mothers taught them English as a foreign language at home prior to school were to become more proficient in English than those children who did not receive such instruction, there would be implications for those designing and implementing policies and programs for English as a foreign language in Taiwan. Such research would provide evidence to inform government policy in relation to the sometimes contentious area of English as a foreign language for children under six years of age.

Furthermore, if further research demonstrated the efficacy of home teaching by mothers, this would have implications for those involved in promoting home English learning, enabling them to tailor their information and programs to specific population groups. Policy-makers and researchers would be advised to gain more information from mothers in the lower education groups to determine why it is that they are less likely to be teaching English than those with university degrees.

Programs could also be developed which target mothers with low English proficiency if governments are to respond to parental desires to teach English to their young children and to promote mother-and-child English language learning experiences (Taiwan MOE, 2004).

Finally, further investigation into the reasons and motivations influencing mothers' decisions, and the practices they employ, is needed. By finding out more about the attitudes, practices and approaches currently adopted by mothers of young children, policy and program developers will potentially be able to provide targeted evidence-based parent programs and work together with parents to promote English language learning more effectively in a manner which is authentic and meaningful for Taiwanese families.

Limitations

An important limitation relates to the scope of the data collected. Although Taiwan is becoming increasingly urbanised, the country includes many rural and agricultural areas and also diverse ethnic and Indigenous groups (Government Information Office, 2008). The present study focused only on a small, urban area in Tainan, Taiwan. Future research is necessary to examine similarities and differences relating to EFL teaching practices and attitudes which exist among other populations groups.

Another limitation concerns the nature of some of the questions asked by the researchers. Only two questions which were subjective in nature were asked regarding mothers' own English proficiency. It may have been difficult for the participating mothers to answer such questions, due to issues such as the extent to which they could evaluate their own English proficiency in spoken and written English, and their degree of self-confidence.

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